

A TESTIMONY TO THE TIMES

Why Christ Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church (Wylie Texas) has continued its Worship Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The times in which we live are indeed strange. Had a minister of the Gospel stood in the pulpit in January of 2020, and declared with confidence that by March of that same year the majority of all Churches would be nearly uninhabited on the Lord's Day, their doors closed to the bulk of their membership and potential visitors, and their worship services canceled what would have been the reaction? The best or most charitable response would be raised eyebrows, and the worst, perhaps cries for his removal for inculcating unnecessary fear. Yet, here we are. In our own town, it is at least odd to see Church parking lots empty on the way to Church on the Lord's Day, and grocery, variety, and hardware store parking lots full, or nearly so, and the vehicle lines wrapped around the building at drive-up restaurants and coffee shops. These are strange and unexpected times indeed. Who would have thought that magistrates would forbid gatherings of 50 or more, 25 or more, 10 or more, upon penalty of citation or worse, and that this ban on gathering would override or temporally suspend the rights of those with religious conviction to meet in devotion to their God—that the assembly itself would be deemed a danger to the larger society? Who would have thought that those who were not demonstrably ill with some viral or other malady would be told that they need to stay home for fear of contraction of “the unseen enemy,” or for fear of secretly or ignorantly infecting others statistically more vulnerable than themselves, though they themselves showed no signs of carrying anything so severe. Yet here we are.

The paragraphs that follow comprise our theological and pastoral convictions, evaluations of the signs of the times, and looking ahead at the effects of our current disruption. Not all will agree with our conclusions, and good men, with whom we share much in common may differ from what follows. This article is not designed to be a thumb in anyone's eye, nor is it written with certain parties as the target audience. Arguments, both of point and counterpoint will be gleaned from others, but these are cited anonymously to provide greater clarity, and we appreciate having argumentation both agreeable and disagreeable to our own convictions with which to interact. In times like these, we all agree that we need men like those “Men of Issachar” of old, who “had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12.32). May the Lord Himself give light to His Church, that she may know the upright, and therefore the best path to glorifying the Triune God in our day, in these times, and in our places of service.

We begin with setting out the Biblical case of what a worship service is, namely that we are under command of our Great God to gather. When we ask the question, “What is a worship service?” among the Church of the 21st century we may receive many different answers. But Biblically, we are not left to such ambiguity. The Bible is clear: A worship service is a holy convocation in which the people of God are called to appear before the Lord to serve Him with services that He has commanded them to bring unto Him. Let us break that down:

1. The people of God are called together.

Whether in the Old Testament or the New, when the Lord would receive service from His people in that public way, the way of the worshipping assembly, the leaders of the congregation would call the people together, and the people of God were to hear that as an authoritative call from God Himself. In other words, it is God who calls His people to worship Him. (Leviticus 8.1-5; 23.1-44; Nehemiah 7.73-8.2 Hebrews 10.19-25, and many other places of Scripture). The point made here—we suppose that there would be little dissent from it—is that the Lord has instituted set times of public worship, during which the people of God gather themselves together to serve Him. He calls us to this duty authoritatively.

2. The people of God are called together to serve the living God.

This is a principle of our worship that is not spoken of enough in our day. Ask the average 21st century Christian about his experience at Church and his topics will range from what he “got out of it” to the beautiful and polished worship band, orchestra or choir, the professionalism and production, and how the message was so relevant, and exactly what “I needed to hear”. While not wanting to discount anyone's sense of pleasure in going to Church and participating there, we are called by the Word of the Lord to remember that worship is not primarily for us, it is primarily for the Lord. We gather at the set times of God's ordering, that is, on His Holy Sabbath, not to serve ourselves, nor to be served ourselves, but to serve Him with the services that He has commanded we bring. This foundation of worship, almost forgotten in our day, is part of our

Reformation heritage. We come to worship the Lord and to serve Him. The benefits we receive are not primary, but secondary. Hear this characterization from our Church's Standards, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646):

THE light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might.^a But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy scripture.^{b1}

The implications of this point are numerous. The first is that if we understand the worship service as service to God and not for ourselves, those services offered must be according to His commandments, and we may not offer to the Lord that which He has not commanded us to bring to Him; and this, no matter how pleasing these services are to us. The criteria is “What has God commanded us to bring?” not “What is pleasant or meaningful to ourselves?” We read that our praise to God is an offering to Him—we render the “calves of our lips”² and offer the “sacrifice of praise.”³ It might even be said that if we are truly participating with our whole hearts that there would be times of grief and not pleasure, as the Lord places His finger of chastisement and revelation of our sin upon us, and we are rightly grieved before Him, as we have come to serve Him.

