

**Sunday Evening Online
Q & A with Tom (Part 1)
Selected Scriptures
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Good evening and welcome to Sunday Evening Online. I am looking forward to another time together in God's Word and looking through some specific issues. Tonight is a little different as you saw in the email that you received and perhaps heard from others. We are going to do online what we sometimes do during the year on Sunday evening services, and that is, to have a Q & A. You have sent in questions, and I am looking forward to going through some of those. Tonight, Jonathan Anderson, our Senior Associate Pastor is joining me to ask some of those questions. Welcome Jonathan.

JONATHAN ANDERSON: Thanks, Tom. It's great to be with you tonight and looking forward to this time.

PASTOR TOM: Same here. Before we get started why don't you open us in prayer and then we can launch right in.

PASTOR JONATHAN: Sounds great. Let's pray together. Our Father we are thankful for the opportunity to be together tonight. Thank you for the technology to join together in this manner. We thank You for Your Word that is truth and that speaks clearly to the issues of life and pray that You would just direct our hearts and minds to it tonight as we discuss these various questions. We trust our time to You now in Christ's Name. Amen.

Thanks to all of those who submitted questions. We've compiled a number of those and are hoping to work through as many as those as we can in the time that we have. Tom, I want us to start with a little bit of follow-up from your message this morning, some questions that were submitted related to the government restrictions for churches assembling in person. Obviously, there is a lot that we can say about that and talk about, and you will get into some that, I am sure, with your Romans 13 series. But for now, as we think about government restrictions on churches

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assembling, is it sinful for the church not to physically gather in person for regular weekly worship?

PASTOR TOM: Well, let's start with the fact with obviously we are commanded to do so, right? There are several contexts in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul assumes that we will gather on the first day of the week and he gives instructions about what is going to happen there. In John 1, it is called the "Lord's Day." So, there are these expectations. Of course, Hebrews 10 says, do not forsake—the word isn't "never skip," the word is "don't abandon," "don't walk away from" the assembling of yourselves together.

There is general agreement however, throughout church history that there are times in the life of the nation when emergencies call for a time when the church doesn't meet together. In fact, just this past week, I was reading a little bit from Richard Baxter's directory, a mammoth work that talks about various circumstances and how to respond. He was making the point that there was agreement among the churches that, in fact, there may be a period of time or because of national crises, national emergencies, that the church wouldn't meet. But he was making the point that eventually you need to get back to that.

So, I think that is where you have to start, but in terms of, we all know that we need to be meeting as a church. We can't forsake that; we can't abandon that. We all know that there can be a time when we can go without meeting because it's required. The question is when? When does it become too long? That becomes a conscious issue for the elders of each church in their framework and in their setting. So, there isn't a simple answer to that.

Our own elders had to work through that in terms of what makes sense for us in our context based on what's going on here. It might be different here than if we had a church in the heart of New York City when the worst was unfolding there. There is some room and space for the elders of the church to make that decision together. The elders are the conscious of the church. Right? It is not one person who makes that determination, together, collectively the elders decide on those issues that fall into the issues of conscious. This is one of those. There is no clear cut: okay, you

can go without meeting for 10 weeks but at 12 weeks you are sinning. There is no such directive. So, it is a process of wisdom, working through.

I think for me, frankly, it never came to this, thankfully, in our situation. But for me it comes down to this, and that is, when have we gone from not meeting because it is a true emergency, and it is for the good of our people and the good of the community and now it's become excessive. Now there is no compelling necessity. Other organizations, other businesses are being allowed to resume and we aren't and are we being singled out. And I understand, our brothers and sisters in California, I know some of them feel that way. I know there was a discussion about that even this last week, some of you probably read and heard about that. That's an issue of conscience for those churches. I think some of them are concluding, and I think that is for them to decide, that line has been crossed. Now, we are being asked to do something that we are convinced is contrary to God's law. Then they need to meet.

On the other hand, there are guys and we saw a couple of them on the news, unfortunately, representing Christianity over the last few weeks who just love a fight. They love to be in the center of the news. That's the wrong thing. As I said this morning, it has got to be with the right spirit; it has to be with the right attitude.

