

*Don't Waste Your Isolation – Part 8*

*3/26/2020*

Brian Borgman is a friend I've never met. I've listened to and benefited from his teaching & writing for years but never had the opportunity to meet him and thank him for his faithfulness. It was my hope to do so in May at this year's Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals (FIRE) International Fellowship in Kirkland, WA as he was one of the scheduled preachers, but this event was cancelled, another coronavirus casualty. Brian is the pastor of Grace Community Church in Minden, NV.

Several friends of mine reposted this article Brian posted on his Facebook page and in it he addresses several concerns I've tried to bring to you over the last week. I've done so with fragments of melodic lines; Brian has written a symphony. He writes as a wise pastor and I commend him to you today.

In fairness to Brian, and so I don't misrepresent his thoughts, I've also included a clarification he posted on Facebook the next morning. As you know by now, I stand with Mark Dever's conclusion more than Brian's concerning livestreaming a service, but all of our hearts beat with a passion for the local church and her Biblical worship.

Pastor Rob

**The Dangers for the Church in This Present Crisis**

**Brian Borgman**

For a five-month span from Oct. 1918-Feb 1919 the Spanish Flu swept through America. The Pandemic took 675,000 American lives. Churches closed for a brief

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period. Only time will tell the impact of the COVID-19. We should take it seriously. However, we should also be aware of real dangers for the church during this time of crisis. I am not trying in any way to mitigate safety measures and precautions, but I do want us to have a bigger picture.

When the church does not gather, it cannot be the church. This needs to be said because we are so accustomed to the axiom, “the building is not the church, it’s the people.” True enough. But the church needs its people to gather, in person, in the presence of Christ and the Spirit, to be the church and do what the church does. The little phrase we see in the NT in various places, “when you come together,” “when you come together in church,” “they were gathered together in one place,” all underscore that the church is an assembly and for the church to be the church, assembly is required. It is in the congregation of assembled Christians that we sing God’s praise, hear God’s Word, enjoy sweet koinonia, take the Supper, and pray. These corporate activities which define who we are and what we do can only take place when we gather.

The first danger is not recognizing what we are really missing when we cannot gather. Certainly, there are times when gathering is not possible. To be sick and unable to gather is not “forsaking the assembly.” To voluntarily do something else instead of assembling is “forsaking the assembly.” In a situation like ours it may be necessary to comply with the government’s mandate in the event that they issue such a mandate. But we are in danger, because of a weak ecclesiology, of not recognizing what we have given up when we do not meet.

The second danger is not recognizing that when we do not gather, a vital part of evangelism has been silenced. Frankly, at times like these we should be much more concerned about eternity than we are. People without Christ perish, whether they have the virus or not. Certainly, times like these may open personal evangelism opportunities, may God grant it to be so! But let us not miss the significance of a Gospel witness being silenced when the church does not meet.

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The third danger is the church not being the church in a time of crisis. The church lives Psalm 46 in the midst of a turbulent world. It is the very turbulence of a fallen and fragile world that the church stands with confidence in her God, who is Lord of all. Society loses much when the church cannot be the church. The assembled saints are a refuge for the weary, are safety for the frightened, are strength for the weak. Let us not lose sight of what is lost when we cannot meet in a time of temporal crisis.

The fourth danger is abdicating too much control to the state. If this is a once per century event, then we can certainly live with that. But what if this virus is more like a roller coaster and the government prohibits assemblies of any size during the flu season? What if any time a novel virus is discovered everything goes into lock-down, including the church? Are we willing to stop being the church because the government said we must desist? Are we willing to relinquish Christ's headship of the church to Caesar? If you think this is not a possibility, you do not understand Satan or church history.

The fifth danger is that if we resort to livestreaming services, including the worship and preaching, we convey that that is church, that is worship, that is the preaching of the Word. We can inadvertently communicate that virtual church is church. This is perhaps one of worst and most subtle dangers. Let me say loudly and clearly, watching livestream is not a valid substitute for church. There is no such thing as a valid substitute for the church. Watching a sermon is not a valid substitute for the ministry of the Word. Digital substitutes are not substitutes at all. That said, in times like these we may be able to utilize technology to aid people, but here is the point, we must not think of these alternatives as viable alternatives to the real thing. They are temporary, less than ideal alternatives. This is one of the main reasons why, without a state mandate, we did not believe that cancelling services and just livestreaming was our first line of defense. It should be our last line, not our first.

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**Some churches, like Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC have decided to provide no alternative and simply allow the absence to be felt.**

**One of the worst dangers is to believe that somehow what happens in the assembly of the saints can be reproduced via livestream or YouTube. It cannot. This is already a danger in our digital age, people thinking that a YouTube sermon is the same as their pastor preaching the Word to them in the assembly of God's people. It is not the same.**

**How we need a good theology of the church and a theology of preaching in our day of digital Babylon!**

**Mark Dever, Pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, said, "Do not slake your thirst for God's best with some cheap substitute. Experience the thirst. Pray that God hones the longing that it creates in you."**

**I experienced that thirst when I had back surgery, brain surgery, and most recently was quarantined after a sickness contracted in Zambia. When I heard, after missing three Lord's Days at my home church due to me ministering in Zambia, that I had to miss another Lord's Day, I wept. I sobbed. Ariel and I sobbed together. My fear is that in this unusual time we fall into the danger of thinking that the substitute is the real thing. My friends it is not, and it will never be.**

**In conclusion, everyone understands the fluidity of this situation and our plans may not come to fruition this Lord's Day. The restrictions may get tighter. If that is the case, we will comply with the mandates. We also understand that there are many who should avoid the assembly temporarily. Even if it for conscience's sake, we respect that decision. But I urge you, have a biblical enough view of the church that you see the dangers in such times as these. Alert others to the dangers. Cherish the assembly of Christ's people in such a way that any absence**

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**makes the heart grow fonder and more appreciative. Treasure the assembly in such a way that an alternative used during this time doesn't quench your thirst for God's best but inflames it!**

**(Posted the following morning): A clarification, in light of the Dangers for the Church post from earlier - I am not opposed to technology, and support using it. We livestream our services for shut-ins, the sick, and for however long, those who cannot or will not attend due to the virus. My only point is that we need to be careful not to see it as an actual substitute for being with God's people. I am thankful for the technology and do not agree with Dever's position, just stated it to make a point. Thanks. May the God who established the boundaries of the oceans, "thus far and no farther", stop this virus in its tracks. May we, His people, be faithful, loving, and charitable, seizing every opportunity for the Gospel.**

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