

GBC'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

After much prayer, study, and discussion regarding the current COVID-19 restrictions on church gatherings in the state of California and Sacramento County, the elders of Grace Bible Church have drawn the following conclusions that we desire to express as a church:

1. The Biblical, normative disposition of a Christian towards governing authorities is one of humble submission.

Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 call on believer's to humbly submit to governing authorities, recognizing that they have been "instituted by God" (Rom 13:1). The Greek word for "be subject to" that Paul uses in both texts describes a humble, deferential disposition, an "acquiescence in a divinely willed order."¹ Paul is calling on believers to honor God by honoring the governing authorities He has instituted. While this is not a command to universal and unquestioning obedience, this disposition will most often manifest in obedience, for it should be the desire of the believer to obey those authorities God has instituted. It is imperative that we as the church both teach and model this submissive spirit, especially when discussing the appropriateness of civil disobedience.

2. God has ordained spheres of authority—including the individual, the family, the local church, and society—and has delegated authority within the boundaries of each of those spheres.

The Lord Jesus Christ alone has unlimited authority (Matt 28:18; Eph 1:21; Col 2:10; 1 Pet 3:22). All other authority is delegated by Him according to His will. Thus, Christ alone is:

- 1) The head of every individual (1 Cor 11:3), and He has given every individual a conscience to bear witness to His law and authority over them (Rom 2:14-16)
- 2) The head of the family, and He has appointed the husband/father to exercise His authority there (1 Cor 11:3)
- 3) The head of the church (Matt 16:18; Eph 5:23; Col 1:18), and He has appointed elders to exercise His authority there (Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 5:1-4)
- 4) The head of society (1 Tim 6:15), and He has appointed governing authorities to exercise His authority there (Rom 13:1).

3. Authorities are only exercising their God-given authority appropriately when they exercise it within their sphere of authority and according to God's revealed will.

Because it has been delegated to them, the authority of a father, church elder, or government is necessarily limited to that divinely instituted sphere of authority. Further, because they are exercising authority on behalf of God, their actions are constrained by His revealed will (Rom 13:8, 10). Fathers, elders, and government officials are accountable to Christ in how they wield His authority and will be liable to judgment for using it outside these divinely established boundaries (Jn 5:22).

¹ Gerhard Delling, "ὑποτάσσω," *TDOT*, 41.

Thus, when governing authorities seek to establish restrictions on the worship of the local church, they are going beyond the authority they have been given. When such restrictions are deemed wise and reasonable by the elders of a local church (i.e., fire code regulations) they should choose to obey—again, submission to authorities ought to be the normative disposition of believers—as an exercise of their divinely given authority in the church.

4. It is the responsibility of the elders of a local church to carry out Christ’s design for the liturgy and polity of His church as revealed in the Scriptures, even if this results in civil disobedience to governing authorities.

Because Christ is the head of the church, elders have a mandate to exercise His authority in carrying out His plan for the local church as revealed in His word. When governing authorities command the church to deviate from Christ’s plan for His church, elders have the responsibility to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This civil disobedience will occur when:

- 1) Government commands us to do what God has commanded us not to do (sins of commission)
- 2) Government commands us not to do what God has commanded us to do (sins of omission).

Civil disobedience, then, is appropriate when Christians are asked to violate either explicit commands in Scripture or implicit principles and implications of Scripture. This is not a license to disobey out of convenience or preference; it is a command to show ultimate submission to the highest authority, God Himself.

In the case of COVID-19 restrictions, our state and local governments have restricted our church in such a way that hinders us from fully carrying out Christ’s prescribed plan for His body in the way that best honors Him and serves the saints. For example:

- 1) Capacity restrictions limit the body from gathering together in worship, which stands in opposition to our priority of maximizing our space for gospel ministry.
- 2) Social-distancing protocols may make it more difficult for individual believers to practice the one-another’s towards each other as effectively as under normal conditions.
- 3) Admonitions to stay home and avoid public gatherings both encourage individual believers to forsake the assembly (Heb 10:25) and hinder them from exercising their spiritual gifts for “the common good” (1 Cor 12:4-8).

In light of this, it is our conviction that the church ought not be bound to comply with these restrictions that inhibit our ability to worship and minister to one another freely. We must honor the Lord Jesus by implementing His plan for His church, even where it conflicts with government ordinances.

5. It is the responsibility of the church to uphold truth and advocate for a Biblical worldview.

The church is “the pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim 3:15), tasked with upholding truth and advocating for a Biblical worldview amidst a culture that is deceived by Satan (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2). We should not expect our secular government to consistently operate according to

God's revealed will or to promote truth as revealed in nature and Scripture. In light of COVID-19 and society's response to it, the church ought to be communicating clearly the following points:

- *Loving one's neighbor*: a familiar argument in our current cultural climate is that the best way to love your neighbor is to wear a mask and distance from them. While concern for another's physical health is one way to love that person, this ought not be at the expense of other Biblical ways to show love to each other. We would argue that the one-another's of Scripture (Jn 13:34; Rom 12:10, 16; 15:14; 1 Cor 2:25; Gal 5:13; Eph 5:19, 21; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; 1 Pet 4:9; Jas 5:16) demand personal interaction. Isolation is harmful (Gen 2:18). We need each other.
- *The priority of spiritual health over physical health*: Scripture prioritizes spiritual health over physical health and safety (Matt 10:28; Phil 3:8). In a world in which our society is most concerned about physical health, the church must teach that this is not our highest priority, nor does worrying over physical health result in a rich and flourishing life (Matt 6:25; Lk 12:23).
- *The inherent risk of living in a fallen world*: Death and disease are inescapable realities of life in a fallen world and always have been. Only in our risk-averse culture would the possibility of exposure to a virus—one that, for most of the population, does not present a significant risk—compel someone to completely alter their way of life. Throughout church history, believers have risked disease and sickness to be with other believers and to worship God in the corporate assembly. We the church we must continue to prioritize gathering with the saints in the manner that most honors the Lord Jesus Christ.
- *The seriousness of the COVID-19 virus*: We recognize that the COVID-19 virus has had a harmful impact on many, in some cases resulting in severe illness or even death. Over time, however, it has become clear the virus does not pose the threat to the general population it was initially reported to. Despite this, our government continues to impose heavy restrictions on individuals and institutions to slow its spread, restrictions that are not commensurate to the threat COVID-19 poses. These restrictions have, in turn, had significantly harmful effects on individuals and society. As the church, we must respond appropriately to the actual threat COVID-19 presents while maintaining the priorities for the church God sets forth in His word.

6. For the individual, there is room for the conscience to inform whether to obey government ordinances relating to COVID-19.

We recognize that Spirit-filled believers will differ in conviction over whether or not to personally comply with COVID-19 ordinances. For example, some will hold the conviction that to wear a mask at church is to be complicit with a false narrative, while others will hold the conviction that wearing a mask at church is an expression of submission to government. Our desire is to affirm and accommodate both positions so long as both stem from a heart that is submissive to governing authorities and a conscience that is Biblically informed. In matters of conscience, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom 14:5). God calls on believers to not "despise" or "pass judgment on" one another (Rom 14:3), but rather to "decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother" (Rom 14:13).