But in the end, "when," "how many weeks," where do you draw that line, that's an issue of conscience for the elders of each church to work through together. I understand how hard that is and I don't sit in judgment on those who land in a different place than I did, whether they go back sooner or whether they wait longer. It is a hard call. Because you want to do what is wise, what is prudent. When we started meeting again, you pray, "Lord, don't let us get into the news for the wrong reason." You understand those pressures as a pastor and elders.

I think it is helpful to remember that it isn't a clear cut "thou shalt," in terms of how long. There is universal agreement on yes, for a time. There is universal agreement that eventually you have to begin meeting again or you really are not obeying Christ. But exactly where that line is is left up to the leadership of each church.

PASTOR JONATHAN: It would though in your mind fall under those exceptions that you described in Romans 13 this morning, eventually, at some point it becomes that kind of an issue.

PASTOR TOM: Absolutely, because the issue is if the elders in the church are convinced in their hearts that this is now sin for them, that if they continue in light of what is going on in the culture, in light of all the other companies and businesses, etc. that are starting up, that now they really need to meet, then I think it could easily become that. Again, it doesn't always. I would say this, I would always err on the side of patience and slowness as opposed to quickness. I just think there is safety in that. But there does come a time when you have to say, "Okay, this is too long." I think it does become then one of the exceptions where—I heard there were some churches thinking about this in California if the governor doesn't give permission, they are going to say, "Look, we are going to meet anyway because you are being unfair. You are being unjust in forcing us not to meet when other organizations that are less essential to the life and health of the community are meeting." So hard things, very hard things, and I think we need to leave that to the leadership of the churches involved.

PASTOR JONATHAN: That is helpful. Thank you. You know, one of the issues that has come up obviously during this pandemic is the desire to be physically present with each other as Christians, but it also reminds us that true Christian fellowship is more than just being physically present. Obviously, that term fellowship gets thrown around a lot for a lot of different activities of being together, what would you say distinguishes fellowship from just socialization involving Christians?

PASTOR TOM: In one sense, both are involved. You look at the word *koinonia* the word from which our English word "fellowship" comes in the New Testament, the word essentially means "partnership." Paul talks about some of the church and some of the people in the churches being in the fellowship of the gospel, in the partnership of the gospel. So, there is one sense in which we're in fellowship with other believers just by virtue of being believers. Whether we are with

them or not with them, we are in the fellowship. There is a sense in which there is that objective kind of partnership or fellowship.

At the same time, if you look at Acts chapter 2, there is clearly another nuance to this concept of this fellowship. In Acts 2, verse 42, you have the new church forming there in Jerusalem adding 2 to 3,000 souls in one day at Pentecost, it says in verse 42, “They continually devoting themselves to” and then it mentions these things: “the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship.” So, clearly fellowship is not just something that is an objective reality that is true because you and I are believers and therefore we are in the fellowship. But there’s also a reality of a mutual sharing of lives.

I think the best way to sort of situate this word is what Paul describes in Romans 1. I was thinking about this not too long ago. I love the way he describes what he wanted to do when he came together with the Roman Christians. If you look at Romans chapter 1, verse 10, “always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established.” That is sort of the apostolic part of what he wants to do. But then notice just the brother-to-brother part in the next verse, I love this, you see Paul’s humility here: he says, “that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.” You know, I think that is the deeper level of fellowship.

I think realistically, you can say there is the objective level of fellowship. We are in the fellowship so whether you do anything, if you sit next to somebody who is your brother in Christ or you don’t sit next to them, just by virtue of being a brother or sister in Christ, you are in the fellowship. Then there is another level and I think that it is just the sharing of lives: living life together; talking about things that we are mutually facing and going through; just normal life things can be fellowship for believers because it is seen, it is interpreted through the lens of the gospel through what the Lord is doing in our lives.

But then I think the deepest level of fellowship, and this is what I think we all yearn for, desire, is this level at verse 12, “that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.” I think that’s a great summary of that deeper level of fellowship that we all crave where we are encouraged together by one another’s faith as we talk about what we are learning, what we are experiencing, what our struggles are, as we pray together.

I think it is all those things. I don’t think you can say that fellowship is “x.” I think that it happens at each of those levels. It happens at the objective level of we are in the fellowship because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. It happens by virtue of just sharing of life together. I think there can be fellowship in one sense among unbelievers, not the kind of fellowship we enjoy, but they enjoy the sharing of lives together. And that is part of what we can enjoy. But ours goes so much deeper because we do what Paul describes here as the reason he wanted to be with the Roman Christians.

