

A Response to a Respectful Question:

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Provenance:

The recent Session mandate requiring masks to be worn during LPC group activities including our worship service, has prompted some questions from various members of the congregation. The following is my perspective on how one such inquiry should be answered.

This is my position paper and should not be understood as the official Session position though it was well received by the Session.

The Question Generally Stated:

“Can you and the session clarify and confirm the Biblical response to governmental mandates—especially in light of Romans 13?”

The question naturally falls within the category of that “required obedience owed to the civil magistrate” which is inherent in the duties of a servant of the Living Christ, our eternal King.

One must start here lest an artificial distinction be drawn between “Law” and “Gospel.” Since all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ, all obedience rendered by His servants must first be understood as obedience to Him. This prior framework distinguishes Christian ethics from virtually all other forms because it firmly roots the existence of “authorities” in any individual life as being the outworking of the prior expression of Christ’s will for us to obey.

This can lead to some surprising applications. Paul, in Ephesians, states this:

Ephesians 6:5–9 (NKJV)

⁵ Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

⁹ And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

In virtually all his ethical exhortations, Paul speaks in a similar fashion. Paul basically teaches, that in the larger scheme of things, both bondservants and their masters, are to see that the institution of slavery itself is in place due to the prior decree of our Heavenly King. Each of the players are, first and foremost, to understand their first duty is to serve their King in that relationship in the way they relate to each other. Notice that Paul makes no claim on the bondservants, that their masters will always be Christian, nice, just, or kindly. Nor does he promise the masters that their servants will not steal them blind, lie, cheat, or even, if given the opportunity, seek their life. What he proclaims is the open-ended general strategy or ethical framework which is to guide each party in their immediate decisions during daily life.

We can immediately distill from this elementary observation that: (1) in general practice, the Christian is to recognize all the “authorities” active in his life as the immediate and intentional manifestation of the Lord’s will, (2) that service and obedience to those “authorities” is submission to Christ’s will for us whether we wish it was otherwise or not, (3) the most important aspect of the actions which comprise our obedience, is not in their actual nature (e.g. some degrading service a servant would do for his master) but in the unresentful attitude and “sincerity of heart” which the servant displays. This is the “witness” of humble service, and it is priceless to our Christ who took on the form of a servant in His ministry for us.

Is absolute obedience to worldly “authorities” required? Logically, “no!” and that follows next.

What Biblical limits govern whether specific calls to obedience are to be obeyed or not?

Certainly, the Scriptures are radically “real” in their sober evaluation of how fallen man has marred and tarnished the beautiful delegation of authority that God has ordained for His creation. Since fallen man is forever seeking to replace God’s absolute sovereignty in all things with his own arrogant and selfish desire to elevate himself to such sovereignty, it is naturally the result that all power granted to fallen human beings and their institutions will tend toward ungodliness.

We see this happening at the dawn of creation when Lamech (Gen. 4:23-24) instituted the rule of tyranny and terror as the basis of his rule. The sad example of Lamech has never passed out of existence as evidenced by fascists, communists, dictators, power hungry democrats and republicans, religious charlatans, etc. down to this day. This background explains why Christians need guidance in their submission to the authorities set over them.

Jesus Himself provides the essential framework in His famous teaching:

Matthew 22:20–22 (NKJV)

²⁰ *And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”*

²¹ *They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”*

And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

Here, our Lord makes it clear, that He has reserved absolute, unconditional obedience in all things only to Himself. If there are no means by which a demanded call to obedience extended by a worldly "authority" can be understood and performed as first and foremost, a duty to the Absolute King, then that call to obedience must not be obeyed.

However, as simple as this sounds, other teachings of scripture call us to humble ourselves before the degree of discernment required here.

The clearest examples of such righteous disobedience to a worldly power is when it requires an explicit violation of God's Word. But we must be very careful that we do not take our own ideas and convictions about how the world "ought to be" and impose them of Scripture here. A serious study of Scripture opens to us the "otherness" of such teachings as God would say fit the category of those wherein "disobedience" is required.

I shall attempt a brief explanation:

God's commands are always summarized in the two great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors.

