

# “THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

## Congregational Worship and COVID-19

By Joe R. Price

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” So the saying goes. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9).

The present COVID-19 pandemic reminds us of valuable spiritual lessons we may have taken for granted until this moment of crisis. For instance, God, in His providence, continues to furnish our needs so that our faith does not turn into anxiety (Matt. 6:24-34). Also, while we have free will with its choices and consequences, we still live under the unexpected reality of *“time and chance”* (Eccl. 9:11-12). Such times warn us to turn to God with all our heart (Joel 2:12-14). And, we call to mind that *“Thy will be done”* must be our north star as we navigate life (Jas. 4:13-17).

Even as 9-11 brought new travel screenings and requirements, this event is likely to produce its share of social changes as we move beyond the temporary “stay at home” orders. Social or physical distancing may continue to impact going to large crowd events, restaurants, doctor’s offices, etc. Education continues to be affected. Sure, online study courses have been around for a long time. Now, online learning has increased to accommodate the stay at home orders prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Chris Reykdal) recently said to expect distance learning to be in place “for quite a long time” (“State schools chief: Expect to use distance learning ‘for quite a long time,’” James Drew, The Bellingham Herald, April 6, 2020). Restaurants are introducing no-touch food delivery systems to prevent food contamination. Tele-med services are on the increase and may become a more standardized way of visiting doctors in the future. These are just some of the innovations and changes happening as we pass through this temporary crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis is also affecting churches of Christ. Many have temporarily rearranged or canceled worship assemblies. Online Bible classes have multiplied to fill this space. Each congregation is making these temporary decisions for the safety of its members (much as they do when extreme weather prevents safe passage to its place of assembly).

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a surge of internet activity among brethren. Most congregations have been providing online sermons, Bible study, and teaching material on their websites for years. During this time, many brethren have turned to additional online methods of communication like Facetime, Skype, Messenger, and internet conferencing services like Zoom to facilitate teaching God’s word.

Perhaps it will be helpful to review the meaning of “virtual” within the context of the internet and computer world. Virtual is defined as “being something in essence or effect, though not actually or in fact” is from mid-15c., probably via sense of “capable of producing a certain effect” (early 15c.). Computer sense of “not physically existing but made to appear by software” is attested from 1959” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* says of virtual computing, “not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so.” It also notes that to “virtualize” is to “convert to a computer-generated simulation of reality” (Ibid).

*Merriam-Webster* corroborates the definition of virtual as “being on or simulated on a computer or computer network...occurring or existing primarily online... of, relating to, or existing within a virtual reality” (*merriam-webster.com*).

By definition, the virtual world is simulated; it does not physically exist. It is not an actual world. The internet is a medium (a network) by which we communicate through computer-generated codes (and many things that go way over my head)! But, I do know this: I have not changed my location when I am online. I am at my keyboard in front of a monitor (or using a smartphone or some other internet device). I am in virtual reality (the virtual world), but I am actually (really) still in a physical or material location.

That said, our purpose here is to issue a gentle warning to avoid letting the temporary become the norm. Just as our country and the world must return to regular activities, so also must local churches. As the virtual world becomes more and more useful and used, we should be careful not to change the nature of the local church of Christ as we use the bandwidth of cyberspace. In other words, we must not take Bible authority for granted as we used the internet. Even in the virtual world, we must have Bible authority for whatever we say and do (Col. 3:17).

The Bible is a book of patterns to which we must conform and hold fast (2 Tim. 1:13; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess. 2:15). By doing so, we obey the commands of Christ's apostles (2 Thess. 3:4; 1 Cor. 11:1).

Holding fast to Bible patterns is another way of referring to having and applying Bible authority (God's authority). Just as God told Moses to build the tabernacle and its furnishings "*according to the pattern*" shown him on Mt. Sinai, we are charged not to alter the gospel of Christ (Heb. 8:5; Gal. 1:6-9).

***When we follow God's word, we will hold fast to the pattern of work for the local church that He approves and blesses.*** For example, God commanded King Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites as God's act of just punishment for their sins against Israel (1 Sam. 15:1-3). God regarded Saul's failure to follow His revealed will (His pattern) as disobedience and rebellion (1 Sam. 15:9-11, 22-23). Saul changed the nature of his conduct into rebellion when he failed to follow God's pattern. As a result, God rejected Saul as king.

***The New Testament pattern for the work of the local church is spiritual.*** The local church's work is evangelism, edification, and benevolence to needy Christians (cf. Acts 2:42-46; 4:32-35; 6:1-7; 1 Thess. 1:8; et al.). When we change the pattern of work for the local church, we have changed the nature of that work into disobedient rebellion against God. Surely, God is no more pleased with us when we change His pattern of work for the local church as He was with Saul when he did not follow God's command.

