

Covid-19, the Government, and the Church: Seeking to be Biblically Wise

I. Obeying God RATHER THAN men

Brothers and sisters, this morning I want to ask and attempt to answer this question: Why have we not been meeting together physically and in person as a church? As I expressed in an email recently, this is no light or trivial decision to be made. In fact, it's a decision that should only be made with a real sense of "fear and trembling." What we're talking about, here, is the assembling together of the church—according to the will of God—to engage in the worship of the only true and living God. That's a big deal. That's sobering. And if we don't feel that, then we're fundamentally unhealthy. So let me ask again: *Why* have we not been meeting together physically and in person as a church? We're probably all familiar with these verses in Acts:

- **Acts 4:18–20** — [The rulers elders and scribes] called [the disciples] and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But 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 5:27–29** — The high priest questioned [the disciples], saying, "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." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

We answer—*ultimately*—to an authority higher than the government – to that divine authority from which the authority of the government itself is derived. We must always remember this and always be ready to **obey God rather than** men. So are we in a situation, now, where we find ourselves obeying men rather than God? Let's take this time to carefully think about these things.

II. Obeying God BY OBEYING men

The Bible tells us that we are to be diligently and actively submissive to the wicked governing authorities. You might be asking right away: Does the Bible really say *that*? Does it really tell us to be subject to the *wicked* governing authorities? The reason I say it like this is because it can expose the fact that sometimes we hold the opposite belief – that the Bible tells us to be subject only to "righteous" or at the very least good and "moral"—or even just "reasonable"—authorities. But the Bible itself makes no distinction between wicked and righteous authorities – between reasonable and unreasonable authorities:

- **Titus 3:1** — Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities...
- **1 Peter 2:13** — Be subject for the Lord's sake to *every* human authority, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors...
- **Romans 13:1–2** — 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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

We need to be clear that the authorities in the days of Paul and Peter were every bit as wicked and unrighteous as many of our government authorities are today. And yet these are verses that Christians have often twisted or even simply ignored in spite of the warning that those who “do these things will incur judgment.” I find that anytime we don’t want to submit to authority—whether it’s men submitting to the authority of the church or wives submitting to the authority of their husbands, or children submitting to the authority of their parents—we simply make “really good” excuses for throwing off the yoke of that authority – because at the end of the day, though we claim the authority of Christ, more often than not we really are our own authority. Authority is fine until I don’t like it.

It’s true that Peter identifies the authorities as those “sent by [God] to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Pet. 2:14; cf. Rom. 13:3-4). And, in fact, almost all governments—even the worst and most corrupt and wicked governments—are fulfilling this most basic function *at some level*. If they weren’t, we would have to say that God Himself is a failure because human government is His idea. We might ask ourselves which is worse: A very wicked government or no government at all? Those who answer, “no government at all,” have perhaps not truly understood the depravity of man which was witnessed prior to the flood (Gen. 6:5; 8:21) and also prior to the kings in Israel (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), or the sovereign wisdom of God in establishing and ordaining these authorities, however wicked they may be. Even when our government fails in some fundamental way to fulfill its God-given function of punishing those who do evil and praising those who do good (for example, abortion), the point of Peter and Paul is not that this absolves us of our obligation to submit to these authorities *as our* authorities.

Jesus also taught submission to the ruling authorities and was a model of that submission Himself.

- **Matthew 22:21** — [Jesus] said to [the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians], “...render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
- **John 19:10–11** — Pilate said to [Jesus], “...Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

