

How feasible is congregational worship during a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic?

O. S. Asaolu (asaolu@yahoo.com), Lagos, Nigeria. {March 28, 2020}

PREAMBLE

The issue of whether and how a local church could worship is raging at the moment (of writing) in various nations due to the prevailing COVID-19 disease or pandemic which is caused by [a novel CORONAVIRUS](#) or newly discovered variant known as SARS-CoV-2. It is a plague or pestilence caused by a pathogen which could be easily transmitted from one person unto another even when an infected person is *asymptomatic* (not showing symptoms). It normally manifests later as flu (influenza within 14 to 28 days) with other mild illness and could be critical in about 20% of those affected. For about 2%, it eventually leads to serious breathing problems and could be fatal especially the aged or those with other pre-existing medical conditions. Thus, it is best for everyone to be prayerful and cautious so as not to be exposed to it if possible and, to follow the recommended protocols if infected. This has made several governments recommend or impose some restrictions on human movement. These are described as ***partial or total lockdowns***; wherein citizens of a national territory may either only leave their homes for essential services/commodities or not go out of their homes at all, depending on the severity of the pandemic in various regions. In few lands, movements outside the home is restricted for weeks. Many governments have limited social gatherings to 20 or 10 or 2 and such persons are advised to stay at least 1.8m (6ft) from each other; termed Social Distance. Those suspected of infection are quarantined while the sick self-isolate or stay in hospital for treatment. Saints are particularly concerned now about the feasibility of coming together to worship as a church. We need to ascertain God's will and try to determine whether a contemplated course of action is scripturally authorized. FEAR NOT and fret not; let us pray for divine help and lean not on our own understanding as individuals, congregations and as nations. God will see us through and uphold us, He will make a way where there seems to be no way.

INTRODUCTION

The church consists of the saved (disciples who have obeyed the gospel of Christ) and the safe (children). It is the body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23). **“For the body is not one member, but many”** (1 Cor 12:14). As God's household we worship in spirit and in truth, which is wholeheartedly as Spirit-born creatures, based on God's word in the New Testament. Our worship is not fixated or confined to a particular geographical location.

John 4:19 *The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. 21 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. 22 Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. 23 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. 24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. 25 The woman saith unto him, I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things. 26 Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he.*

Gentile converts were neither required to be circumcised nor to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Paul wrote:

Colossians 2:10 *And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: 11 In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: 12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.*

Philippians 3:3 *For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.*

God not only cares for our spiritual state but for our total well-being (1 Thess 5:23), hence he wants us to be healthy (3 Jn 2) and to live securely in an orderly society, wherein government looks after the administration of justice. In religious matters, Christians are obligated to obey the leadership of their local assembly who keep the flock (Heb 13:17, 1 Thess 5:12-13). We just as everyone else in a country, are required to obey secular rulers whenever they make rules that do not oppose the word of God. The scenario in Acts 4-5 contrasts with the issue under consideration in Romans 13.

Acts 4:17 *But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name.*

18 And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.

19 But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.

20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done.

Acts 5:27 *And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them,*

28 Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

29 Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

Romans 13:1 *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*

2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:

4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.

6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

In Acts above, the societal and religious leaders opposed the public proclamation of the gospel so that people may not be converted. They wanted to retain their influence and position having crucified Jesus out of envy. In Romans, we are instructed to obey civil leaders who make laws for good governance and provide welfare, security etc. unto all as expected from societal taxes or levies. Only the evil doer need be afraid of such, which operates fairly.

By comparing the two scenarios with our condition now, kindly conscientious consider the following questions:

- Is the present situation of limited human movement or gathering born out of enmity to Christians or good governance desire unto citizens?
- Are the announced lockdowns during this pandemic targeted at Christians only?
- Is any individual of any religion, forbidden from worshipping his or her God?
- Are churches actually banned from preaching Christ?
- Are the restrictions on public gathering intended to be temporary or permanent?
- Is it now unlawful and impossible to gather in any form of assembly within your jurisdiction? (*Has government proclaimed an emergency, enacted laws to prohibit gatherings and there is absolutely no way to go around it*)

CHURCH WORSHIP IN NORMAL AND EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

The worship service of the church in particular on the first day of the week consists of various activities: *prayer, singing praises, exhortation with apostles' doctrine, sharing/giving and breaking of bread (Lord's Supper)* –Acts 2:42-47. ***Under normal and ideal situations, the practice is for Christians in a locality to come together into one place for corporate or collective worship*** -1 Cor 11:17-34, Rm 12:4-13. The benefits are many e.g.