So, I think to me, it’s all of that mixed together. If you think about it, you see that in the Lord’s ministry, right? There was a partnership He had with those who were His followers, whether they were together or not. Then you had the sharing of lives. He chose the 12 so that they would be with Him. They were just with Him in life. They ate together; they walked together; they did life together. There was a sense in which that was fellowship. But then, of course, fellowship goes deeper than that when you begin to share those things that are at a deeper level, the mutual faith that we have and the encouragement that comes through the sharing of those things.

I don’t know if that fully answers where you are going but that’s how I would see it.

PASTOR JONATHAN: I think it is helpful in that Christians don’t have to feel guilty just enjoying time with other believers doing things that are a blessing and a gift in this life. At the same time, there should be an intentionality to do more than that.

PASTOR TOM: That is exactly right. That’s what I think the question was asking because I think for many Christians the fellowship stops at that natural sharing of life together: let’s talk about

sports, shared interests. And there is nothing wrong with that. In one sense that sharing of life is a kind of fellowship. Even around the church office, we talk about a lot of things, it's not all spiritual. We enjoy laughing and sharing life together. But there is also an intentional depth where we are talking about things that matter to us and have changed our souls, our thinking and there is a mutual encouragement in that. It's not a simple concept and I think sometimes we try to make it that.

PASTOR JONATHAN: For all of us, I think we have missed all aspects of that in this unique season. Another question was related to thinking nationally about circumstances of turmoil like this, things that as Christians we hope and pray that the Lord would use this to get the attention of the masses in the nations. One verse that was brought up in regard to that is 2 Chronicles 7:13 and 14 where it says,

If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and will heal their land.

You know this verse is often portrayed as a promise generally to any nation or particularly to America. Does it apply to us or is it just for Israel or is the application for us as well?

PASTOR TOM: I grew up in the sort of God and country, 1976, the Bicentennial and celebration of all that. This verse was front and center everywhere in those days. That's how I first became as a relatively new Christian, I thought about this verse. Just after the fact, I was saved in 1978, just after all of that had unfolded. But this verse was everywhere. Before I came to Christ I was still in the church where my dad was music director, and we did a musical that was all God and country and so forth. It was filled with this. I don't want to make fun of that, but I do want to say, context is always king. We talk about that so often and it is here too.

If you look in context, you have the previous chapter, look at 2 Chronicles chapter 6, you have Solomon's dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. That is the context in which this occurs. When you come to chapter 7 and verse 12, the Lord appears to Solomon and says, "I have heard your prayer. I have chosen this place," that is, the temple in Jerusalem, "for Myself as a house of sacrifice." And then in verse 13, he summarizes all of those judgments that Solomon talks about in his prayer back in chapter 6. And he summarizes it like this, "If I shut up the heavens, so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people." Now "My people" in context can only mean one thing and that is, God's chosen people, Israel, the Jewish people. He is talking about the temple, and He says, "and My people who are called by My name," verse 14, will do these things.

So, I think the first thing we have dispossess ourselves of is that this is directed generally, generically to everyone in specific. And that it is directed to America. America is not God's people. Now, by God's grace, there are a lot of wonderful Christian people in our country, and I often find myself praying like Abraham, "Lord, surely you won't destroy a city if there are so many righteous people in it." My prayer is "Lord, we don't deserve Your blessing. We don't deserve Your best. We deserve based on the choices that our nation is making at this point Your judgment. But be gracious because there are so many of Your people here." But that still doesn't mean that we are His people as a nation. So, this is not a promise to America.

Now, that said, I think in context this is a promise to the people of Israel and God says, if they will do that, verse 14, "they will humble themselves and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways then I will hear from heaven, I will forgive their sin, I will heal their land." Now, while that is specifically a promise to God's people Israel, I think there are within it legitimate applications to us. The first and foremost application is God here describes in a few key words what repentance looks like. That is what He is urging. So, one of the best things we can learn in this verse, is what repentance should be. He says, "If they humble themselves." That's where repentance starts. Sin is by nature, particularly the sin of leaving the path of God, departing from God, it is the sin of pride. "We have turned each one to our own way." That's an intentional turning; that is an intentional rebellion because I know better. I know the best thing

for my life and the best thing for what I need to do. So, it begins by humbling themselves. It is like the young man in the story, the prodigal in the story Jesus told who came to his senses and realized, “what have I done?” A man who was once filled with pride is now in the pigpen and he is humbled, and he is going to come back to the father humbled. “Humble themselves and pray.”