Notice the "otherness" of these commands. No earthly power has the right to demand that we act or conduct ourselves in some manner that does not reflect the overarching call to love God. Nor has any earthly power the right to demand that we act or conduct ourselves in an unloving manner toward others.

Extending this framework to Matthew 22:20-22, we would say that the "things that are God's" in our Christian duty fall under these two headings of love. The "things which are Caesar's" are those things in which a direct and immediate submission to Caesar is the means by which love of God and neighbor is implicitly our purpose.

Thus, paying taxes cheerfully is a service to God in that we recognize His institution of government and the corresponding requirement for funds. Government has the right to demand our physical service in military and other applications. Can this lead to tyranny and abuse? Absolutely. But it is interesting how reticent the Scriptures and the Church as a whole has been in stating that rebellion, or radical disobedience short of rebellion, is the righteous way to go in such a case.

Thus, in evaluating whether a requirement from the magistrate is subject to direct disobedience, we must not focus on ourselves primarily but rather on whether that requirement somehow detracts from our "other" love. Scripture often calls upon us to sacrifice ourselves on the altar of service (as the bondservant above or to magistrates God has raised up

over us). However, it never calls upon us to sacrifice our duties to others, especially our duty to God. Thus, when faced with a decree from the magistrate we must be careful to remove our own distaste or resentment from the consideration.

The controlling requirement to glorify God in our decisions even if it involves self-denying humiliation.

Martin Luther and John Calvin lived in tumultuous times, and both dealt with the question of when it is righteous for Christians to disobey. Luther, as might be expected, was the more passionate. His famous statement: “Frogs need storks” is directed toward how even the most tyrannical prince is still being used by God to keep general unrighteousness (“frogs”) under control. His bottom line was that Christians in the pews should obey the king without virtually any open resistance or rebellion. Luther’s role in the Peasant Rebellion reinforced his position.

John Calvin has a much more balanced and nuanced approach but wound up becoming somewhat ambiguous. His position was that God is never properly served when people contribute to chaos and undermine the principle of “order” in the society. Thus, he absolutely prohibited a mass, rabble-led, insurrection such as transpired later in the French Revolution. However, he left it open for a new “seat of authority” to be raised up in opposition to an existing one such that people could transfer their submission to that authority and leave the service of the other.

What these two magisterial Reformers had in common was the very Scriptural teaching that our public witness to God and seeking to glorify His name in all things, must take absolute priority. If service to the magistrate is tedious or even humiliating, but does not, in a clear sense call upon us to do those things which would be counter to God’s commands or would bring injustice on our neighbors, then we are to submit to them as rendering service to Christ.

Both saw that when passions about various issues elevate tempers and conduce to ugly displays of rhetoric or disreputable scenes of anarchy (e.g., the take-over of government buildings) or vice (e.g., looting, vandalism) then Christ is not glorified in that witness. It would better to obey the magistrate and cry-out to God for Him to judge the tyrant than for Christians to appear lawless and essentially like those who know not the Lord.

The Question Specifically Stated:

“Can you and the session clarify and confirm the Biblical response to governmental mandates—especially in light of Romans 13?”

In light of the foregoing, we have a conceptual framework in which to try to apply the above principles both to a particular Scriptural passage (Romans 13) and a particular social issue (recent government edict requiring the wearing of masks during religious services.)

The biblical passage considered:

Romans 13:1–7 (NKJV)

*13 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and **the authorities that exist are appointed by God.** ² Therefore **whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.** ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵ Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷ **Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.***

Prima facie inspection of the passage recognizes its ready conformity to the general call to submission to the authorities our Sovereign Christ has placed over us. Indeed, it reinforces those teachings in the most explicit manner.

1. All authority is from God, none exist except by His decree.
2. While recognizing the constraints and limits on that authority, the Christian is to solemnly consider that resisting such authority can bring judgment on themselves.
3. The Christian is “to do what is good” unto the end of bringing “praise from the same”, hence the prime objective of bearing witness to the beauty, peace, and glory of Christ.
4. Christians thus, in their initial evaluation of how to respond to commands from the magistrate, are to ensure that they fully submit to the call to “render therefore to all their due: taxes... customs... fear... honor... etc.”

