

# Bethany COVID-19 Purple Tier Order Response

Dear Bethany family,

By now all of us have heard the news that rising infection rates have moved our county back into the colored tier in which churches are permitted to only hold outdoor services. This was not the news that any of us wanted to hear. Once again we find ourselves searching the Scriptures and seeking God's direction as to how we should respond. What does it look like for God's people to faithfully trust and obey him, answer his call to make disciples, love our neighbors as ourselves, and honor those in authority over us in a time when the world is overcome by fear of a virus?

After much prayer and discussion, we have decided to hold service outdoors this Sunday. This was not an easy decision, but it is a good one. Allow me to explain.

We at Bethany believe that before anything else, we must be biblical. As God's inerrant and infallible revealed word, the Bible is our "supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we look to the Scriptures to determine what we believe, how we should live, and what decisions we should make as a church.

Throughout this unique and challenging season in history, it has been our desire to base our response on God's word. Granted, the Bible does not tell us whether or not we should wear face coverings or how far apart we should stand during a worldwide health crisis. It does, however, tell us that we are to both honor and be subject to earthly authorities. That is why in as much as those who govern over us have allowed us to continue to faithfully obey other God-given commands in Scripture, we have sought to respectfully comply with their orders.

It is true that beliefs about the coronavirus, how the data is being interpreted, whether or not the restrictions on churches have been reasonable, equitable, or legal, and even the motives and integrity of the leaders giving the orders, vary tremendously. We have engaged in many long, thoughtful, and passionate conversations regarding these matters. However, in the end, the singular goal of being biblical has been our compass.

When it comes to the church, the Bible is clear that Christians are not to neglect meeting together.<sup>2</sup> By definition church (ekklesia) means "the called out ones." The church is the assembly of God's people. Gathering together is part of who we are. It is in our DNA. We are a people who have been both called out of darkness and gathered together as "a chosen

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<sup>1</sup> Bethany Bible Fellowship Statement of Faith, Article 1

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25

race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession."<sup>3</sup> Scripture teaches that corporate worship is altogether good for our souls, and that the gathered church is a display of God's wisdom to the world and His salvific hope.<sup>4</sup> The church needs to meet.

That said, during the early days of COVID-19, we believed it both prudent and biblically permissible to temporarily suspend our regular in-person Sunday morning services for the sake of respecting our government and caring for the physical well-being of each other in what appeared to be an emergency. While worship via a screen is not a substitute for being together with the body of Christ, our hope was that, during a brief season of separation, our congregation might at least be encouraged by singing praises to God and prayerfully considering the preaching of his word from the safety of home.

We are thankful that we were able to use technology in this regard. Over time, however, it became clear that the emotional and spiritual needs of the congregation could not be met through livestream alone. That is why we made every effort to return to in-person services as soon as possible.

Throughout the last several months we have been able to safely host services outdoors and, most recently, indoors. During that time, our conviction that God's people need to be together has only strengthened. We are not just a family, we are a body that does not properly function or maintain health when it does not regularly come together. For that reason, we are committed, even during this challenging season, to making every possible effort to preserve the safe and responsible in-person gathering of our people.

While many of us may be disappointed to hear the recent order for churches to return to outdoor only services, we recognize that it is not *where* the church meets but *that* it meets that is important. When that happens, it is honoring to God and good for his people. Therefore, so long as we are able and have the resources to care well for the needs of our congregation outside, we have decided to comply with our governing authorities. This is not a convenient decision. It may not be a popular decision, but we believe that it is one that is biblical.

This coming Sunday we will once again have our 9am service on the back lawn. For those unable to attend, we will film a livestream service at 11am. Preparations are currently being considered to provide a winterized outdoor service venue for the following weeks and details will be forthcoming.

In the meantime, let us remember God's faithfulness to those who have come before us and endured far more difficult and perilous times than our own. He is the same yesterday, today,

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 10:19-25; Ephesians 3:6-11; Hebrews 12:22-24

and forever. What is more, his plan and desire for his people is the same now as it has been for ages past: trust and obey.<sup>5</sup> Let's keep our eyes on him and live by the light of his word that we might bring him glory and good to his people.

Yours In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary Becker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent initial "G" and "B".

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<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6