Ultimately, repentance has to be expressed to God. It can’t just be something you feel in your heart. It has to come to God as that expression like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray: he wouldn’t lift up his eyes to heaven but beat on his chest and said, “Lord, be merciful to me the sinner.” You humble yourself; you pray; “seek My face and turn from their wicked ways.” Those are four beautiful descriptions of the components of repentance so I think we can learn a lot in that way and say that whether it is me personally or whether it is in some sense an outbreak of the moving of the Spirit of a revival in our country, this is what repentance would look like. God will hear.

In the case where that happens, God will hear. He has promised that in lots of places beyond this specific promise to the children of Israel and He will forgive their sin. He has promised that. Now the healing of the land part, that obviously is very specific to Israel. There is no guarantee that if there were a wave of repentance that is swept across America that God would repair the damage that has been done. He may because He is gracious, He is good, He’s generous. But this isn’t a promise that He is going to do that. The lessons here are rather what repentance looks like and that where there is true repentance, God will in fact hear and He will forgive.

I’m sort of ambivalent on it because I think it is a great text to say, “Yes, there are great lessons here.” But don’t think “My people” is talking about America and don’t think this is directly addressed to us. It clearly in context is not. So, it’s the balance of those things, I think. Keeping our interpretative mindset on when we come to a text and not pulling it from our context.

PASTOR TOM: Jonathan, I didn’t hear that could you repeat that?

PASTOR JONATHAN: Sorry about that. I was just saying that that is very helpful, and I think, again, it's one of those things where understanding it rightly gives Christians the freedom to be praying that God would use this in a way that would bring repentance to individuals but doesn't heap guilt on us for why our country is in the mess that it's in.

Another question is how do we respond to those in our circle, unbelieving friends or family, close relationships who are living the opposite of what was described as repentance there. An attitude of pride towards the Lord in just high-handed ways. Maybe that's with things like the LGBT movement, or other things. What is an appropriate response for Christians to those who they know and love who are living in high handed rebellion against God?

PASTOR TOM: It's a great question. I know it is complicated for example if you have young children, to what extent do you bring those who have homosexual relationships into your home for the holidays. I have had those kinds of questions. It's complicated. I understand that. But I think you have to back up first and say what should our mindset be? I think there are two passages to me that underscore what our mindset should be.

The first one is 1 Corinthians chapter 5. A lot of Christians misunderstand this but in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul says in verse 9, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral people. I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world." He said, "Listen, when I told you not to connect with immoral people, I wasn't talking about unbelievers. Because if you did that, you would have nothing to do with unbelievers because they are all living in sin of some kind or other. That's the nature of what it means to be an unbeliever." And then he says in verse 11, "But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one." And then he said in verse 13, "REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES."

In the context of the church, he is saying, it is okay to have interaction with immoral people who are unbelievers. As an individual believer in your community, at work, in school, you are going to rub shoulders with and interact with immoral people. Obviously don't be influenced by their sin. Don't be sucked into it. But befriend them, love them, care for them.

By the way, I don't think he is saying here, when he says—let's say you have a family member who is a professing believer that you shouldn't eat with them. You shouldn't have them over, you should cut off all contact. This is talking about how they are treated in the context of the church. They shouldn't be received and welcomed in the context of the church if they are living in open unrepentant sin. But it doesn't mean that if you have a child who is living in one of these patterns of open sin that you should cut them off. You are still their parent. You still love them, and you want to express the love of Christ to them. But that is the first point, he is not saying to cut off all connection, all association.

The next passage is the one I mentioned this morning. Titus chapter 3. It is kind of an interesting passage because it is blended. It starts off talking about government and much of what he has to say here is about government, but he gets broader than that. There is an application for how we think about and interact with unbelievers of all kinds. Not just those in government. Notice he says in Titus 3, verse 1, "Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed." Now we are going broader than just those in government. I think it includes those in government, but I think he is going broader: "to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration"—every courtesy—"for all men." Again, I think it includes how we respond to those in government, but I think it is even broader than that.

