

THE SALTSHAKER

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Coronavirus Reset

By Rev. Sean McCann

March 13, 2020, is the day our lives changed in ways we could never have imagined. That afternoon – a Friday – our elders met to discuss the wild news of the previous 48 hours and the new requirement from our Governor that limited large group gatherings. It seemed unimaginable that we would vote to cancel public worship, but in the spirit of loving our neighbor and obeying our civil magistrates, we canceled all church gatherings for two weeks. The following week, as the restrictions grew, we canceled worship indefinitely. Much has changed since March, and yet much remains the same. In the space below I want to think about where we have come since March, where we are now as a church, and what we have learned that we can carry forward into the new year.

Every Sunday since March 13 we have joined together in some form of worship as a body. For those first fourteen Sundays (March to May) we sent out weekly Home Worship Guides, accompanied by the audio of a recorded sermon. Since the beginning of June (thirty-one Sundays) we have gathered indoors and streamed the service, as well as gathered outdoors in a second service in the side yard (only canceling twice because of weather). In September and October, we met on Sunday evenings outdoors for a prayer service, and in November we moved that service indoors, as well as flipped the morning services so that the outdoor service could warm up a bit. During these seven months we have also gradually returned to small group Bible studies and prayer meetings. Over that stretch of time, we have celebrated together the sacraments of Baptism (three in total), and the Lord's Supper (monthly since September). We have seen people leave our fellowship and we have welcomed new members. We have voted in new officers and said goodbye to others. We have explored new uses of technology including live stream, video devotions and teaching, and podcasts. It has been a trying time for all of us, and one we all wish would end soon.

But it hasn't ended; far from it. No matter what we think about it, we live in a world of virus and restrictions, and

must figure out how to live with the strain of that reality – both as individuals, and also together as a church body. Our church has not been immune to that strain. So where are we now as a church, at the end of one of the hardest years of our life together? Our highest calling is to worship God, so we continue to be committed to gathering on the Lord's Day for worship. We continue to gather in the Sanctuary with masks and distancing, with both the morning and evening services available on live stream and YouTube. We no longer have the outdoor service, but have opened the Fellowship Hall where people may participate via live stream, and with less restrictions than in the Sanctuary. None of this is ideal, but it represents the wide range of different comfort levels we have in our church. Some of our members choose not to gather right now for worship and instead join from home on the live stream, while others choose not to go inside, regardless of what restrictions are in place. Some choose to put on masks for worship, while others choose not to and gather instead in the Fellowship Hall.

You fit into one of those categories (unless I am missing one), and when you are honest with yourself you know the temptation to think ill of those who are more or less cautious than you are. We must resist this temptation! It is one thing to graciously disagree with another's decision, even that of the leadership of the church; it is entirely another thing to impugn the motives of your brothers and sisters in Christ by assuming they are acting out of sin. It truly grieves me as your pastor to hear people make critical comments to or about one another that seem to be thoughtless and insensitive. Are we not the body of Christ? Are we not called to bear with one another in love? Are we not called to let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away, to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave us? Let us put off the old self and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Morning Worship Service Indoors, Sundays at 10:00 am - Due to weather conditions in the cooler months, we are offering two options for indoor worship. We will not be meeting outdoors during the winter. In addition to our service in the Sanctuary (where masks are required), we have added a set-up in the Fellowship Hall, where a projector will simultaneously broadcast the service from the Sanctuary. We encourage all worshippers to wear masks, but do not require it of those who choose to attend in the Fellowship Hall. We also encourage social distancing in both locations, and it is up to those who attend all services to assume the risk.

Livestream Worship Service, Sundays at 10:00 am and 6:00 pm - Morning and evening services are live streamed every week on our website and continue to be a source of encouragement for those who are not able to attend in person. We usually have 20-30 viewers of the livestream, and our experience setting this up has enabled us to help other sister churches do the same. The services are also posted on our YouTube channel every week.

Evening Worship Service, Sundays at 6:00 pm— Our pastors are teaching through the book of 1 Corinthians during these services. This service meets in the Sanctuary, and masks are required. There will be no evening service on January 3. The service will also be broadcast in the Fellowship Hall.

Lord's Supper: We will celebrate the Lord's Supper at the morning services on the third Sunday of each month; January 17th and February 21st are our next two celebrations.

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What might this look like going forward? I imagine that in ten years we will look back at this season and have a better grasp of what God is doing, but we have been in it long enough to articulate some lessons that might help us in the coming year. Here are three:

1) Worship Is Essential. How do we know what is essential to our lives and what we can live without? Does the government tell us that, or should we instead listen to God’s word? The public, gathered assembly of God’s people is how we are called to worship him. At times we may be providential hindered from gathering, but ultimately the church must not forsake her calling in the world. Just this month Gallup published a mental health study that showed that the only people in America doing better this year than last year are weekly church attenders. Worship is essential to our health.

