

Drawing Lines in the Sand

By TE Arch Van Devender at the request of the Session of Liberty Church PCA
This document has been reviewed and approved by the Session.

Background:

Very understandably, some members of our congregation have had “red flags” raised in their mind by Liberty Session’s decision to comply with the recent Emergency Order issued by the Baltimore County Executive. A recurring question has been “where do we draw the line?” In other words, again, quite reasonably, there is some concern that complying with such policies as the “mask mandate” is taking the first step down a slippery slope of surrendering the God-given prerogatives and independence of the Church vis-à-vis the local magistrate.

Obviously, the Session does not view the “mask mandate” as crossing that threshold and Pastor Arch has put forth an explanation of the biblical basis for complying with the order. This document is available to anyone who wishes to read it.

That still leaves the question of “where” and “when” do we say “No” to similar but more severe government orders. In this short statement I hope to lay out some hypothetical but highly possible scenarios in which your Session is not only willing to say “No” but also to submit to penalties or judicial actions stemming from our position.

Introduction:

I ask that a few basic caveats be accepted prior to the discussion:

It is not possible to predict all the possible edicts which we may face.

The scenarios presented below must be understood as representative. Every situation that may and, most probably, will arise in the future will require some degree of subjective evaluation. This is not to be feared. This is why God has given the Church elders. He raises up men to take the teachings of Scripture and, through discernment, apply them to the infinite range of contingencies that may arise. Because the Session is a plurality of elders or, if you prefer, a collegiate decision-making body, the beauty of the Presbyterian form of Church Government should give us, as a body, great comfort and assurance that God will guide us through every challenge.

The fundamental balancing act of giving honor and obedience to those secular magistrates whom God has placed over us over and the requirement to never violate Scripture or the call to “God first” obedience will always be the framework in which such decisions are made.

In other words, deciding what, in each instance, is that which we must render unto Caesar and that which we must give unto God, will seldom produce an absolute “Black and White” decision. This is just the nature of such questions, and some patience will be required. It is possible that the Session will decide to adhere to some aspects of a magistrate’s order but soundly and definitively reject others. Here the congregation must be committed to prayer for your elders, especially for wisdom, discernment, and courage. Spiritual warfare is a grueling battle, and the stakes are high.

Liberty Church will never comply with edicts which, in any manner, require us to compromise on Scripture and obeying God’s Commands.

As is clearly evident in the question about wearing masks, some members may read God’s word in such a way that they fear compromise has already been made. The Session disagrees and, conversely, argues that the Session’s decision was not only Biblical but that course which Scriptures dictated as appropriate in this instance. Please refer to the position paper alluded to earlier on this point.

But that doesn’t mean that Scriptures can be read or interpreted in such a way as to justify any compromise or cowardly retreat from secular edicts. Again, there are principles involved that must be sought.

Liberty Church will never submit to an edict which diminishes or seeks to displace God as the highest authority in the Church nor will it submit to any edict which would disadvantage or bring harm to others.

The secular powers are always seeking to displace God as the ultimate authority for discerning righteousness from evil. It started in the Garden with Man’s first sin and has continued through every epoch down to the present day. Therefore, secular man, out of his own pride and arrogance will devise many schemes to undermine Biblical righteousness. Liberty PCA will steadfastly oppose each of these when they are discovered. Some examples follow:

1. Liberty Church will never consent to calling evil, good.
 - a. Marriage is righteously understood as being the relationship formed in covenant between one man and one woman, to the glory of God and the production of godly offspring. Liberty Church will not submit to any edicts requiring toleration of other points of view on this subject.

- b. The classification as “hate crimes” subject to criminal prosecution, of preaching and teaching of certain biblical doctrines such as: gender identity, the sinfulness of homosexuality and other perverted pleasure, the clear teaching that an embryo is a human being and is to be protected and valued as such, and other false doctrines, no matter how popular, will not be countenanced nor obeyed.
 - c. Any attempt by the magistrate to dictate the order, content, and extension of the church’s ministries, especially in worship, will be rejected.
 - i. The big name for this is “Erastianism” and it holds that the magistrate is sovereign over the church in all things. Liberty Church will never submit to edicts which say that we must extend the offer of the Lord’s table to all who approach it without any qualification. This is one example.
 - ii. Another would be the government bringing civil charges against the church or its officers in their legitimate exercise of Church Discipline including “excommunication.” This goes against the society’s grain in seeking to define “toleration” as the acceptance of any alternate views as being equally legitimate with Biblical teachings.
 - d. Along those same lines, if the government magistrate arbitrarily ordered churches to not gather or made restrictions such that reasonable church gatherings were impossible, this would be considered contrary to the Word of God.
 - i. Scripture calls Christians to gather as a church and “not forsake our assembling together” (Heb 10:24-25).
 - ii. Obviously at the beginning of this pandemic, when the true health threat was not understood, Liberty did not gather as a church temporarily, and complied with government restrictions that were judged to be reasoned at the time, under those circumstances.
 - iii. However, based on our current understanding of the public health risk, not to gather would be considered unbiblical and obedience to the government would require disobedience to God.
 - e. If the government magistrate arbitrarily ordered that there be no singing in local churches, this would also be considered contrary to the Word of God. Scripture calls churches to sing (Col 3:16; Eph 5:18-19). Obedience to the government, under these conditions, would require disobedience to God and would be rejected.
 - f. The Church, nor any of its ministries (such as LCS) will not submit to imposed “social justice” theories or even scientific/psychological theories, which it determines to be outside of Biblical teachings. It will jealously protect its God-given right and responsibility to oppose error wherever it shows its ugly head and especially when the magistrate seeks to require such teachings to be presented either as an alternative or as a substitute for Biblical doctrines.
2. Liberty Church will never consent to attempts to suppress the church or render it irrelevant.
- a. The magistrate may seek to so regulate the building codes or “safety laws” such that churches are unable to gather as a corporate body for worship and business.

This will violate God's will that the church grows as an organism and that we should not neglect assembling together. Liberty Church, upon discerning such a threat in government actions, will not comply.

- b. The magistrate may so order the people to treat all matters of faith as being restricted to "private" opinion and thus impose sanctions on any attempts to proselytize or evangelize the surrounding world. Liberty Church will ignore such rules and use all means at its disposal to have such sanctions overturned.
- c. The magistrate may seek to introduce "diversity" into the Church viewed as a business with employees. Liberty Church will always resist such "fair practices in hiring and firing" which dictate that the Church cannot require potential employees to be first a member of the Church and to conform to Reformed Biblical teachings regarding morals and lifestyle. The Church will not necessarily conform to definitions of diversity if it discovers such diversity to be unbiblical.

Conclusion:

This paper is not intended to be exhaustive in covering the infinite possibilities of challenges which our current social/governmental order might present. Its sole purpose is to assure the congregation that your Session is not blind to Satan's wiles and is on guard against his intrusion into the things of God. Thus, there will perhaps be many questions in people's minds which begin with "well, what about...." The Session will certainly be open to such questions and seek, as God gives it wisdom, to respond truthfully and faithfully to each.

The Session sincerely hopes that this paper will comfort some fears and apprehensions regarding Liberty Church's zeal in pursuing "purity and peace." Our desire is to please our God and we seek to do so by diligently applying ourselves to His Word and applying His Word to our lives and the life of our Church. May God give us unity and joy in our service together.