

Christ, Not Caesar, Is Head of the Church

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A Biblical Case for the Church's Duty to Remain Open

Christ is Lord of all. He is the one true head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18). He is also King of kings—sovereign over every earthly authority (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16). Grace Community Church has always stood immovably on those biblical principles. As His people, we are subject to His will and commands as revealed in Scripture. Therefore we cannot and will not acquiesce to a government-imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship or other regular corporate gatherings. Compliance would be disobedience to our Lord's clear commands.

Some will think such a firm statement is inexorably in conflict with the command to be subject to governing authorities laid out in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Scripture does mandate careful, conscientious obedience to all governing authority, including kings, governors, employers, and their agents (in Peter's words, "not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable" [1 Peter 2:18]). Insofar as government authorities do not attempt to assert ecclesiastical authority or issue orders that forbid our obedience to God's law, their authority is to be obeyed whether we agree with their rulings or not. In other words, Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 still bind the consciences of individual Christians. We are to obey our civil authorities as powers that God Himself has ordained.

However, while civil government is invested with divine authority to rule the state, neither of those texts (nor any other) grants civic rulers jurisdiction over the church. God has established three institutions within human society: the family, the state, and the church. Each institution has a sphere of authority with jurisdictional limits that must be respected. A father's authority is limited to his own family. Church leaders' authority (which is delegated to them by Christ) is limited to church matters. And government is specifically tasked with the oversight and protection of civic peace and well-being within the boundaries of a nation or community. *God has not granted civic rulers authority over the doctrine, practice, or polity of the church.* The biblical framework limits the authority of each institution to its specific jurisdiction. The church does not have the right to meddle in the affairs of individual families and ignore parental authority. Parents do not have authority to manage civil matters while circumventing government officials. And similarly, government officials have no right to interfere in ecclesiastical matters in a way that undermines or disregards the God-given authority of pastors and elders.

When any one of the three institutions exceeds the bounds of its jurisdiction it is the duty of the other institutions to curtail that overreach. Therefore, when any government official issues orders regulating worship (such as bans on singing, caps on attendance, or prohibitions against gatherings and services), he steps outside the legitimate bounds of his God-ordained authority as a civic official and arrogates to himself authority that God expressly grants only to the Lord Jesus Christ as sovereign over His Kingdom, which is the church. His rule is mediated to local churches through those pastors and elders who teach His Word (Matthew 16:18–19; 2 Timothy 3:16–4:2).

Therefore, in response to the recent state order requiring churches in California to limit or suspend all meetings indefinitely, we, the pastors and elders of Grace Community Church, respectfully inform our civic leaders that they have exceeded their legitimate jurisdiction, and faithfulness to Christ prohibits us from observing the restrictions they want to impose on our corporate worship services.

Said another way, it has never been the prerogative of civil government to order, modify, forbid, or mandate worship. When, how, and how often the church worships is not subject to Caesar. Caesar himself is subject to God. Jesus affirmed that principle when He told Pilate, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). And because Christ is head of the church, ecclesiastical matters pertain to His Kingdom, not Caesar’s. Jesus drew a stark distinction between those two kingdoms when He said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Our Lord Himself always rendered to Caesar what was Caesar’s, but He never offered to Caesar what belongs solely to God.

As pastors and elders, we cannot hand over to earthly authorities any privilege or power that belongs solely to Christ as head of His church. Pastors and elders are the ones to whom Christ has given the duty and the right to exercise His spiritual authority in the church (1 Peter 5:1–4; Hebrews 13:7, 17)—and Scripture *alone* defines how and whom they are to serve (1 Corinthians 4:1–4). They have no duty to follow orders from a civil government attempting to regulate the worship or governance of the church. In fact, pastors who cede their Christ-delegated authority in the church to a civil ruler have abdicated their responsibility before their Lord and violated the God-ordained spheres of authority as much as the secular official who illegitimately imposes his authority upon the church. Our church’s doctrinal statement has included this paragraph for more than 40 years:

We teach the autonomy of the local church, free from any external authority or control, with the right of self-government and freedom from the interference of any hierarchy of individuals or organizations (Titus 1:5). We teach that it is scriptural for true churches to cooperate with each other for the presentation and propagation of the faith. Each local church, however, through its elders and their interpretation and application of Scripture, should be the sole judge of the measure and method of its cooperation. The elders should determine all other matters of membership, policy, discipline, benevolence, and government as well (Acts 15:19–31; 20:28; 1 Corinthians 5:4–7, 13; 1 Peter 5:1–4).

