

Who defines you?

In Boston, many years ago, I once donned a “Big Bird” costume for the children's group at the church I was attending. The goal was to get their attention that I might share the Gospel with them. In hindsight – now realizing that the Gospel is for humans and all – I might decide differently today... but that's another matter. ;o)

One of the deacons, who over saw the children's ministry, came and introduced himself. “Hi. I'm Brother Jim Sasso”.

“Hi Jim! It's a pleasure to work with you!”

“**Brother** Sasso!”, was all he replied, and had no further conversation with me.

Brother Sasso had defined himself. Indeed, he **was** Jim, and in that moment, we **were** colleagues. But in Jim's mind, he **was** not Jim... at least not to me. He **was** *Brother* Sasso; unmistakably, my superior.

Now why – the inquiring mind is asking – did I underline and boldface those words above? Here's why.

In that moment, Jim was not asking me, “Hey Pete. Nice to work with you too. Could you do me a favor and in the presence of these little kids, please address me as Brother Sasso? We're trying to teach them to be respectful of elders and church leaders. Thanks”.

But he did not.

You see, those above, underlined, boldface words are part of the conjugation of the verb “to be”. “To be” is a funny verb. It's not like *sing, sang, sung*. When we refer to the past, present or future of the action of singing, we can see easily that it's about singing. But the verb “to be” is weird. In the past it is “was” and “were”... not even similar. In the present it's “is”... again, very different. In the future it's “will be”... similar but requiring another word.

What Brother Jim was doing in his response to me was defining what “is”... since we're talking about a 40 year old event, it's actually what “was”.

But who's role is it to define what “is”?

Is/was it Jim's? Is it mine or yours? Is it the church's...?

That's a real question in 21st Century America, isn't it? What with people actually defining themselves as “other” that what they **are** (there it is again!).

What's in my mind as I write this to you, **is** the State's definitions of what **are** and what **are not** “essential services” during our recent economic, cultural, societal shutdown. In recent months, the States **have been** deciding which services, **be** they sales or service, **are** essential ones and which **are** not. There **are** of course the controversial ones like the hairdresser who **was** considered non-essential while the dog-grooming

salon in the same strip mall **was** considered essential. But we won't treat all those here... I really want to talk about the church, meeting, and whether or not that **is** essential.

While methadone clinics, liquor stores and marijuana dispensaries (in states where it is sold) **were** deemed “essential” and allowed to carry on their businesses, churches **were** deemed non-essential and banned from carrying on theirs. There **were** actually places where church attendees **were** issued \$500 citations for sitting in their cars in the parking lots of their churches with their windows rolled up, while observing a “drive-in” service. They were cited for merely **being** there, thus violating the “spirit” of the state's Lock-Down orders. My friend attended a church that **was** fined for holding service, and then closed, even though the manner in which it conducted its service **was** exactly in keeping with the Lock-Down mandates of social distancing and masks.

Well this raises a question... how **is** it that Walmart **is** considered an essential service, and church **is** not? Indeed, that question **may be** asked of liquor stores, home-improvement stores, dog-grooming salons, etc, etc, etc. The question really **is**, who determines what **is** essential and what **is not** essential, and how, and why?

Sadly, only when it suits a political need, will many governmental administrations acknowledge that the spiritual aspects of the human being **are** as important as the physical and emotional aspects... but only when it suits a need. When there **is** nothing to be gained by acknowledging the spiritual needs of the human being, those needs **are** deemed non-essential. And so it has happened in recent days, that the essential services lists of states, do not include churches... read that, church gatherings. Churches can exist, but they **were/are** not allowed to gather. Churches **were** only allowed to “gather”, virtually. Those who decided that virtual gatherings would meet the spiritual needs of congregants in the same manner that actual, physical gatherings would, **are** the same people whom deemed churches' gathering non-essential in the first place. In other words, not only **was** a governmental administration deciding whether or not churches **were** or **were not** essential, they **were** deciding which aspects of any church's worship **were** essential or non-essential. In other words, what **is** and what **is not**, externally and internally, both behaviorally and doctrinally, **was** now to be determined by a governmental agency, rather than by those religious groups themselves. I'm going to say that again... What **is** and what **is not**, externally and internally, behaviorally and doctrinally, **is** now **to be** determined by a governmental agency, and not by the church. ... and all the behaviors, e.g. gathering, that **are being** banned – behaviors that **are** mandated by the churches' beliefs/doctrines – **are being** banned while not having violated any laws, ordinances or statutes. This means that the Constitutional, first amendment rights of all religious institutions **were** suspended, threatened, modified,

deemed a violation, _____ fill in the blank. The practice of *gathering* for one's own, or a group's own religious purposes, a practice banned in many other countries as a violation of governmental mandate – for whatever reason – **was** now also banned in the United States of America as a violation of governmental mandate. Oh yes, I understand that the reason given **was** that the “government's responsibility” **was/is** to keep the population safe from epidemic. Perhaps...but that **is** another discussion, **isn't** it? ... a discussion about the, *role, scope* and *ability* of any government to even undertake such a thing! Here, we **are** addressing only the issue about the gathering, and the essentiality or non-essentiality thereof... and here **is** why.

