

TRINITY BIBLE CHURCH

STATEMENT ON REGATHERING

UNDER COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH RESTRICTIONS

FROM THE SHEPHERDS

AUGUST 14, 2020

We believe that the corporate gathering of Christ's church is vital to her life and mission. Gathering is essential to her nature. When the local church gathers, she gathers as Christ's church—a holy assembly—to worship God publicly. This is a massive privilege *and* responsibility. The church gathers to make manifest and thus reveal the worth of Christ, which is to say that we gather to make much of Christ in our community.

In all of creation, there is only one institution that has been charged with the high responsibility of knowing and making known the person and work of Christ—the world's only Savior. That one institution is His *church*. For this reason, the church stands above every other institution under heaven for the promotion of God's glory and the joy of humanity both now and forever. The gathering of the church is categorically distinct from any other social gathering. Her gathering is more important than any other.

We pray that all among us would have a holy longing for the church to gather. As shepherds, our burden for the church under these conditions is indescribable. Love and care for souls compels us. It is our resolve and priority to earnestly seek the regathering of Trinity Bible Church.

This document is intended to outline our official statement regarding our present status and direction. It serves as a position paper that explains why we are taking the present course and outlines what principles will guide our decisions and future actions. The executive summary outlines the main points in the statement for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the body of material that follows. It is designed not as a substitute but as an overview of the official statement. The executive summary is organized in an outline format that corresponds to the body of the official statement. Hyperlinks to each section heading are embedded in digital versions of this document.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. WE WILL HONOR CHRIST ABOVE ALL

We will honor Christ above all. We acknowledge Christ alone as our Lord and will render to Him alone unqualified obedience. We acknowledge that obedience to Christ's commands includes His command to obey other authorities that He places over us. While the regathering of Christ's church is inestimably vital, higher still is our priority to honor Christ.

(A) HONORING CHRIST IN CHURCH AND STATE

(1) God Instituted Civil Government for His Glory and Our Good

We acknowledge that every ruling authority has been established by God and for His glory. We acknowledge that God instituted civil government for the good of all people. We acknowledge that God appoints every ruling authority but does not necessarily approve of their ways.

(2) Distinction of Church and State

We recognize an essential distinction between the church and the state. This is based on the principle distinctly pronounced by Jesus, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

(B) HONORING CHRIST BY OBEYING HIS COMMANDS

We resolve to honor Christ by obeying His commands through the full counsel of Scripture.

(C) HONORING CHRIST BY BEING SUBJECT TO THE STATE

We resolve to honor Christ by obeying His commands through the full counsel of Scripture, which include commands to obey all civil authorities.

(1) Christ Commands Our Submission to the State

We acknowledge that willful subjection to governing authorities is a spiritual obligation not merely a civil duty. We recognize that submission to governing authorities is not contingent on their righteousness or goodness or quality or consistency.

(2) Christ Models Submission to the State

We will honor Christ by obeying His commands and following His example of submission to civil authorities.

2. WE WILL OBEY PUBLIC HEALTH ORDERS

We are not convinced that civil disobedience is justified under the present health order restrictions. Therefore, we will submit to our governing authorities out of obedience to Christ in matters of public health. We indescribably long to gather, but the end does not justify the means.

(A) ESSENCE VERSUS SCHEMA

As a public entity in and not of this world, the church has both an outward *schema* and an inward *essence*. The schema and essence of the church may be likened to body and soul. The schema is the church's physical form or model when gathered. The essence is her heart and soul, including what she believes and loves, what she teaches and preaches, and is concerned with her freedom to worship God according to her own convictions and conscience.

(B) JURISDICTION

We do not claim as a church to have jurisdiction over public health. We affirm that worship (essence) is exclusively within the church's jurisdiction, and yet her gathering (schema) intersects with the state's jurisdiction.

3. WE WILL OBEY CIVIC AUTHORITIES CONDITIONALLY

We will obey civic authorities only conditionally—Christ is Lord, not Caesar. The obedience we render to the government is in worship of Christ. If obedience to the government means disobedience to Christ, then we will not—we cannot—obey the government.

(A) WHEN PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES DISCRIMINATE AGAINST THE CHURCH

As a church, we will obey the public health orders of Santa Clara county so long as they are neutral and generally applicable to like schemas.

(1) First Amendment

The First Amendment plainly states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

The First Amendment does not grant churches exemption from temporary, extraordinary orders issued in the interest of public health that are neutral and generally applicable. The present public health restrictions do not interfere with belief or conscience, they have to do with the schema of a public assembly of people.

(2) Religious Discrimination

The restrictions issued in our county do not discriminate between public gatherings based on their essence, only their schema.

(3) Contagious Quotient

Large indoor gatherings are being restricted because they present a social "contagious quotient" or numeric probability of spreading a contagion.

(4) Neutral and Generally Applicable

For these reasons we cannot rightly claim that the present public health orders violate our First Amendment rights as American citizens. Therefore, we will obey the public health orders so long as they are neutral and generally applicable to like schemas.

(B) WHEN THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES PROHIBIT WHAT GOD COMMANDS OR COMMANDS WHAT GOD PROHIBITS

As a church, if the government commands us to do what God forbids or forbids us to do what God commands, we will obey God rather than government.

(1) Civil Disobedience According to Thoreau

We recognize the popular tendency of civil disobedience as a means of political protest against government generally. As a church we refuse to disobey our governing authorities' public health orders based on other corruptions or injustices within government.

(2) Civil Disobedience According to the Bible

We recognize that civil disobedience according to the principles given in Scripture depend on one great violation: the denial of God's rights, not ours. God has an absolute right to our reverence, submission, and obedience. If the government denies God that right by imposing laws on us to the contrary, we will unreservedly obey God rather than government.

The following four principles will help guide our decision-making process in obeying God over government when obedience to both appears to conflict.

1. Unequivocal

When obedience to government unequivocally results in disobedience to God, we must obey God rather than government.

2. Means

We should advance only when all normal channels of reason and appeal have been exhausted. This requires serious prayer and collective wisdom.

3. Peaceful

If we are forced to disobey the government out of obedience to God, we must do it peacefully.

4. Consequences

If we are forced to disobey the government out of obedience to God, we must be willing to accept all earthly consequences without vengeance.

(C) USE OF SCRIPTURE TO ADDRESS PUBLIC HEALTH ORDERS

We deny that the current, temporary public health orders unequivocally require us to disobey God by any direct and immediate command of Scripture.

(1) "Not neglecting to meet together"

We deny that biblical exegesis supports the use of Hebrews 10:25 as a law that temporary public health restrictions unequivocally require us to disobey.

(2) "We must obey God rather than men"

We deny that biblical exegesis supports the use of Acts 5:29 as a precedent for disobeying public health orders.

(3) Other Examples of Civil Disobedience

The clearest examples of civil disobedience in Scripture can be grouped into three general categories: *idolatry* (Daniel 3:13-27; 6:1-10), *proclaiming Christ* (Acts 4:18, 20; 5:29), and *sanctity of life* (Exodus 1:17, 21; Matthew 2:8, 12). There is no example in Scripture of the church disobeying civil authorities for itself.

(D) HOW WE WORSHIP

We recognize that every person is called by God to worship Him according to His prescribed order. We also recognize that God calls all in Christ to worship Him in spirit and truth, in the freedom of our own conscience. For these reasons, we will not allow the state to dictate how we worship. How we worship is first a matter of conscience and personal responsibility according to Scripture and accountable to God through the church.

(1) Singing

We will order our worship services according to the rule of the church. We will honor the worship of God according to conscience, which includes the free expression of an individual's praises to God.

(2) Communion

We affirm that the same basic principles argued for singing apply to communion. We reserve the right, under constitutional law, to freely exercise communion as a sacred ordinance of our Lord given to His church for the express purpose of worship to Him.

(E) BIBLICAL AND LOGICAL CONSISTENCY

We acknowledge that these issues are complex and should not be oversimplified for the sake of expedience. The task of harmonizing the intersection of two different jurisdictions (church and state) under two different domains of law (Christ and Caesar) demands clear, objective, biblical and logical consistency. Common objections and logical fallacies are dealt with this in section.

4. WE WILL BE FAITHFUL STEWARDS

At the very start of the shelter-in-place public health orders, we called the church to steward the storm. We have not changed our course. The principles that guided us then have not changed. Some of the circumstantial conditions have changed and this official statement of the church has sought to address them. In this section, we turn our attention to next steps.

(A) WE CALL FOR UNITY

We believe that in order for us as a church to make much of Christ in this situation, we must be united in love.

(B) WE CALL FOR RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

We call members of the church to act responsibly as Christian citizens of America, to influence our civil government and especially in these extraordinary times. We recognize

that as Christians *and* citizens of an earthly state, we are responsible to not only evangelize our land but influence it for God's glory and the good of the people.

