

Why We Made the Difficult Decision to Close Our Church During the COVID-19 Outbreak

“Cowards!” That was the harsh accusation made by some who’d made the decision to remain open. While others decided that it must be a lack of faith on our part.

Simply put, it was neither.

And I’m guessing for the majority of the churches who chose to close during this pandemic it was for neither one of those reasons.

We preach the gospel around the world, in prisons, on the streets and in pretty dangerous places. We stand firmly on faith and preach healing everywhere we go, so we didn’t feel like were operating in fear or being faithless.

For us, as I’m sure for pastors around the country, the decision to close our doors did not come easy. It was one that we wrestled over, prayed over and searched the Scripture over. We also sought council from the medical field and from those over us in the Lord. We’ve never navigated through a pandemic before. We realized this was a decision that would most likely be judged harshly no matter what we chose.

Our knee-jerk reaction was to stay open! To believe for protection and stand on Psalms 91. We know that God is able to protect and keep us—to keep all plagues away from us. We’ve seen God perform great miracles, heal cancers, and even raise the dead while we prayed the name of Jesus and spoke life.

Besides, there’s separation of church and state, right? The government cannot tell us we can’t meet with our congregation! It is within our constitutional rights to have church if we

choose to, we argued.

But then something happened. Disney World closed.

Seriously.

We're Floridians. Disney World has only closed seven times since it first opened in 1971. But it was closing both in compliance with our president's request and in an effort to stop a highly contagious virus that is deadly to the elderly and immunocompromised. Other major corporations also began to close in an effort to flatten the curve. Sporting events were ceasing all activities, and gatherings and arenas were locking up.

Yet we were contemplating remaining open. And then it occurred to us, what message was that sending to our community?

Would our neighborhood and our city believe we didn't care about their well-being and the health of their families? Would they understand we were standing in faith on Psalms 91 or would they believe us to be irresponsible? Even blame us for spreading the virus?

Yet closing our doors could have a devastating effect on our church—the spiritual growth of the people, the finances, everything could be affected.

But Philippians 2:3-4 instructs us, "Let nothing be done out of strife or conceit, but in humility let each esteem the other better than himself. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

And of course, Jesus tells us to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

How could we best love our neighbors?

The amount of people who could safely gather began to dwindle down and the CDC and President Trump issued a statement

banning gatherings of more than 10 people. Doctor Tim Hill, the general overseer of the Church of God (our denomination), held a livestream with consultants standing in support of the mandate. We'd received directive from the two governing bodies we pay allegiance to, support and are accountable to.

And Paul tells us explicitly in the book of Romans to submit to the authority God has set over us: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are appointed by God" (Rom. 13:1).

We felt like we knew what we needed to do. What God was directing us to do: Submit to authority. To honor both our government and denomination.

We learned something about honoring, even when you don't believe honor is deserved, while filming *Hope Has A Name*. In one of the sections we were filming in a nation that is closed to the gospel. In spite of everything done to the person we interviewed, she was careful not to say anything to dishonor or shame the government. Her words stick with me: "We were not sent here to uncover but to love. Love covers a multitude of sins."

The Scripture thrown at us in opposing argument from well-meaning believers was from Acts 5:29 to obey God rather than men. This was concerning. Were we failing in our stand, in our faith, in our commitment to serve the Lord God above all else? Were we obeying man rather than God? The wrestling match was on again.

The Lord directed us to the entirety of that Scripture, which says, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? Yet now you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring on us this Man's blood" (Acts 5:28).

So, then it came down to these questions:

–Was the government telling us we could not preach the gospel? No. In fact, Facebook and other streaming services are having issues keeping up with the demand being placed upon them on Sundays. We were simply asked not to gather in groups of more than 10.

–Was the government singling out the church and Christians? No. Mosques are closed. Synagogues are closed. Theme parks are closed. Bars and restaurants are closed. Everyone else wasn't being allowed to stay open while the church was being forced to close.

If that were happening (and that may come unless we have an awakening, a reformation, a healing of our land), then we would dig in our heels and obey God rather than man. For now, we have a man in office (appointed by God) who has been sympathetic and supportive of Christians. We felt we should be supportive of the work he's trying to do in stopping this deadly virus.

So, we chose to close the doors not out of cowardice, but for honor. Not out of fear, but for love. Following the arrest of Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne, while we were completing this article, many states including Florida exempted churches, recommending they follow public health guidelines.

For the time being, our church will remain closed, out of concern for the safety of our family, church family and neighbors. Meanwhile, we will honor those who open their doors and hope to receive the same honor in return. {eoa}

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