



May 11, 2020

Dear Bethel Baptist Church family,

These are tough times for all of us. We, the Elders, have been in prayer for you all, and we ask for your prayers as well. We will be organizing a prayer service to take place soon, but please don't wait to pray for us until then. When Paul, Sylvanus, and Timothy wrote 1 Thessalonians together, they spoke of how their love for the Thessalonians meant they "were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). We want "to share our own selves" with you by sharing some of our struggles and vulnerabilities with you all. We are sure that many of you will relate to these struggles, and our hope is that our transparency will help all of us work through this together, as the Body of Christ. The COVID epidemic has created very strong, and potentially divisive, opinions. Are we "safer at home" or are we "safer at work"? Which is more deadly and dangerous: the virus itself, or the economic and emotional impacts of our response to it? Part of our challenge is that the most reliable data points in more than one direction, with officials and experts disagreeing on how to interpret the data. Plus, the sources we get information from – especially news outlets, social media and other internet sources – tend to reinforce opinions we already hold, surrounding us with only one perspective. The result is increased division and contempt, rather than understanding others' opinions.

Within the Elders we have found ourselves in a disagreement about how and when to start opening the church back up. Each opinion is a result of a strong conviction driven by the belief that God's Word and His Spirit must direct us, and so we aren't taking any of those opinions lightly. However, we want to make very clear that this **disagreement** does not diminish our commitment to the **unity** that we are called to pursue in Ephesians 4:1-6. Each elder loves and respects the others, and our discussions have demonstrated those truths. But we want to lay bare our weaknesses to you for two reasons: **first and most of all, we need your prayers**.

Throughout every age of the Church, crises have risen that no one had planned for, forcing believers to turn back to the Lord and to His Word for guidance and direction. In times like these we recognize how small we really are and how much we need the sovereign hand of God to guide our decisions.

Our disagreement on the timing and manner of reopening Sunday services arises from strong convictions. Our aim, as a group and as individuals, is to honor Jesus Christ with our decisions. This means our consciences are not in agreement. We ask you to join us in reading and meditating on Romans 14, and then lift prayers to God for wisdom, love, and direction from His Spirit. When you are meditating on this passage **don't** ask yourself which side is the "**stronger**". That is missing the point. Ask yourself, "**How can I love my brother by not causing a violation of his conscience?**" That is the question that the Elders are asking, and the prayer we covet from our members. We need the Lord to give all of us wisdom and guidance to navigate these waters.



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The second reason we share this with you is that we want to model our attempt at disagreeing in Christ. In 1 Peter 5:3, the Holy Spirit, through Peter, tells us that elders are to shepherd the flock in a way that is “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” It is our duty to show you – even though we do it imperfectly – how to disagree without disunity. After all, disagreements are inevitable in relationships, in families, and in churches.

The Elders remain very unified despite disagreement. We are unified in our love of our Lord Jesus Christ and for His flock that He has entrusted to us to lead. We are unified in our concern for the Body of Christ and how this epidemic might cause division. We need people to know that it is because of our love for each other that we have the freedom to speak our hearts without fear. We encourage the opinions of our fellow elders because we value each other. As we ask for your prayers, we also ask that you treat your fellow members in a like manner. Remember, we are all citizens of a heavenly kingdom where sickness and death will no longer have a hold on us. Oh how we long for that day!!

There will be more information coming about an upcoming prayer meeting. Stay tuned...

Blessings,
The Elders