A further implication is that if worship is for the Lord and not for the worshipper, this will affect the attendance of the Church's membership. If worship is for the worshipper, then the worshipper might be competent to say, “I have enough,” and therefore absent himself from the public worship. He may judge his rest to be more important to his well-being that day than receiving some benefit from worshipping the Lord. He may believe that his bodily needs are more acute on a given Lord's Day than his spiritual needs. But if worship is for the Lord, and the people of God enjoy the high privilege of offering themselves as living sacrifices unto the Lord, serving Him with their ears in hearing His Word authoritatively preached, with their mouths in singing praise and in the corporate Amen, with their hearts in learning to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ through the ministry of the Word, and in having their faith and trust in the Lord's good mercy augmented through the sacraments, yea, as they give their whole selves unto Him, then this worship takes on a new dimension. They lose sight of themselves and offer to Him who is worthy of all they have and more—they come to serve Him through the mediation of their Savior and learn to rejoice in that high privilege.

They are like Ruth, giving herself to Boaz as her “near kinsman.” She comes to him in the middle of the night, to his threshing floor, and lays his skirt over herself, in testimony that she is offering herself to him as a wife, to serve him. Now Boaz is a type of Christ, and so he does not send her away empty, but fills her apron with grain for her mother in law. But if Ruth would have returned to Naomi only with a full apron, and not with the promise of redemption from her Goel, she would have returned with sad news. That she was to serve Boaz was the great privilege. And so, Naomi asks her not, “What have you received?” but “Who art thou, my daughter?” It is the high privilege of the people of God to come, gather, and serve their God, for they are His people.⁴ This is what distinguishes them from the rest of the people upon earth. This is their privilege, and they come in obedience to the command of the Lord, to offer unto Him.

3. Ministers Govern the Church only according to the Commands of Christ speaking in His Word

With that said, no churchman has the authority to speak contrary to the Word of the Lord. We cannot say that the Lord has not called us to worship Him when He has called. Further, we are under command to carry out the will of our King. Jesus Christ is King of His Church and He has called her to worship, to offer, and to appear before Him. This is His command. Can we change or augment, can we forestall, or in any way negate that command? While admitting that there may be times when the command to meet cannot be obeyed, our approach must be, “What has the Lord said, and what has He required?” The people of God have been deprived of the public worship and observance of the Sabbath in the history of redemption.

^a Rom. 1:20. Acts 17:24. Psal. 119:68. Jer. 10:7. Psal. 31:23. Psal. 18:3. Rom. 10:12. Psal. 62:8. Josh. 24:14. Mark 12:33.

^b Deut. 12:32. Mat. 15:9. Acts 17:25. Mat. 4:9-10. [Deut. 15 to the 20th Verse.] Exod. 20:4-6. Col. 2:23.

¹ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 111–114.

² Hosea 14.2

³ Hebrews 13.5

⁴ Ruth 4.6-17; Isaiah 43.21

The Israelites in Egypt were commanded upon the exodus to “Remember the Sabbath”—as slaves, they were ruled by hard taskmasters who made them to serve with rigor. The Psalmist writes of being deprived of the public worship (Psalms 42-43) due to some kind of bondage or captivity.

