

Moving Together

After six blessed months in the courtyard, we are moving Sunday services indoors to the sanctuary starting December 6. I have prayed through and agonized over this matter at length with our staff, and it is my belief this is the right move at the right time. My heart in the matter is to keep us moving forward together in obedience to God. Together is the key. I believe God's heart is to lead us with trust in our steps and praise in our hearts. So why now? From our first Sunday service in the courtyard back in May, I have been working on two directives from God: 1) keep gathering in person, and 2) meet people where they are. These are rooted in Biblical truths: "This is not the time to pull away and abandon meeting together" (Heb 10:25 TPT) and "I have adapted to the culture of every place I've gone so that I could more easily win people to Christ" (1 Cor 9:22 TPT). With the winter months upon us, it has become unrealistic for us to gather outside consistently in a way that meets people where they are. As a church family, I believe we are on God's timing to move inside. This is not to say that everyone will be happy with the step, but that God has prepared us to make it together.

Since the announcement, sincere questions have risen from differing perspectives. With our county again in the purple tier where indoor worship gatherings are restricted, why are we doing this now? Are we asking people to do something unsafe? Are we inviting people to break the rules? Why are we choosing to wear masks? Why are we maintaining physical distance? Don't these restrictions represent government overreach and a violation of our religious liberty? How can we preach faith and show the brotherly affection required of the church with these restrictions in place? Is it even morally consistent to choose certain pieces of the guidance to follow and not others? I think these and other sincere questions are valid. We have certainly discussed and prayed through them at length as a staff.

Before sharing responses to these questions, I want to address an underlying dynamic where I believe God wants to work in our midst. On one hand, there are those who feel strongly that following COVID-19 public health guidelines at church gatherings amounts to turning over leadership of the church to a secular state government. For some with this perspective, wearing a mask has become the symbol of this unjust rule and a sign that we are sadly giving up our precious constitutional liberties. They feel a deep personal conviction to resist this government intrusion, even at significant personal cost. On the other hand, there are those who feel strongly that ignoring COVID-19 public health guidelines at church gatherings amounts to rebelling against the God-instituted authority of our land. For some with this perspective, refusing to wear a mask is the symbol of a rebellious spirit and a blatant disregard for the wellbeing of others. They feel a deep personal conviction to resist this apparent defiance, even at significant personal cost. Do you see the problem? People with these two perspectives have almost no common ground. Moreover, if such disagreements centered on essential doctrines of the Gospel, there would be no remedy apart from going our separate ways. It is true that these issues ARE important for our time, but they are not essential doctrines of the Gospel. Thus, they are not grounds to walk away from fellowship from one another. In fact, I believe God is leading us on a third way for our good and His glory. This third way is not a compromise, but a way that will refine our convictions and heal our division if we cooperate.

We are not the only people to have wrestled with issues of this magnitude or with such opposing views. The early church had disputes over Sabbath regulations, Kosher diets, drinking wine, circumcision, taxes, and eating food sacrificed to idols. All these matters were and still are important, but not essential doctrines of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul's New Testament letters address believers on each side of these disputes and instruct us how to apply deeper Gospel truths and preserve unity. The way Paul exhorts believers in Corinth to mend their dispute over eating food sacrificed to idols is particularly relevant:

“Now let me address the issue of food offered in sacrifice to idols. It seems that everyone believes his own opinion is right on this matter. How easily we get puffed up over our opinions! But love builds up the structure of our new life. ² If anyone thinks of himself as a know-it-all, he still has a lot to learn. ³ But if a person passionately loves God, he will possess the knowledge of God. ⁴ Concerning food sacrificed as offerings to idols, we all know that an idol is nothing, for there is no God but one. ⁵ Although there may be many so-called gods in this world, and in heaven there may be many “gods,” “lords,” and “masters,” ⁶ yet for us there is only one God—the Father. He is the source of all things, and our lives are lived for him. And there is one Lord, Jesus, the Anointed One, through whom we and all things exist. ⁷ But not everyone has this revelation. For some were formerly idolaters, who consider idols as real and living. That’s why they consider the food offered to that “god” as defiled. And their weak consciences become defiled if they eat it. ⁸ Yes, we know that what you eat will not bring you closer to God. You are no better if you don’t eat certain foods and no better if you do. ⁹ But you must be careful that the liberty you exercise in eating food offered to idols doesn’t offend the weak believers. ¹⁰ For if a believer with a weak conscience sees you, who have a greater understanding, dining in an idol’s temple, won’t this be a temptation to him to violate his own conscience and eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ So, in effect, by exercising your understanding of freedom, you have ruined this weak believer, a brother for whom Christ has died! ¹² And when you offend weaker believers by wounding their consciences in this way, you also offend the Anointed One! ¹³ So I conclude that if my eating certain food deeply offends my brother and hinders his advance in Christ, I will never eat it again. I don’t want to be guilty of causing my brother or sister to be wounded and defeated.” (1 Cor 8:1-13 TPT)