- Pray in one accord, bear one another's burden and intercede for rulers -1 Tim 2:1-3
- Admonish and comfort one another as we sing God's praises –Col 3:16, Eph 5:19
- Edify and encourage one another with the word of God -1 Cor 14:26
- Give of our means to assist the needy amongst us -1 Cor 16:1-2
- Break bread in memorial of Christ as Jesus enjoined on disciples –Mt 26:26-30

The breaking of bread (LS) is an important reason for individual Christians coming together **physically** for a joint worship service –Acts 20:7. It is instructive that after the church started on the day of Pentecost, the disciples met publicly and privately for worship. Initially, the church met in the precincts of the temple and from house to house, they had favour with the people in society (Acts 2:46-7). That represents the normal situation. Do not forsake the assembly (Heb 10:25) is qualified. ***In emergency and abnormal situations, the church should try to devise means to allow saints to still worship together rather than suspend or abolish coming together unless it is impractical and inexpedient to do so*** e.g. during an assault in war-time or natural disaster (hurricane, etc.). Jesus expects each disciple to be a good steward of his or her personal health, body and life. He noted that if persecuted in one city they should flee to another (Matthew 10:23a). ***In essence, we are not to waste or jeopardize our lives unnecessarily.***

After the Jews murdered Stephen, a severe persecution of the saints ensued. It would be logical to acknowledge that the church would then refrain from meeting publicly in Jewish structures but only in *home fellowships* from which they were still being haunted and arrested (Acts 8:1-3). Many were scattered to various regions except for the apostles. Later, James son of Zebedee was beheaded and Peter was apprehended about to be executed after the Passover! Let us review the inspired record of how the church acted; we know an angel rescued the apostle.

Acts 12:5 *Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of **the church** unto God for him...*

11 And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

12 And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.

13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.

14 And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.

15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.

17 But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.

18 Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.

19 And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.

Careful examination and honest reasoning will allow anyone to accurately answer some queries based on the passage.

- Was prayer made by the church not just individuals? **Yes** (vs 5)
- Was the intercessory prayer made in only one place/venue by the church while assembled ALTOGETHER in one place? **No** (vs 12 shows that MANY [not all the church] were gathered at the house of Mary while vs 17 suggests that OTHERS were gathered in some different locations for same purpose)
- Would the whole church have gathered at a public space, on the following first day of the week to worship and thus expose Peter, the remaining apostles and brethren unto danger? **Unlikely!** (vs 18–19)

The point is, if the church could gather in few clusters to pray during a crisis and period of threat to life then it is not unreasonable to hold they would have broken bread likewise from house to house or at different locations. Such scriptural precedent permits us to do likewise. During a period of intense danger to life, the inspired leadership of the Jerusalem church permitted gathering to worship in various groups. After Herod's death and some relieve came the church started meeting as a whole again (Acts 12:19-24 & 15:4,22). 1 Cor 11:17–33 addresses 'when ye come together in the church' or 'as church rather than just random individuals.' Coming together 'as or in a church' means gathering in the name of Christ for worship, service and duty rather than only in private capacity as family, friends, business partners, etc. ***"If therefore the whole church be come together into one place..." is the ideal situation but emergency periods permit unusual measures! Many, few or just two Christians may worship together when the assembling of whole church isn't viable during a crisis.***

Objection: "We just can't find any authority for a pattern for taking the Lord's Supper in a small group, separate from the assembling together of the congregation."

Response: Do you contend that it was NOT THE CHURCH THAT PRAYED FOR PETER in Acts 12? By your reasoning and position, it was a random, ad-hoc gathering of individuals that did! Such assertion would be and is at variance with the inspired word –**it was indeed the church that interceded for Peter via house fellowship clusters without necessarily all assembling in one place.** It wasn't random but well distributed clusters which knew where others were meeting. Such groups within the Jerusalem church would definitely observe the LS when Herod was busy searching for prominent saints to kill and the church was meeting in homes and secluded places. The inference from this scriptural example is necessary.