2) Technology Cannot Replace Embodied Community. We are grateful for the live stream; it has been a lifeline for many. We are also grateful for SermonAudio, Zoom, YouTube, Vimeo, and Podcasts; they provide points of contact and resources that can be helpful. But despite the good that has come from this, we are not going to rethink how we do church (as some in our culture have called for). The church is an embodied community called to gather to worship God on high. Personhood cannot be reduced to a voice from a speaker or a face on a screen. Our souls inhabit bodies, and it is as embodied persons that we gather as an embodied community, and this is what so many of us have missed these past months. And more than just missed, it has hurt us spiritually to be absent from one another. We are thankful for technology, and we are thankful that God sustains us when we must be apart, but we maintain the vital nature of in person gatherings and yearn for their full return.



The Sacred Desk

By Rev. Sean McCann

This coming year will begin for us in the beginning, as we begin a new sermon series in Genesis. Genesis is a book of beginnings, and it is often argued that if you get Genesis wrong then you will get the rest of the Bible wrong. This is certainly true, but so is the inverse. Just as a building without a foundation is incomplete and will soon fall; so too is a foundation without a building incomplete, and ultimately insufficient.

At its root, the Bible is a book of promises: promises made by God, and fulfilled by him in time. Where does Genesis fit in a book of promises made and kept? First, it serves as a prologue to explain why promises are needed in the first place. Man’s sin ruined God’s good creation and now we need him to fix everything that we broke. God will indeed restore that which was lost, and he begins this work of restoration by making promises, first to Adam, then to Noah, and ultimately to Abram.

God’s role in this narrative is fairly straightforward: he makes promises that he will – in time – fulfill. He promises to bless his people by giving them a land as their inheritance and a seed that will grow into a nation to fill that land. These promises sound wonderful, and yet, we find time and time again in the book, people struggling to believe them. The storyline of Genesis follows the ups and downs of a family responding to God’s promises: sometimes with faith by believing them, other times with disbelief that leads to glorious failures. Though the circumstances may be different from our day, the pattern sounds pretty familiar: our walk of faith is best understood as a struggle of faith to believe God’s promises to us in Christ.

With this theme in mind, I have entitled the series *Genesis: God’s Promise to Bless*. It is my tentative plan to preach through the book in one year and finish up around Christmas, 2021. It is my hope that as we struggle together to believe God’s promises, we will take great encouragement in our journey from the pages of this foundational book.

3) Bearing With One Another Is Hard. To bear with means to *endure* one another, to be *patient*, to *put up with* one another, to “tolerate the faults and sometimes grating personality quirks of others in the church” (Arnold). When it comes to the tension-filled discussion of masks, how many of us feel misunderstood by someone with a different view? Maybe you have been accused of fearfulness, or of selfishness; of mindlessly obeying authoritarian restrictions, or of needlessly disobeying moderate restrictions. When I disagree with someone, I always try to see the matter through their eyes so that I can at least sympathize with them, but even that is hard to do right now. This is one of the reasons we are struggling to bear with one another, and why we must heed the call to do so with all sympathy and patience.

How can we bear with one another? It starts with believing that Christ bears with us. When Jesus encountered his disciples’ unbelief in the face of a sick boy, he asks rhetorically: “How long shall I put up with you?” Will Jesus continue to bear with unfaithful people like us, or will he finally lose patience and give up? You know the answer. He is patient and long-suffering, kind and tenderhearted, gentle and lowly in heart. We should exasperate him, but instead we are welcomed by a Savior who lives to make intercession for us. He bears with us and bore our sins on the cross; should we not also have mercy on others as he had mercy on us?

Dear friends, we are all tired and weary, so let us find our rest in Christ, and with his strength not grow weary of doing good, “for in due time we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are in the household of faith.” (Gal 6:9-10)

Preaching Schedule	
Date	Morning
Jan. 3	Rev. 6:9-11
Jan. 10	Gen. 1:1-2
Jan. 17	Gen. 1:3-25
Jan. 24	Gen. 1:26-31
Jan. 31	Gen. 2:1-3
Feb. 7	Gen. 2:4-17
Feb. 14	Gen. 2:18-24
Feb. 21	Gen. 3:1-7
Feb. 28	Gen. 3:8-25

