May 11, 2020

Greetings, church family! I pray that each of you are doing well and staying healthy. These have been trying times and I pray that though we have been apart, you have been encouraged by our online services, devotions, emails, and phone calls that you have received. I miss each of you so much and I am eager to see you soon and worship the Lord Jesus Christ *together* as soon as possible. As we look toward returning to in person gatherings at First Baptist there is much to consider. As your pastor, I pray that you know this decision, as well as the details of it, did not come in haste or without much prayer, conversation, and wise counsel. As you might imagine the decision of when to open and how to open are critical and there are many factors that must be considered. Below, I want to share with you a few things that I have considered in the process of determining when / how to best re-gather.

***Biblical Instruction***

Of course, the place that we must start is asking the question, *how would the Bible instruct us on this matter?* To that end, scripture has much to say. On the one hand, it calls believers to gather together regularly as the church in places like Hebrews 10: 24- 25:

 *24And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Still, there are times when the Lord providentially puts restrictions in place that limit or hinder our gathering - whether it be something like a health matter, military deployment, or even a global pandemic. We can be assured that it is okay and not sinful disobedience if we cannot meet for a season.

Additionally, there is the clear instruction from scripture on how the believer is to relate to those who are in authority over them, for example, in places like Romans 13: 1:

*“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”*

To be clear, this does not mean that we give a blanket approval to anything that the authorities placed over us demand - certainly when / if they seek to interfere with our free worship of the Lord, the pattern of scripture in places like Acts 4: 18-20 teaches us that they are not to be regarded:

***1****8So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”.*

The challenge of course comes when the answer doesn’t seem so black and white. How do we honor those who have been placed in authority by God over us and at the same time enjoy the privilege of the sanctuary and gathering together as a body? This is the decision that churches, pastors, and specifically myself have been weighing and praying through in order best to answer.

***My own personal desire to see you***

Beyond this is my own desire to see our church together once again. To see you and your family. To worship with you - as we sing, give, pray, and are instructed by the Word of God together. I am thankful for the online outlets that we have had during this time but it is simply not the same; it is far less. I also miss seeing you in your home or visiting with you at church, laughing, sharing a meal, and serving together. I cannot wait to be together with you - all of you - again - as soon as possible.

***Love of Neighbor and Community Witness***

In unison with the above, there is another matter we must keep in mind as we determine when/how we will return to in person gatherings and that matter is *love of neighbor.* Jesus tells us in Mark 12 that this is the second greatest commandment.

*“Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.****30****And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’****31****The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself…’” Mark 12:29-31*

In this current context, I believe that loving our neighbor as ourselves means at least three things: The first is asking how can we best protect the vulnerable and at risk among our own church body and faith family? It means asking how and what process need to be in place when we resume in person gathering. Loving our neighbor means being willing to lay aside our preferences or own thoughts of best practice in order to serve those around us - our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers in the faith. It means understanding that the choice each person makes on when / how to return to in person gatherings in this time, is the *right choice* for them. Loving our neighbor as ourselves may mean doing something or not doing something that we ourselves may feel unnecessary for the sake of the comfort of another believer.

Secondly, loving our neighbor as ourselves means asking the question: What do our decisions about when / how we re-gather communicate to the neighbors of our church and our community at large? I don’t have to tell you that the issue of when to begin reopening the country is a polarizing one and while we may not agree with one approach or the other, as Christians we still must ask what our actions communicate to those around us - some of whom are the very ones we desperately want to reach with the gospel love of Jesus.

Lastly, loving our neighbor as ourselves means asking and praying to the Lord for wisdom on how to reach the neighbors of our church and our community at large with the gospel of Jesus. The last few months have shaken many and for some torn down false trusts placed in healthy, security, and prosperity. Our church needs to be ready to offer the only true solution available, the gospel of Jesus Christ. When / how we re-gather in order to engage those around us will be critical in our response.

***Concluding Thoughts***

Obviously, there is much that goes into this decision of when and how best to re-gather. As your pastor, I would like to ask you to do six things in light of all that we have said:

1. Pray for me and other leaders to have wisdom in our decision making and plan.
2. Be willing to be gracious with decisions made and practices to be implemented, even and especially if you disagree with any of them.
3. Please understand the procedures in place are meant to provide a safe, health conscious environment and seek to the best of our ability to be in line with federal and state requests. These policies are in no way meant to be unfriendly, stiff, or unwelcoming in any way 😊.
4. Hold onto to this plan and the next weeks loosely. As things continue to evolve in re-opening and as we learn what may or may not be best for our church, understand that this plan is temporary and fluid.
5. Be willing to lay down your preferences for love of neighbor.
6. Please evaluate your own health and comfort level as you make the decision on when to return. We would encourage anyone that may be in a vulnerable category to continue to take advantage of watching our services online.

Enclosed you will find a document outlining the “nuts and bolts” of our planned process and procedure for returning to in person service. We ask that you prayerfully consider each component as you make your decision on returning**.**

**In order to ensure that we have adequate spacing, please respond with your plans to attend and how many of your family will be attending with you to the church office at 502 477 8197 or email or email Pastor Chance** **fbctchance@gmail.com** **by Wednesday May 20, 2020.**

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Because He Lives,

Pastor Chance McConnell

Enclosed: Plan for Re-gathering