If there was ever a time to think that we were absolved from submission to authority it would be when the government sent the Son of God to be executed. But even in this time, Jesus Himself acknowledged the authority that this government—and more specifically, this *governor*—had *from God*. There are some brothers and sisters who would say that our governing authority is the constitution and not the men and women holding office and enacting the laws. In other words, we are subject not to human beings in authority, but rather to an impersonal “so-called” government that we call “law” (the “rule of law”). I’m not against working to preserve our constitutional rights and liberties. However, when the Bible speaks of authorities, it’s not speaking of constitutions or laws written down on paper (or not written down on paper), but rather of the currently functioning government and of those actual “human creatures” (*anthropine ktisei*; 1 Pet. 2:13) holding office in our day (“the emperor”; the “governor”; the “ruler”; “the *one who is in authority*”). Pieces of paper cannot carry out God’s wrath or receive

taxes or praise those who do good. And so once again we must be exceedingly careful not to find ways to excuse our disobedience to the government and therefore even our disobedience to God Himself. If we're not free in the bible to disobey the government when the government is failing at some level to fulfill its *divine* mandate, then how can we say that we're free as Christians to disobey the government simply because the government is failing to fulfill its *human* (constitutional) mandate?

I said a moment ago that the Bible tells us to be *diligently* and *actively* subject to the wicked governing authorities. I said this because our obedience to every command in Scripture ought to be earnest and diligent rather than lazy or reluctant. There is a true joy in this! This doesn't mean that we obey the government when it commands us to do something directly contrary to what God has commanded us to do. But this does mean that we have a strong desire deep within us to always be diligently living in submission to our governing authorities in so far as this is at all possible. In other words, it's not that we only submit to God, and in so far as the government is in alignment, we just happen to be in submission to the government, too. No, we actively, purposefully choose to submit to our government – even submissively paying the taxes that our government will use at times for wicked and evil ends (cf. Rom. 13:5-7). We submit to our governing authorities as a means of submitting to God and as an expression of our *trust* in *His* hidden and sovereign government of this world. This is the principle that lies behind our submission to every God-appointed authority in our lives (church, parents, husbands, etc.).

With this understanding of the Bible's command to be diligently and actively submissive even to the wicked governing authorities, and also with this understanding that we must always be ready to obey God rather than men, we can now be in a proper place to think carefully and biblically about these days in which we're living.

III. Obeying God BY BREAKING God's law

One thing we need to grasp at the outset is that sometimes God's laws can appear to contradict each other, and in fact there can be at times a hierarchy in God's commands. In other words, in the vast majority of cases a command must be obeyed, but in some unique cases, one divine command may be superseded by another.

□ **Matthew 12:3-5** — [Jesus] said to [the Pharisees], “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was *not lawful for him to eat* nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple *profane the Sabbath* and are guiltless?”

I believe Rahab's lie to the men who came to her house asking about the spies was actually a lie that glorified God because it stemmed from her confession of Israel's God as the only true God and because it was intended to protect the lives of the men in her house (Josh. 2:1-13; cf. Exod. 1:15-21). When Samuel asked how he could go to anoint David king without Saul hearing of it and killing him, this was *God's* response:

□ **1 Samuel 16:2** — Take a heifer with you and say, “I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.” In normal circumstances, that would be called a “half-truth” and a deception, *but not in this circumstance*.

So while on the one hand, we must be uncompromisingly ready to obey God, we must also be careful to recognize that there are times when one command of God will supersede another command of God. Sincere and genuine Christians may disagree about when this hierarchy comes into play and also about what the hierarchy actually is. Our job in these situations is simply to discern as best we can through prayer and study what is most honoring and glorifying to God in a particular situation and then to love and respect and pray for those brothers and sisters who conscientiously differ from us.

IV. The Lord’s Day Assembly: Desire versus Legalism

So, let’s consider the question of meeting together for corporate worship as a church. On the one hand, it’s obvious that this is a really big deal. The weekly meetings of the church are rooted not ultimately in any one, or two, or three proof texts, but in a biblical theology/understanding of creation, a biblical theology/understanding of man, a biblical theology/understanding of the covenant, a biblical theology/understanding of redemption, a biblical theology/understanding of the church, and a biblical theology/understanding of the glory of God. From all of these things, we know that meeting together as a church is according to the will of God and that any time we despise and disregard the will of God—whether due to fear, or laziness, or misplaced priorities and idolatry, or even just ignorance, or outright rebellion—we’re guilty of serious sin.

