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The Christian, public worship and government health orders

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The Covid-19 crisis that has shaken the world for many months now has had a profound impact on the life of the Church of Christ. Christians have wrestled particularly with the restrictions that government authorities at various levels in society have placed upon their public assemblies for worship.

The interface between political and spiritual affairs is particularly controversial. However, the child of God must learn to distinguish between a Biblical, spiritual response and a political reaction to these things. The Christian will find that there are legislative issues they can oppose from a political perspective but must submit to for spiritual reasons. It is easy to confuse these two reactions. I fear that many have adopted a political position with regard to the government's public health orders but have presented it as being a spiritual response. I am concerned that many Christians who defy their government's health orders do so out of a carnal rebellious spirit that simply indicates they resent being told what to do. As an example of this, I recently had a short email discussion with a person who accused me of obeying men and not God, in closing our services. In the course of the discussion they stated they believed the government had no right to require driving licenses or hunting permits!! This person's view of the issue affecting the church was simply an extension of their political opinion that governmental regulation should be restricted. A spiritual response to any issue is based firmly on the carefully considered teaching of Scripture. The old maxim, that the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice, must be applied.

Some have adopted the view with reference to the imposed Covid-19 restrictions, that since Christ is the Head and King of the Church, *we ought to obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29). This is indeed true, but only when what is required of us by men is contrary to the commands of God. There is nothing in either the words or behaviour of Christ the King that warrants a defiance of government authority in this case.

1. God's people must function within the society where God has placed them.

Under authority. They must submit to the authority that governs that society in everything that does not conflict with the duties God requires of them. This is why the Scripture says what it does regarding the civil magistrate.

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation (i.e. the 'condemnation' of God). For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. (Romans 13:1-7)

The passage above deals with the Christian as a citizen and also sheds light upon the duties of government. The civil magistrate is a 'servant of God' and has a duty to act for the good of those governed. It is clear that the good that is referred to is temporal and material rather than spiritual. It can surely be contended that covid-19 restrictions are for the welfare of society generally, as an attempt to preserve the health of citizens, and as such is in agreement with the Divine mandate. The government that acts for the benefit of its citizens' health is acting as the 'servant of God'! This is not to endorse all that government authorities do. Some of the practices of governments in dealing with this crisis has been corrupt and evil. The promotion of vaccines developed and tested using cells from an aborted child, is one case in point. Nevertheless, the



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Christian has a responsibility to objectively determine what is 'good' and support it.

Sacrifice. Participation in a society always involves a degree of sacrifice of personal liberties and freedoms by its citizens. This is necessary for the communal good. In a marriage, which is an example of a society of two persons, the Scripture teaches for example, that the husband cedes certain rights to his wife and she to him. See 1 Cor 7:4. There is cooperation for communal benefit rather than purely independent action.

To give another example, if I wish to use the public road I must give up my right to drive where and how I please. I can drive like that in my own property, but must give up that right and adhere to the rules of the road in order to use the public highway. To insist on my right to drive as I please on the public road only brings chaos and I expose myself and others to grave danger. By doing so I am properly liable to the penalty of the law. If I wish to enjoy the benefits of being part of a society I must be ready to sacrifice certain personal interests, rights and freedoms. The Christian is not exempt from this! Circumstances may arise that are severe enough that will impact the exercise of his liberty and he may be called on, in common with all in his society, to curtail certain activities for the common good.

The Lord Jesus Himself illustrates this kind of personal sacrifice in many ways. In His incarnation He was born into a society under the occupation of a foreign invader—Rome. Accordingly, He was enrolled from His birth as a citizen of that empire, even at the expense of the discomforts associated with His birth in Bethlehem. He was there in obedience to the dictates of the tyrant Caesar. It may be said that this submission was His first act as God manifest in flesh! This is all the more notable as there were many who campaigned vigorously against conformity to this law at the time, in the very region where Mary and Joseph were living at the time. See Acts 5:37. It was not the practice of faithful saints like Mary and Joseph, nor of the infant Christ Himself, to resist the tyrannical law of the Roman authorities that interfered significantly with their rights and freedoms.

Later in life He makes arrangements to pay the Temple tax levied upon Jews even though there is clearly a case to refuse to pay! ... *What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers? Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free.* (Matthew 17:25-26) Though, as a natural born Jew, He was one of the children referred to here and could have made a case for being free from this obligation, He denied Himself that liberty to refuse and paid the tax rather than cause offence.

