

September 3, 2020

Dear Christian Assembly Church,

We are grateful for you and pray daily for you to grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. The stories of how you are seeking first the Kingdom of God are a source of constant encouragement! People both throughout Los Angeles and around the world are hearing about the gospel of Jesus Christ and experiencing tangible acts of His love through your actions. Together, God's grace is compelling us to lead spiritually convinced and unconvinced people to complete commitment to Jesus Christ.

Recently, several people have asked us, "What's the plan?" By that they were asking things like how long this pandemic season will last, how Christian Assembly will respond along the way, and when we will resume in-person, large-scale gatherings for weekend services on our campus. Maybe you have the same questions.

As we have been addressing these questions, we have noticed four themes that surface in discussions. Also, some people in our congregation have said, "I wish our entire congregation could have heard our discussion because it helped to calm me and encourage me in these challenging times." So, we are writing this pastoral letter to "let you hear" the conversations. Letters do not always convey tone well, but we write to you with our hearts full of love, humility, and deep gratitude for you.

As part of answering the question, "What's the plan?", we need to address four recurring themes which are: (1) the nature of the church, (2) the fear of God and not man, (3) the Biblical principle of Christian diversity and unity within the body of Christ, and (4) the nature of wisdom. For us, that speaks to not only "what" the plan is but also "why" the plan is being chosen. Both are important. Let us humbly walk through each of these themes sequentially as a way to grow in our discipleship before the Lord, as well as navigate this season with grace and truth. We are writing to you at length (but not exhaustively) because of our great love for you. (For ease of reading, we have included all the references to Scriptures as endnotes.)

### **The Nature of the Church**

For those of you who are Christians, we are calling you to live out of the abundant overflow of what God says about the church. If you are new to faith, let us humbly instruct you to edify your new faith. If you are mature in faith, let us remind you of what you already know God told us about the church. Jesus Christ Himself builds the church and adds to our numbers.<sup>1</sup> This promise comforts us, knowing that Christ is at work building His church and simultaneously calls us to join with Him in that endeavor as we make disciples of Jesus. Jesus' work building His church is not on pause in this disruptive season. His command for us to go and make disciples is not on pause in this season either.<sup>2</sup> In fact, we know that many, many of you are making disciples of Jesus! We constantly hear stories about you sharing your faith with friends, family members, clients, and even strangers in this season. And you are not only leading people to Christ, but you are helping them grow in Christ too. It's amazing to see God at work through you!

Remember, Christ loves the church, gave Himself up for the church, and so great is God's plan for the church that God exalted Christ to the position of highest authority for the sake of the church.<sup>3</sup> The Lord knows those who are His.<sup>4</sup> We know that many of us may be afraid for a variety of reasons – for health reasons, economic reasons, and more. Let us encourage one another with Jesus' words to His followers: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."<sup>5</sup>

It is important to see that the Bible gives us a number of the marks of the church, including the practice of baptism and the Lord's supper, the teaching of God's Word, prayer, oversight by appointed elders, giving of offerings to support the work of the church, acts of obedience born from love of God and our neighbor, and more.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament rightly commands, "Let us not neglect meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – all the more as you see the Day approaching."<sup>7</sup> We could not agree more! But notice this passage does not prescribe a singular size or location of meeting together. For example, in the New Testament, the word "church" is not conditioned by its size nor its location so long as the other marks of the church are present. A small group in a private home is called "church,"<sup>8</sup> the church in an entire city is called "church,"<sup>9</sup> the church throughout an entire region is called "church,"<sup>10</sup> and the church in the entire world and throughout all of history is called "church."<sup>11</sup> Let us remember that even prior to COVID, we had adapted our gatherings to our available facilities by having 6 different services in 2 locations. And yes, in this season, we have adapted our meetings yet again, but we have never ceased meeting.