This last paragraph (4) alone should give many Christians pause. If they, as Christians, approach the civic decisions required of them motivated by unseemly passions of disgust, suspicion, hatred, anger, etc. then whether they choose to conform to the decision or stand against it in protest is irrelevant. They have already failed in their prime duty of “rendering what is due.”

All this is to say that the modern cultural antinomianism which characterizes many Christian and non-Christian responses to such issues as “mask wearing” may very well be of greater import than the masks themselves. Christians are called to a higher standard and must remember that when surrounded by passionate and “useless wranglings of men.” (1 Timothy 6:5)

Is Civil Disobedience Ever Justified?

Only in the most direct instances do the Scriptures give any encouragement or praise for actions which we would call “civil disobedience.”

Daniel's refusing to obey Darius in the matter of submitting their petitions to him rather than any god (Dan. 6:8) recognized that this clearly violates the first law of God (above). His actions are particularly instructive. He deliberately opened his windows toward Jerusalem and knelt to pray at his accustomed hour. Notice that his intent was not just to "not hide" his actions but to take steps such that his enemies (of whom he was well aware) would see them. Thus, Daniel intentionally disobeyed Darius but also ensured the witness of his actions communicated that man is to first submit his petitions to God not man. All the rest, as they say, is history.

Thus, if a Christian (or a church) undertakes to disobey the edicts of the magistrate, there are grounds for doing so if the conditions above are met. But in doing so, the Christian (or the Church) should solemnly consider that it's not something to be done "on the quiet." If the magistrate is openly requiring actions that violate the first duty of loving God and the second duty of loving our neighbor, then that point should be made. The Christian must tell the magistrate that we intend to obey God and not man in this regard and for clear reasons. As, with Daniel, they must then willingly and cheerfully submit to the magistrate's punishment trusting that their God will prove them righteous in how that works out.

The bottom line is this: Christians are not allowed to have their cake and eat it also. Civil Disobedience is allowed but it is, by its very nature, a public event. It is done to make a point and that point is the "witness" of the action.

It is interesting that the most highly acclaimed advocate of civil disobedience in the modern era was Dr. M. L. King, Jr. His stated position was that non-violent civil disobedience had, as its goal, negotiation and thus confrontation. In this there is overlap with the above. The acts of civil disobedience he advocated and initiated were to make the issues public. Dr. King was a Christian preacher however, to some extent, it can be questioned whether his work might have departed from Christian priorities in Christian civil disobedience. This is reflected in a comment made by one writer: "Dr. King was a Christian pastor. But, more than that, he was a civil rights leader." That last statement gives a person pause. Christians must always remember that their actions in defiance of the magistrate, especially in the household of God (worship), must never be rooted in abstract philosophical or political principles even if some can be traced to some Scriptural backing. Especially in decisions regarding worship the Party that is treated as being "offended" must always be our own Sovereign God and the impact of the individual worshipers must be treated as a distant and relatively minor corollary.

Therefore, summarizing this point, not wearing masks as an act of "civil disobedience" to the magistrate when gathering for worship, is a matter of solemn and careful deliberation. It is one thing to deliberately go mask-less in restaurants and public venues. It is another thing entirely to do so within the halls of worship. The first can be seen as a "public" duty like those advanced by Dr. King. The second may bring public dishonor on Christ Who has decreed that He will be accounted "Holy" by those who draw near to Him. Both, in order to qualify as civil disobedience, are to be deliberately public in order to furnish a venue for discussion.

Is the “wearing of masks” an inherently moral issue or only one by implication?

The act of “wearing a mask” is essentially a question of “clothing.” This is not to “trivialize” the act because the Scriptures treat clothing and things like hair styles quite seriously. (cf. Isaiah 3:18-23) A clear teaching is that there is to be no gender confusion in men’s and women’s dress (Deut. 22:5). Similar restrictions are imposed on hair styles. (1 Cor. 11:4-15) Paul called for women to worship with their hair veiled or have their heads shaved. (1 Cor. 11:5,6)

What is readily apparent is that the scripture is not overtly and explicitly concerned about masks or veiled faces. Unlike later Islam, Christianity was not founded in cultures that insisted on women veiling their faces and, though desert traveling men often veiled or masked themselves against the stinging sand, we do not read often or importantly of any moral import assigned to this activity.