In His death He submitted to the demands of the governmental authorities of the day, both Roman and Jewish. He had the power to resist but did not. *Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?* (Matthew 26:53)

2. God's people are to submit even to outrages perpetrated against them by the various authorities they live under.

Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. (1 Peter 2:18-20)

*Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And *whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,*



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and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)

The teaching of these passages is very clear. The Christian is to submit even to the abuse of authority by a tyrant and the threatening of an enemy, for the gospel's sake. Such self denial is a basic of gospel living! It is evidence of being a child of God and of being like Him. The covid-19 regulations implemented by our government do not come close to being as severe as the abusive behaviours the Saviour commands His people in these verses to submit to.

See also the following statements by Paul which clearly address his own spiritual and worship practices, in which he displayed tremendous self-denial of his own spiritual freedom and rights:

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel: Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. (2 Timothy 2:8-10)

When any with authority over us encroaches on our personal freedoms, the Christian is to submit for Jesus' sake. While it may be appropriate to make political protest at such encroachments as being wrong, and even lobby to have them removed, it is not to be resisted and defied by the Christian.

3. Public worship and government restrictions on public assembly.

It is particular concern that our government has severely restricted public gatherings for worship in churches. This is not unique to the Christian church but has been applied to all religious assemblies and indeed to other types of non-religious gatherings. The grounds of this restriction is not related to freedom of religion but to public health. The rationale behind curtailing the numbers of persons that can assemble; regulating what activities can take place and which cannot; prohibiting congregational singing etc; requiring masks to be worn; is a rationale based on the very real fear of transmitting a serious disease, and for the most part are based on informed medical opinion. It is simply NOT true to say that the government has banned worship, or the preaching of the gospel, when it requires its citizens not to assemble in large groups in a church building. To advance this view is a deliberate perversion of reality.

a. Worship is not exclusive to a public assembly of saints. The Christian has a duty to worship God and ordinarily this duty is regularly performed in a public setting in the company of fellow believers. However, this is not the only setting in which worship occurs. The worship of God is primarily a personal spiritual act of the heart and is to be a constant feature of the Christian's life. Paul uses the once-a-year feast of solemn worship at the Passover to urge this point. For the Christian, every day is to be a spiritual Passover. Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

The sad reality that plays into some of the controversy over the closure of churches is that many Christians



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have equated the practice of worship with the activity of an hour on a Sunday in a specific location and never think of the matter outside that framework. So they are outraged by the closure, feeling that they are restrained from worship. We are perfectly at liberty to develop our personal and family acts of worship to compensate for any temporary loss of public worship opportunities.

The words of the Lord Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well also emphasize this truth.

Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:20-24)

Interestingly, this emphasis on the true nature of worship in all ages is given in the context of an historic controversy about the importance of the Temple as a place of public worship. True worship is not tied to any geographical location and therefore cannot be prevented by a lack of access to that location.

Worship, being spiritual in nature, can occur even when the external elements of public worship in a public gathering are not possible.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:6)

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19)

Clearly, audible public singing is not essential to worship! The song of the heart is the key thing.

The health authorities in our government have seen fit to severely curtail public gatherings of its citizens, including in church services, yet the means of remote instruction and preaching are permitted and encouraged. While not ideal, and hopefully only temporary, the spiritual worship of God can continue in this way.

b. The duty of man to God has always been moderated Biblically by other considerations. This vital fact comes through in the words of the Lord Jesus about the Sabbath day — ...The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath. (Mark 2:27) That is, in other words, there are other human factors, in addition to the command of God, to be taken into account when determining what is appropriate in terms of performing our duty to God. The context here and in Matthew 12:1-14 makes allowance for what have become known as the works of necessity and mercy, as part of any proper definition of the language of the Divine commands about the Sabbath and other matters. Ordinarily, under the strict letter of the law, the actions of David eating the shewbread, or the man rescuing the trapped sheep on the Sabbath, which the Saviour uses as illustrations, would not have been proper but such exceptions to duty were permissible and legitimate.