When people ask us, "When is the church going to open and meet again?", the correct Biblical answer is, "Christian Assembly has never closed. We are open right now and have never stopped meeting." That's not spin or hype. It's not splitting hairs or semantics. That's reality according to God's Word. Here's just one person's testimony to God at work in this season:

*"My wife and I had long considered joining a CA life group but never made it a priority. However, recently we decided to join an online life group over Zoom. Not only have we been able to connect at a deep level with other CA brothers and sisters as we respond to Sunday morning messages and dig into the Scripture together, but we regularly lift up our members in prayer throughout the week and seek specific ways to bless those in our group and challenge one another to serve our individual communities across the LA area. As we dedicate ourselves to meeting together as the body of Christ, we praise God that the church is not a building but a people dedicated to the purpose of living out the Gospel in our hearts, homes and beyond."*  
~ Grant

Now, certainly we will all have different preferences of how, where, or when we gather. That's understandable. And yet, we must never allow our individual preferences to cause us to stand in judgment or division against those who hold differing views on when, how, or where to gather. Let us not be discouraged thinking that "the church is closed" when in fact, according to God's Word, we are forever open and operating.

Thankfully, God has given us several metaphors to help understand who He is calling us to be as the church even in these pandemic times. We are given metaphors such as: the church as a family<sup>12</sup>, the bride of Christ,<sup>13</sup> branches on a vine<sup>14</sup>, a field of crops<sup>15</sup>, and a new temple not built with literal stones but with Christians who are "living stones" built upon the "cornerstone" who is Christ Jesus.<sup>16</sup> We are viewed as God's house with Christ Himself as the builder of the house that becomes the pillar and bulwark of the truth.<sup>17</sup> The church is also called the body of Christ<sup>18</sup> with Christ as our head.<sup>19</sup> And even that list is not exhaustive.

Each metaphor is designed to help us more deeply and fully understand the great privilege that God has given us by incorporating us in the church. The fact that we are a family should increase our love and support for one another. That we are His bride should stir us to love Christ more in purity and

holiness. The agricultural metaphors call us to grow in Christ and bear godly fruit in our lives and for His kingdom. The list could go on.

These metaphors are designed to show us not only *what* the plan is but also *how* we are to do it. So then, *how* are we called to live in this time of pandemic as the church? According to God's Word, here's how: We are called to be at peace with each other, to love one another, to honor one another above yourselves.<sup>20</sup> We are commanded to stop passing judgment on one another and to accept one another just as Christ accepted you.<sup>21</sup> We are told that "if you keep on biting and devouring each other...you will be destroyed by each other."<sup>22</sup> The list could go on; by one count there are 59 different commands in the New Testament instructing the church on the plan of *how* to relate to one another. Today, right now, each of us can be used by Christ to build up His church in this season by living out any number of the "one another" commands we are given in the New Testament.

### **"We Should Fear God, Not Man."**

This is a phrase that we have heard recently. Amen! We agree! So then the question becomes: "What does it mean to 'fear God and not man' in this time, in this situation?" To answer that, we must humbly and prayerfully dig into the Scriptures.

Some people stating this phrase point to Acts 4 where Peter and John were commanded by officials to no longer speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."<sup>23</sup> One of the principles of understanding God's Word is to keep it within its context. So in context, these leaders were commanded to no longer speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. They defied the religious rulers (known as the Sanhedrin) who made that command. Thankfully, as of this writing, Christian Assembly Church has not had any religious body of rulers nor secular government official command us to no longer speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Rest assured, if that happens, we humbly hope and trust that the Lord would empower all Christians with the courage to kindly and humbly defy that command in obedience to Christ.

Another verse that speaks to this theme of fearing God and not man is when Jesus says, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."<sup>24</sup> Some mistakenly interpret this verse to apply to how the church gathers. However, in context, Jesus says this as He is sending His disciples out on mission. And the mark that Jesus gives as to whether we are fearing God and not man is this, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."<sup>25</sup>

Let us encourage you that for 113 years, every generation of Christian Assembly Church has acknowledged Jesus before others. Together, we have acknowledged Jesus before men and women, young and old, democrats and republicans, government officials and business leaders, classmates and clients, family and friends, neighbors and co-workers in every line of work, people of every ethnicity, and those near and far both throughout the city of Los Angeles and to the far-flung nations of the world.