In our day, we have heard from our brothers that this is not persecution but a reasonable request on the part of magistrates to limit the spread of a disease. But we reply, as churchmen, who speaks for God in this society of ours if we do not? Do we not have a command from the Lord to gather to worship Him? And does not obedience to the Lord’s command take precedence over reasonable risk, and any inconvenience that rises from that obedience? On the topic of reasonable risk, of course we understand that risk is a human term, based upon the Lord’s ordinary providence, and a moral expectation of how He has worked ordinarily and will continue to work. We are not permitted, in keeping the 6th commandment, to put our lives in danger by various means because of a promise that “the Lord will protect us.” This was the tempter’s perversion of Scripture quoting from Psalm 91.11, tempting our Lord to cast himself off the pinnacle of the Temple⁵ when there was no command to do so. However, there is a command to gather for worship, and we must be ready to obey this command even at great inconvenience or cost. Our practice in Wylie, Texas, has been to keep abreast of the changing statutes, re-working our sanctuary furnishings to provide recommended distance between families, purchasing the means to meet outdoors, providing hand sanitizer, reducing our Lord’s Day schedule from anything optional, and other such measures to be able to move forward in obedience to the Lord AND the Civil Authorities. Other ideas might be to split into multiple services, reducing numbers to acceptable levels in various portions of the building, meeting outdoors, or even if necessary, moving to the countryside. Certainly these measures are inconvenient, but they are also *obedient*. They can all be undertaken while maintaining proper canons of contact recommended by epidemiological authorities. Others of our Churches have petitioned local authorities, sought clarification, and pressed for ways to meet while still being good citizens, working with civil authorities. Remember that it is our duty to instruct unbelieving magistrates as to what the Lord requires of His people, and to help them understand what preserves and advances their civil authority in righteousness, which will in turn preserve the commonwealth in the sight of God. If after exhausting all ideas and means of redress the Church still cannot meet, if she has truly given her strength to the command of the Lord to gather and she cannot, then she should weep for the deprivation the Lord has brought upon her, regularly fasting and praying before the Lord until He restores to them the ability to obey.

4. What about “Live-Stream” Services?

We have also heard from some of our brothers that a live-stream worship service is still a true worship service. With this we disagree. The momentum toward online services as primary or acceptable to God as worship in today’s Church ought to be seen as a sign of her profanity, rather than her holiness, and the enthusiasm with which some Churches have taken up and are promoting this technology is quite alarming. Some may take offense at these words. It is not our intention to be offensive, but to partake of a brotherly candor.⁶ There are things that take place in an “in-person” worship service that the Lord in His omniscience has granted in the “solemn assembly” that cannot obtain in a live-stream. Some of these are the interaction between the minister and the people of God, the ability to see the face of each individual, the encouragement of gathering in families and the example this sets, the level of devotion and attention given to the elements of worship, to hear the singing of the people of God, to behold the reverence and awe with which they approach the Lord as it is displayed in their posture, upon their countenance, and in their conduct throughout the worship service—these are only a few of the intangible benefits of the service that the Lord has ordered, and why it cannot be replaced with a digital venue. Even the travel required to and from Church, preparation for it, and how that time is spent is a part of what the Lord has ordained.⁷ Live-stream services can at best be called enhanced family worship. This difference used to be clearer to some of us. Many of us have counseled wayward Christians not to settle for a televised worship service. Why now has this suddenly become a godly and viable alternative to meeting together as a people? Is it now acceptable because these are *our* services? Please brethren, this is not spoken to be offensive, but to call us to an appreciation of the ordinance the Lord has ordained, not our own device or substitute.

⁵ Matthew 4.6

⁶ Psalm 141.5; Leviticus 19.17

⁷ See Exodus 34.23-24; Luke 2.41-52;

