

# Is It Biblical to Stop Churches From Meeting in Person During Pandemic?

As thousands of protesters on foot and in vehicles converged recently on Michigan's capital to rally against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-at-home orders in the state (as reported here), many are asking the same question: "Is restricting movement constitutional?" More importantly, is it biblical? This is a critical question as more protests begin to form across the country, such as the ones in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Los Angeles.

Others, far more gifted than me, have written extensively on this topic, but I'd like to share some thoughts from a pastoral perspective. First, I love America—I love how God has blessed us. I read the writings of the Founding Fathers and the Puritans often. My heart beats for restoration and renewal. Second, my heart is to honor and obey our elected officials when they are trying to honor God. Scripture is clear here on black and white issues. Third, it's important that Christians respond in wisdom versus reacting in pride.

I did not agree with some of the pastors initially who defied the government. This was a public health emergency. As a society, we are called to take certain steps to try to curb the infection rate and minimize death, minimize people getting sick and love your neighbor—we should be setting an example of that. Martin Luther gave examples of this during the plague that hit his area in the 1500s.

I don't think it was a First Amendment issue, at least not initially, because the stay-at-home order appeared to be short-term and very specific. I also believe that reacting can damage our witness if decisions are not bathed in prayer and

carefully considered. It can demonstrate a spirit of rebellion and send a wrong message across the landscape of America. Civil rights must be viewed in the context of social responsibility, such as, "Will exercising my 'right' hurt others?" The government was not saying that we can no longer preach God's Word—that would be a game-changer. Actually, the reverse happened. Many churches saw a huge spike in online views. For example, within a month we had over 400,000 views of sermons on one media platform.

From my vantage point, leaders were saying, "Let's all pull back temporarily and see if we can curb this crisis." But then the question of what is an "essential" establishment comes up. I have seen vacuum repair stores and doughnut shops open while churches remain closed. That can't continue. I know that some in our congregation have gone back to destructive addictions and marriages are on the verge of divorce—streaming services and on-screen messages are not going to solve those issues. We need to be together. God's house needs to be a place of wholeness and restoration. Churches must not be handcuffed much longer. Many experts agree that with respiratory diseases, the one thing that stops them is herd immunity. Isolation can actually work against us. So, are we doing more damage by staying at home?

An interesting dynamic, as well as a transition, is taking place—dynamic in that some of our leaders are not truly seeking God, so decisions are made in fear and guided by anxiety. Granted, COVID-19 is a threat, but we must seek God wholeheartedly and unconditionally if we truly desire wisdom. And there is a transition in that it's been over a month since many churches shut their doors in compliance. When does compliance turn into complacency, and when is it overkill? That is the million-dollar question.

We have been very compliant and will honor certain dates, but as this drags on, understand that we will need to meet again to fellowship, pray and seek God. We don't know what this will

look like when we do come back together, but maintaining 6 feet to pray for the sick may be an impossibility. Jesus laid hands on the sick and the leprous. I'm not implying that we become rebels and do what we want to do; there is a fine line between presumption and faith, but at some point, the church must be the church. God-given rights must be maintained.

My conviction on this day, mid-April 2020, is that we continue to support local ordinances and hold them to their commitment to reopen portions in May. During this time, we must humble ourselves as we fast and pray for direction. Are you doing this? I don't think anyone should protest until they have first sought the heart of God, and no Christian should incite unbiblical rebellion. By the looks of things, an extended time of prayer and fasting would benefit most of us. We can't sit at home as intoxicated gluttons cleaning our guns and expect that God will speak to us. Wake up, America, and humble yourself. Are you "reacting" in anger or "responding" in wisdom?

As a personal observation, many people protesting seem to be very prideful and lack a mighty filling of the Spirit. We shouldn't follow those who aren't following God. Granted, this doesn't apply to everyone protesting (you may find me at one of these events at some point). It's just a general observation to point out the desperate need for humility and brokenness in those calling themselves "Christians." Their snarky, arrogant comments are disheartening; their lack of love is evident.

As I said in a recent article, in addition to bringing back the economy, we must constantly turn to God and His Word. Psalm 119:67 reminds us of an essential truth: "Before I was afflicted I wandered, but now I keep Your word." Affliction via difficulties, challenges and obstacles can lead us back to God. In one fell swoop, COVID-19 has dethroned many of our idols. We are finally realizing what is really important. In this sense, I am incredibly encouraged, since this is fertile

ground for revival.

Revival thrives in brokenness, repentance, humility and passionate prayer. I am concerned that America is fearful but not repentant, anxious but not surrendered to God, worried but not worshipful and confused but not diligently seeking Him. What will it take to draw us back to God? Like the Israelites in Joel's time, we must change course and cry out to Him in repentance with prayer and fasting. God heard His people then, and He will hear us now—once again pouring out His Spirit on a dry and thirsty land, for whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Joel 2:25-32).