



Responding to Covid Restrictions: Church and State

By Peter Barnes

John MacArthur and the elders at Grace Community Church have recently issued a clarion call declaring that Christ, not Caesar, is the Head of the Church, and that therefore the Church ‘cannot and will not acquiesce to a government-imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship or other regular corporate gatherings.’ This is not to be a discussion point: ‘Compliance would be disobedience to our Lord’s clear commands.’ To Grace Community Church, it is an Acts 5:29 issue, and we must obey God rather than man. The novel coronavirus has indeed seen many a stumble in terms of public policy, and trust and coherence within many societies is crumbling.

What are Christians to make of this statement from a Christian teacher and leader, who is highly respected – and rightly so – and from whom many of us look to for help? I must begin with a confession that it is all too easy for such debates as this to become rather unseemly quarrels, like the letting out of water (Prov.17:14). There is so much about this pandemic that we do not know, there is as much guesswork as solid medical research, and, as in other pandemics such as the Spanish Flu of 1918-1919, it is the second and third waves that can be more lethal. We will not see things with identical eyes. We all need to pray to be humble, helpful and faithful in what we say. I have five overlapping points.

1. THIS IS A GENUINE ISSUE.

Civil authority is from God, but civil authorities can lack wisdom, just like the rest of us. The regulation is open-ended, so there has been little attempt to gain the cooperation of churches. I am not on top of all the American regulations – nor the Australian regulations, for that matter – but Nevada and California seem

to have been unduly hostile to the churches. Nevada only allow 100 worshippers per congregation, while casinos can operate at 50%. Comparisons are not always fair – it may be safer for 5,000 to attend a football match outside in the open air with social distancing than for 500 church members to congregate inside, even with social distancing. Nevertheless, the priorities of civil authorities have often been seen to be worldly, and even ungodly.

2. CHRISTIANS HAVE GOOD REASON TO BE ALIENATED FROM A DISINTEGRATING SOCIETY.

It is a particularly galling situation because Californians have long basked in a hostile anti-Christian environment, and too many of them have been proud of it. Nowadays, Harvey Milk is venerated, and Jonathan Edwards despised. Drawing from Psalm 37, Calvin commented: ‘It is not easy to maintain peace of mind in this uncertain world, when we see evil men acquiring power and influence.’ There is a ‘browned-off’ factor at work here. In explaining the appalling evil and tragedy that was the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn explained: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’ Christians are never meant to feel at one with the world, but the sense of alienation has only increased in recent times.

3. IT IS NOT OBVIOUS THAT THIS IS THE RIGHT ISSUE.

Yet the response of the Grace Community elders does not seem quite appropriate and in order. The church could still meet outdoors. One may hold justifiable suspicions, but on the surface at least, the government regulations are not aimed at the Church as such but at gatherings, be they in churches, restaurants, gyms,

shopping malls and the like. The government may have lost its moral credibility, but the legislation is still designed as a health regulation. In his sermons on Titus, Calvin stated that ‘it is better to have a bad government than to have none at all.’

Eternity News has cited Richard Baxter who asked in his *Christian Ecclesiastics*: ‘May we omit church assemblies on the Lord’s day if the magistrate forbid them?’ Baxter replied that magistrates could be disobeyed if they were seeking to assault the Christian faith, but not if there was some special case such as infection by pestilence, fire, war, and such like. There are complexities to this issue. It is not in the same category as the ‘deal-breakers’ such as Christian opposition to abortion and homosexual propaganda.

4. THE LINES BETWEEN THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY AND THE STATE CANNOT BE DRAWN SO SHARPLY.

In John MacArthur’s view, the state has no authority over the family or the church. In reality, there is more overlap than MacArthur allows. The state can intervene in the family or in what calls itself a church. The USA did so in the nineteenth century in acting against the Mormon practice of polygamy. It would be difficult to sustain a case that the state can never intervene in the family, no matter how debased its lifestyle. The demarcation line exists but it is not always easy to delineate it.

It will not do to cite Ephesians 5:19 and say that the state cannot forbid Christians singing, and Hebrews 10:24-25 and assert that the state cannot forbid Christians’ meeting together. No doubt, tyranny is often found in such decrees, and the state owns the weapons of war. However, as much as the Psalmist delighted in meeting with God’s people (e.g. Ps.42-43; 122), this was not possible for lepers who were in quarantine (Lev.13-14). In other words, there were situations where Psalm 122 was a song to be sung in comparative solitude.

Situations vary, and responses vary. Under the Clarendon Code, notably the Five-Mile Act of 1665, Puritan preachers and teachers were not allowed to live within five miles of Anglican churches. It is fair to say that most Puritans did their best to undermine this or disobey it. And rightly so! The Scottish

covenanter, Donald Cargill, was executed in 1681, mainly for excommunicating King Charles II – yet another illustration of why the divine right of kings was opposed by the Puritans. Yet, as Jonathan Leeman from 9Marks has pointed out, in World War II churches on the west coast of the USA had to obey black-out requirements in case of attacks from enemy planes.

At other times, the issues are not so pressing. In 1934-35 at the height of his struggles against Presbyterian liberals within the Church, J. G. Machen took time out to champion the cause of jay-walking. That is allowable, I suppose, but it appears to be a somewhat quirky example of taking too rigid a line on the dangers of state authority.

5. GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH UNDERMINES ITS OWN CASE IN THE LAST SECTION.

The document itself admits that Grace Church originally consented to government orders to curb aspects of church life, saying ‘we believe guarding public health against serious contagions is a rightful function of Christians as well as civil government.’ The Church now believes that ‘the virus is nowhere near as dangerous as originally feared.’ Here, then, is the problem: Grace Church has turned a health call into a moral call. It may or may not be correct about the lethal nature of the virus, but it is making a decision which is largely outside its jurisdiction and area of expertise, and calling on Christians to see it in Christ versus Caesar terms.

The Christian response to these issues is fraught with dangers. One only has to open one’s mouth to get it wrong! There is plenty of scope for Christians to practise Acts 5:29 as governments become more intrusive, debased and unrighteous, but there are too many health aspects remaining in the present troubles for the trumpet to be blown with just one note.

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