Christian Assembly Church has not only acknowledged Jesus before every kind of person, but together we have done so in every kind of season. During World War 1, the 1918 pandemic, the Great Depression, World War 2, the turmoil of the 1960s, the oil crisis of the 1970s, the stock market crash of the 1980s, Y2K, the Great Recession, and now in the COVID pandemic, the people and leaders of Christian Assembly have continued to acknowledge Jesus before others. You have done so in homes

and the Hollywood Bowl, in passenger cars and the Pasadena Civic, in schools and submarines (yes, that happened!), in parks and prisons, on beaches and in the mountains, in person and online. You have acknowledged Jesus before others in word and deed, in poetry and prose, in song and sermon. Truly, we see that God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases Him.<sup>26</sup> When we consider all the ways that God has seen our little congregation through the challenges of the last 113 years while we constantly acknowledge Him before others, we tear up and fall to our knees in wonder and gratitude!

So let us consider another passage that might speak to the question, “What does it look like in this place, at this time to walk in obedience and the fear of God?” In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter probably believed he was fearing God and not man, acting courageously when he defied the officials with a sword. However, in that case, Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”<sup>27</sup> Maybe Peter thought Jesus just lacked the courage to fear God and not man. But Jesus’ actions were born of the great courage He had to obey His Father. Peter had a strong personal conviction about what should happen in that moment. And Peter was wrong in that case because he could not understand what God was doing.

Fast forward to when Jesus stood before Pilate – who was a government official – and submitted Himself. Now ask yourself, “Was that because Jesus was ‘fearing man and not God?’” Not according to Jesus. He tells Pilate, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”<sup>28</sup> So then Jesus was submitting Himself to Pilate not because Jesus was fearful of man, but because in that instance, He discerned (from the Scriptures and His time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane) it was how He was to be obedient to the Father. Sometimes, courageously obeying the Father might mistakenly be judged by onlookers as the fear of man. Courage might come in an unexpected form.

Speaking of Christians relating to the government, we are told in Romans 13:1-2: “Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished.” These verses make it clear that for many Christians, they choose to be subject to the governing authorities not because they “fear man” but because they are seeking to obey what God has instituted.

So then, does that mean that under *no circumstances* should we ever defy a government official? Well, Jesus allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture, so we must do the same.<sup>29</sup> For example, in Daniel 3 as well as Daniel 6 we have examples of faithful people humbly defying the government’s direct command to deny their faith in God. In both cases, in the course of events, God vindicated those individuals. By seeking to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, it seems that we are to seek to comply with government officials with the exception of times of direct commands to deny our faith in God.

Now, it is quite possible that different Christians (and even different congregations) may arrive at different thresholds upon which they believe that a government official is ordering them to deny their faith. This section is not a commentary on any other Christian congregation’s actions. Instead, we are writing to help the people of Christian Assembly Church stay humble and open-handed towards one another by seeing that different Christians may arrive at different actions on these matters without us degenerating into judging the quality or strength of another’s faith. These things call for humble, wise discernment. As Jesus Himself said, “wisdom is proved right by all her children.”<sup>30</sup>

### The Principle of Christian Diversity and Unity Within the Church

Speaking of a diversity of opinions, one of the most repeated phrases you all say about one another is, “I love how diverse our church is!” And truly, we are diverse in more ways than one. We have people who are different generations, different ethnicities, different economic realities, and even differing amounts of time walking with the Lord. And yet, if we are honest, we love that we are diverse until we run into someone in our congregation who has a different opinion on a topic that we are passionate about!

One of the utterly shocking realities of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it can gather people who are otherwise at odds with one another on any number of a wide range of subjects. When we discover that another Christian holds a differing opinion than us, on the surface this can discourage us. On a sociological or psychological level, we think that is natural. We tend to feel most comforted by people who think like us, agree with us, like what we like, and dislike what we dislike. Tribalism always has a strong attraction for humans, especially in times of pressure and strain. And yet, we must remember that the church is not simply a sociological nor psychological phenomenon; the church is a supernatural phenomenon created and sustained by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In fact, bringing different kinds of people together within His church is something that Jesus has been doing since the birth of the church. Speaking of how Christ brought both Jews and Gentiles together in the church, we are told, “For Christ Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has torn down the dividing wall of hostility.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, as you may know, the disciples of Jesus were first called “Christians” in the city of Antioch, which was so diverse that the only identifier they all shared in common was a professed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.<sup>32</sup> We are told that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>33</sup>

Let us not be naïve. The church has always had to work through how to remain true to the gospel among a wide variety of viewpoints. The early church wrestled with how an all-Jewish church would make space for Gentiles who were repenting and coming to Christ through faith.<sup>34</sup> The church in Corinth had to wrestle with opposing views on whether Christians should consume meat sacrificed to idols.<sup>35</sup> And yet, the Bible makes it clear for Christians to be *one* does not mean being exactly the *same*. In other words, because of Christ, we can be *united* without being *uniform*. Speaking to this vision of diversity and unity within the church, God’s Word tells us, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, *who* we have in common is greater than *what* we have in distinction. We must never lose sight of this fact. If we can see this, it is glorious to behold!