In short, as the church, we do not need the state’s permission to serve and worship our Lord as He has commanded. The church is Christ’s precious bride (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:23–27). She belongs to Him alone. She exists by His will and serves under His authority. He will tolerate no assault on her purity and no infringement of His headship over her. All of that was established when Jesus said, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18).

Christ’s own authority is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And [God the Father has] put all things in subjection under [Christ’s] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:21–23).

Accordingly, the honor that we rightly owe our earthly governors and magistrates (Romans 13:7) does not include compliance when such officials attempt to subvert sound doctrine, corrupt biblical morality, exercise ecclesiastical authority, or supplant Christ as head of the church in any other way.

The biblical order is clear: Christ is Lord over Caesar, not vice versa. Christ, not Caesar, is head of the church. Conversely, the church does not in any sense rule the state. Again, these are distinct kingdoms, and Christ is sovereign over both. Neither church nor state has any higher authority than that of Christ Himself, who declared, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18).

Notice that we are not making a constitutional argument, even though the First Amendment of the United States Constitution expressly affirms this principle in its opening words: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The right we are appealing to was not *created* by the Constitution. It is one of those unalienable rights granted solely by God, who ordained human government and establishes both the extent and the limitations of the state's authority (Romans 13:1–7). Our argument therefore is purposely not grounded in the First Amendment; it is based on the same biblical principles that the Amendment itself is founded upon. The exercise of true religion is a divine duty given to men and women created in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27; Acts 4:18–20; 5:29; cf. Matthew 22:16–22). In other words, freedom of worship is a command of God, not a privilege granted by the state.

An additional point needs to be made in this context. Christ is *always* faithful and true (Revelation 19:11). Human governments are not so trustworthy. Scripture says, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). That refers, of course, to Satan. John 12:31 and 16:11 call him “the ruler of this world,” meaning he wields power and influence through this world's political systems (cf. Luke 4:6; Ephesians 2:2; 6:12). Jesus said of him, “he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). History is full of painful reminders that government power is easily and frequently abused for evil purposes. Politicians may manipulate statistics and the media can cover up or camouflage inconvenient truths. So a discerning church cannot passively or automatically comply if the government orders a shutdown of congregational meetings—even if the reason given is a concern for public health and safety.

The church by definition is an *assembly*. That is the literal meaning of the Greek word for “church”—*ekklesia*—the assembly of the called-out ones. A non-assembling assembly is a contradiction in terms. Christians are therefore commanded not to forsake the practice of meeting together (Hebrews 10:25)—and no earthly state has a right to restrict, delimit, or forbid the assembling of believers. We have always supported the underground church in nations where Christian congregational worship is deemed illegal by the state.

When officials restrict church attendance to a certain number, they attempt to impose a restriction that *in principle* makes it impossible for the saints to gather *as the church*. When officials prohibit singing in worship services, they attempt to impose a restriction that *in principle* makes it impossible for the people of God to obey the commands of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. When officials mandate distancing, they attempt to impose a restriction that *in principle* makes it impossible to experience the close communion between believers that is commanded in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, and 1 Thessalonians 5:26. In all those spheres, we must submit to our Lord.

Although we in America may be unaccustomed to government intrusion into the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, this is by no means the first time in church history that Christians have had to deal with government overreach or hostile rulers. As a matter of fact, persecution of the church by government

authorities has been the norm, not the exception, throughout church history. “Indeed,” Scripture says, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Historically, the two main persecutors have always been secular government and false religion. Most of Christianity’s martyrs have died because they refused to obey such authorities. This is, after all, what Christ promised: “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). In the last of the beatitudes, He said, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11–12).