Atonement: the Work of the Great High Priest

By Rev. Chris Brown

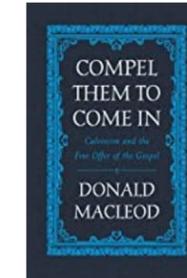
We’ve begun a new, online Sunday school series this Winter that studies the nature of the atonement. I’ve learned a thing or two about how to record videos, edit, and put them up on Youtube, but I certainly know that nothing can replace in-person Sunday school. I hope that this topic, though, is worth taking the time to watch the full videos. I say this, but you may be wondering: Why study the atonement during this time of COVID? Studying the atonement is helpful now because it is the essence of the work of our great High Priest, Jesus. We need to focus on the essentials to help support ourselves under trials. We get chicken soup when we are sick because of its fat and protein content and comfort, yet its ease on the stomach. We need something like that theologically, I think. The work of Jesus to reconcile us to God is both rich and comforting.

Another question you might ask is: Why study the atonement online? I’ve learned that the topics we choose to focus on via online videos can have a broad reach. While this is primarily designed for the discipleship of our Church members, lots of people have access to these lessons. And, if you were to scour the internet for good lessons on the atonement, you’ll find that there is a lot of disinformation. Aside from the doctrine of Scripture, there seems to be nothing else people love to criticize and attempt to undermine more than the atoning work that Jesus has accomplished for sinners. If we can add a solid, biblical set of lessons that present Jesus as the sufficient and only Savior of sinners, then we’ve contributed something to benefit the online environment.

But last, you might be wondering: Why study the specifics of the atonement? We’re going to go into some pretty detailed lessons on it. The problem is that if we butcher the atonement, we may not have our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we believe that Jesus is sufficient to save if we add certain works, or that Jesus and Mary or Jesus and the saints are sufficient together, based upon our view of the atonement, then we are not coming to the actual Jesus Christ for salvation. So, negatively, to get the atonement wrong might mean we get Jesus wrong too. But, positively, a robust understanding of the atonement will help nourish our weary souls. We will appreciate the excellence and love of the Savior who undertook such a profound work. We will see His absolute sufficiency to save, and His enjoyment of rescuing desperate and needy sinners. And my hope is that we will be filled with joy, even when trials come our way, as we consider the magnitude of what He has done for us.

Compel Them to Come In

by Rev. Chris Brown



In Donald Macleod’s most recent work, “Compel Them to Come In: Calvinism and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, Macleod forcefully argues for the importance of the free offer of the gospel. He says, “No doctrine is more important than the free offer. To deny it... is heresy.” In this work, he takes up the age-old issue of how limited or particular atonement relates to the free and open offer of salvation in Jesus Christ.

To put it another way: how can we who believe Jesus died to effectually save only the elect then offer Jesus Christ to everyone? While Macleod’s work is theologically driven, and therefore somewhat theologically dense, its practical implications make it worth picking up and reading.

In the first three chapters, Macleod discusses the relation of the free offer of the gospel to three related issues: man’s spiritual bondage, predestination, and limited atonement. Within these chapters, he argues that we ought to study the biblical pattern of evangelism as it relates to biblical doctrines like these. When we look at the biblical pattern of evangelism, Jesus as a sufficient Savior is offered to everyone who is dead in sin. The good news about Jesus is declared as both a promise, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,” as well as a summons to come to Jesus by repenting of sin, and believing the promise, “All who come to me I will never cast out.” Christ commands an indiscriminate offer in the great commission, when he says, “go”. With that in mind, Macleod points out, “Christ is with us only in our going”. Not only that, but it is God’s regular pattern to outwardly call everyone regularly (Is. 45:22; 55:7). Last of all, he discusses how predestination and particular atonement are actually an incentive to evangelize.

Chapter four is perhaps my favorite chapter in this book. It covers the issue of “divine sincerity”. The issue is: if God has atoned only for the sins of the elect, how sincere is He really in offering salvation to every single individual? Based on this question, there are some Calvinists who believe that the offer of salvation is sincere from preachers, but not sincere from God. They believe that since a preacher is ignorant about who is elect, and who is not elect, they may say, “Come to Him, and He will save you,” but that God only sincerely desires that the elect come to Him to be saved. I thoroughly enjoyed Macleod’s chapter because he combats that view successfully, in my opinion, and makes a compelling case that God sincerely desires the salvation of even the non-elect. Indeed, this sincere desire is one of the basis for ministers and for layperson to offer Christ to anyone and everyone.

Macleod’s work may contain some deep theology, but the results are extremely beneficial. It will train you as both a theologian and an evangelist as you ponder God’s words, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?” declares the Sovereign Lord. “Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” (Ez. 18:23).