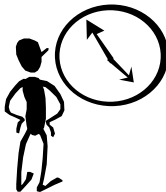


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### Time of Assembly



#### **Sunday:**

Bible Study	9:00 a.m.
Worship	10:00 a.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.

<b>Wednesday:</b>	7:00 p. m.
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## By What Authority?

By David Watts Jr.

### Some Background

For generations, brethren have correctly demanded authority for all that we do. We have correctly followed the pattern of Acts 15 when the brethren and apostles came together to consider the question of circumcision for Gentiles. We demand direct statements from Scripture, approved examples, and necessary conclusions.

We have also argued correctly that we do not act out of the silence of the Scriptures. Rather, we are to “prove what is the good and acceptable will of God.” (Romans 12:2). Simply put, we don’t act from silence. There is a duty on man to provide *affirmative Bible authority* for all that we do. God puts that duty squarely on our shoulders.

And we have also pointed out correctly that to honestly ask for Bible authority is not offensive or divisive. We hold our denominational neighbors to this standard. We ask them for authority. We mean no hatefulness nor offense. But this is our duty.

When Christ was challenged by Pharisees, even Pharisees with impure hearts, he was quite happy to explain His authority. Of course, he first asked the Jews about the baptism of John. His question to the Jews reminds us that there are just two sources of authority: Men or God. (Matthew 21:25)

We don’t establish authority by emotional circumstances. We don’t establish authority by what we’ve done in the past. We don’t establish authority by human reasoning. We establish it based on God’s written word.

### The Present Challenge

Now we find ourselves in difficult circumstances both as brethren and as people. A potent disease is sweeping the world in the form of a global pandemic. While it is true that the fatality rate is generally thought to be about 1% across the general population, it is also true that the disease is bringing much hardship and suffering. Many will die. And we all have genuine concerns that medical facilities in the US (and every other country for that matter) will be overwhelmed with patients.

We are moved with compassion for our fellow man. As a nation we are guilty of the blood of millions of unborn children that are murdered in what is truly America’s Holocaust. Nevertheless, while the nation carries great guilt, we still mourn for the suffering of each individual.

The government has issued “shelter-in-place” type orders far and wide. In areas around Dallas, for example, these are in place until April

30. In NY State, the government has indicated this may continue for many months.

Gatherings of more than 10 people are forbidden, and in some cases no gatherings outside the home are permitted by the government. Texas Governor Gregg Abbott made clear these prohibitions do not restrict religious assemblies. However, he asked that such assemblies follow prudent social distancing standards, currently in the form of six foot separations.

However, the government still supports necessary travel to Walmart or the grocery store to buy groceries. Brethren and citizens do this in recognition of some risk to self and others. Yet, despite the risk, we must eat. We must continue to secure food and essentials for continued life. Brethren and citizens in industries identified as “essential” are permitted to work and gather. My daughter will work this very week 40–46 hours at Kroger, because this is essential work. She, and all those who work with her, and all those who visit Kroger, do so in view of some risks. But they also understand there is a responsibility to be met.

And many continue to go to such locations as drug stores, pharmacies and grocery stores. As of this writing, March 24, 2020, a trip to the grocery store will put you amongst fellow citizens numbering anywhere from tens to hundreds. Prudent social distancing provides a reasonable measure of protection.

### **The Response Among Churches of Christ**

Churches of Christ have responded in various ways. Some elders and/or men of the congregation have suspended the Lord’s Day assembly. They have organized services remotely using solutions like Zoom for audio and video conferencing. Other congregations have continued to meet in person, following prudent guidelines for limiting the opportunity for spread of COVID-19.

Despite the challenging times and circumstances, we must continue to ask for Bible authority for our practices. We must continue to prove what is the good and acceptable will of God. We must continue to follow the pattern of sound words from the Lord. (2 Tim 1:13).

With this context, I ask — upon what authority do men suspend the Lord’s Day assembly? I’m referring to the commanded assembly of the brethren in each congregation in order to partake of the Lord’s Supper and remember our Savior’s death on the cross.