(C) WE CALL FOR LAMENTATION AND PRAYER

Christ has given His church two essential commands regarding her obligation to the state: *obey* and *pray*. Let us look to God not government for true healing. Let us cry out to the Lord for His mercy upon our nation, state, and county—in physical, social, political, and spiritual dimensions.

CONCLUSION

We believe that the corporate gathering of Christ's church is vital to her life and mission. We call for honoring Christ above all, obeying civil authorities under His command. We call for obeying public health orders so long as they are temporary, neutral, and generally applicable to like schemas.

It is our resolve and priority to earnestly seek the regathering of Trinity Bible Church. We intend to gather outdoors. We will continue working with local authorities and as American citizens will seek to petition civil authorities to relax the current restrictions.

We call for lament and prayer for our land and the church. We call for trusting Christ as the sovereign Lord over every detail, who owns the civil authorities and owns the church. We call for unity in all these matters.

If you should have any questions or concerns about this statement, please contact the Shepherds (shepherds@trinitybiblechurch.org).

May God be glorified and may we find joy in honoring Christ through these difficult times.

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OFFICIAL STATEMENT

1. WE WILL HONOR CHRIST ABOVE ALL

We acknowledge only one supreme Ruler, Authority, and Lord—Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18; Acts 10:36; Romans 10:12; Ephesians 1:22).

We acknowledge Christ alone as the Head of His church (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18) who rules His church objectively through His written word (1 Corinthians 4:6; 11:23; 15:3-5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 3:16). We affirm with the Reformers that the Scriptures are the (*norma normans non normata*) standard of which there is no higher standard. In the Scriptures, then, we possess the highest source of authority that bows to no other source.

We acknowledge that we owe all obedience ultimately to Christ our Lord (Mark 1:27; 4:41; John 3:36; 2 Corinthians 10:5; 1 Peter 4:17; 1 John 5:2). We acknowledge that obedience to Christ is expressed by observing all that He has commanded through the full counsel of Scripture (Matthew 28:20; Acts 20:27). Therefore, obedience to Christ will sometimes be expressed in obedience to other biblically-defined, God-ordained authorities (Ephesians 6:1, 5; Hebrews 13:17). We affirm that obeying our governing authorities is a form of obeying Christ—“for the Lord’s sake” (1 Peter 2:13-15; see also Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1).

As a church, we will honor Christ above all. This will take different forms and expressions depending on the circumstances and conditions. While the regathering of Christ’s church is inestimably vital, higher still is our priority to honor Christ.

(A) HONORING CHRIST IN CHURCH AND STATE

(1) GOD INSTITUTED CIVIL GOVERNMENT FOR HIS GLORY AND OUR GOOD

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

ROMANS 13:1–5

We acknowledge that every ruling authority has been established by God and for His glory (Romans 13:1-2; 11:36). Civil governments possess only a *derived* and *limited* authority, being described as “servants” and “ministers” of God (Romans 13:4, 6). Because their authority is derived from God, Christians are to be in subjection to them as unto Christ (Romans 13:1, 5; 1 Peter 2:13). Resisting their authority means resisting God’s authority, which has grave consequences (Romans 13:2). Because their authority is in subjection to God as a servant, it is a limited authority that cannot justly contend with God’s authority (Romans 13:1; Isaiah 42:8). All governing authorities are subject to God’s appointment (John 19:10-11) and removal (Daniel 2:21; Psalm 75:7). God rules in, through, and over the plans of all governments (Ezra 1:1; Proverbs 21:1; Isaiah 44:28–45:1; Daniel 4:25) and to Him all governments will ultimately give an account (Psalm 2; 46:6; 72:11; Proverbs 8:15; 16:12; 1 Peter 3:9; Revelation 17:14; 19:16).

We acknowledge that God instituted civil government for the good of all people (Romans 13:4; 1 Peter 2:14). Government serves the common good in at least two fundamental ways:

1. JUSTICE

The first God-appointed responsibility of government is to execute justice by punishing evil and protecting from it. This is primarily concerned with lawless actions against people and their property.

- a. “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad” (Romans 13:3).
- b. “If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4).
- c. “Kings” and all subordinate “governors” are appointed to “punish those who do evil” (1 Peter 2:14).
- d. Government is to acquit the innocent and condemn the guilty (Exodus 23:6-7; Deuteronomy 1:17; 25:1; Proverbs 17:5).
- e. Government is to protect the helpless and defenseless (Psalm 82:3-4; Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17-18; Isaiah 10:2; 11:4).

2. ETHICS

The second God-appointed responsibility of government is to uphold and promote righteous ethics. Whereas the first is primarily negative, this responsibility is primarily positive. Rightly based on the uniqueness of the human being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and humanity’s fall into corruption (Genesis 3:17; Romans 3:10-12), government is to maintain order and encourage ethically right conduct. This includes seeking the common good of society through honesty, morals, liberty, respect, personal responsibility, and the sanctity of life, marriage, and conscience.

- a. Government is “to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:14).

- b. “Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:3-4).

We acknowledge that God appoints every ruling authority but does not necessarily approve of their ways (Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalms 2:1-2, 9, 12; Proverbs 11:1; Ecclesiastes 5:8). All governments are ordained by God, not all are pleasing to Him. But the child of God can trust in Him who rules over all rulers, knowing that whatever injustice earthly governments impose or allow will eventually be brought to perfect justice (Daniel 2:44; 7:27; 1 Peter 2:23).

We also recognize the value that God places on small civil government and individual responsibility (1 Samuel 8:10-18).

(2) DISTINCTION OF CHURCH AND STATE

We recognize an essential distinction between the church and the state. This is based on the principle distinctly pronounced by Jesus, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). Historically, this was a revolutionary concept. It was contrary to all national and tribal ideologies. Israel, as well as every other nation, was a socio-politico-religious entity—a society where religious life was integral to political life, and religion was an affair of the state.

But the church transcends nations and national identity. Therefore, John Calvin rightly speaks of a *duplex regimen* for all in Christ:

There is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political ... These are usually called the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘temporal’ jurisdiction by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life ... For the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom. Now these two, as we have divided them, must always be examined separately; and while one is being considered, we must call away and turn aside the mind from thinking about the other. There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority.¹

The church is in and yet not of the world (John 17:15-16). In the world, we are subject to the general, temporal jurisdiction of the governing authorities placed over us by God. And at the same time, we are under a particular, spiritual jurisdiction that governs our inner mind. This is not an appeal to dualism, as in Greek philosophy. But rather a call to guard from oversimplifying our relationship to political governing authorities. This reminds us that while we live as sojourners, we live under a dual citizenship (Matthew 6:33; Philippians 3:20-21).

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xix, 15.

From this we identify two principles of application: (a) we acknowledge that the church should not govern “the things that are Caesar’s” and (b) we acknowledge that civic authorities should not govern “the things that are God’s.” Each should respect their God-appointed jurisdictions.

(B) HONORING CHRIST BY OBEYING HIS COMMANDS

We resolve to honor Christ by obeying His commands through the full counsel of Scripture (Matthew 28:20; Acts 20:27). Christ said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15) and “whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:21). Jesus summarized the greatest of His commandments with these words: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31). A summary of the New Testament commands of Christ include:

- worship God alone (Matthew 4:10; 1 Corinthians 10:14; 1 John 5:20-21)
- love one another, your neighbor, and even enemies (John 13:34; Luke 10:27; Matthew 5:44)
- fear God and nothing else (Luke 12:5)
- take up your cross, deny yourself daily, and follow Christ (Luke 9:23)
- pray without ceasing (Romans 12:12; Ephesians 6:18)
- turn away from all evil (1 Peter 3:11; Romans 12:9)—murder (Romans 13:9), malice (1 Peter 2:1), wrath (Ephesians 4:31), bitterness (Ephesians 4:31), adultery (1 Corinthians 6:9), sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18), lust (1 Thessalonians 4:5), lying (Ephesians 4:25), obscene talk (Colossians 3:8), drunkenness (Galatians 5:21), strife (1 Corinthians 5:11), violence (Luke 3:14), envy (Galatians 5:26), thievery (Ephesians 4:28)
- lay up your treasures in heaven not on earth (Matthew 6:19-20)
- be content (1 Timothy 6:8; Hebrews 13:5)
- be clothed with humility (1 Peter 5:5)
- make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)

Temporary public health restrictions do not contradict any of these commands.

(C) HONORING CHRIST BY BEING SUBJECT TO THE STATE

We resolve to honor Christ by obeying His commands through the full counsel of Scripture, which include commands to obey all civil authorities. We submit to Caesar not because he is Lord, but because Christ is Lord. We willfully place ourselves in subjection to governing authorities to acknowledge the supreme lordship of Christ—all appearances of allegiance and fear of Caesar repudiated.