***When we follow God's word, we hold fast to the pattern of worship for the local church that He approves and blesses.*** For example, the fire Nadab and Abihu offered God was "*strange*" because God "*had not commanded it*" (Lev. 10:1). They changed (corrupted) the nature of worship when they offered unauthorized fire. Their worship became "*strange*" (profane, foreign) and unacceptable to God.

***The New Testament reveals a pattern for the worship of the local church.*** Local churches assembled to pray, to sing, to eat the Lord's Supper, to give as they have prospered, and to hear the word of God (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; 1 Cor. 16:2). When we change the pattern of worship for the local church, we have changed the nature of that worship into "*strange fire*" that God has not commanded. Surely, God is no more pleased with us when we change His pattern of worship as He was with Nadab and Abihu when they changed the fire He commanded.

***When we follow God's word, we hold fast to the pattern of congregational worship that He approves and blesses.*** Each Christian is responsible for his or her worship. And, God has provided the congregational arrangement for us to express our individual worship responsibilities. For example, the church at Corinth came "*together...as a church...in one place...to eat the Lord's Supper*" (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20). (Unfortunately, their worship became corrupted, which the apostle addressed.) Each Christian was to eat the Supper while gathered together (1 Cor. 11:23-34). The Lord arranged the assembling of ourselves together as a feature of regular worship (Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Cor. 14:23, 26; Acts 20:7). And so, when we come together as a church in one place, we are following the New Testament pattern of congregational worship.

During this period of temporary suspension of worship assemblies, we should realize we are not attempting to reconstitute the congregational worship assembly when we arrange a virtual Bible study online. We are indi-

viduals in different places, not in one place, communicating via the internet. The internet is no more an actual **“place”** we gather any more than the old telephone party line was an actual place we met. Both the party line and an internet conference call are forms of communication individuals use at the same time when they are in different places. We may indeed “meet” on the phone or online to converse, but we are not in **“one place.”** When we **“come together to eat,”** it is contrasted with and different from activities done **“at home”** (1 Cor. 11:33-34).

God’s pattern reveals some acts of worship are designed exclusively for when the church comes together in one place. The Lord’s Supper and the weekly contribution are of this nature (1 Cor. 11:17-22, 33-34; 16:2). Other acts of worship (singing, praying, and listening to the God word) are included in, but not limited to, a congregational context (Jas. 5:13-16; Acts 20:20).

We understand and practice this when a Christian is sick and unable to attend the worship assembly. We do not take the Lord’s Supper to them, because the word of God places the Supper in the assembly of the local church. We do not take the collection plate to the sick Christian, either.

Let us remember that honorable intentions do not equate to God’s approval (Bible authority). There was a time when many Christians would take the Lord’s Supper to brethren who were shut-in in nursing homes. Though well-intended, this practice overlooks the congregational arrangement for the Supper. And, perhaps unwittingly, it reflected an undue elevation of the Supper to a near sacramental status as the most essential part of worship.

Just here, it helps us to recall King Saul’s impatient disobedience in 1 Samuel 13. When Samuel did not arrive at Gilgal in the time expected, Saul went ahead and offered a burnt offering. When Samuel came and questioned Saul, he replied by describing the circumstances he faced, then explained, **“Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering”** (1 Sam. 13:11-12). But in truth, what Saul did (however good his intentions) was foolish disobedience (1 Sam. 13:13).

Good intentions do not equal Bible authority and God’s approval. In our zeal to actively maintain a connection with our brethren through online Bible studies and prayers while going through the temporary suspension of our assemblies, let us be careful that we do not change the nature of God’s pattern of congregational worship.

After this current situation passes, it will still be a violation of God’s word to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Arranging a virtual worship service at the lake (or at home) instead of coming together as a church will not suffice (Heb. 10:24-25). If this is incorrect, then let us simply abandon the actual assembling of ourselves and transition to virtual assembling and virtual congregational worship. Or, if there is no distinction, then let us provide a “tradition” worship assembly (so as not to offend the older, more traditional brethren), and also arrange a “virtual” worship assembly (for those who are more comfortable with a new reality). But, to do these things changes the nature of the worship assembly. When we change the nature of congregational worship from actual to virtual, it amounts to offering God **“strange fire”** that He has not commanded.

Please understand, we are not charging anyone with deliberately and willfully changing the nature of worship. Not at all. By all means, we are thrilled to see many Christians having online Bible studies and sharing video sermons to spread the gospel and edify the saints. There is a needed place for such worthy endeavors. As we do so, may we be cautious and not allow our temporary, virtual practice to redefine (or replace) the actual practice of congregational worship.

We pray for a swift reversal of this present crisis, for the sake of saving lives and so that Christians may soon come together in one place for the congregational worship God designed (Heb. 10:24-25). ***The Spirits Sword***, April 12, 2020. ■

**Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM**

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