

As many of you have been made aware, there has been a change in the policies of our local health department in regards to local churches being permitted to gather inside their buildings. Our governor had made an adjustment back in early June that permitted churches to meet indoors during phase 1.5, so long as they met under a 25% room capacity of their sanctuary and practiced safe masking and social distancing practices. We, and all of the other churches in our area, immediately pursued this upon our county entering into phase 1.5 back in the first week of July.

There is some confusion as to whether our local health department has changed their policy, or had maintained this policy from the very beginning of phase 1.5, but it would appear that the Benton-Franklin Health District has been given the authority by the state office to decide its own protocol for what is allowed to be open during this modified phase we are in. And in this phase, apparently due to the continuing rise in Covid-19 infections in our county, the health district has determined that churches are actually not permitted to gather indoors, but must continue to gather outdoors as we were when in phase 1. Further, though anything can change in a few days notice in this pandemic world we are living in, but the document that was sent to us by the health district makes it seem like this restriction will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

This has been an arduous, painful season for us all and having the proverbial rug ripped out from under us once more has made this feel even more deflating. So, though your elders have been made aware of this for the past two weeks, we have spent that time thinking, praying, meeting, discussing, and looking to what other like-minded churches in our area and across the country are doing. We want to approach this decision wisely remembering that we elders are responsible...

1. To be obedient first and foremost to our Lord at whatever cost that may bring.
2. To love our neighbor as ourselves, and to especially love our fellow church members, preferring their needs over our own, and showing special deference to weaker members.
3. To make decisions that serve our congregation's spiritual well-being as we strive to feed Christ's sheep who are entrusted to us.
4. To submit to the governing authorities so long as they are not prohibiting gospel ministry or coercing us to sin or violate our conscience.

So, in light of those responsibilities what are we to do as a church in light of this new restriction? Some churches have decided to continue to gather indoors (as we have these past few weeks) and some churches have decided to move outside, or cancel their corporate worship entirely and just produce a video to be sent out over the internet. We, Quinault Baptist Church, will respond to this new change with caution. What do I mean by that? I mean that we will, starting next week, gather outside for our worship gathering—but, we will not do so indefinitely. We will continue to gather outside so long as weather will permit us to do so. However, once extreme heat, cold, rain, or any other form of inclement weather that would

normally prohibit us from gathering, we will then move our corporate worship inside and proceed to do what we have been doing these past few weeks.

We are doing this because

1. We will not forsake the regular gathering of fellow Christians for corporate worship. Christians are people who *gather*. Our religion is not one of private experience or monkish solitude, but of fellowship, of hospitality, of singing together, breaking bread together, praying together, worshipping together. And while our fellowship is not limited to what happens on Sunday morning, our corporate worship on Sunday morning is the crown jewel of that fellowship. The very word for “church” in Greek literally means “assembly, gathering.” And we are commanded in Hebrews 10:24-25 to not forsake gathering together as a church. Jesus tells us that it is in our physical gathering as a church that His presence is made manifest in a unique and distinct way (Matt 18:20). This is not something that can be reproduced through an online streaming service; you cannot have “church” online any more than you can hold your wife’s hand online. We initially cancelled our corporate worship gatherings and produced sermon videos for family’s to worship at home because there was much unknown about the virus, its mortality rate, and our hospital’s capability to keep up. Further, we were under the impression that this would be a temporary pause needed to slow the infection down for a few weeks. However, those few weeks stretched into months. And, as our elders have been reaching out and checking in on our members throughout this season, we have seen the emotional and spiritual toll exacted on our people by the loneliness, isolation, and separation from the body during the quarantine. It is not good for man to be alone, and Christians are intended to live in community with one another.

This does not mean however, that our members who are unable to gather with us because of health concerns are walking in sin—the command of Hebrews 10 refers to *willful* neglect of the church gathering; that is, not coming because you just don’t feel like it or your weekend just got too busy or you just wanted to sleep in. That would be a willful violation of this commandment; but staying away from the gathering because you are at a high-risk of catching a virus that may be deadly for you would never be understood to be *willful* neglect of gathering by our elders. And, of course, our whole church should be diligently praying for those who are not regularly gathering with us: look around and take note of who is not able to be here with us and diligently pray that the Lord would sustain them through this season, and maybe even reach out to them, check in on them, see how you might be able to encourage and edify their family.

2. “If the worship gathering is so important, than why move outside?” Because while Hebrews 10 tells us to not forsake gathering, it does not specify that we must gather *in a building*. So, we are able to continue to gather and obey Hebrews 10:24-25 by gathering outside on our lawn. We have even had members who have been staying home tell us that if we were to gather outside, they would actually be able to attend. It is objectively safer to gather outside in regards to virus transmission. Further, by moving outside that gives us an opportunity to comply with what our local government is asking

of us, and likely helps preserve our gospel witness to our unsaved community who might interpret our gathering indoors as an unloving action. There will likely be a time where we will need to disobey the government and risk how others may perceive our church, but those are issues that we do not want to risk flippantly.

3. “But, you said you would gather indoors if the weather didn’t let you gather outdoors? Won’t you be disobeying the government or risking your testimony by doing that?” Well, the short answer is: yes and yes. From the beginning I have said that a Christian is required in Scripture to submit to the governing authorities *so long as they are not (1) requiring us to sin or (2) prohibiting gospel ministry*. Once the government begins to intervene in the ministry of the gospel they have transgressed their God-given authority and have no legitimate grounds for their actions. We are happy to submit to the government when and where we can: for instance, the government requires our church building to meet its safety standards and fire codes. We are happy to comply with those requirements and see how that helps us love our neighbors well by creating a safe place to gather.

But, while Romans 13 calls Christians to submit to the governing authorities, *Revelation 13* portrays the governing authorities like a beast who devours and gobbles Christians up. So, we submit, but we do so with caution, always remembering where our highest allegiance lies. We are alarmed at the way that the government appears to have so easily cast aside the importance of church gatherings, both locally and across our nation—permitting businesses to operate with patrons indoors, but prohibiting churches from doing the same. Particularly while politicians and medical professionals enthusiastically encourage and protect the rights of citizens to gather in protests, citing the first amendment of our constitution, but do everything they can to limit, throttle, and discourage attendance at religious gatherings, which is also cited and protected in the very same first amendment, smacks of hypocrisy and discrimination.

We do not believe that our local government is intentionally seeking to persecute Christians or have any particular animus against churches. Rather, it is my assumption that our governing authorities are simply ignorant to the importance of Christian fellowship. So, while it is very clearly important to them to get businesses to open up to drum up the economy, prioritizing churches just does not bear the same weight. It has the same importance of a baseball game or concert: a large gathering of people for something non-essential that could just be reproduced online. So, we are simply here to remind them and our community that actually what happens here is essential, is necessary, and is worth it. So, short of some dramatic information becoming apparent, if the government tells us we can no longer gather together, indoors or outdoors, we will, with the apostle Peter say, “we must obey God rather than men,” (Acts 5:29).

So, in closing, we want to encourage all of our members to trust the Lord’s inscrutable wisdom and unfathomable knowledge as He unfolds His sovereign plan. God is in control and He is

good. It is our duty to day-by-day walk in immediate obedience to Him and let Him worry about tomorrow. Please be diligent in prayer for one another and for your elders.