So this means that it is a wise and mature Christian who is able to say to another Christian, “I completely disagree with your opinion on a secondary topic that is a passion for me. We can continue to discuss our opposing views in love and goodwill to learn from one another. And yet, I want you to know that even if I disagree with you, I will continue to walk in fellowship with you. Why? Because ultimately, I am not in fellowship with you because we agree on everything. I am in fellowship with you because we agree on and have faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ: His life, death, and resurrection.” Let us remember that Jesus prayed for His followers to be one.<sup>37</sup> We each must do our best to pray for and protect the unity of the church as we know many of you are.

### **The Nature of Wisdom**

So how do we live wisely in these times? In Jesus' day, John the Baptist was known for fasting – and so some people criticized him, claiming he must have been possessed by a demon. Jesus came feasting – and so some of those same people dismissed Him, saying He must be a glutton and a friend to tax collectors and other sinners. Then Jesus says this interesting line, “But wisdom is shown to be right by its results.”<sup>38</sup>

Notice, people saw differences between Jesus and John the Baptist and could have assumed they must be opponents. But Jesus and John the Baptist were never opposed to one another. Yes, on the surface they chose different actions. One came fasting, and the other came feasting. They had a “diversity” in their methods, and yet, both of them resulted in positive results for the Kingdom of God. Time would reveal that both were walking by faith in obedience to God. Pitting them against each other is unhelpful.

Likewise, let us recognize that different individual Christians or even congregations may respond differently in this season. Wisdom will be shown by what results. Who knows? Like John the Baptist and Jesus, maybe there's more than one way to be faithful to God in this season. Instead of pitting people and congregations against one another, let us allow wisdom to be shown to be right by its results in time. And in the meantime, let us continue to pray for one another and all the Christian congregations seeking to live faithfully in these times.

### **“What's the Plan?”**

Now let us return to this question. We want to answer in two ways: one which will be deeply unsatisfying and one that will hopefully provide some reassurance.

Our first answer is: we don't know how long this pandemic will last. Because things change weekly, it is exceedingly difficult to make plans with certainty. We know that is an unsatisfying answer. It is for us too. All of us know that our lives would be exponentially easier if we could tell exactly how this will all unfold.

Our second answer is this: the pastors and staff of CA will consistently seek to provide pathways and options for people of varying opinions and concerns to gather in a variety of ways to grow in Christ and participate in God's mission in this season. Those efforts can already be seen in some life groups who choose to meet online and some life groups who choose to meet in person for our weekend worship. For those who are wanting to meet in-person, outdoors, with social distancing protocols in a group larger than a life group, our plan is to offer a weekly outdoor service on Saturdays at Village Christian School beginning September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Our hope is that those of us who select one form of gathering will not waste time condemning or judging those who select a different form of gathering.

But there's something that goes deeper than the plan for the *forms* of our gatherings. The something deeper is the plan for the *heart* of our gatherings in any form. God's Word tell us that meetings of His church are to be marked by loving one another, carrying each other's burdens, and by kindness, compassion, and forgiving one another.<sup>39</sup> Our plan is to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ and in humility consider others better than ourselves.<sup>40</sup> Our plan is to teach, admonish, and make our love increase and overflow for one another.<sup>41</sup>

Our plan is that we are going to seek to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>42</sup> And yes, love our enemies too – whoever that may be for you, whether it’s a neighbor, coworker, or someone on social media. Maybe you are a “big fan” or “not a fan” of our current elected officials on local, state, or federal levels. Of course, we each have our own opinions too on such matters. However, regardless of our opinions, we are commanded to pray for them as instructed by the Bible.<sup>43</sup> What would happen if we replaced (or at least accompanied) every frustrated comment about a policy or politician with a prayer? We are not just telling you that; we are telling ourselves that too.