On the other hand, we know that there is no explicit command in Scripture saying, “Thou shalt meet every Sunday as a church for worship.” This explains why some of you miss church occasionally when you go on vacation, or when work requires, etc. There’s no explicit command in Scripture for the church to meet weekly for worship because such a command is not needed (it’s simply assumed that this is what *true* and *faithful* Christians will desire and choose to do when at all possible). What’s at stake here truly is a matter of theology and a matter of the heart – not a matter of the law “*per se*.” On the one hand, rather than minimizing the importance of our assembling together, this only calls us to a far higher account. On the other hand, this also warns us against a legalistic and oversimplistic approach to this question of our weekly gatherings as a church. So what about that very important passage in Hebrews chapter ten?

□ **Hebrews 10:23–25** — Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not forsaking/abandoning/deserting the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

These verses are a powerful, stinging rebuke to what kind of people? To the people who *forsake* and *abandon* and *desert* the assembly of God’s people. The Greek word here is stronger than the ESV’s “neglect.” Paul uses this word when he speaks of how Demas, “*in love with this present world,*” had “*deserted*” him and gone to Thessalonica (2 Tim. 4:10; cf. 4:16). The word, here,

assumes a certain *kind* of forsaking. The writer of Hebrews has in mind those who were deserting the assembly because in some way they, too, were “in love with this present world.” It may have been due to laziness and apathy (5:11-14), or—more likely—it was due to *fear* of being ostracized and persecuted (10:32-34; 12:4-11) But in any case, what the writer of Hebrews warns against is the heart attitude of idolatry and carelessness and fear that was leading some professing Christians to forsake and abandon the church and the Christian faith for the world. It is this that we must never, ever, ever do no matter what the government might ever say. The writer to the Hebrews immediately follows his command not to forsake the church for the world with these words:

- **Hebrews 10:26–30** — For **if we go on sinning deliberately** after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. **How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?**

The forsaking of the meetings of the church was the symptom of the true and deeper issue – a rejection of the Christian faith leading to eternal damnation. It’s in light of these things that we need to be very discerning about when we’re willing to boldly and lovingly call people out—*on the basis of these verses*—for “deserting” the assembly. Once again, what we come back to in Hebrews 10 is really a matter of biblical theology and principle, and—as always—a matter of the heart.

V. Seeking to be Biblically Wise

As elders, as we examine our hearts and as we hear from all of you, what we see is that our longing for the gathering of the saints has only grown exponentially during these days. What we see is not an abandoning of the church for the world, but rather a growing devotion to Christ and His church. In the end, we know that for all those who are true Christians, this time will only make us all the more determined to never, ever forsake or desert the church for the world. Therefore, even as we feel the pain of longing, we can rejoice that that longing is ours.

As elders, as we examine our hearts we know we need to make sure that we are not motivated in any way by fear – whether it’s fear of the government or fear of sickness, or even fear of death. God’s word to us is always “fear not” (cf. Luke 12:7, 32). God has given us “a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7). To *act* or to *choose* out of fear is always sin.

So, if we’re not motivated by fear of the government, or by fear of sickness, or by love for this world, then why have we chosen thus far to suspend our weekly meetings? This is something of our line of thinking. Is the government targeting or singling out the church? Perhaps in some isolated instances, but not in general. The idolatrous, money-making god of sports has also stopped “meeting,” and non-Christians as well as Christians have lost their jobs. Is this a

permanent quarantine? No. Is this an unconstitutional government overreach? Maybe so, but we have to be careful to remember that this is still our government and these are still the ones to whom God has given authority – and authority *over us*. Do we have the right to peaceful protest or access to the courts for redress of perceived wrongs? Yes, we can be thankful that we do. Is it our deep desire, as representatives of Christ and as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, to manifest where at all possible a humble submission even to our wicked governing authorities? Yes, it is. Whether we agree with it or not, since this is the course of action that *our* governing authorities have chosen to take in fighting this virus (including, by their silence, our legislative and judicial branches) and since many people are suffering economically as a result, we believe that to this point it has been legitimate to avoid sending a public message to our community and to the world that we intend to undermine and slow down the return to “normalcy” for everyone. In this rare and unique case, and for the time being, we believe that submitting to our governing authorities, loving our neighbor, and guarding the honor and reputation of God’s name supersedes our calling to gather in corporate assembly every Sunday.