(1) CHRIST COMMANDS OUR SUBMISSION TO THE STATE

Scripture is abundantly clear on this matter. Willful subjection to governing authorities is a spiritual obligation not merely a civil duty. God holds all people responsible in general, and Christians in particular (for the sake of Christ), to obey their civil government.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

ROMANS 13:1–2

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

1 PETER 2:13–14

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work.

TITUS 3:1

We recognize the grave biblical importance of submitting to our governing authorities in all civil matters. We agree with the following expositional comments by John MacArthur as accurately reflecting the command of Christ through the apostles:

Regardless of the numerous immoral, unjust, and ungodly failures of secular government, believers are to pray and seek to influence the world for Christ by godly, selfless, and peaceful living under that authority, not by protests against the government or by acts of civil disobedience.²

That command does not exclude authorities who make bad or unjust decisions. ... Despite the evil that occurs because authorities are fallen and institutions are imperfect, believers must trust that God still exercises sovereign and perfectly wise rule over societies and nations (cf. Gen. 18:25).³

Paul gives no qualification or condition. Every civil authority is to be submitted to willingly ... with no exception related to the rulers' competence or incompetence, morality or immorality, cruelty or kindness, or even godliness or ungodliness.⁴

SUBMISSION IS NOT BASED ON THE QUALITY OF THE AUTHORITY

This is one of the hardest principles to accept. We naturally tend to think that we are to submit to our governing authorities so long as they are just, reasonable, righteous, competent, and agree with the principles of Scripture. We must remember that the above commands of Scripture were written in a church-state construct, where the state was thoroughly pagan and even anti-Christian. The early church had to wrestle deeply with the

² John MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You*, 27.

³ MacArthur, *1 Peter*, 149.

⁴ MacArthur, *Romans*, 213–214.

idea that Christ was commanding them to submit to a government that was persecuting them because of their allegiance to Christ.

We can also learn from the intense struggles and pains experienced between the church and state during the Reformation. In 1521 at the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther boldly placed himself squarely against both his religious and civil magistrates, declaring, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” But this was no political matter. Nor did it have anything to do with church practice. It was distinctly a theological conflict. Luther was willing to burn at the stake for the truth of the gospel. Yet, even after nine more years of strife between church and state authorities, Luther would admonish inquirers in a letter:

According to Scripture, it is in no way proper for anyone who would be a Christian to set himself against his government, whether it acts justly or unjustly. Rather a Christian ought to suffer oppression and injustice by his government. For even if His Imperial Majesty were acting wrongly in this matter and were transgressing against his duty and his oath, neither his imperial authority nor his subjects’ obligation of obedience has thereby been abolished.⁵

Arguably one of the greatest examples comes to us from a godly martyr who wrote a book specifically on this subject, entitled, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528). William Tyndale was called “the faithful minister and constant martyr of Christ” by his own generation. He not only gave us the sacred Scriptures in the English language he taught and modeled a most stunning Christlike humility. Near the end of his book on submitting to governing authorities, he wrote:

I declared that God has taken all vengeance into his own hands, and he will avenge all unrighteousness himself ... I showed also, that whoever avenges himself is damned in doing the deed, and he falls into the hands of the temporal sword. This is because he takes the office of God upon himself, and robs God of his most high honor, in that he will not patiently await God's judgment. I showed you about the authority of princes, how they are in God's stead, and how they may not be resisted; however much evil they do, they must be reserved to the wrath of God. Nevertheless, if they command us to do evil, then we must then disobey, and say, ‘We are otherwise commanded by God;’ but do not rise against them. ‘They will kill us then,’ you say. To this I say that a Christian is called to suffer even bitter death for his hope's sake, and because he will do no evil. I showed also that the kings and rulers (however evil they may be) are still a great gift of the goodness of God; they defend us from a thousand things we do not see.⁶

It is to be remembered that Tyndale lived out his teaching and was martyred for translating the Bible into the English language.

We recognize that submission to governing authorities is not contingent on their righteousness or goodness or quality or consistency. The above commands addressed Christians who lived under politically corrupt, godless, immoral, cruel, murderous, and deranged tyrants. Christian obedience is not conditioned on the quality of the authorities.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 47:6.

⁶ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528, taken from 1831 edition), 100.

The autocratic, ruthless, and demonic regimes of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung were no exceptions to God's command to be subject to civil authority. The equally ruthless empires of ancient Assyria and Babylon were no exceptions. The Roman empire, sometimes ruled by caesars who proclaimed themselves to be gods, was no exception.⁷

(2) CHRIST MODELS SUBMISSION TO THE STATE

Christians are commanded to willingly submit themselves to the governing authorities. In so doing, we follow both the command of Scripture and the example of Christ and the apostles. Our Savior came into a world where slavery abounded, dictators dominated, heavy taxes were the norm, and the followers of God were frequently persecuted. The people of Jesus' day had no democratic process, nor did they possess many of the liberties we take for granted in this nation. But how did Jesus respond to these circumstances? He told His listeners, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). He did not call upon angelic armies to bring down oppressive governments or attempt to establish a new political order. He did not set up any kind of political administration, nor did He organize public protests against Rome. His ministry was not focused on those things, but instead was ever aimed at the hearts of individual sinners who were in desperate need of God's grace (Mark 10:42-45). Jesus did not lead civil rights demonstrations. Rather, He preached the good news of forgiveness and salvation. The Lord did not launch a new political order, but a spiritual one—namely, the church. Christians have been called to follow His lead.⁸

Christ is head of the church and He commands us to obey civic authorities. Moreover, we should follow His example. He had all authority in heaven and on earth and yet He demonstrated profound submission and yielding to corrupt civic authorities. Jesus made this clear to Pontius Pilate when He stood as under him (John 18:33-38). He openly acknowledged that Pilate had authority over Him in civil matters because it had been granted to Him from above (John 19:11; see also Acts 4:24-28). He did not resist Rome's authority, corrupt as it was. Even more penetrating is the fact that He attributed the greater sin to the religious leaders of Israel. When asked about a matter concerning an earthly inheritance, during His ministry, Jesus did not usurp the authorities that sat in judgment over such matters. Instead, He promptly replied, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:13-14). In another instance, when asked about paying the temple tax, Jesus explained that He and His disciples do not technically have to pay because "the sons are free." But then says, "however, not to give offense to them" we will pay the tax (Matthew 17:24-27). In the Garden of Gethsemane, while Jesus was being arrested, some of the disciples urgently asked Jesus if they should strike with swords (they look to His authority). Peter does not wait for directions, he strikes. After all, he was in service to protect the life of the King from corrupt authorities. But Jesus responds forcefully, "No more of this!" (Luke 22:51). He then rebukes Peter for his impetuous conduct. His words are telling: "Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will

⁷ MacArthur, *Romans*, 219.

⁸ MacArthur, *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*, 124.

at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:52–53). Jesus affirms two relevant principles here. First, He affirms that the government has the authority to use the sword against Peter in punishment for him using a sword against a soldier. Second, He affirms that He has the power and authority to invoke a heavenly army against these earthly authorities arresting Him, but instead willingly submits to them. The first affirmation, coupled with Jesus’ appeal to justice in verse 55, reminds us of the civil implications of this otherwise theologically charged encounter. Jesus demonstrated submission to governmental powers, even if they operate on lies (Matthew 27:11-26). If He who is above all authority in heaven and on earth subjected Himself to corrupt civic authorities, should not His followers?

THE APOSTLES MODEL SUBMISSION TO THE STATE

The apostles also modeled the same. In fact, it was approximately eight or nine years after writing, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1) that Paul then wrote, “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities” (Titus 3:1). It is significant that this was after he had suffered substantial maltreatment at the hands of his civic authorities. Suffering great loss does not change principle. It has been pointed out that throughout “all of Luke’s narrative is ... Paul’s careful adherence to the Roman law.”⁹

Similarly, when Peter wrote, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors” (1 Peter 2:13-14), Nero was emperor. History testifies that Nero was a deranged and unusually cruel tyrant. He despised Christians, burning part of the city of Rome, and then blaming it on the Christians to cover up a business scandal. He was a champion narcissist and sadist who set Christians on fire as human candles in his backyard purely for pleasure. To this man, Peter said, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme.” There is no hint of political activism here. The gospel is the only hope for these Christians who submit, which makes much of Christ. Only a profoundly high and fearless love and allegiance to Christ could offer any possible reasonableness to this high calling of submission to governing authorities. In the immediate context of submitting to governing authorities, Peter writes:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

1 PETER 2:21–24

As a church, we will honor Christ above all. As a church, we will honor Christ by obeying His commands and following His example of submission to civil authorities. As a church, we

⁹ Rupprecht, cited by Fernando, *Acts*, 215.

will honor Christ by disobeying civil authorities when obedience to them means disobedience to Him.