Objection: "We see no example of Paul and Barnabas taking the Lord's supper as just the two of them. We see no example of Paul and Silas taking the Lord's Supper as just the two of them. We see no example, while Paul was on a ship to Rome for at least two weeks, that he and Luke and the others with him took the Lord's Supper alone."

Response: Sure but we cannot aver with certainty that they *did not* since they constituted disciples who may come together for worship. Recall that Jesus gave the instruction on LS unto the apostles ever before the church was established, to be observed in His kingdom (Lk 22:18-20) so it is not merely to be done by a local church but by any group of disciples who are citizens of the kingdom. If Paul and Silas **could pray & sing together in jail** (Acts 16:25), it would not be unreasonable to grant that they might have broken bread together if the materials for the Lord's Supper and opportunity was there on any first day of the week. Same goes for Christians who are prisoners, travelling sailors, soldiers, etc. today –such would worship together and not refrain because they were away from a church building or regular congregation! During transit or constrained situations such worship scenario is appropriate and during an emergency, *the church in thy own house* may meet. That Paul made a choice in Troas seems based on his desire to fellowship with and exhort the local brethren since that was the time they normally assembled, his schedule accommodated it.

CONCLUSION

Originally, many congregations started in homes even in the scriptures e.g. Philippi church at Lydia's place (Acts 16:15,40). Brethren in various cities hosted a church in their house which predominantly consisted of household members (Rm 16:5, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, Philemon 1:2). It was for convenience after much growth and societal acceptance, post-first century that church buildings became expedient and fashionable, facilitating house churches or fellowships to come together as a larger body. During crisis, even the Jerusalem church under the apostles and elders, temporarily met in various home clusters not at a public, regular venue. The leadership of each congregation should prayerfully make a prudent decision aligning with God's word as per the **COVID-19 pandemic** in their locale and national jurisdiction. The shepherds must care for the flock (1 Pet 5:1-5). Individual Christians must assess their health and the risk to life [of everyone] in making personal judgment calls as to whether their presence or absence in a gathering of the whole church or a segment, thereof is justified. **If sick or especially vulnerable or caring for the sick, stay home.** Anyone exhibiting symptoms of the disease should seek medical help (Lk 5:31), pray and request for same from the saints (Jms 5:13-15).

EPILOGUE: LIKELY SCENARIOS

1. **Where there is no restriction or lockdown** (very low or no incidence of the infection, things are well contained)
 - A. Continue regular service.
 - B. Practice social distance, make hand sanitizers available for entrants and drinking water to rehydrate. Disinfect venue after each service.

Distribute communion items ahead in case the situation worsens and 2 or 3 below subsequently applies.

2. **Where there is partial lockdown and only limited persons may meet in public** (some infections with contact tracing going-on)

Do not all come together into one place to minimize the risk of infection since some members or visitors may be asymptomatic. Share information and edifying materials via calls and congregational social media platforms. For any gathering, practice 1B. **Either**

 - C. Run shift/multiple services in assembly hall, members are scheduled to come (and pre-informed by phone/email, etc.) **or**
 - D. Meet as house-fellowships for proximate members in same neighbourhood. Keep collection with someone or transfer electronically.

Note that govt. may unexpectedly revise the number/size of those who may assemble so be alert to adjust plans accordingly.

3. **Where there is total lockdown or curfew** (many infections, no movement except for essential services or getting medication/groceries)
 - E. Activate '*the church in thy house.*' Let each family worship and break bread, singles living far apart may be constrained from the LS. Those who defy government directive to gather in their church building should consider whether their action is of good report, expresses love to God and their neighbours. They may be dispersed or fined or beaten or imprisoned or shot by security forces of the state aside the risk of contracting the illness. If their faith is so strong as to '*their immunity, protection or divine healing*' then they should not practice social distance but should rather lay hands upon the sick in prayer. Consciences could be seared in such gathering when saints cannot shake/hug one another as usual or where some wonder if the communion trays are uncontaminated. **Note that there are reports of congregations that met with many members now infected, some quarantined and few dead.** Faithfulness does not warrant *foolish martyrdomology* otherwise the Jerusalem church would not have scattered and worshipped in homes away from public glare during the Jewish and Herod persecution. **We need to watch** (minimize the risk, take reasonable medical/general precautions) **AND pray**, not just profess believe without acting wisely in faith. It is not expedient to gather altogether, exposing every congregant to danger when none is certain as to who is a virus-carrier in an infested area.