While we make this decision conscientiously, we can also respect those who, in spite of their deep longing to be able to submit even to the wicked governing authorities, find that their conscience leads them to humbly and quietly choose a different course of action. Brothers and sisters, whichever course we take and at whatever time we take it, we find that we are called to exercise biblical wisdom and discernment and to always be examining our hearts before God. There could come a time when because of our higher allegiance to God (and as we continue to seek to exercise biblical discernment and wisdom) we feel that it’s necessary to start meeting again in spite of the government quarantine – when obedience to a theology of the church will supersede our obligation to submit to the governing authorities. We don’t know when such a time would be, and no doubt different Christians and churches will have different opinions about when that time has arrived. Let us pray earnestly that such a time will not come for us, but that we may continue to live a peaceful and quiet life before the world – godly and dignified in every way (1 Tim. 2:2). *True biblical* submission takes courage – far more courage, in fact, than rebellion. But there is also joy in submission as we rely not on our own understanding but rather acknowledge God in all our ways (Prov. 3:5-5).

VI. Conspiracy theories and the Gospel

One of the things that can complicate our thinking on these things is the fact that there are many false teachers preying on the church today by warning of secret, behind the scenes plots and conspiracies. Why do I call these people “false teachers”? It’s not because I deny the existence of conspiracies or “secret plots.” In Acts 23 we read of forty men who made a “conspiracy” to murder Paul (Acts 23:13). In 2 Samuel, we read of the “conspiracy” that Absalom made against his father, David (2 Sam. 15:12). We read of many “conspiracies” to assassinate various kings of Israel and Judah (cf. 2 Kings 12:20; 14:19; 15:15, 30). So why am I warning about the “false teachers” of conspiracies in the church today? In the first place, these false teachers don’t just believe that people make conspiracies, they hold to a conspiratorial view of history. In other words, history (or at the very least, the history we’re living in today) is the product of a grand series of conspiracies or even a world-wide conspiracy and cover-up. In this way they teach that the judgment of God at Babel when he divided the languages of the world has been overruled

and invalidated either by the genius of Satan or the genius of man – even though we know that this judgment is only undone at Pentecost within the context of the church. The conspiracies that these false teachers peddle are far more sinister and evil and powerful than any of those more “innocent” conspiracies that we read about in the Bible. The false teachers may give lip service to the idea that God is ultimately *sovereign over these “conspiracies,”* but sadly it’s only lip service. What they’re all teaching the church is that there’s a competition between God and the conspiracies in which God will certainly come out on top in the end, but right now those conspiracies sure are giving God a run for His money. And so while on the one hand these teachers promote fear and/or rebellion, on the other hand they deny God’s sovereignty and exalt and even in some sense deify the genius of man. Never will you find more “god-like” men and women than in the conspiracies of the conspiracy theorists. But the Bible calls this idolatry.

In the days of Isaiah, the people of Judah we’re gripped by the fear of secret plottings and conspiracies. So listen to what God said to Isaiah and to all of the true believers in Judah:

- **Isaiah 8:12–13** — Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

One commentator writes:

[Isaiah is] talking about a general approach to the **explanation of events**, especially unpleasant and trying events... Isaiah challenges his people to reject paranoia and see God’s hand in the events of their time. To refuse to do so is to become more and more fearful, more and more unstable, for it means that our lives are ultimately in the hands of unknown powers, too devious for us to know or control. (Oswalt)

According to the word of the Lord, the Christian’s focus on conspiracy theories (which very often becomes an overruling obsession) is a grave sin that needs to be repented of, and those false teachers who promote this conspiratorial view of history will face a severe judgment. A true, biblical understanding of the sovereignty of God over history requires that we all turn a deaf ear to those who “peddle” conspiracies.