At first glance through our own cultural lenses, the severity of this dispute is not apparent. Pagan temples were the government-sanctioned religion of the day. These temples were the centers of all kinds of occult practices, government corruption, and child abuse. Boys and girls were enslaved as prostitutes, salvation and commerce privileges for citizens were bartered, and temple workers sanctioned by the government made all the profits from selling the peoples’ sacrifices. Many believers viewed eating at a pagan temple or buying food used in idol worship as deeply offensive to God, unclean, and capitulating to the culture’s evil practices. As in other New Testament writings (e.g. Romans 14-15), Paul exhorts believers here to look beyond the intensity of a temporary dispute to the eternal bond of unity in Jesus Christ. Did you notice where God places the responsibility for accommodation? The responsibility to accommodate lies with the mature. The mature are called in the name of Christ to forego liberties and disadvantage themselves in areas of conscience for the sake of other believers where they are vulnerable. This practice is unique to Christianity. In every other religion and cultural system, the weak adjust to the strong. In Christianity, the strong make allowance for the weak. Jesus is our model.

Let me apply this deeper Gospel truth to our dispute today. Those who are strong in their conviction before God about their mask liberty have a Gospel responsibility to wear a mask if they choose to gather in certain settings for the sake of others. Those who are strong in their conviction before God about wearing masks have a Gospel responsibility to refrain from mask-shaming other believers who choose not to. All of us need to remember this season is temporary and these issues are NOT grounds to “cancel” Agape or fellow believers with differing convictions. There is no way to proceed without testing our willingness to disadvantage ourselves for the sake of others. Now on to some specific questions:

With our county again in the purple tier where indoor worship gatherings are restricted, why are we doing this now? During the winter months, we will not be able to rely on a consistent outdoor space to gather that allows us to meet people where they are. Meeting people where they are means that we offer a space protected from inclement weather for those depending on in-person gatherings and the ability to live-stream online to those avoiding public gatherings. In order to follow how I believe God is leading us, we are choosing to be respectfully non-compliant to certain aspects of our state’s public health guidance. Respectfully non-compliant??? What does that even mean? It means we will not attract attention to our non-compliance, and we will remain respectful to those offices that we are not compliant with (e.g. I will continue to pray sincerely for our local officials, our governor, and our president). In addition, it is important to note that we have cover from our local county law enforcement, who consider worship gatherings essential and exempt from fines.

Are we asking people to do something unsafe? Armed with all we have learned about the transmission of the COVID-19 virus, we can provide an equally compliant experience at Agape as many other “essential” activities like shopping at Costco. Ultimately, our safekeeping comes from God, and I trust everyone to decide how best to stay connected with your church family during this TEMPORARY season. (Disconnecting is not a good option)

Are we inviting people to break the rules? Meeting indoors and singing are not compliant with the state’s current purple tier guidance for our county, so in those respects, yes. I believe these aspects of the guidance at least partially obstruct our mandate to assemble and worship God. We will do our best to follow the other aspects of public health guidance respectfully. If this approach does not sit well with you, I also respect that. Please stay connected with us in other ways until this season is over!

Why are we choosing to wear masks? Wearing a mask is uncomfortable but not sinful. At this point, we are asking people to wear masks indoors. For those that prefer not to wear a mask, we will have extra no-contact face shields available. Some will have medical exemptions, and we will do our best to accommodate. We will also have some covered outdoor seating near the Family Life Center for those that want to be on campus but have reasons not to wear any form of face covering.

Why are we maintaining physical distance? Maintaining physical distance is inconvenient but not sinful. There isn’t a perfect solution here, and our approach will probably evolve over time. At this point, we have our rows of seating spaced out and we are asking for three empty chairs to be left between family groups.

Don’t these restrictions represent government overreach and a violation of our religious liberty? As an American citizen, I believe they do in some respects. Putting an entire population in quarantine does not seem like the best way to protect a small number of adults who are elderly or have compromised immune systems. We can see evidence in other jurisdictions of more targeted restrictions having better overall containment results with lower social, emotional, and economic impact. I would encourage everyone to weigh the value of both our constitutional rights and our short-term security carefully. As a follower of Christ, however, personal liberty is not my primary concern. More important to me is the bond of peace I share with my brothers and sisters in Christ and the loving posture of respect I take before God and neighbor.

How can we preach faith and show the brotherly affection required of the church with these restrictions in place? Faith can be preached to people wearing masks and to those who choose not to wear masks. Brotherly affection can be shown with a hug, a fist bump, or a smile from six feet.

Is it even morally consistent to choose certain pieces of the guidance to follow and not others? I do not believe it is right to restrict churches from gathering or singing. The other guidance issues like masks, distancing, sanitization, ventilation, and foot traffic directions are all matters of conscience or inconvenience but not moral violations. Therefore, the right thing to do is make our best effort to comply.

I know our best days are ahead because Jesus is still on the Throne! Hang in there!