



ISSUE

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# Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF  
THE OL-  
SEN PARK  
CHURCH OF  
CHRIST

## Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

## Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

## Deacons:

Steve Dixon

Ryan Ferguson

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McNear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Kevin Wise

Trevor Yontz

## Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

## How Christians Responded to Spanish Influenza in 1918

By Kyle Pope

Just over a century ago, from 1918-19 a strain of an H1N1 virus swept across the United States. Twenty years earlier, from 1889-90, a similar flu epidemic had killed one million people worldwide but had only limited impact in the United States. Yet as World War I was drawing to a close, returning soldiers unwittingly brought Spanish Influenza home with them. Worldwide 500 million people would eventually become infected, resulting in the deaths of 50 million people worldwide and 675,000 people in the United States. The first cases arose in military camps in the spring of 1918. By September, it was spreading throughout the country at alarming rates and the Federal government advised State and Local officials to limit public gatherings, including schools and churches. By mid-November most restrictions were lifted, but during the fall months of 1918, just as now churches of Christ confronted the challenging questions of how to obey the laws of both man and God, and how best to show love and care for the physical and spiritual well-being of others. While Scripture and not history must stand as our authority, there is great comfort in knowing that our brothers and sisters in Christ 102 years ago faced and ultimately overcame the same issues that confront us today. Peter taught, in resisting Satan to take comfort in the knowledge that **“the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world”** (1 Pet. 5:9, NKJV). In that spirit, I offer three examples of how brethren in those days confronted challenges amazingly similar to the situation we now face because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**J.C. McQuiddy** was the editor of *Gospel Advocate* magazine from 1885-1924. As conditions worsened, one of the first articles addressing the problem was written by A.B. Lipscomb, the nephew of David Lipscomb, and preacher for the Russell Street church in Nashville. As city hospitals filled up, forcing them to turn people away, Russell Street converted its classrooms into a temporary hospital with a physician and nurse volunteering their services (“In Behalf of the Sick”). In the next issue, McQuiddy praised this action, asking no questions as to whether this was a scriptural work of the

church or not, appealing to Jesus's words in Matthew 25:40 as authority for it, as Lipscomb would also do in the same issue ("The Spanish Influenza"; "The Russell Street Hospital"). While this was certainly an extraordinary circumstance that only served a temporary need, it undoubtedly set the stage in the decades to come for some brethren to unscripturally expand the collective work of the church to include medical missions.

The October 24 and 31 issues of *Gospel Advocate* devoted significant attention to this rising problem. Both featured Public Service Announcements (PSA) entitled, "Spanish Influenza—What It Is and How It should Be Treated" (1023, 1048). McQuiddy wrote two articles on the problem and ran a report from Lipscomb on the Russell Street Hospital. In his first article, entitled simply, "Spanish Influenza," McQuiddy began:

The reports from all parts of the country concerning the inroads of this disease are really fearful to contemplate. The number of deaths in our army camps is truly frightful. This common danger behoves us all to exercise special vigilance in protecting our own health and that of our families. . . . It will be well for the brethren and people everywhere

to observe strictly all the regulations urged by our State Boards of Health and cooperate in every way to help combat and drive out this unwelcome scourge (1016).

He then quoted from a sister publication, known as the *Christian Leader*, encouraging churches to continue their support of preachers even though they "will be unable to fill their appointments" (ibid.). His second article, entitled "Closing Churches," dealt specifically with the question of suspended assemblies of the church. He began:

On account of such rapid spread of influenza as to endanger the lives of many people of our country, the national government at Washington has advised the different State governments to issue a proclamation closing all churches so long as this great danger to the health and lives of the people exists (1020).

Earlier the same year McQuiddy had opposed inconsistent calls by officials to close churches in order to preserve coal and fuel during the war while leaving breweries, pool halls, and theaters opened ("Shall We Close the Churches?"). In this case, however, he did not see the government's action as inappropriate. He explained, "I do not understand that the government intends by this proclamation to interfere with Christians' worshiping God as they understand the New Testament requires them to do" (ibid.). He then began to expound upon Acts 20:7, 2:42, Hebrews 10:23-25, and 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 for authority for the church to assemble regularly on the first day of the week, to break bread, and contribute, adding, "This privilege should not be neglected now, for the expenses of the church are continuous and perhaps greater than they were formerly"—"Christians should contribute on the first day of the week as well as break bread. There is no warrant in the Scriptures for neglecting the contribution any more than there is for neglecting the prayers and the breaking of bread" (ibid.).

McQuiddy did not address the question of whether the Lord's Supper is restricted to the context of a church assembly but discussed several issues raised as a result of closing churches. First, he expressed his hope that the situation would actually cause those who had previously neglected the assembly to appreciate more acutely what they were missing. Second, he compared the condition to choices Christians are often forced to make when family members are ill. He wrote:

Christians have not felt that God required them to meet upon the first day of the week when any of their family or loved ones were seriously sick. Especially they have not felt called upon to leave them and meet with the disciples on the first day of the week if thereby they would jeopardize the lives of members of their families. Even so Christians now should feel that God does not call

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upon them to meet in a way that will jeopardize and endanger the health and lives of not only their own families, but the families also of many other people (ibid.).