Within Biblically defined parameters, it is clear that certain other considerations could take priority over the commanded duties of the Sabbath day, and in David's case, the practices governing the house of God. I contend that the concepts of necessity and mercy developed in these passages by the Saviour, warrant submission to the restrictions on public assembly for worship. The covid-19 restrictions are necessary to avoid spreading infection; and are a work of mercy in that they show concern for our neighbour's health.

c. Specifically, the duty to gather for public worship is conditioned by other circumstances which may render it impossible. The duty to engage in various acts of public worship is seen in Scripture at times to be secondary to other considerations. I believe that there are important applications of these truths to our own time and circumstances.



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Passover. Under Levitical law, attendance upon the Passover, which was ordinarily mandatory on pain of serious censure (Numbers 9:13), could be suspended because of contact with the dead. See Numbers 9:6, 9-11. There were health and hygiene concerns at play here! The Passover was to be observed in due course but this was put off till the contamination of contact with the dead was no longer an issue.

Birth of children. Another instance of this sort is seen in the regulations regarding a woman who had given birth. Again, physical and health concerns are part of the reason for this legislation for Israel.

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled. But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days. (Leviticus 12:1-5)

Obviously there is a prolonged absence from public worship, not only permissible but required, on these occasions.

David. David's experience affords further illustrations of one unable to attend the house of God because of the circumstances of life. It was not health concerns that prevented him but the political state of the nation that led to him being in danger of his life.

To the chief Musician, Maschil, for the sons of Korah. As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. (Psalms 42:1-4)

There are reasons for saying that these words belong to that period of David's life when for years he was hunted by Saul. He was distressed by the fact that he could not attend the public assembly of worship but clearly he is still in touch with God and even speaks under the inspiring power of the Holy Ghost in this situation!

A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary. Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee. Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips: When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches. (Psalms 63:1-6)

These words belong to the days when he was King but had been exiled by Absalom's rebellion. Again he is removed from the sanctuary but still engages in worship and is in communion with God. Again, it appears that this forced absence from God's house lasted for some time.

In both these instances, discretion and wisdom determined it was best for David's physical safety and welfare not to attend the public assemblies for worship at the house of God - perhaps for months and years at a time!

d. Not forsaking the assembling of saints. It is appropriate to add a comment on the words of Hebrews 10:25 since they are often used to support arguments for refusing to abide by the government regulations prohibiting Church gatherings.

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling



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of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

In the context, these words are addressing the action of an apostate. That is, they envisage a final abandonment of the faith evidenced by an abandonment of the congregation of God's people, as visible evidence of never having been truly the Lord's. It is decidedly NOT addressing the circumstance where, for legitimate reasons, attendance upon public worship is not possible. No-one would dream of applying these words to denounce an aged, or bed-ridden Christian, or one confined to hospital, or temporarily prevented on some other grounds from attendance at church, as an apostate! These words certainly do not make a case for defying the authority of government policies introduced to safeguard public health. They appear in the context of a reference to the penalty of Moses' law (v28) for apostasy, i.e. the Levitical code which, as we have seen, allowed for and in certain cases demanded, absence from the public worship of the sanctuary.

Conclusion

The call by some Christians to defy the government regulations preventing assemblies of large groups in churches, has no warrant in Scripture. In fact, the opposite is true. The teaching and example of Christ and His Apostles and prophets, warrant submission to these laws, for our own and our neighbour's good.

It is not, therefore, persecution of the church when individuals who break the law suffer the penalty of the law. The words of Peter seem applicable to such cases! For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps...(1 Peter 2:20-21)

The Saviour's suffering was not as the result of any defiance of legitimate authority either Roman or Jewish. There is no justification that can be found from the life of Christ for defying the measures government authorities have taken to curb the spread of Covid-19. That being so, it cannot therefore be to 'do well', as Peter put it, to defy the regulations imposed by our government.

Some have cast themselves as martyrs and champions of religious freedom as they face fines or imprisonment for breaking these laws. It is wrong to do so. If I am detected breaking the speed limit, or driving without insurance, on my way to preach at a Church gathering and am detained by the authorities for doing so, I cannot claim they are acting as enemies of the gospel and curtailing my religious liberty, or persecuting me, because I cannot attend the service I was going to!

Instead of defying the law we should pray for a turning to seek the God who has sent Covid-19 and speak, as we are able, to instruct men about their defiance of God and that there is mercy for the penitent. I believe that the gospel message of penitent submission to the stroke of Divine displeasure, urging sinners to turn from their defiance of God, is practically denied by the Christian who defies the government's health regulation in this matter.