Our plan is going to be to encourage one another – and to even do so daily – and to spur one another on to love and good deeds.<sup>44</sup> Our plan is to refuse to slander one another or grumble against each other.<sup>45</sup> Our plan is to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other.<sup>46</sup> We will all use our gifts to serve one another.<sup>47</sup> And most of all, our plan is to love one another.<sup>48</sup> We are told that “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”<sup>49</sup> In that way, the plan for us as a church is the same as it has ever been: God’s grace compels us to lead spiritually convinced and unconvinced people to complete commitment to Jesus Christ. In this season where it can feel like everything has changed, the reality is that some things haven’t changed at all.

In summary, here is what we are calling all of us together to do in this season:

- Join us every weekend to worship God together - you can select which form of gathering best serves you – but decide now to make it a priority to join us every weekend.
- Pray for and protect the unity of our congregation. Be wise, humble, and loving in your interactions with one another, with our staff team, and with those outside the church too.
- Please begin or continue to read the Bible and pray every day, asking God to speak to you from His Word.
- Please join a CA group – whether online or in-person, socially distant. God calls us to do life together, not alone. Your faith will grow in a group, and the group will be better off from your participation too.
- Please continue to be faithful in your giving back to God financially to support our ministry efforts as a church both locally and globally as God provides for you. Thank you to the many of you who are doing just that!
- Please continue to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others in both word and deed.

We love you deeply and pray for you daily. Let us close with these words from Scripture: Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.<sup>50</sup>

Humbly, with grace and truth in Christ,

The CA Pastoral Management Team and Church Council

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:47

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 28:18-20

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- <sup>3</sup> Eph. 5:25; Eph. 1:22-23  
<sup>4</sup> 2 Tim. 2:19  
<sup>5</sup> Luke 12:32  
<sup>6</sup> Matt. 26:26-28; Matt. 28:18-20; Matt. 6:7-15; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 2:42; Matt. 18:17  
<sup>7</sup> Heb. 10:25  
<sup>8</sup> Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19  
<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1  
<sup>10</sup> Acts 9:31  
<sup>11</sup> Eph. 5:25; 1 Cor. 12:28  
<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 6:18; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; Matt. 12:49-50; 1 John 3:14-18  
<sup>13</sup> Eph. 5:32; 2 Cor. 11:2  
<sup>14</sup> John 15:5  
<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 3:6-9  
<sup>16</sup> 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:4-8  
<sup>17</sup> Heb. 3:6; Heb. 3:3; 1 Tim. 3:15  
<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-27  
<sup>19</sup> Eph. 4:15-16  
<sup>20</sup> Mark 9:50; John 13:34; Rom. 12:10  
<sup>21</sup> Rom. 14:13; Rom. 15:7  
<sup>22</sup> Gal. 5:15  
<sup>23</sup> Acts 4:19-20  
<sup>24</sup> Matt. 10:28  
<sup>25</sup> Matt. 10:32-33  
<sup>26</sup> Phil. 2:13  
<sup>27</sup> John 18:11  
<sup>28</sup> John 19:11  
<sup>29</sup> Matt. 4:5-7  
<sup>30</sup> Matt. 11:19  
<sup>31</sup> Eph. 2:14  
<sup>32</sup> Acts 11:26  
<sup>33</sup> Gal. 3:28  
<sup>34</sup> Acts 15  
<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor. 8  
<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-13  
<sup>37</sup> John 17:21  
<sup>38</sup> Matt. 11:16-19  
<sup>39</sup> Gal. 6:2, Eph. 4:2  
<sup>40</sup> Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:3  
<sup>41</sup> Col. 3:13, Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 3:12  
<sup>42</sup> Matt. 22:37-40  
<sup>43</sup> 1 Tim. 2:1-4  
<sup>44</sup> 1 Thess. 4:18, 5:11, Heb. 10:24  
<sup>45</sup> James 4:11; James 5:9  
<sup>46</sup> James 5:16  
<sup>47</sup> 1 Pet. 4:10  
<sup>48</sup> 1 John 3:11  
<sup>49</sup> John 13:35  
<sup>50</sup> Eph. 3:20-21

The above passages are provided for you if you would like to read some of the referenced passages on your own. Please note that this list is not intended as an exhaustive Biblical list of any single topic mentioned.