Being subject to our governing authorities, then, means that as Christians we will respect and obey by default the authorities that God places over us. Our obedience is a matter of principle. It is not conditioned on our agreement. Nor is it conditioned on the quality of the authorities. Nor is it conditioned on the practical consequences for disobedience.

These are the major principles that frame a biblical worldview for the church relating to Christ and government. Now we turn to direct application of these principles under our present situation.

2. WE WILL OBEY PUBLIC HEALTH ORDERS

We are not convinced that civil disobedience is justified under the present health order restrictions (more on civil disobedience below). Therefore, we will submit to our governing authorities out of obedience to Christ in matters of public health. We indescribably long to gather, but the end does not justify the means.

(A) ESSENCE VERSUS SCHEMA

As a public entity in and not of this world, the church has both an outward *schema* and an inward *essence*. The schema and essence of the church may be likened to body and soul. The schema is the church's physical form or model when gathered. The essence is her heart and soul, including what she believes and loves, what she teaches and preaches, and is concerned with her freedom to worship God according to her own convictions and conscience. This is a key distinction that helps to unlock clarity and disarm confusion in this situation.

Civil authorities are not interfering in ecclesiastical matters related to conscientious worship, they are interfering in social matters related to public health—the two happen to intersect in the gathering of Christ's church. But they should not be conflated as though the state is opposing religious freedom.

We affirm that the church cannot rightly be compared to a business in principle. We might call this the "essence" of the entity. On this level the church should not be placed in categories along with amusement parks and places of entertainment. But then there is what we might call the "schema" of public entity, that which is its modal form or concrete social expression.

Businesses do not have First Amendment rights as churches do because the essence of a business is not, to use the terminology of the Constitution, religious. The essence of a business and a church is categorically distinct. But the schema of a gathered church may be classified with non-church gatherings that are similar in schema (conferences, movie theaters, concerts, larger social gatherings in confined indoor spaces, etc.). The present restrictions are addressing only the schema, not the essence of the public entity.

(B) JURISDICTION

We do not claim as a church to have jurisdiction over public health. “The most difficult church/state questions arise when people disagree over whether something belongs to the realm of the church or to the realm of the state.”¹⁰

As noted above, church and state have distinct jurisdictions. Both are limited. Neither church nor state should exceed the bounds of their respective jurisdictions. In America, we are privileged to be under a government that in principle honors these distinctions.

(1) CIVIL

Our federal and state authorities openly claim jurisdiction in matters of public health. Erwin Chemerinsky, an American legal scholar in constitutional law and federal civil procedure, notes that

Throughout American history, quarantine orders have been upheld as valid exercises of the police power possessed by state and local governments. Not long after the Revolutionary War, Philadelphia imposed a quarantine to stop the spread of yellow fever. In 1799, Congress, by statute, recognized the power of states to impose quarantines.¹¹

In 1905, the Supreme Court ruled (*Jacobson vs. Massachusetts*): “Upon the principle of self-defense, of paramount necessity, a community has the right to protect itself against an epidemic of disease which threatens the safety of its members.” Then in 1926, the Supreme Court ruled that “a state, in the exercise of its police power, may establish quarantines against human beings.” While the following addresses the relationship between private Christian schools and the state, the principles discussed remain pertinent.

Federal and state governments have passed many laws designed to protect the general welfare of their citizens. Our food and water are subject to federal health standards. ... The law describes the government’s right to establish rules to ensure the general welfare as a “compelling interest.” ... The courts consistently support this right of federal, state, and local governments over against the absolute freedom of even religious institutions. No organization, Christian or not, is free from any and all government control. There are significant questions about specific applications of this concept, especially when the issue involves a practice grounded in a religious belief. However, if the government can show that it has a vital interest in a given matter, the courts can and do rule against the private school [or church] in such cases. Issues of basic health and safety are examples of areas in which the government’s interest would take precedence. Christian schools [and churches] should cooperate as much as possible with government regulations in these areas. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a Christian belief that would oppose basic standards of health and safety.¹²

¹⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 100.

¹¹ Erwin Chemerinsky, “Op-Ed: Yes, the government can restrict your liberty to protect public health” in *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2020.

¹² House, *Christian Ministries and The Law*, 111.

The church is subject to food preparation and serving regulations and has no problem honoring those measures. If there were some public health threat within the church's worship center, whether it be mold, chemical contamination, fire hazard, etc., the church would be temporarily inhibited in her gathering. These are all matters of public health and safety.

We should all agree that the state has the God-given authority and power of the sword (Romans 13:4). The state is responsible to guard the sanctity of life. At the restart of human society, this is precisely what God commanded, life for life (Genesis 9:5-6). Civic government rightly wields this power (Exodus 21:12). If the state has the jurisdiction to protect earthly life in social matters, it is not unreasonable to infer that jurisdiction extends to public health.

Wayne Grudem illustrates this principle well:

Jehovah's Witnesses have traditionally objected to blood transfusions, claiming that this is a *religious* belief. But the civil government, in a number of cases, has forcibly imposed blood transfusions to save the life of a young child over the objections of Jehovah's Witness parents, reasoning that the *protection of a child's life* is not a matter of worship or church activities but is rightly the domain of civil government (and I agree).¹³

The church is not responsible to protect the life and property of people in society at large. She looks to the civil authorities for that. These are simple matters of jurisdiction.

If the church's stance defies a government order for public health and the church's actions contribute in any way to the public health burden, then will the church assume public responsibility? The church does not issue public health orders and the church does not assume responsibility for the complexities of public health—that is the government's jurisdiction.

If the government has jurisdiction for public health, the church should honor that even if we disagree with their policy, doubt their motives, distrust their competency, etc.

(2) CHURCH

It may be a question for political science to discuss the finer points of the role of the state in matters of public health, but it surely cannot be established biblically that the responsibility of public health falls to the church. Certainly, various forms of mercy ministry, caring for the material needs of her own is within the church's purview. But we have not a word in Scripture that would grant the church the authority and power to rule over society in matters of public health.

The Westminster Confession of faith urges that matters concerning the commonwealth are not within the jurisdiction of the church but belong to civil authorities (magistrates):

Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by

¹³ Grudem, *Politics According to The Bible*, 101.

way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.¹⁴

The church gathers under a shared, common realm of public earthly life. Again, the church's essence and schema intersect whenever she gathers physically. We must not confuse the two in a pandemic (extraordinary) situation. What we do then as a member of a larger public society is subject to those responsible for the public health of that society.

Even distrust of government does not nullify their jurisdiction nor grant the church jurisdiction. If indeed public health belongs to the state and not the church (which we believe it does), then public orders are part of the "civil laws such as zoning, building codes, fire safety regulations, and every other law and regulation" that "like individual believers, a local church is obligated to observe."¹⁵ Frustration over circumstances to which all like schemas are subject, personal assessments about the severity of the virus, complaints about the incompetency of public health officials, statistics, testimonials, etc., do not warrant overreaching our own jurisdiction. Determining what is and is not right for public health restrictions is simply not the church's call, regardless of how unreasonable we think they are.

We affirm that worship (essence) is exclusively within the church's jurisdiction, and yet her gathering (schema) intersects with the state's jurisdiction. We must not oversimplify this central distinction. Civic rulers have jurisdiction over our public health and safety, which the church intersects when she gathers. By honoring public health orders the church is not abdicating their care and responsibility to love and shepherd Christ's people or farming it out to a godless government, they are giving to Caesar what is Caesar's. "The church must not hide behind any spiritual excuse when its negligence concerning the safety of its members and guests is involved."¹⁶

If public health is rightly under our governing authorities, then to bow to Christ would be to obey those authorities, which He placed over us. The one who "resists the authorities resists what God has appointed" (Romans 13:2).

3. WE WILL OBEY CIVIC AUTHORITIES CONDITIONALLY

We will obey civic authorities only conditionally—Christ is lord, not Caesar. The obedience we render to the government is in worship of Christ. If obedience to the government means disobedience to Christ, then we will not—we cannot—obey the government.

What follows is an outline of contingencies that guide us biblically in matters pertaining to civil disobedience.

¹⁴ *WCF* 31.4.

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Romans*, 216.

¹⁶ Powers, *Church Administration Handbook*, 220.

(A) WHEN PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES DISCRIMINATE AGAINST THE CHURCH

We are citizens of heaven, but we shall not neglect to consider our privileges and responsibilities as citizens of America as well. The biblical principles stated above transcend governments. Most of what is stated should be applicable for a church under any nation. Here, however, we want to exercise the biblical principle of stewardship and consider how as a church in America we are, by the grace of God, granted unique privileges and responsibilities.

As a church, we will obey the public health orders of Santa Clara county so long as they are neutral and generally applicable to like schemas.