### **Reminder: God Commands a Congregational Assembling Together to Remember His Son’s Death**

For generations, we have preached correctly that the Lord’s Supper is not something done in ad-hoc, separate, gatherings of brethren. Rather, the Lord shows that it is done when brethren come together as a congregation of God’s people.

This is the divine example in Acts 20:7.

This is also abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 11:17–33.

Notice that in this context, there are five clear indications that this remembering of our Lord’s death is to be done together, in one place, as an assembly of the saints.

1. The context of this passage is “when you come together” — vs. 17.
2. Paul continues, “when you come together as a church” — vs. 18.
3. Paul continues, “When you come together” — vs 20.
4. Paul contrasts what they are doing (coming together as a church) with some sort of at home situation. He does this by pointing out, “What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in.” The point here is that this was a gathering of brethren together in one place, this was not ad-hoc, scattered gatherings of small groups in homes.
5. Finally, Paul again emphasizes, “when you come together to eat.” This reference to “come together to eat” is entirely consistent with Acts 20:7 where Luke records, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread....”

Scripture is clear, God expects brethren to come together, as a congregation, not as ad-hoc small gatherings in homes, to take the Lord’s Supper.

In spite of five clear indications in Scripture that the Lord's Supper is to be taken in a physical congregational gathering, some brethren read this context and conclude that we can somehow take the Lord's Supper in remote, scattered, ad-hoc gatherings that are not "an assembling of ourselves together."

## **God Commands That This Assembling Be on the First Day of the Week**

At risk of stating the obvious, God's instruction is that the Lord's Supper is to be taken on the first day of the week. Acts 20:7 shows this as an approved example.

The collection for the saints is not the same thing as the Lord's Supper, but it is also clear that this is to be done on the first day of the week. Clearly, this was also to be done in a gathering of the congregation, not across ad-hoc, scattered gatherings of brethren.

## **The Question Remains: Where is the Authority to Suspend What God Commands?**

When discussing marriage, Christ made clear in Matthew 19:6, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

By principle it is clear, man does not have authority in himself to suspend what God has commanded. Given that God's word perfectly equips us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17), if suspending a command of God's is authorized, there must surely be divine instruction permitting this.

## **Is This Like a Hurricane?**

Churches have sometimes needed to suspend the Lord's Day assembly because of an immediate threat from a hurricane. Is this current situation the same thing?

Respectfully, no.

If this is like a hurricane, this is a strange hurricane that allows people to go to work (if essential), allows people to go to the grocery store, go to the drug store, go to the doctor, even go to the veterinarian... and yet somehow selectively prevents people from assembling to worship the Almighty.

Hurricanes or blizzards actually involve physical barriers to assembly. Literally, roads are flooded and impassable. Bridges are washed out. Roads are truly impassable.

This is not our situation. Our situation is far more selective. Many hundreds and thousands of people use prudent precautions to go to the grocery store to buy supplies, but somehow those same prudent precautions are insufficient for worship of the Almighty.

Furthermore, if this is a hurricane, this is a hurricane that won't merely last a single Sunday — but may last for months and months on end. Surely, the comparison is faulty at best.

Nevertheless, we don't establish Bible authority based upon human reasoning, and for good reason. Situations are different. But God's word is our perfect standard.

## **Do the Shepherds Have the Authority to Suspend the Lord's Day Assembly?**

Some have suggested that 1 Peter 5:2 ("shepherd the flock of God that is among you...") is authority for elders to suspend the Lord's Day assembly.

But perhaps they fail to remember that two verses later, in verse 4, elders are reminded that there is a Chief Shepherd: Jesus Christ.

Under what circumstances can fallible shepherds suspend the command of the infallible Chief Shepherd? The principles of authority make clear that shepherds answer to the Chief Shepherd and such men have no authority to suspend God's commands.

## **Local Churches are Local, Right?**

Yes, the Bible is clear, each congregation is autonomous and is not governed by any other men, elders, or organization.

The simple question, "Where is the authority?" does not in any way erase congregational autonomy. It is simply a dialog among individual saints.

## **Government Isn't Preventing Worship, Right?**

This point has been made by brethren. The argument essentially is: "This is not government per-

secution. The government is trying to take care of us. This is not a case where government is preventing us from worshipping.”