About the closest the Scriptures come to assigning moral consequence to the rather modern idea of wearing a mask, is that of Leviticus 13:45 & 46 where the “mask” is prescribed for men diagnosed with a leprous condition. In other words, those who are possibly contagious were told to wear them.

It is not too far a stretch to say that calling for mask wearing for those who are obviously contagious is not far removed from providing grounds for calling for masks for those who might be unrecognizably contagious. Certainly, though without over burdening the passage, Leviticus teaches that the society can call for mask-wearing without automatically incurring moral sanctions for doing so.

Further arguments are sometimes adduced stating that mask wearing in some manner hides the “image” of God in man. This is a blatant mischaracterization of “image bearing” and does not really require much rebuttal. The Triune God in Whose image man is created is not “physical” in the sense of having a “face” and His image present in man is not tied to man’s physical makeup but of his ontological, rational, and moral character. Covering the face in no way hides these things.

“Mask wearing” summary

There is no ground for assigning moral significance to mask wearing in and of itself. Any questions directed for or against imposing such a mandate has to ultimately be resolved on other grounds.

The Question Pragmatically Considered:

I believe that the Covid mandates hinder Church worship and fellowship and according to science are of no benefit.

These statements are directed toward the pragmatic / prudent considerations regarding mask-wearing in the Church.

Although the idea of mask's being of "no benefit" is certainly disputed by large segments of the medical community, I do not intend to address it.

What is clearly on point here is the decision process for applying the government mandates in the church. It is up to the Session of each Church to satisfy its own conscience regarding whether to impose mask-mandates within its precincts. The Session's first obligation is to model obedience to Christ as discussed above. If the Session determines that its duty before God is to conform to the government guidelines, then whether or not those guidelines are of "no benefit" is not ultimately the question. It is the question of the Church's witness that is crucial even if the above assertions are true.

There are other prudential and pragmatic considerations that may come into play. The most obvious one is that of showing love for our neighbor. If the Session determines that some sensitive souls in the congregation may have their worship hindered by the presence of people making a political statement by not wearing masks, then certainly, in accordance with several biblical texts, people should wear the masks.

The Question of "Jurisdiction."

Magistrate imposed "mask-wearing" mandates quickly arouse questions regarding "jurisdiction" especially when it extends to religious gatherings. This is to be expected and, on the whole, to be encouraged. Although there are some biblical teachings that are proposed as warrant for fundamental "jurisdictional" divisions of authority within the social order, one has to be careful in determining what is the "Christian" response to individual edicts or mandates that are issued within that order.

I will review the idea of "jurisdiction" further in the comments following. What must first be understood in the present debate are these:

1. All abuses of power, in the last analysis, are, almost by definition, violations of biblical jurisdiction. They consist in over-reach or immoderate use of power.
 - a. All of the ethical principles presented above assume some violation of jurisdiction, such as the master's abuse of his bondservants.
 - b. If there is no abuse of jurisdiction then the distinctly "Christian" character of the teachings is not in play. They, along with non-Christians, must simply obey the magistrate's or master's rightful commands.
 - c. The question of civil disobedience is only applicable when some jurisdictional abuse is in play.
2. Violations of jurisdiction require adjudication to resolve.
 - a. The Christian response, short of Civil Disobedience, is to obey as unto the Lord.
 - b. Acts of Civil Disobedience, as outlined above, are one means of seeking adjudication. The problem confronting Christians is, apart from living in a

theocracy, there can be no expectation that the Biblical presuppositions of “jurisdiction” will be honored.

- c. Another means of seeking adjudication is that of “just war.” The comments on Calvin (above) apply here and do provide that in extreme cases, abuse of jurisdiction can provide grounds for a just war.

Sphere Sovereignty and Jurisdiction

Many claim John Calvin as fountain head of “sphere sovereignty” and with some justification. Calvin strongly resisted the desire of the town council to encroach on the church and its policies. This placed him well over and against Martin Luther who positively encouraged the local sovereign to assume responsibility for the church and to be actively involved in its debates and practices. Luther, of course, owed his life to the local magistrate’s protection during the early days of the Reformation and he was at least consistent.