The point of this statement is that as American citizens under a representative democratic republic, we will hold our governing authorities accountable to the law of the land—the United States Constitution.

(1) FIRST AMENDMENT

The First Amendment plainly states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

This follows the basic principle reviewed above, namely the distinction of church and state.¹⁷ In America, we are granted the right to freely exercise our religion. This freedom, of course, is not absolute since it does not grant immunity to civil law and order. Satanists are not allowed to offer human sacrifices under the Free Exercise Clause. What it does grant is protection from governmental intrusion on matters of conscience in the worship of God. George Mason, considered the “Father of the Bill of Rights,” elaborated:

[A]ll men have an equal, natural and unalienable right to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that no particular sect or society of Christians ought to be favored or established by law in preference to others.¹⁸

James Madison rephrased the First Amendment in an official record, saying, “Congress should not establish a religion, and enforce the legal observation of it by law.”¹⁹ Historical records indicate that neither the Establishment Clause nor the Free Exercise Clause were intended to promote an atheistic or anti-church government. The original intent of the First Amendment did not protect government from the church but the church from government. This is consistent with the Westminster Confession:

¹⁷ The legal metaphor, “separation of church and state,” has been so abused and overloaded with artificial intent that we will abstain from its use.

¹⁸ Cited by David Barton, *Original Intent*, 29.

¹⁹ *Annals of Congress*, 1789.

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.²⁰

The application of our First Amendment right to this situation is often misconstrued. Albert Mohler said on a recent broadcast of *The Briefing*, “I have argued that churches should cooperate with authorities and should respect and follow guidelines handed down that are reasonable and neutral and generally applicable.” He uses these terms, “neutral” and “generally applicable,” because they are the very terms used by the US Supreme Court in deciding matters regarding the Free Exercise Clause in the First Amendment. Mohler goes on to point out, “if the regulation or the policy is neutral and generally applicable, then it probably is justified, at least in some sense for some time ... the bottom line is there is no justification for any negative or non-neutral application against a church.”²¹ Exceptions, like the recent case between a Nevada church and a casino, should be addressed as discussed below.

The First Amendment does not grant churches exemption from temporary, extraordinary orders issued in the interest of public health that are neutral and generally applicable. It has well been said that “the right to swing your fist stops at another person’s nose.” Our governing authorities deem the threat of COVID-19 worthy of extended quarantine measures. We may not agree, we may not like it, but under this condition our right to swing our fist (public indoor gathering) stops at what is considered a public health violation. A constitutional law professor recently wrote, “Yes, the government can restrict your liberty to protect public health ... the Supreme Court has been clear that there is no exception to general laws for religion.”²² The present public health restrictions do not interfere with belief or conscience, they have to do with the schema of a public assembly of people.

(2) RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Many claim that we are experiencing religious persecution and that the church is being discriminated against. We do not consider these temporary restrictions on public gatherings, in the interest of public health, in class with real persecution that our brothers and sisters suffer in underground churches.²³ Nor are they discriminatory against the church. Comparing the church to public entities of different schemas as proof of discrimination is to commit the logical fallacy of equivocation. To reference the state’s allowance of sales of potentially life-destroying substances (alcohol, cigarettes, etc.) or the allowance and even support of grossly immoral businesses and services, like abortion clinics, does not establish the case that the state is discriminating against the church. It demonstrates the godlessness and immorality of our governing authorities, but it does not establish religious discrimination or the violation of our First Amendment rights. Presently

²⁰ *WCF*, 23.3.

²¹ Albert Mohler, *The Briefing* (Monday, August 3, 2020).

²² Erwin Chemerinsky, “Op-Ed: Yes, the government can restrict your liberty to protect public health” in *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2020.

²³ See <https://www.persecution.com> and <https://www.prisoneralert.com>.

the orders are neutral (non-selective on the basis of religious belief) and generally applicable (applied to all like schemas). The restrictions issued in our county do not discriminate between public gatherings based on their essence, only their schema.

(3) CONTAGIOUS QUOTIENT

Large indoor gatherings are being restricted because they present a social “contagious quotient” or numeric probability of spreading a contagion. This has to do with the schema of a gathering. The essence of a church is quite different from the essence of a movie theater. But in the case of preventative measures to counter the spread of disease, the church and the theater are not so distinguished. Here we see that the contagious quotient of both are similar because their schemas are similar. The question we must honestly deal with is this: on which of the two (essence or schema, religion or contagious quotient) are the authorities basing their restrictions?

(4) NEUTRAL AND GENERALLY APPLICABLE

For these reasons we cannot rightly claim that the present public health orders violate our First Amendment rights as American citizens. Therefore, we will obey the public health orders so long as they are neutral and generally applicable to like schemas.

If at any point Santa Clara County discriminates against the church by issuing public health orders that are no longer neutral or generally applicable, then we will exercise our rights as American citizens to appeal to the First Amendment. Stated another way, if Santa Clara County issues public health orders that discriminate against us because we are religious or because of what we believe or do when we gather for worship, or if they treat us differently as compared to other public entities with like schemas when gathered, then we will exercise our rights as American citizens to appeal to the First Amendment.

This course of action involves legal appeal and possibly peaceful protest against an illegitimate denial of constitutional rights, and therefore technically is not civil disobedience but a part of our government’s judicial protocol.

(B) WHEN THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES PROHIBIT WHAT GOD COMMANDS OR COMMANDS WHAT GOD PROHIBITS

Whereas the former contingency addresses our actions in relation to our rights under the authority of the US Constitution, this contingency addresses our actions in relation to our supreme submission to God.

We have unreserved allegiance to Christ. We render to God alone obedience that is unqualified. God commands us to be subject to and obey our governing authorities. The question of civil disobediences arises when these two authorities come into direct and immediate conflict.

Disobedience is not God’s design. It results only because of rebellion, either from us or our governing authorities. Only through man’s rebellion does man create a situation which

brings obedience to God and to state in conflict. When our governing authorities rebel against God in such a way that their laws come into direct and immediate conflict with God's laws, we obey God rather than man—without question.

(1) CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE ACCORDING TO THOREAU

Today's notion of civil disobedience often reflects more of Henry David Thoreau than anything biblical. Thoreau's concern was man, not God. He was a humanist and a political activist. His influence was pervasive and profound. In fact, it was his essay, "Civil Disobedience," that Gandhi printed and distributed in pamphlet form, always keeping a copy for himself within arm's reach. The occasion of Thoreau's influential work was a night in jail. It was July 1846, and Thoreau was arrested and detained for refusing to pay a poll tax. His refusal to pay was a protest against supporting a government that supported slavery.

Thoreau's model of civil disobedience dominates popular thought today, even in the church. But it is more of a cultural-political protest than an appeal to a higher authority. Following this model, civil disobedience is often justified in the minds of such protestors without any authoritative basis. They disobey civil authorities based on some potentially unrelated issue they deem to be unacceptable in the government.

We recognize this popular tendency of civil disobedience as a means of political protest against government generally. As a church we refuse to disobey our governing authorities' public health orders based on other corruptions or injustices within government. Furthermore, we refuse to use Christ's church for political purposes.²⁴

(2) CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

We recognize that civil disobedience according to the principles given in Scripture depend on one great violation: the denial of God's rights, not ours. God has an absolute right to our reverence, submission, and obedience. If the government denies God that right by imposing laws on us to the contrary, we will unreservedly obey God rather than government.

Civil disobedience is biblical only when it is divine obedience. Its purpose is theological, not political. It must be to demonstrate submission to God, not defiance to government. It should be noted that unlike following Thoreau's model, we will only take a stance against authorities in obedience to a higher authority. Therefore, it is not determined by us, but rather by the disobedience of the governing authorities.

*As a church, if the government commands us to do what God forbids or forbids us to do what God commands, we will obey God rather than government.*²⁵

²⁴ This does not preclude the encouragement of personal responsibility as American citizens to rightly influence our society (more on this in the last section).

²⁵ This statement is consistent with God's prescribed **normative principle of authority**, which effectively means that God has ordained that the normative condition of our relationship to civil government is to obey their authority.

The following four principles will help guide our decision-making process in obeying God over government when obedience to both appears to conflict.

1. UNEQUIVOCAL

When obedience to government unequivocally results in disobedience to God, we must obey God rather than government.

This principle demands that we wrestle with the nature of the laws that are in conflict. We must carefully discern if this really is an either/or situation, or if there are alternatives that might satisfy. We should ask ourselves, “Do I really understand what the government is commanding me to do and how it violates God’s word? Have I studied God’s Word diligently, prayed for His insight, and thought things through?” Civil disobedience is not biblical if it is over preference, personal desire, tradition, etc. If the government’s command is in immediate and direct contradiction to God’s written command, then we can move on to the next principle.