As government policy moves further away from biblical principles, and as legal and political pressures against the church intensify, we must recognize that the Lord may be using these pressures as means of purging to reveal the true church. Succumbing to governmental overreach may cause churches to remain closed indefinitely. How can the true church of Jesus Christ distinguish herself in such a hostile climate? There is only one way: bold allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even where governments seem sympathetic to the church, Christian leaders have often needed to push back against aggressive state officials. In Calvin’s Geneva, for example, church officials at times needed to fend off attempts by the city council to govern aspects of worship, church polity, and church discipline. The Church of England has never fully reformed, precisely because the British Crown and Parliament have always meddled in church affairs. In 1662, the Puritans were ejected from their pulpits because they refused to bow to government mandates regarding use of the Book of Common Prayer, the wearing of vestments, and other ceremonial aspects of state-regulated worship. The British Monarch still claims to be the supreme governor and titular head of the Anglican Church.

But again: *Christ is the one true head of His church*, and we intend to honor that vital truth in all our gatherings. For that preeminent reason, we cannot accept and will not bow to the intrusive restrictions government officials now want to impose on our congregation. We offer this response without rancor, and not out of hearts that are combative or rebellious (1 Timothy 2:1–8; 1 Peter 2:13–17), but with a sobering awareness that we must answer to the Lord Jesus for the stewardship He has given to us as shepherds of His precious flock.

To government officials, we respectfully say with the apostles, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge” (Acts 4:19). And our unhesitating reply to that question is the same as the apostles’: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Our prayer is that every faithful congregation will stand with us in obedience to our Lord as Christians have done through the centuries.



Updated at 9:45am

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Below we want to answer the primary question we have received in response to the statement: *Why did you submit to the original government order, citing Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2?*

The elders of Grace Church considered and independently consented to the original government order, not because we believed the state has a right to tell churches when, whether, or how to worship. To be clear, we believe that the original orders were just as much an illegitimate intrusion of state authority into ecclesiastical matters as we believe it is now. However, because we could not possibly have known the true severity of the virus, and because we care about people as our Lord did, we believe guarding public health against serious contagions is a rightful function of Christians as well as civil government. Therefore, we voluntarily followed the initial recommendations of our government. It is, of course, legitimate for Christians to abstain from the assembly of saints *temporarily* in the face of illness or an imminent threat to public health.

When the devastating lockdown began, it was supposed to be a short-term stopgap measure, with the goal to “flatten the curve”—meaning they wanted to slow the rate of infection to ensure that hospitals weren't overwhelmed. And there were horrific projections of death. In light of those factors, our pastors supported the measures by observing the guidelines that were issued for churches.

But we did not yield our spiritual authority to the secular government. We said from the very start that our voluntary compliance was subject to change if the restrictions dragged on beyond the stated goal, or politicians unduly intruded into church affairs, or if health officials added restrictions that would attempt to undermine the church's mission. We made every decision with our own burden of responsibility in mind. We simply took the early opportunity to support the concerns of health officials and accommodate the same concerns among our church members, out of a desire to act in an abundance of care and reasonableness (Philippians 4:5).

But we are now more than twenty weeks into the unrelieved restrictions. It is apparent that those original projections of death were wrong and the virus is nowhere near as dangerous as originally feared. Still, roughly forty percent of the year has passed with our church essentially unable to gather in a normal way. Pastors' ability to shepherd their flocks has been severely curtailed. The unity and influence of the church has been threatened. Opportunities for believers to serve and minister to one another have been missed. And the suffering of Christians who are troubled, fearful, distressed, infirm, or otherwise in urgent need of fellowship and encouragement has been magnified beyond anything that could reasonably be considered just or necessary. Major public events that were planned for 2021 are already being canceled, signaling that officials are preparing to keep restrictions in place into next year and beyond. That forces churches to choose between the clear command of our Lord and the government officials. Therefore, following the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, we gladly choose to obey Him.

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