It is generally thought that the concept of “liberty” (as understood then and not to be confused with present notions) originated in Geneva under Calvin, spread to the Dutch Republic through the robust writings of men such as Grotius, Witsius, etc. and from there greatly influenced the English Puritans and especially those who became known as the Pilgrims. Some say that the American Revolution had its seed bed more in Geneva than in classical Enlightenment theory.

That said, Abraham Kuyper is perhaps the most well-known, though by no means the only, proponent of “sphere sovereignty.” His application cannot be divorced from his broad-ranging view on “Common Grace.” I will not attempt to articulate the breadth of his views nor critique them. I will only hit the high points.

Essentially, “Biblical sphere sovereignty” assigns jurisdictional authority, based on the makeup of each “sphere”, to the family, the Church, and the State. Obviously, the family is sovereign over all things that have to do only with itself as “family, the Church over things associated with the religious leadership and conduct of the “Church”, and the State over all public aspects of the society.

There is plenty of Biblical warrant for such jurisdictional divisions however, once one gets past the abstract theory, one finds that all three “spheres” indeed overlap. The “family” cannot be divorced from the “Church” nor the “State.” Thus, as Kuyper recognized, there can and will be tensions within the ordinary conduct of any social order. How these tensions are to be legally distinguished and enforced is a matter of constitutional law and one of the prime purposes for constitutional government as a whole.

Thus, the question of “abuse of jurisdiction” requires some common ground of reference if questions are raised about individual mandates. In the absence of biblical presuppositions operating within the social order (a “post-Christian” society), appeals to “jurisdiction” will most likely carry little weight. The Church congregation may be convinced that jurisdictional over-reach has happened, but **the ordinary non-Christian will be more influenced by arguments**

that it was necessary for the general welfare. There is a long history of this in the United States where laws of habeas corpus have been set aside, Japanese American citizens have been uprooted and placed in internment camps and extended confinements of accused individuals who were “awaiting trial” have been justified as “in the public interest.”

So, again, and this is the reason for including questions of jurisdiction under “Pragmatic Considerations”, **it is clear that the immediate question of whether to conform to a magistrate’s decree will devolve to the Christian ethical points made earlier.**

The Jurisdiction of the Session is Reinforced

However, the question of how to respond to the magistrate’s decree, does reinforce the jurisdictional authority of the Church Session. When the policy is considered, the corporate response (whether to obey or to undertake civil disobedience) is unquestionably one that rests with the Session. **In their action, unless clearly it is sinful and a violation of God’s law as discussed above, they make a policy which is definitely within their sphere of sovereignty, and this dictates how that policy is to then be obeyed.**

The Session, acting within its Biblical jurisdiction, must be obeyed or the corporate Christian character of the obedience or the civil disobedience will be reduced to shambles. It is not up to each man, in this instance, to be subject to his own conclusions regarding the matter. **His first duty is to obey those God has placed over him in the Church and to cooperate with them in seeking to glorify God in the manner they have called upon the congregation to do.**

Summary of Pragmatic Considerations

The bottom line is that different Sessions may (and have) come to different conclusions regarding conforming to mask mandates. It is interesting that few (or none) who have opted against mask mandates have also elevated their decision and actions to public notice.

It is my perception that Liberty Church’s policy has derived from similar conclusions to those I have outlined above. (I hasten to acknowledge that this statement is mine and is not an official Session position.) They clearly have ruled that mask-wearing is not a moral issue in and of itself, that mask-wearing does not necessarily prevent worship, that mask-wearing eases the consciences of some of our brothers and sisters, and, that there are more advantages than disadvantages to the policy.

Conclusion:

I apologize for any overly tedious or pedantic aspects of this paper. It reflects the way my mind works in dealing with problems and is thus not written in an off-hand or superficial manner.

It is also written from a position of high respect for those having concerns. I stand ready to continue in dialogue with any regarding the statements I have made here and hope that nothing in it might prove an obstacle to a full and loving appreciation for each other.

Blessings,
Pastor Arch