2. MEANS

We should advance only when all normal channels of reason and appeal have been exhausted. This requires serious prayer and collective wisdom.

Means will vary from place to place. Whatever our situation, we should use every civil right available to us to honor God. We should consider possible alternatives. We should ask ourselves if we have made an effort to listen and understand exactly what the government is ordering me to do. We should consult with other respected Christians and churches. We should treat civil disobedience as a last resort. Daniel models a careful, respectful, and creative approach to dealing with a civil command that conflicts with a divine command (Daniel 1:8–16). In this case, the situation was resolved. We would do well to consider his example. When all of our God-given means of resolution prove fruitless, we have no choice but to disobey our civil authorities.

3. PEACEFUL

If we are forced to disobey the government out of obedience to God, we must do it peacefully. We are divinely commanded: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18). There is no place for violent, spiteful, hatred. Even in the act of disobeying our civil authorities, we must be acting out of obedience to God. We must carefully examine our hearts and consciences, testing our motives. Our actions should be a demonstration of humble obedience to God, not defiance to government. Love to God and neighbor should mark our steps. Aims and objectives should be carefully defined and communicated to the church. If

Obedience is due them under all normal conditions. Disobedience is exceptional, being only when the governing authority is in direct and immediate disobedience to God.

possible, a public explanation should be given in an effort to direct attention to Christ.

4. CONSEQUENCES

If we are forced to disobey the government out of obedience to God, we must be willing to accept all earthly consequences without vengeance. We must be prepared to suffer the consequences of our actions while avoiding any desire for personal martyrdom or fame of victimization. We acknowledge that direct confrontation between Christians and civic authorities is anticipated in passage like Matthew 10:17-20. In this context, Jesus tells us, “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). Civil disobedience done legitimately in obedience to God does not bring exemption from civil punishment. Church history is filled with stories of martyrs, many of whom truly acted out of pure, obedient devotion to Christ (see also Hebrews 11:35-37).

(C) USE OF SCRIPTURE TO ADDRESS PUBLIC HEALTH ORDERS

We deny that the current, temporary public health orders unequivocally require us to disobey God by any direct and immediate command of scripture.

We reject the use of Hebrews 10:25 to justify civil disobedience under temporary pandemical conditions. By temporary, we acknowledge that these restrictions are not legislated law but orders from a health officer. Furthermore, we reject the use of Acts 5:29 as a relevant precedent of civil disobedience for those under temporary pandemical conditions. We would do well to be like the Bereans, who did not receive even the apostles’ words without “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

(1) “NOT NEGLECTING TO MEET TOGETHER”

We deny that biblical exegesis supports the use of Hebrews 10:25 as a law that the current public health restrictions unequivocally require us to disobey. We acknowledge that the government’s orders are given for temporary compliance under extraordinary public health conditions. It is not an either/or situation. Obedience to the temporary public health restrictions does not unequivocally require us to disobey God.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

HEBREWS 10:24–25

Hebrews 10:25 does not command when, or where, or how, or how long, or how frequent to gather. Nor does it command what we must do when we gather. To be sure, the intent of the exhortation is to call each heart to a commitment of mutual love that seeks the regular gathering and encouragement of the church. According to the *MacArthur Study Bible*, “The warning here is against apostasy in an eschatological context.” The admonishment is

against abandoning the church's gatherings, correcting the "habit of some." It is about "fellowship love."²⁶ It is not intended to be used as a rigid law that has no legitimate exception. And because it is about love, when there is an exception the faithful heart laments out of a desire to gather together.

If a doctor orders you to stay home and not attend a church gathering, is that calling you to disobey God? If you judge that the doctor was exaggerating your condition or overreacting, does that change the situation? Is he now calling you to disobey God?

We are faced with the question, is the state forcing us to cease the worship of God? We must think through these matters carefully and guard from oversimplifying. Albert Mohler recently remarked:

The New Testament does tell us of the responsibility not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together ... But even as those things are made clear as is the practice of the church in gathering in the main on the first day of the week in honor of the Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, there is no specific reference to the frequency. There is no specific application to how this has to be understood under different kinds of contexts, such as a pandemic. There is no particular reference to meeting indoors rather than outdoors.²¹

We must deal honestly with the claim that the state is forbidding the worship of God (see Romans 12:1). This is nothing like the situation with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3) or Daniel (Daniel 6). That involved a command to idolatry. The state is not telling us what we must or must not believe, worship, or preach. They are not forbidding any of the commands outlined above (see I.B). They are not forbidding us to preach Jesus or worship Him or love one another or make disciples. In contrast, if the state orders us to deny Christ or to cease preaching Christ, there is no dilemma. This is an absolute and universally binding matter of allegiance to our Lord from a direct command of Scripture (Matthew 10:33; 2 Timothy 2:12; Mark 16:15; Acts 10:42; etc.). There can be no exceptions or temporary or extraordinary circumstances that justify such a capitulation.

We give thanks to God that—*while emphatically not a substitute for gathering*—we live in an age where technology allows us to communicate and join together audibly and visually in prayer and praise as a church. We give thanks that in this country we have the legal right to preach the gospel of our Lord both to the church and to the world.

Our governing authorities are restricting social gatherings, which happens to interfere with the normal form of the church's practice of corporate worship. But again, these restrictions are only concerned with the schema and not the essence of the church. If indeed the state is exercising her God-given authority to restrict social interaction in the interest of public health, then as citizens of this land it is our Christian duty to obey its laws. Submission is our responsibility whether we agree with the governing authorities or not, whether they are reasonable or not, whether they are competent or not, and whether they are moral or not—no exceptions. If the civil authorities have jurisdiction over public health, then they

²⁶ MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 269.

have jurisdiction over the schema of the public gathering of the church and under God we must obey.

Does our current situation adversely affect us spiritually? Absolutely! Does it interfere with our worship? Yes. Is it an exercise of authority against God's commands? That case has not been established.

In times like this the exercise of clear, objective, and consistent critical thinking is essential. We are all tired of the restrictions. Statistics are used and abused to justify every position. There is the scent of a political agenda in these public health policies. Widespread distrust is in the air. The economy is in serious danger. Then there is the concern for leftist exploitation. So much loss is at hand. Add to all of this, the tragedy that the church cannot gather. We are overly ripe to act, like Peter, without looking to and waiting on Christ and discerning our place under this world order (Luke 22:49-51; Matthew 26:51-53).

At this hour, we more than ever need disimpassioned consistency of principle to guide us. When our desire is high, we tend to reason in reverse. We tend to begin with what we want and work our way to support it. We most definitely—indescribably—long to gather. But our longing does not change our principles. *Our end does not justify our means.*

We cannot rightly use Hebrew 10:25 to justify civil disobedience because of our longing to gather. While we wait for relief from this pandemical conditions let us worship God according to conscience with family, be as connected with the church as we can through the various means made available, and devote ourselves to lamenting and praying (see below).

(2) "WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN"

We deny that biblical exegesis supports the use of Acts 5:29 as a precedent for disobeying public health orders.

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

ACTS 5:29

Acts 4:19 and 5:29 were statements in response to orders from governing authorities explicitly forbidding the preaching of Christ. Our governing authorities are not forbidding us from preaching Christ. In response to their preaching (Acts 3:19–21) the apostles were arrested and put in custody (Acts 4:3). They were then charged "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). It is in this context that "Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard'" (Acts 4:19–20). They were released and again preached Christ. Consequently, they were again arrested and imprisoned (Acts 5:18). They were sternly reminded, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us" (Acts 5:28). Again, in this narrow context, Peter and the apostles answer, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

We stand with the apostles in their convictions and should likewise be prepared to suffer the same consequences. But we submit that using these texts to justify defiance against the present public health orders is an inconsistent overreach of application.

Historical narrative statements like Acts 4:19 and 5:29 must be properly considered in the direct light of clear commands given to the churches in the epistles like those found in Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13, and Titus 3:1 before we can make application. Moreover, Acts is dealing with direct and immediate laws against proclaiming Christ. The conflict was theological in nature. And it was in direct and immediate contradiction to Christ's personal command to them.

For these reasons, we cannot rightly use 5:29 as our response to our governing authorities under these present temporary conditions issued in the interest of public health.

(3) OTHER EXAMPLES OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

The clearest examples of civil disobedience can be grouped into three general categories: *idolatry* (Daniel 3:13-27; 6:1-10), *proclaiming Christ* (Acts 4:18, 20; 5:29), and *sanctity of life* (Exodus 1:17, 21; Matthew 2:8, 12). Of the examples of civil disobedience in Scripture, all but those of explicit idolatry are committed for the sake of others. Our longing as a church is for us to gather. The main argument is for us, not others. Granted, shepherds long to gather for the sake of the sheep. Nevertheless, the church longs to gather for the church. This does not reflect the character of any example of civil disobedience in Scripture. There is no example in Scripture of the church disobeying civil authorities for itself. We recognize this observation as an opportunity to prompt and examine our own hearts and motives.