This is a false straw-man. The issue is not whether government is preventing us from worshipping. We are of course free to engage in some acts of worship in our homes. We can worship in our cars. We can worship in a field of corn.

However, it is in fact accurate to state that government is forbidding brethren from assembling together on the Lord’s Day to remember our Lord’s death and partake of the Lord’s Supper — as God has commanded.

That is a serious infringement upon our duty as Christians. This is exactly the same type of infringement that occurred in Acts 5:29.

In that context, the government said, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name...”

Perhaps brethren today would have advised Peter and the apostles, “Look, they’re not preventing you from worshipping. Just go into your house and worship God. You’re not being persecuted.”

Yet Peter and the apostles resolutely rejected the government’s demands as it violates God’s commands to teach and preach. Maybe our brethren would have advised Peter and the apostles to just be quiet for 30 days or maybe a couple of months?

Yet the answer from Peter was unyielding: “We must obey God rather than men.”

Simply: God told us to teach and preach. We will do that, with or without your authority.

Today the situation is of the same type.

Government has said, “***Do not*** assemble on the first day of the week to remember Christ’s death.”

God has said, “***Do*** assemble on the first day of the week to remember Christ’s death.”

Our response ought to be exactly what is found in Acts 5:29. We will obey God rather than men. We will defy such orders and assemble with prudent social distancing precautions.

### **Does “This Present Distress” Suspend The Requirement to Assemble?**

Some are proposing that we are authorized to suspend the Lord’s Supper gathering in view of “this present distress.”

Perhaps they seek to borrow language from 1 Corinthians 7:26, “I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free.”

Perhaps brethren forget that Paul is talking about marriage. Marriage is optional. Paul made clear in verse 1, that it is 100% proper to remain unmarried. However, when marriage is undertaken, now God’s laws prevail, and if a person is married they must not seek to be free... even in the present distress.

Likewise it is clear. Assembling on the first day of the week is law. The “present distress” does not suspend our duty to assemble to partake of the Lord’s Supper, no more than the “present distress” authorizes divorce.

### **Aren’t We Supposed to Love our Neighbors?**

Yes, this is the second great command as provided by Christ in Matthew 22:37–38. To be clear, Christ said, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is relevant because doctors and researchers tell us that we can be carriers of the COVID-19 virus while completely free of symptoms. It is of course true that none of us wants to be the person that passes the virus on to another person — perhaps one that might be especially vulnerable.

However, perhaps our brethren have forgotten that in this very context Christ indicates there is a “great and first commandment” — that being, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

We would do well to remember 1 John 5:3, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

We must love our neighbors. But we have a first great command to love God. And loving God includes obedience to God's commands. And God has commanded that we assemble together to partake of the Lord's Supper.

Under what circumstances can the second command cause us to violate the first and great command?

Surely, there must be clear authority before we do such a thing.

### **Haven't There Been Other Pandemics Where Churches Have Closed the Doors?**

Perhaps. That's a question for history. But we do not establish Bible authority by appealing to past practices. Those past practices may have been right, or they may have been wrong.

We establish Bible authority by clear revelation in Scripture.

### **The Path Forward: Scriptural and Prudent**

If we limit ourselves to Scripture, as we must, and the established principles of Bible authority, here's the path forward.

1. No man has the authority to close the assembly on the first day of the week to remember Christ's death and partake of the Lord's Supper together as a congregation.

2. Any elders who do forbid the assembling together on the first day of the week are acting without Bible authority. They are essentially locking the doors of the building and preventing what God has demanded.

3. The same brethren who are perfectly capable of making a reasoned decision about the safety of going to Walmart or Kroger or even work, in spite of some risk, are also perfectly capable of assessing their risk in assembling for the Lord's Supper.

4. The Old Testament, which was written for our learning (Rom 15:4) makes clear that those who are sick should be quarantined. This is Biblical. Numbers 5:1-4 is one such place that reminds us of this truth.

5. Note: quarantine is not for those who have zero symptoms. It is for those who are sick.

6. By application, those who are especially vulnerable are justified in remaining in quarantine. Likewise, there are those who must care for sick family members or friends and may not be able to assemble. This fits the Bible pattern.

