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COVID Masks and Congregational Worship

<http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2021/09/covid-masks-and-congregational-worship.html>

by Phil Johnstone regard the wearing of masks in worship first of all as a matter of conscience—and since we are forbidden by the teaching of Christ not to make extrabiblical religious rules that bind men's consciences (Matthew 23:1-7; 15:1-9), we neither mandate nor forbid the wearing of masks in worship. Veils and face coverings have profound religious significance in many world religions. Indeed, much of the rhetoric surrounding COVID masks (even among evangelical Christians) describes them as symbols of personal piety. Serious questions about the usefulness, effectiveness, or medical necessity of masks are routinely dismissed or swept aside, and people are told to wear them simply because they are a tangible, visible means of showing love for one's neighbor. This rationale is pressed on people's consciences regardless of whether it can be proved statistically that they really safeguard anyone from the virus, and irrespective of the fact that masks can cause other medical problems. But COVID masks have become, in effect, secularism's substitute for religious vestments. No one can reasonably deny that face coverings have become the chief symbol of popular culture's sanctimonious devotion to the secularist credo. But one of the distinctives of Christian worship is face-to-face fellowship. Koinonia is the Greek expression the New Testament uses to describe it. The word conveys the idea of community, close association, and intimate social contact. Thus the apostle's instructions: "Greet one another with a holy kiss" are repeated four times in the Pauline epistles (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:22). The importance of face-to-face koinonia is stressed repeatedly. Paul writes, "We . . . were all the more eager with great desire to see your face" (1 Thessalonians 2:17). "We night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face" (3:10). The apostle John writes, "I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full" (2 John 12). "I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face" (3 John 14). Worship, in particular, is best seen as an open-face discipline. Covering the face is a symbol of disgrace or shame (Jeremiah 51:51; Job 40:4). Concealing one's mouth while praising God suppresses the visible expression of worship. The Psalms' calls to worship are filled with the words "tongue," "lips," and "mouth." "Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise" (Psalm 81:1). "Wholehearted worship cannot be sung as intended—unrestrained and unmuted—from behind a state-mandated face covering. We see "the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (4:6), and our faces were designed by him to reflect that glory back to heaven in uninhibited praise. It is true, of course, that for now, "We see in a mirror dimly, but [someday] face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:2). That speaks of a face-to-face encounter with Christ himself, when we will be brought into the fullness of knowledge and moral perfection. John the apostle says, "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Despite the temporary limitation of seeing heaven's glory as if we were looking in a dim mirror, we nevertheless are privileged as Christians to have a view of divine glory that is superior to what Moses and the Israelites enjoyed at Sinai. We see God's glory revealed in Christ—"glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Unlike Moses, who was shielded in the cleft of a rock from seeing the full display of divine glory; and unlike the Israelites, who only saw the fading reflection of glory on Moses' face (and even that was covered with a veil) we see Christ so clearly revealed that it is as if we are looking in the very face of God's glory. "We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Again: we see "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (4:6). Yes, the language of that biblical passage is symbolic. We don't literally see the face of Christ physically. For now, we see him as he is revealed on the pages of the New Testament. But the symbolism embodied in Paul's description of seeing him with "unveiled face" is important, and the wearing of masks—especially government-mandated masks that serve as the vestments of secular religion—feels like a covert attempt to erase one of the core truths that makes Christianity unique. Those are my personal convictions about masks. It's not a dogma we teach. It's certainly not a rule we expect people in the church to swear fidelity to. Again, we don't want to bind anyone's conscience with manmade restrictions. We especially do not want to shame the person who wears a mask purely because he or she genuinely believes the current orthodoxy about masks as an effective shield against viral transmission. People in the church are free to wear masks if they choose. But people who share the above view are likewise free to worship, sing, pray, and proclaim God's Word without a face covering—even if that goes against the vacillating, sometimes arbitrary, and frequently heavy-handed dictates of government officials. It is simply not the church's duty to enforce executive orders based on a politician's whimsy—particularly when those edicts impinge on our freedom of worship.

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