

Church, Don't Let Coronavirus Divide You

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The Gospel Coalition

For church leaders and elder boards everywhere, the last few months have presented a near-constant array of complex challenges related to shepherding a church during the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest complex challenge is perhaps the trickiest yet: how to prudently resume in-person gatherings.

As if [the logistical details](#) weren't challenging enough—how to maintain social distance and limit crowd size, whether or not to require masks, [to sing or not to sing](#), what to do with children, and so on—the whole conversation is fraught with potential for division. If a congregation—and within it, a leadership team—is at all a microcosm of our larger society, it will likely contain a broad assortment of strongly held convictions. Some will be eager to meet in person and impatient to wait much longer to get back to normal. Others will insist it's unwise to meet at all until there's a vaccine. Plenty will fall somewhere in between.

In such a precarious and polarizing environment, how can churches move forward in beautiful unity ([Ps. 133](#)) rather than ugly division? It won't be easy. But by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working to unify us in ways our flesh resists, the opportunity is there for us to be a countercultural model for the rest of the world.

Countercultural Sacrifice

At a time [when self-idolatry is being exposed in ugly ways](#), the church has an opportunity to model love that places the interests of others above the self. For example, someone might find it personally difficult—even maddening—to have to wear a mask during church and stay six feet away from everyone at all times. You might think these precautions are a needless overreaction. But here's the thing: *even if it turns out you're right*, can you not sacrifice your ideal for a season, out of love for others who believe the precautions *are* necessary? Even if you personally think it is silly, or even cowardly, for someone to stay home even after the church is open again on Sundays, can you not heed Paul's wisdom in [Romans 14](#): “Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother”? Or [1 Corinthians 8:9](#): “Be careful, however, that your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

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Likewise, those who think the lockdowns should continue should not pass judgment on those who question the wisdom of the government's ongoing restrictions. Churches should strive to honor people on both sides of the spectrum. Yes, it will be costly for churches to keep offering online services for those who don't feel comfortable attending physical gatherings. Yes, it will be a sacrifice for church members who are sick of masks, social distancing, and Zoom to continue to use these for the sake of others. But little is more Christian than a posture of sacrifice ([Rom. 12:1](#)). We should embrace it with gladness.

Countercultural Humility

Have you noticed how remarkably *confident* so many of us are in our views right now? Unfounded certainty—on the part of laypeople, leaders, modelers, and “experts” alike—is a contagion at least as viral as COVID-19 itself. We could all use a bit more humility, and the church should lead the way.

As much as ever before, Christians should follow the advice of James to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). Listening well may slow down the process of deliberation and planning, but it is worth it. Whatever opinions church leaders themselves have on the matter of reopening, they should take time to humbly hear the voices of others—perhaps convening forums of various stakeholders within the church, as well as other church and government leaders in their area. Church members should likewise model Christlike humility (e.g., [Phil. 2:3](#)) in how they react to the plans outlined by leaders, even if they [don't agree with every aspect of it](#). No one of us should assume we've arrived at the definitive answer on how to do this well. Let's model humility by acknowledging that [everything is not obvious](#), and we are all just trying to do the best we can in this “build the plane in midair” moment.

Countercultural Patience

Patience is one of the rarest virtues in today's insta-everything world. And yet patience has rarely been more needed, as many of us are antsy to break free of “stay home” isolation and get back to normalcy as soon as possible. To be sure, it is good and right to be eager to gather again as churches. We should take [Hebrews 10:25](#) seriously when it says we ought not neglect meeting together. We should feel the ache of what is lost when we only meet virtually, and every Christian should long for the day when “church on Zoom” gives way to “church in a room.” That day will come. But we should be careful to not rush it. We should be careful to not go faster than governments allow, or faster than those in our community can understand. We should be patient with a timeline that might be slower than we'd prefer; patient with a reopening process that will doubtless be clunky; patient with leaders feeling the pressure of this complex situation; and patient with one another as we figure out the new normal. Those who are not comfortable with physical gatherings should be patient with those who *are*, and vice versa. As hard as it will be to practice patience, remember that in the scheme of eternity this season—whether it's months long or years—will be but a blip.

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Countercultural Nuance

We live in an *un*-nuanced age. The economic model of the media (built on clicks and views) works against nuance. Advertisers know nuance doesn't sell. Politicians know it too. We shouldn't be surprised by how rare it is for someone to hold humble, complicated, “both/and” views in today's [hyper-partisan, media-catechized world](#). But if churches are going to emerge from this crisis with unity and fellowship intact, we must embrace the countercultural path of nuance. It's the path that avoids ALL CAPS hysteria of every extreme sort, recognizing that truth is rarely as simple and shrill as Twitter would have us think. It's the path that prizes *both* courage and prudence, and avoids *both* pollyannaish and doomsday

responses. It means we can be [skeptical of some aspects of the lockdown](#) without [resorting to outrageous conspiracy theories](#), and we can honor governing authorities ([Rom. 13](#)) while engaging them in civil pushback when necessary. Countercultural nuance avoids thinking the worst of people and concedes that the other side of a debate is sometimes right, just as we are sometimes wrong. Nuance often results when humility and patience combine.

There are some things Christians should *not* be nuanced about, of course, and one of those is our rugged commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and all that Scripture commands. What Paul urges the Ephesian church, therefore, should be equally urgent for us today: “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” ([Eph. 4:1–3](#)).

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