5. The Proper Limits of Civil Power

The next point here is that many of our brethren have allowed the Civil Authorities to define what a worship service is. We have heard from our civil fathers that “religious services are essential services”. Thankfully, we can commend them for such recognition and protection of this right for God’s people. Not all magistrates have done so, and it would certainly be a grief to serve under such governmental authority and would require greater creativity and petition to maintain an obedient procedure before the Lord. In our state of Texas, and in others, religion has been deemed an essential or necessary enterprise. And while it is a grief that this declaration extends to false religions that commit “soul murder,”⁸ still we do enjoy that nod from our civil authorities, and we grieve for our brethren in other places where this is not the case. But in every place it seems that when our civil fathers go on to say that these essential services should be “live-stream” services, we must protest that they have overstepped their God-given authority by teaching the Church what her God requires of her. This, we believe, is to reverse the proper order. Truly, magistrates should be coming to Ministers and Elders to ask them what the Lord requires, in order that they might know how to order their civil duty before Him, so as not to incur His displeasure and bring judgment or calamity upon the commonwealth. We mentioned that many of our brethren have declared that we are not being persecuted, and with this we are in substantial agreement. But it surely seems that the chariot wheels of persecution are rumbling in the distance, when there is a national debate as to whether religious services are “essential” or not, when religion is relegated to the status of *optional* by civil decree even among the devout, and when authorities can with such cavalier fiat declare online services true substitutes for those services required by God Himself. Our Lord has created us for Himself, body and soul. He has redeemed us, body and soul. We belong to Him, body and soul. We worship Him, body and soul. The covenantal-physical-corporate element of our worship cannot be removed without proceeding against His establishment. As Elders and Ministers, we must be on the forefront of petitioning our civil fathers not to usurp the ministerial office by forbidding worship services under the color of emergency declaration statutes or by redefining what a worship service is. “It appertaineth not unto thee”⁹ must be our humble petition to our governors at such a time as this. May the Lord raise up valiant churchmen, as he did in the days of Uzziah, to oppose such measures as subjects of our Civil fathers, but especially as Ministers of Jesus Christ. We must not lay down or roll over. We ought to be about instructing our leaders that there are two kingdoms in these United States, one civil, ruled by our national/state constitutions and laws, and the other ecclesiastical, ruled by Jesus Christ as King of His Church.

6. The Sixth Commandment and Holding Worship Services

We have heard some different claims pertaining to our 6th Commandment duty. Some have said, “Stay home to save lives.” Others, more refreshingly have said, “Stay home, it *could* save lives.” Others have cited the works of respected theologians of the past and present that spoke to whether civil authority can rightly be exercised in times of disease and pestilence in closing Churches. Some have said that it is irresponsible for the Church to continue meeting, recklessly endangering lives doing so. In answer to this, several things are in order. The first is that Churches should have a policy of attendance that is not draconian, but sensible, taking into account our weakness and human frailty. If church members are at higher risk of contracting this disease because of age or other compromising of immunity, they should be given leave to stay home. If anyone is sick, with this or any other disease, they should stay home. If any is afraid either of contracting this disease or unwittingly spreading it, they should be given leave to stay home. Churches should encourage proper distancing, hand-washing, refraining from touching common surfaces, and in times of pestilence these measures can be put into place very quickly. This is a reasonable hedge against 6th commandment violation. Other methods can be used as well—Perhaps taking the temperature of those who come to Church, giving out respiratory masks, tasking the diaconate with deeper cleaning, changing the air filters of the building to filter out a greater proportion of pollution or even contagion, rearranging the seating, and the list goes on. These measures are all in keeping with the Lord’s command to meet for worship. The second point is that we have no sure guarantee that canceling worship services saves any lives at all. We have a sure command from the Lord that is countermanded by a supposition, or the possibility of saving lives. Carried to its logical conclusion, staying home could save all kinds of lives due to automobile accidents, slip and fall injuries incurred at Church, and a host of other

⁸ See Samuel Rutherford: “We desire a reason why the gentleness of the sonne of Gods government should free the blasphemers, and the soul-murderer, from sadder, yea from all bodily punishment, and not free him that destroyes the body also. See: , *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience Tending to Resolve Doubts Moved by Mr. John Goodwin, John Baptist, Dr. Jer. Taylor, the Belgick Arminians, Socinians, and Other Authors Contending for Lawlesse Liberty, or Licentious Toleration of Sects and Heresies. / By Samuel Rutherford Professor of Divinity in the University of St. Andrews*, Early English Books Online (London: R.I. for Andrew Crook, and are to be sold at his shop, at the signe of the Green Dragon in St. Pauls Church-yard, 1649), 191.