Earlier this week, the President of these United States, said that church meetings, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or otherwise, **are/were** essential. Now let's think about that for a moment.

If church services **are** essential now, as opposed to before, there must **be** a reason for that change, no”... if indeed it is a change at all...

Is the stress of an economic shutdown now necessitating as essential, church gatherings? **Was not** the threat of a global pandemic sufficiently stressful so as to warrant the essentiality of attention to the spiritual aspects of the human being and therefore, church gatherings?

Really, **are** church gatherings essential now where they **were not** before?

The very word, essential, speaks of ontology... what a thing **IS**, in its essence. Unless one believes that only now, the spiritual needs of humans demands attention in a manner that it did not a few months ago, then one cannot justify the switch from non-essential to essential. Essentiality doesn't work that way. Barring pathology, my essential needs **are** not determined by you nor anyone but me, and neither can I determine your essential needs with any greater legitimacy.

Alcohol sales **were** deemed essential. They **are** for others, but not, for me.

Marijuana sales **were** deemed essential. They **are** for others, but not, for me.

Home-improvement items sales **were** deemed essential. They **are** for others, but **are** not (at this moment, thank God!) for me.

This listing and comparison could go on ad infinitum ad nauseum. Barring pathology, essential needs are those needs which are essential to that individual. Even governments realized and recognized that reality in their selection process, for there **are** those for whom they considered alcohol, essential. Hmm... was that not the case during prohibition, when alcohol **was** deemed nationally, not only non-essential, but illegal!?

This only displays the arbitrary nature of a central entity deciding for every individual, what **is** and what **is not** essential. Now regarding churches... They **were** considered non-essential. They **are** essential for me, and now the “leader of the free

world” **is** agreeing with me, and contradicting dozens of state governors, publically. There **is** no way for church meetings to now be essential if they **were** previously non-essential. They **are** essential for people of faith – for the people whose faith calls them to gather with other believers of their faith. And if they **are**, and therefore **were**, essential, what of those who had the temerity to call them non-essential and ban them, fining adherents of that faith, whatever that faith might **be**, and threatening them, ultimately at the point of a gun if and when enforcement efforts **were** resisted.

Even governments know that they cannot legislate beliefs. Religious regulations (for that **is** what banning assembly **is**) can only regulate the “expression” of beliefs, which in the case of most religious organizations, includes/requires gathering... and most certainly **is** the case in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the three major religions in our culture.

But as many questions as this diatribe raises for governments and societies, it still leaves unanswered questions for the churches themselves.

Did/do you consider yourselves essential or not? **Is** gathering, for those of your faith, essential or not? If gathering **is not** essential, then banning gathering **is** not of great concern. But if gathering **is** to be considered essential, than **was/is** church gathering(s) – in its essence – something essential for human existence?

Who **are** you, in your essence. Who has decided what you **are** and therefore what you do in demonstration and expression of who you **are**?

Are church gatherings suddenly essential, when they **were not** so, just last month? **Is** that what essence means? If it **is** now deemed “OK”, **is** that the same as “essential”? And who decides what **is** OK?

Wait... **are** we talking here about OK, or essential?

Indeed.

If you believe that the state decides – legitimately – what **is** and what **is not** essential for the human creature in the exercise of his/her beliefs about their creator, then your church, with groups like the New Haven clergy association (ECCO) can remain closed. ECCO has recommended that their churches remain voluntarily closed, making available their empty buildings for Covid-19 testing sites. For them, gathering **is** non-essential.

But if you believe that people decide – legitimately – what **is** and what **is not** essential for the human creature in the free exercise and expression of his/her beliefs about their creator, then you might decide differently.

If on the other hand, you believe – as do I, and the President of these United States –

that churches gathering **is** an essential practice, and therefore by definition *always **was** an essential practice*, then you've got some 'splainin' to do.

God decides what **is**. Truth **is** what **is**. Most contemporary definitions of truth appeal to “reality”; but in a culture that advocates that each person in this life can have his/her own reality, then definitions of truth can't be based merely on “reality”. God decides what **is**. Truth is what **is**... being... essence... ontology... or as some theologians say, the Truth of a thing is the “**Is-ness**” of a thing.

If I'm lying to you, then all those underlined, boldface words above, all iterations of the verb “to be”, are lies... for I am not the determiner of what is. God is, and the lies do not come from Him. Rather, they come from the enemy of our souls, the devil himself.

Remember that.

Pastor.