And so, when you think about how you treat those who are into the LGBTQ lifestyle or whatever it might be, this is how you want to think. You want to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every courtesy for all men. Why? Verse 3, "For"—because, here's why—"we also once were foolish ourselves" Look, they are no different than we are or were before Christ. Their sins might be different. Their temptations might be different, but it is the same in kind. We were "foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our

life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.” And then the kindness of God our Savior and His love appeared. He changed us, he saved us.

So, what I think Paul is saying is when you interact with unbelievers keep this mindset.

Remember that apart from the grace of God, that’s you. And that you have been redeemed and that is God’s grace. It is not because you were smarter or made better choices or whatever. It is because God in His grace intervened in your life. And so therefore, if you keep that mindset, it allows you to interact with unbelievers who are locked into all kinds of different lifestyles with that graciousness. I love that expression, “showing every courtesy”—literally—“for all men.” You can be courteous and kind and interreact with them on a gracious level.

PASTOR JONATHAN: Just briefly, in terms of practical interaction, thinking through how and when to confront that sin, obviously there are two extremes: never confronting sin in unbelievers or a feeling like every time you interact you have to confront that sin. What guidance would you give just practically?

PASTOR TOM: Obviously, if you have a friend who is professing Christ but is living in a pattern with one of these sins, then, yes, Matthew 18, you have to follow that. If that person is in your family, lives in your house, that doesn’t mean every time you see them, you have to confront their sin. It means that they have to know that you believe that they have chosen a sinful lifestyle because it is what the Scripture says, but that you still love them. You still care for them. That you still want to have a relationship with them because they are still related to you. They are still flesh and blood and you are committed to them in that way. So, it’s that balance.

But certainly, you can go overboard and every time you see somebody who professes Christ who is living in sin if they are a family member particularly, you can feel like you need to confront that. That’s overkill. They just need to know—you need to be straightforward, there needs to be a time when that is made very clear and that you are praying for them, you still love them but that’s sin.

If it is a person who is an unbeliever, then it's part of the larger confrontation. It is not even about that specific sin, it's about their need for the gospel. You need to help them understand their sin, if they are not convinced that they are sinners, then you can confront them with that. But the chances are, they already know that. What they need to be reminded of is that they can turn from that sin and receive forgiveness in Christ. You bring that to bear. Again, you wouldn't do that every time. Let's say it's a friend, a co-worker, you are not doing that constantly. You are choosing those moments. You are praying for wisdom but at strategic moments you are asking the Lord to help you step in and share the gospel with that person so that they are reminded of the hope that is found in the gospel of Christ. It's a delicate balance but I think, yeah, you are right, people can get too aggressive with confrontation and then there are other people who are peace lovers that they never say that there is anything wrong. Both of those are extremes.

PASTOR JONATHAN: Unfortunately, that is all the time we have tonight. We didn't quite get through all the questions, but thankful for the time that we could spend and for those who submitted other ones, we will do our best to find another time to continue this conversation and address more of those. Thank you, Tom for your time tonight and interacting about these things and obviously we are thankful the Scriptures speak to the issues of life in clear ways. Next week, for Sunday evening online just to give you a heads up hope you will join us again. We are going to do something a little different next week. It'll be an opportunity for me to sit down with Daniel Schubert who is our counseling pastor, he is newer to our staff. We want to give folks a chance to get to know him a little bit. We will be talking about how issues and trials like the current pandemic reveal issues in our own hearts and how the Scriptures direct us to respond. So, look forward to that time with Daniel. Hope you will be able to join us as we anticipate that. Tom, you want to close us in prayer, and we'll be done for the evening.

PASTOR TOM: I will do it. Thank you, Jonathan. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do thank You for Your Word. Thank You that You have not left us as orphans in the world, but You have given us Your Word and You have given us Your Spirit. We thank You

for the church and for the wonderful way You shape and direct our lives through the fellowship that we were talking about even tonight.

Lord, we pray that You would use our time together tonight, the discussion about these issues to help shape our thinking. Lord, help each of us to always be coming back to what does the Bible say. What does the Scriptures say about these matters? Lord, may that be our first question and the most important concept of our minds when matters arise.

Thank You for this time. Again, use it for our good. I pray that You give us the opportunity, even in the week before us to live out some of the things we that we have talked about in loving the people around us and bringing the gospel to bear in their lives for the glory of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen. Good night.