⁹ 2 Chronicles 26.16-23

possibilities, none of which have obtained the status of instrumentality in cancelling worship services. But there is another point to be made here. We ought to make use of the earthly means at our disposal, and ought never to be presumptuous as was said above. But further, we may never rest in these means in the absolute sense. Distancing, refraining from handshaking and hugging, staying home, ordering groceries online and having them delivered, wearing respiratory masks, etc. will not make one hair of your head either white or black, and will not add one cubit to your stature.¹⁰ We may and should use means of protection, but this is not our defense—our defense comes from the Lord. We have listed reasonable measures above. It is however an unreasonable measure to cancel worship services, contrary to the command of the Lord, for an unknown outcome. Offending the Lord by meddling with His worship is consistently condemned in Scripture, as well as trusting in earthly means, even lawful ones.¹¹ It is an aggravation of the systematic violation of the 4th Commandment, prevalent in the visible Church of the 21st century, to cease holding worship services among the well because this “could save lives.” As the people of God have trodden upon the Lord’s Day with their own recreations in violation of Isaiah 58.13-14, so now they add to that the aggravation of not worshipping the Lord publicly, thereby disobeying His direct command while trusting in earthly means that have no certainty of outcome. We must not think that this is a course the Lord will bless. We have ceased serving Him contrary to His command to meet, we have aggravated violations of the 4th Commandment, and we have committed idolatry in believing that earthly means will prevent disease not trusting in the Lord instead. It is at least a novel application of 6th Commandment responsibility to forbid asymptomatic and otherwise healthy people to meet for worship. At best, during the days when the plague contributed to the deaths of nearly half of the population of Europe with a mortality rate of anywhere from 50 to 100%, it was still debatable whether or not Civil Magistrates had the authority to forbid Church services for those who were well. Suddenly, without debate, without question, we accept the supposition that closing our Churches will “save lives,” and dutifully heed the Magistrate’s cancellation of our assemblies. So, while grocery, hardware, convenience, and liquor stores remain open, Churches are closed to “save lives.” Surely this is a high offense in the face of the Living God, who calls upon His people, every Sabbath Day, to worship Him. If the ever-changing numbers, statistics, models, and predictions have taught us anything, it is that God’s Word is the alone and sure foundation upon which we must build our lives in obedience before Him, and rest our health and well-being both in this life, and for the one to come.

7. The Failure of the Church to Understand the Deprivation the Lord has Brought in this Malady

The Prophet Amos speaks to the northern kingdom, Israel, in the days of her idolatry before the fall of Samaria, and has some hard things to say, as well as some comforts. The Lord begins the third chapter by reminding them of His grace and kindness toward them in several particulars: He brought them out of Egypt, He yet considers them His people, He yet has a special familial relation to them, and He continues His fatherly chastisement upon them. These are all indicative of the gracious dealing the Lord maintained even with His wayward people. As Reformed Christians, inheritors of the doctrines of the Bible that formed the basis of the Protestant Reformation, we might look around the landscape of the visible Church and see much declension from our Reformation/Biblical heritage. Yet the Lord still speaks to His people in His Word, declaring in Amos 3.1-8 that it is He who has roared in the city. There is no evil that befalls the Church except that God has brought this to pass. And, one of the things that the Lord has done currently is to close down a majority of the Churches. As we began this testimony we spoke of the strangeness of the day, the unexpectedness of the effects upon the Churches. How can we fail to see that this is of the Lord? There are two places in the Scriptures where the Lord speaks to His people of ceasing from worship for their insincerity, hard-heartedness, and perversion of His service: Isaiah 1.10-15, and Malachi 1.6-14. How can the Church fail to see, and why are there so few voices that are proclaiming repentance for the Church, regarding the perversion of the Lord’s worship, and her not keeping the Lord’s Day holy? When the Lord so dramatically, counter to expectation, shuts His Churches, shall the ministers and elders continue to cry, “**peace, peace?**”¹² Or, ought they not to “**Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgressions, and the house of Jacob their sins.**”¹³ This near-immediate change to a substandard alternative, and the celebration of it, the failure to call out the falling away from our Reformation standards of worship and Sabbath-keeping, coupled with the advertisement of “getting back to normal” as quickly as possible reveal our stopped ears and blind eyes to the repentance and reformation we need in our Churches presently, which Lord has made known to us by “shutting the doors.” Will we have ears to hear? As it was in the northern kingdom, the Lord is still speaking kindly, seeing that these chastisements are

