

# On OHBC Church Services for the Foreseeable Future

As preventative and safety health measures expand, rightly, to address the dangers and spread of COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease-2019), two foundational responses from the church of the Lord Jesus Christ are paramount:

1. **First, that we remain calm and hopeful instead of spreading fear and creating panic.** The most frequent command in all of Scripture is some form of this: “Do not be afraid (do not fear, fear not, be not afraid, etc.)!” Then there are *semantic equivalents*, as well, like: “Let not your hearts be troubled ...” (John 14:1), “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled ...” (1 Pet 3:14), “... do not be anxious about your life ... do not be anxious about tomorrow” (Matt 6:25, 34), “... do not be alarmed ...” (Mark 13:7; 16:6), “... do not be terrified” (Luke 21:9), “... do not be anxious about anything ...” (Phil 4:6), and so on. Taking those commands to heart sets us squarely within the framework of three life-shaping truths:
  - a. **The truth about the kind of world we live in**, namely, fallen, sin-warped, dark, dangerous, high-risk, “with devils filled,” as Luther puts it, threatening “to undo us.” Any view of the world that fails to take this biblical reality into consideration is foolishly Pollyanna-ish and delusional. On this count, then, there seems the greatest reason to “be afraid!”
  - b. **But there’s also the truth about the kind of God we love and serve**, namely, sovereign, good, wise, all-knowing, all-powerful, “the Alpha and the Omega ... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:4), who has life in himself, and whose saving purposes in time and eternity are unstoppable, “... declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose ...’” (Isa 46:10), thus the God who says to us with complete authority, “Do not be afraid!”
  - c. **And so there’s the truth about the kind of life our Lord calls us to live in such a world**, namely, believing, trusting, resting, hopeful, loving, one-another-oriented, other-directed, and “not afraid!”

There will *always* be something to fear, to be afraid of, to be anxious about. And the truth is that the less grounded we are in the Word of God, and the more our eyes are distracted by situations and circumstances instead of fixed on God as he has revealed himself, the more vulnerable we will be to fear, anxiety, depression, and despair. Hear the Word of the Lord: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1:17–18).

2. **Secondly, that we exercise proper leadership that is both biblically wise and practically circumspect.** “For [because],” Paul writes, “God did not give us a spirit of fear [δελίας, *deilias*; *faintheartedness, cowardice, a failure of spirit caused by fear, something Philo defined as “a more serious disease than those which afflict the body”*] but [a strong contrast] of power [capability] and love and self-control [*sober-mindedness, good sense, prudence*]” (2 Tim 1:7).

True, there are tremendous challenges for us here, and the tasks are daunting. Yet, we have *power* for living the Christian life, for battling with temptation and sin and doubt and despair, and also for enduring, and going on whatever the conditions—power to hold on and hold out!

We also have been given “a spirit of ... love.” That may seem odd, at first, in the context of addressing our fears, but one of the main causes of our fear is *self-love, self-concern, self-protection*. Fearful people are really people who’re absorbed with *themselves*. And one of the best cures for *self* is to become absorbed in *others*, so that we have no time to think about ourselves. The spirit of love gives us love to God, which delivers us from the spirit of *self-interest* and *self-concern* and frees us to love others as ourselves.

And we’ve further been given a “the spirit of ... a sound mind”—of self-control, discipline, and sensible behavior, a spirit of wisdom and a balanced mind. This truth means that we need neither *overreact* to the circumstances nor *ignore* them. We’re not called to fear or to foolishness, but to a measured, biblically wise, and practically circumspect response to the matter at hand.

### **The Facts as of Friday, 13 MARCH 2020**

Here is the latest confirmed information that is available concerning COVID-19 and its threat and impact:

1. For most people, the immediate risk of becoming seriously ill from the virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to be low (CDC).
2. Someone who has completed quarantine or has been released from isolation does not pose a risk of infection to other people (CDC).
3. There are simple things you can do to help keep yourself and others healthy (CDC):
  - a. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; going to the bathroom; and before eating or preparing food.
  - b. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
  - c. Stay home when you are sick.
  - d. Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
4. You can help stop COVID-19 by knowing the signs and symptoms (CDC):
  - a. Fever
  - b. Cough

- c. Shortness of breath
5. As of 13 MARCH 2020, five new countries/territories/areas (Jersey, Réunion, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Cuba, and Guyana) have reported cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours.
  6. The U.S. has 1,264 total confirmed cases, 277 of which are new.
  7. Public school systems in Georgia, including Cobb County, have canceled school for the foreseeable future. Universities are following suit, as are athletic and entertainment venues.
  8. “Social distancing” seems to be the only feasible solution to stopping or at least slowing the spread of the virus at this time.
  9. As of 12 MARCH 2020, Georgia had 31 confirmed and presumed positive cases of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

### **The Way Ahead**

At this time, and in accord with a good many pastors and churches for whom I have the greatest respect, we will be suspending all of our public church gatherings, not out of fear, but out of biblical wisdom, practical circumspection, and an abundance of caution. As we have heard, those most at risk are people who are over 60 years old and also have some other chronic/underlying health issues, which includes quite a few of our church members. While nearly every other venue for public gathering is taking necessary precautions, the *last* thing the church should do is become the epicenter for the spread and impact of this disease. The better way is to take the same precautions, but then go *beyond* them in our unselfish love for and service/ministry to those who are suffering, endangered, and otherwise negatively impacted by the virus and the restrictions it has imposed on society for now.

We will also be exploring alternatives for “gathering” (digitally, virtually, on social media platforms) to encourage one another and to hear the Word of the Lord. And further, please remember that our financial obligations and needs go on during this time and make every effort to continue giving to the Lord for the work he’s called us to in these strange days (giving through online banking, stopping by or mailing to the church your tithe/offering, etc.).

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (Ephesians 6:10).

Pastor Spencer