- **Psalm 33:10–11** — The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

In so far as the nations are perpetually “plotting”—and have been ever since the fall—we know that God is perpetually “laughing” (Ps. 2:1-4; 37:13; 59:8). I’m not denying that there are such things as conspiracies or that as a church we can expect suffering and persecution. What I am emphatically rejecting on biblical grounds is the conspiratorial view of history which is common to all conspiracy theorists. We saw earlier this biblical principle: We submit to our governing authorities as an expression of our trust in *God’s* hidden and sovereign government of this world. The false teachers turn this biblical principle on its head when they say: We rebel against our

governing authorities as an expression of our knowledge of the hidden and secret conspirators governing this world.

This leads me to a second reason that I call these people “false teachers”: They all claim a higher, secret knowledge of the workings of the evil one—of the plans and machinations of Satan himself – or at least of his human pawns. In other words, there’s an elite knowledge that none of us could have unless these false teachers revealed it to us by authoritatively *explaining* and *interpreting* the *meaning* of the events in this world and then telling us about other events that only certain “initiated” people know about in such a way that we’re given privileged insight into secrets otherwise covered up. In other words, these false teachers of conspiracies are themselves the “illuminati” and so what they’re ultimately doing is setting themselves up as a rival to God’s inspired and authoritative revelation in the Scriptures. Think about it like this: If one of these false teachers was ever to listen to this message he or she would say that this message is proof of one of two things: Either I’m part of the conspiracy, or else I’ve been duped and blinded by the conspiracy. And so any evidence against the conspiracy is always, automatically, turned into evidence *for* the conspiracy. But do you see how this gives to the false teachers and their teachings the ultimate authority of prophets and divine revelation?

Brothers and sisters, the Bible has already brought into the light the only conspiracy that *as Christians* and citizens of a heavenly country we will ever need to be concerned about and that’s the spiritual plotting of Satan to destroy the faith of God’s elect. We don’t need a false teacher to warn us of this very real danger. Jesus said to Pilate:

- John 18:36 — “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”

The Apostle Peter writes:

- 1 Peter 5:8 — Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

The Apostle Paul says that we’re not ignorant of Satan’s designs (2 Cor. 2:11), and so we don’t need anyone else to tell us what Satan’s designs are. Paul speaks in Ephesians of the schemes of the devil and says that in response to these schemes, we need do nothing more than take up the complete *spiritual* armor of God which, in the end, is nothing more than the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph. 6:10-18). The problem is that a focus on conspiracy theories, by its very nature, will only, ever, distract us from the *true* Gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, conspiracy theories are a conspiracy – they’re a part of Satan’s scheme to distract God’s people from the true battle, and from the true peace and hope and joy of the Gospel of our salvation.

If I could speak to them personally, I would call all those who peddle conspiracies to a true repentance not only because this practice deifies man, denies the true biblical teaching of the sovereignty of God, arrogantly claims secret knowledge, and sets itself up as a rival to God’s inspired revelation, but also because this practice is destructive to Christ’s church which He

purchased with His own blood, promoting fear and paranoia where God has called us to perfect peace and trust in Him.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we are not ignorant of Satan's devices. He would use these times to promote in Christ's people fear and/or unwarranted rebellion against the civil authorities. Therefore, let us in these days—and *every* day—always keep the main thing the main thing.

- **Ephesians 6:10–20** — Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day [which is *every* day], and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of [Gospel] truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly **to proclaim the mystery of the gospel**, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

The battle today is the exact same as it was in Paul's day, and the same as it was a year ago. It's a battle for people's souls as we strive by the free and sovereign grace of God to remain faithful to the end. That's the only thing we need to be concerned about; and the good news is that we have at our disposal the complete armor of God. Therefore, the victory is ours. Jesus is *still* building His church and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it (Mat. 16:18).

Conspiracy? If I could invent an expression: "Conshmiracy." The one who sits in the heavens laughs. He brings the counsel of the nations to nothing. He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of **the Lord** stands forever. The plans of **His heart** to all generations. Brothers and sisters, may each one of us know experientially, every day, the truth of these words:

- **Isaiah 26:3** — You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.