¹⁰ Matthew 6.22-34

¹¹ 2 Chronicles 16.12; See also Westminster Larger Catechism, Question and Answer 105

¹² Jeremiah 6.14

¹³ Isaiah 58.1

certainly less than our sins deserve—but we must have eyes to see and ears to hear.¹⁴ Sadly, we seem still to be groping in the darkness.¹⁵

8. Some Pastoral Observations and Implications

The harm currently being done to our ecclesiastical estate is difficult to quantify. Others may have different concerns, we are voicing some of ours here. Perhaps the Lord will make use of these and the concerns of others, and be gracious to us, that by the publishing of these concerns we may, by His grace helping us, avoid some of these pitfalls.

1. The first is a general declension of commitment to regular attendance on public worship. Times of disruption undermine religious conviction for many. If one's home Church calls two worship services each Lord's Day, the temptation, when so many neighbors, friends, and relatives are skipping Church all together, is to decline from that practice by settling for one service, or even to allow the general stress of a disrupted society to triumph over one's commitment to public worship and serving the Lord, and missing Church altogether. The irony here is that public worship holds out the best remedies to be found for the stress and worry of this life, against this tendency to isolate and keep one's own counsel, and toward finding mutual encouragement and commitment in the physical gathering of the saints.
2. The second observation is a general declension in the perceived efficacy and spiritual utility of public worship. We have received several queries from those looking for a Church home, and in these queries a new question has emerged, "Do you live-stream your services?" There are, in our estimation, many who would add this to the list of their "must-haves" for their home Church. And, because Churches compete for membership, like businesses, this will become a new offering, finding its place on the Church's website, and sadly it will, we believe, usurp the place of in-person worship for many professing Christians. While the medium itself may not be the culprit here, in order rightly to be used, great care must be exercised by the Church so that it does not become a spiritually unhealthy crutch, and push out the Biblical duties of corporate worship, visiting the sick, bewailing the deprivation of the public worship, and cultivating true Biblical unity through face-to-face contact with God's people.
3. A third observation has to do with how we begin to look upon one another. We are all becoming sensitized to the threat of infection, becoming more inclined to draw back from one another, rather than offer that hand, those outstretched arms, that holy kiss, to our brothers and sisters in the Lord, yet another indication from Scripture that ours is a social religion.¹⁶ Instead of anticipating encouragement from one another, we are developing fear toward one another during this time of isolation. It is not as severe, but it is of the same species as the tender and delicate woman of Deuteronomy 28.54-57, where we begin to see one another as objects—"petri dishes" or "infectors"—rather than as brothers and sisters, looking with an evil eye, in suspicion at every snuffle, cough, and sneeze. We must take precautions against these temptations, trust the Lord with our health, and be ready to return to the time when we can hold out that arm of encouragement, greeting one another and living before God in hearty love and friendship rather than objectivizing each other.
4. A fourth observation is that if we have surrendered our worship services so easily in the face of this disease, what will happen if things are worse? What if the Lord sends another disease similar in mortality to the plague? Will we hole up in our homes for fear? Will we trust and rest in earthly means to keep us safe? Will our spiritual duties be the first to go by the boards? We are afraid that this response speaks to a great spiritual weakness in the visible Church, and it behooves us to call for a reordering of our priorities, seeking first the Kingdom of God¹⁷, setting our affection upon Christ in the heavens,¹⁸ and not minding earthly things.¹⁹ As it appears now, the great things the Lord has given us for our spiritual health and security have been in many cases the first things to fall casualty to this disruption, whereas they ought to be the last. As the Puritan preacher John Rogers once exclaimed, **"Lord, whatever thou dost to us, take not thy Bible from us; kill our children, burn our houses, destroy our goods; only spare us thy Bible, only take not away thy Bible."**²⁰ For our purposes here, we may declare the same

