

Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the questions raised by the COVID epidemic is: "What are the essential services and businesses of our society?" People agreed that healthcare, utilities, and retailers of food, toilet paper, and gasoline were rather essential. Other services and businesses were considered not as essential and they were closed down for a while.

As Christians, we have to ask ourselves, "Is the Church an essential service?" Some governors decided that the Church was not essential. Some people argue that faith is essential but that people can find faith in other ways besides the Church. We often hear, "People don't need the Church to be Christians."

However, from the time of the apostles until now, Christians have always believed that the Church as the gathering of people in Jesus' name is essential. The Church is simply people gathering as a public witness to the Gospel of Jesus. Sure people can find the Gospel in other ways (books, radio, TV, the internet, neighbors, etc.) just like children can get an education apart from public schools. But as we saw last spring, for most children public schools are essential to their education and therefore to the long-term health of our community and nation. Martin Luther advocated for public education as a way to raise literacy rates. Without public schools, education becomes the privilege of a very few. And public education is essential to the promoting of public values and common social ground.

The Church is also essential. If the Church were to stop gathering and simply become a media company publishing and broadcasting a message, something vital would be lost. God didn't send the Gospel in a book or a radio program. God sent us the Gospel in a person – Jesus. And Jesus didn't write down the Gospel for future generations. He sent his followers into the world to be his Body, his physical presence, in the world. It takes a village of believers to reflect the grace and truth of Jesus for the world. Faith is relational and therefore faith is as much caught as it is taught.

The Church is essential because it is the one institution promoting the true meaning and purpose of life. Our political institutions claim that life is all about power. Our media claim that life is all about popularity. Our sports claim that life is all about competition. Our schools claim that life is all about knowledge. Our families come closest to the truth proclaiming that life is all about love. But family love is a private love for a limited circle. The Church focused on the Gospel of Jesus is the one institution promoting God's love for all humanity.

For those who have grown up in the Church, we can come to take the Gospel for granted. But the truth is that there are cultural and spiritual forces trying to uproot the Gospel from our society. We live in a world that is not good soil for the growth of faith in God. Some would say that the world is a spiritual desert. Others argue that it is more like a spiritual jungle. And we have a spiritual enemy who is attempting to sabotage faith in God. If left to ourselves we will not believe the Gospel and we will not have faith in God. Faith is a miracle of the Holy Spirit transmitted to us through the Word and through the love of the community of faith.

The Church is essential because the Gospel of Jesus is essential. The Gospel is the strongest foundation for human rights. Without the Gospel, there is nothing to prevent totalitarianism from taking over. The Gospel is the strongest foundation for morality and integrity. Most people want to be good, but only when it is convenient for them. Schools can teach ethics, but without the Gospel, we lack a real motivation for real integrity. The Gospel is the only foundation for real forgiveness.





Without the Gospel, our culture will continue to fall deeper into anger, bitterness, and polarization. The Gospel is the surest foundation for marriage and family as it teaches us to love one another sacrificially.

The greatest danger is that we take the Church and the Gospel for granted. Apart from constant connection to Christ through the Word and through the Body of Christ (the Church), we are in danger of losing our faith without even realizing it. Down through history, Christians have seen weekly gatherings as a bare minimum for the sustaining of faith in a hostile culture. The Church is far more vital than sports. The Church is even more vital than education. Without the Gospel, education just produces smart sinners. Sure, parents can raise good kids apart from the Gospel and the Church. But they won't have the most valuable thing that anyone can have: a living faith that gives us purpose and hope to life.

Depression and despair are epidemic in our culture right now. Suicide rates have risen 35% in the past 20 years with 1.4 million attempts last year. I read that suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. Drug overdoses have skyrocketed. These are just symptoms suggesting that depression and despair are epidemic. Why? Because people have no meaning and hope for their lives. Does this have anything to do with the way that the Church has been marginalized in most people's lives? The Church is as essential now as it has ever been.

If the Church is essential and we are unable to do Church the way we have always done it, perhaps it is time for us to find new ways to do Church. Perhaps we can meet in small groups. Perhaps we can meet outside. Throughout our history as the Church, the most common way Christians gathered for worship has been in small groups outside. It may be healthier spiritually as well as physically. It may be the only way that the Church survives going forward. I'm just wondering.

Yours in Christ, *Phil Nielsen*