7. Simply put: if sick, stay home. If especially vulnerable, stay home. If caring for sick family or friends, stay home. Otherwise, make the same informed decision you make when you go to Walmart, and using the same criteria, and understanding our spiritual responsibility, make a reasoned determination to assemble for the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week.

8. Do this without regard for government permission. Acts 5:29 still applies.

9. Be encouraged by the example of Daniel. Daniel was commanded not to pray. Yet, in Daniel 6:10, Scripture records that "when Daniel knew the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously." Perhaps brethren today would have counseled Daniel to just close the windows and pray in private. Perhaps brethren would have told Daniel to worship in other ways. But Daniel deliberately defied the government and did so in a very public manner. This pattern remains for us today.

10. Some congregations across the land have indeed continued to assemble in prudent ways. Some have met outdoors in an open area, with plenty of space between families and brethren. In so doing they have fulfilled God's commands.

11. Others have met in their regular meeting locations, but separating with pews between them, and additional space between each person. Some have allowed older brethren to enter and leave

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first, and avoid unnecessary social contact. Some congregations have asked each member to enter the building and immediately wash their hands. These are reasonable approaches that allow us to fulfil God's command and remain prudent.

12. Brethren have added precautions to the taking of the Lord's Supper, with those who serve wearing gloves. In some cases brethren have ensured the bread is broken into small pieces in a sterile manner, so as to avoid cross contamination.

13. The point is simple: it is possible to observe the Lord's command, and assemble together with prudent precautions. It is a patently false narrative to claim these things are mutually exclusive.

### **The Path Forward: Courage and Conviction**

We have a duty to meet on the first day of the week to remember our Lord's death. That command is not suspended by elders, or men, or by government.

The path forward, to continue to assemble "as we have done previously," (Daniel 6:10) will require courage.

We do not pretend we are immune to this disease. I suspect that eventually all people will be infected with this virus. Indeed, researchers and doctors indicate the lock down in place today is only designed to "flatten the curve" and avoid overwhelming hospitals. The efforts will not stop the number of people infected, but will simply spread those infections out over time.

We should also remember that while medical personnel and researchers often have the very best of intentions, they don't always get it right. Mark 5:25–26 reminds us of a woman who "had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all she had, and was no better but rather grew worse."

We appreciate the intentions of most medical personnel, but we also remember that they are not infallible — neither in the past nor in this present struggle. As such, while we seek medical counsel, we must not abandon our trust and reliance on God. King Asa would surely caution us against over-reliance on doctors and under-reliance on God (2 Chronicles 16:12).

We must have the attitude of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3:16–18. My paraphrase: Our God is able to deliver us. And He will deliver us. But if he chooses not to deliver us, we still will not forsake God.

In today's situation: Our God is able to deliver us from this pandemic. And we have full faith that he will. But if in his eternal wisdom he determines to not deliver us, let it be known: we will not suspend God's command to assemble on the first day of the week.

### **Other Questions to Consider**

In this present trouble, do we have the right to also suspend baptism "in the same hour of the night"?

That is to say, a person contacts the preacher and genuinely wishes to be baptized in water for the remission of his sins. He asks the preacher, "Can I be baptized this very day?"

The Bible pattern is clear: "Yes, I'll meet you at the nearest water and based on your faith and confession that Jesus is the Christ, we will baptize you immediately."

But government says there is to be no travel apart from essential food, groceries, medicine, doctors, etc. Government does not want any assembly of any number outside the home. Even a two person gathering for the purpose of baptizing another is not permitted.

Shall we suspend the commandment regarding baptism because of what the Government has imposed? God forbid.

Shall we suspend baptism based upon the fact that we might expose this person to the virus, or he might expose us to the virus? God forbid.

Surely the absurdity is clear. We will obey God. We have no authority to suspend baptism. We can baptize with prudent precautions, but we will follow God no matter the cost.

### **Conclusion:**

The simple question — where is the authority to suspend the Lord's Supper assembly — is fair and proper. In fact, it is necessary.