(D) HOW WE WORSHIP

We recognize that every person is called by God to worship Him according to His prescribed order (Hebrews 12:28-29; Leviticus 10:1). We also recognize that God calls all in Christ to worship Him in spirit and truth, in the freedom of our own conscience (John 4:23; Romans 14:5; 1 Corinthians 10:29-31; Hebrews 9:9; 10:22). God alone is Lord of the conscience. For these reasons, we will not allow the state to dictate how we worship. How we worship is first a matter of conscience and personal responsibility according to Scripture and accountable to God.

How does this position not contradict what is stated above about gathering? The fundamental difference is between *how we gather* and *how we worship*. In a crude analogy, it roughly amounts to the difference of restricting a professional sports team from assembling to play and telling them how to play. What appears so obvious here should help to illustrate the infinitely greater reality of God's people assembling to praise Him—the state does not tell the church how to express our praise to God.

(1) SINGING

We acknowledge that our governing authorities have issued restrictions on singing in a gathered worship service. While we respect the expressed interest in public health, and will

consider their concerns as guidelines, the state will not dictate how we worship. When the church gathers for worship, she will worship God according to a biblically informed conscience. We hold that singing praises to God is part of the essence of the gathered church's express worship to God (Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16; Psalm 95:1; 96; etc.). Singing belongs to the church's essence. If conflict results, in this instance we will appeal to our constitutional right under the Free Exercise Clause.

We acknowledge the following argument: singing intersects both the scheme and the essence of the church and therefore is still subject to the state. In response, we appeal to the demarcation of jurisdiction at the act of worship itself. The state's jurisdiction has only limited reach into how we gather while how we worship belongs to the church's jurisdiction. The state shall have no hand in the church's worship. Just as we have argued for the church to respect the state's jurisdiction, so now we argue for the state to respect the church's jurisdiction. The state's jurisdiction over the schema of the church does not justify interference with the essence of the church.

We would rather have no regulations on how we gather, but even here we seek to honor and respect our authorities. But *how we gather* (how many people, in what space, indoors or outdoors, how close together, etc.) is distinct from *how we worship* (prayer, singing, preaching, teaching, baptizing, communion, discipling, etc.). In America, how we worship is not the state's affair so long as our exercise of religion does not violate any criminal law. It is not criminal to sing.

We will order our worship services according to the rule of the church. We will honor the worship of God according to conscience, which includes the free expression of an individual's praises to God. We will hold all participants personally responsible for their conduct in the public assembly of God's people, to respect and honor the consciences of others.

(2) COMMUNION

We affirm that the same basic principles argued for singing apply to communion (see above). We reserve the right, under constitutional law, to freely exercise communion as a sacred ordinance of our Lord given to His church for the express purpose of worship to Him.

We will be diligent to care for the gathered church, exercising precautionary hygienic measures and seeking the best method of preparation and distribution of the elements. We will honor and respect the conscience of each participant in obedience to Christ.

(E) BIBLICAL AND LOGICAL CONSISTENCY

We acknowledge that these issues are complex and should not be oversimplified for the sake of expedience. The task of harmonizing the intersection of two different jurisdictions (church and state) under two different domains of law (Christ and Caesar) demands clear, objective, biblical and logical consistency. Some summary examples follow:

OTHER CHURCHES ARE MEETING, WHY CAN'T WE?

We must come back to the *why*. Why do we do what we do? The conduct of others never justifies our own. We together are responsible for the decisions and actions we take as a church. As passionately as we want to regather, we must follow biblically and logically consistent principles—not peers, feelings, or popularity.

ESSENCE VERSUS SCHEMA

Consider the following common claims: (a) our First Amendment rights are being violated by (temporary) public health restrictions; (b) the church is being discriminated against because liquor stores and abortion clinics are open but houses of worship are not; (c) the church should not be classified with movie theaters in these public health orders—religion and entertainment should not be treated the same. Each of these claims fails to apply the public health orders in a logically consistent manner. The problem arises when the *essence* and *schema* of the church are conflated in our thinking. It amounts to the inconsistency of assuming that a constrained body constrains the soul (consider Paul singing in prison). See section 2(A).

JURISDICTION

To claim that the state has no authority over the church fails to acknowledge that the state has a limited measure of God-given jurisdiction over the schema of the assembled church. If criminal activity were being threatened or perpetrated against a church assembly, the church would certainly call on governing authorities to serve protection and justice. The church submits to fire codes, building codes, etc., all of which potentially impede the gathering of the church. All of these are examples of how governing authorities exercise a measure of jurisdiction over the schema of the gathered church in the interest of public health and safety. To accept one and not the other is inconsistent. See section 2(B).

PUBLIC HEALTH STATISTICS

If public health orders belong to civil jurisdiction, then public health statistics should not be cited as grounds for civil disobedience by the church. Christ does not permit His church to disobey civil authorities based on the authority's quality, competency, integrity, honesty, morality, etc. Statistics or not, it is not the church's call. See section 2(C) and 2(B).

As Americans, political petitioning by citizens is a privilege that would be a consistent method of responding to apparent discrepancies between public health statistics and government policy. See section 4(B).

THOREAU STYLE

Many in the church assume that civil disobedience against public health orders is justified because the state supports abortion (or some other egregious offense against God). The current death toll from COVID-19 in America is only a fraction (~166k) of the death toll of human lives under the atrocity of abortion in American per year (~876k). This is true and

utterly tragic. But for the church to disobey public health orders on these grounds is to engage in political protest Thoreau style. This has several problems. First, it is the responsibility of individual citizens to go through the proper channels to influence legislation (which may indeed involve peaceful protest). But this is not the church's responsibility. Second, it comes too close to exploiting an excuse. If abortion is the real problem, then make that the target issue, not public health orders. Third, it is inconsistent with the biblical standard to disobey governing authorities in one area because they are unrighteous in another. Rome was far more wicked in its dealings with people than our authorities, yet Christians were commanded to obey them unless it meant direct and immediate disobedience to God. See section 3(B)1.²⁷

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Some claim that the state is discriminating against the church because it restricts the church from gathering indoors while allowing businesses to open their doors. At the surface, this argument appears valid but is proven invalid when the public health order is understood. The governing authorities are not discriminating against types of public entities (essence) but gathering formats (schema). This discrimination is based on the contagious quotient of the schema. Instead of assuming that the difference in treatment is owing to the difference in essence we should see that the difference in treatment is owing to the difference in schema. The original argument then compares apples to oranges. See section 2(A) and 3(A)3.

DISTRUST

The claim that the government cannot be trusted therefore we should not submit to them, is inconsistent with the plain teaching of Scripture. While we may question the motives and worldview behind the decisions being made by state and local authorities, this is not grounds for civil disobedience according to the Bible. See section 3(B).

UNEQUIVOCAL

Claiming that the present temporary public health orders require us to disobey God cannot be established unless an either/or condition can be demonstrated. The temporary orders do not unequivocally require us to disobey a direct and immediate command of God. See section 3(C)1.

If the state bans the church's gatherings *permanently*, we will gather. If the state bans *only* the church's gatherings, we will gather. If the state bans the church's gatherings because of what we *believe* or *preach*, we will gather. These are all cases that (a) violate our constitutional rights as Americans and (b) force an unequivocal condition of obedience to either God or government. Let us pray that it does not come to this. Temporary pandemical

²⁷ We agree that "careful discernment is necessary to distinguish a biblically warranted occasion for civil disobedience from a mere rationalization of illegal protest growing out of other motives and interests. Rigorous and prayerful searching of the Word of God must be accompanied by careful analysis of the sociopolitical situation." — D. W. Gill, *EDT2*, 264.

conditions, supported by neutral and generally applicable restrictions on all like schemas, call for prayer, lamentation, self-discipline, and patience—not disobedience.

THE END DOES NOT JUSTIFY THE MEANS

Biblical and logical consistency calls for principles, not excuses. The more we want something the more we will rationalize the means to get it. Even a righteous end should not be sought by unrighteous means.

Local churches are in a crisis. They know that gathering pleases God. They may even discern that it is reasonably safe to gather. They want to honor and worship Christ, and they do not want the government interfering with the church. These are right and good desires, but they do not justify any means of action. We are being called to wrestle with realities that the American church has rarely felt. May the glory of Christ be our focus.

Now is the time for us as a church to stand firm in the faith on the principles that God has so clearly provided and to do so trusting Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. WE WILL BE FAITHFUL STEWARDS

At the very start of the shelter-in-place public health orders, we called the church to steward the storm. We have not changed our course. The principles that guided us then have not changed. Some of the circumstantial conditions have changed and this official statement of the church has sought to address them. Now we turn our attention to next steps.