¹⁴ John 12.37-43

¹⁵ Isaiah 59.9-15

¹⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5.26

¹⁷ Matthew 6.33

¹⁸ Colossians 3.1-3

¹⁹ Philippians 3.17-21

²⁰ J. I. Packer, *"The Puritans as Interpreters of Scripture,"* in *Puritan Papers: 1956-1959*, ed. J. I. Packer, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 192.

concerning the great privilege of worshipping the Lord publicly with His people. If we have run with the footmen and have been wearied, what shall it be when the horsemen come?²¹

5. A fifth observation has to do with the Church at large, and her reaction to this deprivation and disruption. As was said above, this public worship belongs to the Lord, and it is the privilege of His people to offer it unto Him. We might then look not for a “business as usual” attitude when our Churches are shuttered, but calls for fasting, weeping, repentance, self-examination, and making our voice to be heard on high.²² We praise the Lord for those few voices that are calling for these spiritual and appropriate measures. But we must also ask, why are there not many more men of Issachar that know what Israel ought to do in our day? In too many places the prayer requests have swelled in asking the Lord for health, protection of health, protection for health-care workers, vaccines and other cures, comfort for those who have suffered loss, for those who have lost employment, for jobs and provision, etc. Now while all of these are good things to pray for, these earthly concerns ought to take a secondary place to spiritual and heavenly concerns—that the Lord has shut the doors of His Churches, that His people are prevented from offering that “pure offering”²³ through Jesus Christ, that Gospel preaching is curtailed, and that Godly conferences on the Lord’s Day are but a memory. The prophet Joel calls for a fast after he has prophesied of the Lord’s chastisement to come, not yet present.²⁴ If it is the prophetic example to fast over judgments threatened, what of judgments already here? Yet, there are so few voices calling for fasting, for weeping, and for repentance. The spiritual maladies in the Church have existed for some time, yet we have not fasted. The Lord has sent some judgment, certainly not as severe as our sins deserve, and still we have not fasted and repented. *Oh Lord! Be pleased to send a greater spiritual sensitivity to thy people, that we do not return to the status quo!* The Prophet Amos speaks of a people that did not receive the Lord’s judgments rightly, not returning to Him in them.²⁵ We must learn to hear the trumpets of warning the Lord sends.

As we close this testimony, there are some things for which to be thankful. In Amos 3.7-8 the Lord declares, **“Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?”** The Lord has given us, in His Word, the right way to understand and receive His current chastisements. Has He placed His finger upon our worship, and Sabbath keeping? Has He struck against our health and earthly estate? Has He exposed our trust in the earthly means of governments, medical science and medicines, economic prosperity, and pragmatism, these “idols of the heart?”²⁶ We believe He has done all these things, among many others. Let us then hear the rod, and Him who has appointed it!²⁷ If the Lord has sent these things, there is yet time, and there is yet hope for the repentance He calls for. As the Prophet Joel declared in calling for a fast, **“Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?”** We can have confidence that our God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in mercy and truth, and will repent Him of the evil, if we turn to Him with all our heart. One final word: The Psalmist writes of a people becoming complacent precisely because the Lord is merciful, in Psalm 85. The Psalmist praises the Lord’s goodness, asks for repentance, and a withdrawing of the Lord’s hand of chastisement (verses 1-7). In verse 8 the confidence of the Psalmist in the Lord’s mercy is displayed, but then there is this warning: **“I will hear what God the LORD will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints: but let them not turn again to folly.”** These are wise words. We ought not to pray for a return to the status quo. The Lord has made His voice to be heard in the city—*O Lord! Let thy people hear, and let them not return to folly!*

²¹ Jeremiah 12.1-6

²² Isaiah 58.3-7

²³ Malachi 1.11

²⁴ Joel 2.1-17

²⁵ Amos 4.6-13

²⁶ Ezekiel 14.1-11

²⁷ Micah 6.9