In light of this, he urged compliance with the government's guidelines by worshipping at home or in small groups. He wrote, "The government's order gives each family an opportunity to show its loyalty to the government and also to God" (ibid.).

Third, he explored the question of whether the Lord's Supper could only be observed with a large crowd assembled, arguing, "For Christians to urge that we should now assemble in large crowds to break bread in the face of the proclamation of the government is not warranted by the Scriptures, but is a direct violation of the command of the Holy Spirit," quoting Romans 13:1-2 (1020-21). He concluded, "It will not be questioned that the intent of the government is to protect and care for the lives of its subjects" urging "Christians should observe the command cheerfully, seeking to lead quiet, holy, and unblameable lives" (1021).

**A.O. Colley** was a preacher in Dallas, Texas. By November, *Gospel Advocate* no longer ran the PSA about treatment of Spanish Influenza, but did run one entitled, "Druggists Please Note!! Vick's Vaporub Oversold Due to Present Epidemic" (1076). Perhaps in reaction to his rather broad acceptance of the government order, McQiddy published two articles that month by brethren who advocated different ways of complying with proclamations limiting assemblies. In Dallas, on a Saturday the Mayor had issued an order closing "churches and other places of public gatherings," leaving little time for churches to make provisions for what to do. A.O. Colley, in his article entitled, "Obeying God Under Difficulties," explained how he and the eldership in his own local church addressed the situation. Colley met with the Mayor and explained that they felt they "had no right to abandon 'the assembling of ourselves together' even under these circumstances" (1060). To which the Mayor first responded that there could be no exceptions. We can understand his reluctance given that Philadelphia, on September 28 had refused to cancel a large parade and by the end of the week 2600 people died! ("How U.S. Cities Tried to Halt the Spread of the 1918 Spanish Flu"). Colley, asked the Mayor, whom he described as a "religious man" what he would do if confronted with a choice to obey God or man. To which the Mayor responded, "I would obey the Lord." At the Mayor's suggestion, the congregation began having "open-air" meetings. Colley explained:

We have met each Lord's day since, to "remember the Lord's death till he come," out on the lawn by the side of the church house. We are trying to help the city relieve the suffering, care for the sick, and bury the dead. This is a time for sober thinking and faithful acting (ibid.).

**E.C. Fuqua** was a preacher who conducted numerous tent meetings and helped establish churches, often without any financial support for his efforts. He would later be known for his erroneous teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage which argued that unbelievers are not amenable to the Law of Christ (*Warren-Fuqua Debate on Divorce and Remarriage*). Yet, near the end of November, *Gospel Advocate* ran an article he wrote entitled, "The Churches and the 'Flu.'" Fuqua set forth what he considered to be an apparent conflict between the responsibility to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29) and yet be subject to the "higher powers" (Rom. 13:1-2). Putting it rather bluntly, he wrote:

The so-called "Spanish influenza"—has so overrun the West that stringent steps have been taken to counteract it. These steps included the unconditional closing of all churches throughout the State—the "unconditional surrender" of the kingdom of Christ to the civil government for the time being, so it would seem (1141).

While he moderated his initial harsh tone in the rest of the article, Fuqua bemoaned that it seemed some were using the government order as a way to neglect the commands of God. He offered his own judgment that . . .

The authorities have not forbidden all intercourse. We are allowed, under certain restrictions, to visit in the homes. Carefully observing these restrictions, we feel free

to meet a few brethren in a private home and worship according to the New Testament teaching. The assembly thus formed is not unlawful, and the worship rendered is lawful to God; hence in this we combine loyalty to both (ibid.).

These brethren rotated between different houses each Lord's Day in small groups in compliance with the government restrictions. Fuqua felt, "in all matters where the State has spoken, in my experience I have yet to find a case where the State enjoins anything that really leads to hostility to Christ in any matter," arguing that the approach they had taken was choosing the "way of escape" (1 Cor. 10:13) from a temptation to do wrong (ibid.). Whether this succeeded in protecting the Christians who chose this method from spreading or contracting the virus is not recorded.

**Conclusion.** Centuries ago the Holy Spirit led Solomon to write, "**That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun**" (Eccl. 1:9). Brethren have wrestled with challenges to our service to

God from the establishment of the church. These brethren, a century ago faced circumstances hauntingly similar to our present situation yet they did so in a time of war, without the advantages and comforts of modern technology. May God bring this present trial to an end quickly and may we draw comfort from the knowledge that we will make it through it as our brothers and sisters did in the years that have gone before us.

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