(A) WE CALL FOR UNITY

Our highest priority is to bring honor and glory to Christ in this situation. We believe that the best way that we can do that is by obeying Him through a careful study of and reasoning with the Scriptures. Our efforts here are to provide shepherding guidance by sharing the fruit of our labors in the Scriptures and careful reasoning. This official statement serves not merely to explain but to exhort, in love. We believe that in order for us as a church to make much of Christ in this situation, we must be united in love.

We recognize that this extended separation, with its attended trails, can easily cause emotionally charged division within the church. Distrust, doubt, confusion, frustration, anger, and a list of other troubling symptoms can become barriers to Christ-honoring unity. We also recognize that the political dimension to all of this can foster opinionated disunity.

WE WILL LEAD

We assume full responsibility to lead the church through these troubling times and do not relegate that responsibility to our civic government. We accept spiritual accountability for our decisions as those who watch over your souls. Help us to lead with joy (Hebrews 13:17).

Let us not be distracted by what other churches are doing. Some members of the church have asked for our official response to the recent statements made by John MacArthur and Grace Community Church (GCC). We have drafted a response, which is expressly intended as an explanation of our concerns and reservations with GCC's statement and a call for unity of conviction among all members of TBC.²⁸

We resolve to lead the congregation through this storm responsibly, boldly, and in the fear of God alone.

WE FEAR GOD ALONE

Some may assume that to submit to the governing authorities at this time is cowardly and done out of fear. We have received letters telling us that as leaders we need to trust God and be strong, not fearing or cower to the government. This argument is charged with assumptions. First, it assumes that the right thing to do is disobey civil authorities at this time. Second, presupposing that civil disobedience is justified it assumes weakness, lack of faith, and misplaced fear. The irony is that we are concerned that some in the church may be motivated to stand against the government out of fear of political tyranny. This is not our fear. We do not fear government. We do not fear death. We do not fear opinions. We take our stand and will lead in the fear of God alone.

Let us remember that it is much harder to submit than to rebel. Which requires more faith, more strength, more trust, more humility, more self-control? It is much more like Christ to appear weak—"He was crucified in weakness" (2 Corinthians 13:4). We are tasked to lead God's people on the path of self-denial. May we as a church join with Paul, saying, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Let us all guard against wrong motives, distractions (emotionally charged, patriotic passions, movements, arguments, disputing politics, etc.), and pride that blinds. Let us all be sensitive to what our Sovereign Lord is doing for His glory and our good.

Our hearts ache for the people we love and serve, yet we are not able to gather together with them. True unity within the congregation is our great desire. In a similar spirit with the apostles, we say, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). We "appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). We recognize that this is only possible in the power of Spirit with the gospel as our banner. So we call all within the church to steward this storm "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3). Humility is key at this hour as a church. "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Peter 3:8).

²⁸ Our response is drafted in the following document: [Response to GCC Statement](#).

(B) WE CALL FOR RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

We call members of the church to act responsibly as Christian citizens of America, to influence our civil government and especially in these extraordinary times. We recognize that as Christians *and* citizens of an earthly state, we are responsible to not only evangelize our land but influence it for God's glory and the good of the people. We agree that this brings with it a measure of political obligation: "Christians *should* seek to influence civil government according to God's moral standards and God's purposes for government as revealed in the Bible."²⁹

We recognize that the church itself has no political obligation. While the church may comment on the morality of governments and their policies it is not the place of Christ's church to enter into the political arena or lobby for policy (Acts 2:42). Though the church faced many injustices and social evils it never called for political or social reform. The church is commissioned with power to exalt Christ, edify the saints, and evangelize the world—not become entangled in politics. But this does not mean zero influence. "Christians ... should act in their capacity as citizens rather than as representatives of the church. In this way the gospel works through moral persuasion and the working of God's grace among citizens."³⁰ There are both Old Testament (Genesis 41:37-45; Exodus 8:1; Esther 5:1-8; Jeremiah 29:7; Daniel 4:27) and New Testament examples of this (Matthew 14:3-4; Luke 3:18-20; Acts 24:24-25).

Rather than complain or rationalize disobedience let us be model citizens, making use of every civil right available to improve government policy. There is always a danger that government might use its power as an excuse for unnecessary restrictions on personal freedom. Our Christian obligation to submit to our governing authorities does not mean that we are hindered from influencing our government through the proper channels and in a Christ-honoring manner. We are not called to standby and allow the government to do whatever it wants in the name of stopping the spread of a communicable disease. Wherever the government seems to be unreasonable, inconsistent, or unjust in their policies, let us speak up. By God's grace we are granted the privilege and responsibility to influence our government. Let us not neglect to steward that privilege and responsibility.

We have considered and are exploring the possibility of petitioning our county authorities for relaxing restrictions on public gatherings. Other means that citizens can make use of include writing or calling city, county, and state representatives, participating in town hall meetings and county council meetings, lobbying, and starting or getting involved in an organized campaign. Let us remember that even in these efforts we must rely on the Holy Spirit and not our own strength.

²⁹ Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible*, 55.

³⁰ Silva, *The Reformation Study Bible*.

(C) WE CALL FOR LAMENTATION AND PRAYER

Our stewardship is important and honors God. But God alone has the power to change our circumstances. We make much of Christ when we turn in lament and cry out to Him who sits on the throne and acknowledge that we are presently suffering an affliction upon our land as sinners among sinful people. Whether you are over the sense of threat or are still concerned about COVID-19, it is a pestilence that has afflicted our land. Let us follow the pattern of old:

If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you—for your name is in this house—and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.

2 CHRONICLES 20:9

We call the church to lament and pray. Temporary separation is nothing new. The church has countless times in centuries past been hindered from gathering due to pestilence and wars. The true church often grows stronger through it. This is not to encourage separation; separation is contrary to the nature and prescribed pattern for the health of the church. But it is to remind us that this is a season of trial that we of all people should be leading by prioritizing spiritual realities—turning to God in lament and prayer.

We are concerned that too much attention is being directed to our government and media. What about the sovereignty of our Lord and His purposeful hand in all of this? Is His purposes for us to make cultural-political statements? Is there no room to acknowledge that we as a people and a nation have sinned against our holy God? Is there no place for us as a church to lead in lamenting and repenting? Is not a largely forgotten expression of worship, that we owe to God, humble lament? Did God not say, “Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6). Again, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?” (Lamentations 3:38). Let us remember the words of our Lord to Israel, warning them of the consequences of their careless sins against Him and His covenant: “if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me ... and if you gather within your cities, I will send pestilence among you” (Leviticus 26:24, 25; see also: Numbers 14:12; Deuteronomy 28:21; Ezekiel 14:19, 21). Let us remember how the singular holiness of God calls for us to focus more on Him, not governments, when plagues and pestilences strike us:

I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things (Isaiah 45:5-7).

Let us look to God not government for true healing (1 Kings 8:37-38; 2 Chronicles 20:9). Let us cry out to the Lord for His mercy upon our nation, state, and county—in physical, social, political, and spiritual dimensions.

Christ has given His church two essential commands regarding her obligation to the state: *obey* and *pray*. We covered obedience above, now let us take to heart our responsibility to pray for our governing authorities.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

1 TIMOTHY 2:1-2

Indeed, let us be in much prayer for our governing authorities, great and small. This should be of great interest to Christ's church as these authorities are instruments of much good or much evil—and we are called to submit to their rule. Let us keep in mind that God is specifically sovereign over all the affairs of this world. He alone has the power to destroy COVID-19 and He alone has the power to change the hearts of our governing authorities: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1).

Let us turn to our sovereign Lord in lament over our own sin and the sins of our land and cry out to Him for mercy.

CONCLUSION

We believe that the corporate gathering of Christ's church is vital to her life and mission. These matters are of utmost importance to us. Yet we will not act as though the end justifies the means.

- We call for honoring Christ above all, obeying civil authorities under His command.
- We call for obeying public health orders so long as they are temporary, neutral, and generally applicable to like schemas.
- We call for unity in all these matters.

It is our resolve and priority to earnestly seek the regathering of Trinity Bible Church.

- We intend to gather outdoors and are immediately pursuing an initial pilot outdoor meeting.
- We will continue working with local authorities and as American citizens will seek to petition civil authorities to relax the current restrictions.

Finally, we call for lament and prayer for our land and the church. We call for trusting Christ as the sovereign Lord over every detail, who owns the civil authorities and owns the church. He raises up and brings down kingdoms. He gives and takes life. He opens and closes doors. He cares more for His bride—the church—and delights in her gathering more than our greatest longings. Our Lord Himself has promised us that in Him we will have peace—"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

May God be glorified and may we find joy in honoring Christ through these difficult times.