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My thoughts about Congregational Worship, Social Distancing, Submission to Caesar, and Obedience to God

<http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2020/07/my-thoughts-about-congregational.html>

by Phil Johnson do of course, wholeheartedly affirm the principles of Romans 13:1-7 ("be in subjection to the governing authorities") and 1 Peter 2:13-17 ("Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution")—while recognizing also that those commands are limited by the principle of Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than men"). If you believe the threat to public health is real and deadly, you'll probably be inclined to submit to all the governor's orders. If you suspect politicians are milking the entire thing and exaggerating the threat for partisan purposes, you're more likely to conclude that the duty of Hebrews 10:25 outweighs any obligation to kowtow to the governor's latest whim. Circumstances surrounding the current quarantine, riots, and mass political demonstrations have greatly blurred the question of whether Acts 5:29 applies in this case. Good, Bible-believing Christians have landed on both sides of the question. If you believe the threat to public health is real and deadly, you'll probably be inclined to submit to all the governor's orders. If you suspect politicians are milking the entire thing and exaggerating the threat for partisan purposes, you're more likely to conclude that the duty of Hebrews 10:25 outweighs any obligation to kowtow to the governor's latest whim. During more than 16 weeks of quarantine (with the death toll just a sparse fraction of what experts originally predicted) the elders and staff of Grace Community Church observed every order related to the quarantine. But the rules change almost daily and are being applied unfairly. Statistically, people are far more likely to get the virus in a gym or a bar than in a worship service. (Of 3+ million cases in the US since March, only 650 have been traceable to churches.) Yet bars, gyms, gambling casinos, and even massage parlors have been given freedoms that are withheld from churches. In fact, as these and other businesses are finally being permitted to reopen, restrictions targeting churches are becoming even more onerous. The California Governor has gone so far as to tell churches they must cease all congregational singing. Governor Newsom: Unclear on the Concept. (It's supposed to be a mask, not a chin strap.) Our elders and security team cannot in good conscience become enforcers of rules that 1) we believe unfairly target the church, and 2) the government itself has declined to enforce. Owing to the arbitrary, capricious way these regulations are made and changed, combined with the fact that authorities did nothing (and are doing nothing) to enforce the masks-and-social-distancing rules on political demonstrators who gather regularly in downtown L. A. in crowds of thousands, it seems only right to leave the question of how far to go in observing social-distancing recommendations up to each individual. The degree to which we permit masks and social-distancing recommendations to impinge on our worship in the congregational context ought to be seen as a matter of conscience. "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). In other words, the degree to which we permit masks and social-distancing recommendations to impinge on our worship in the congregational context ought to be seen as a matter of conscience. "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). And don't be quick to condemn believers who hold a different opinion, no matter which side of the issue you have come down on. Grace Church's elders have made it possible for people with scrupulous consciences to obey every government-issued regulation to the letter. The church provides masks and hand cleanser at stations around campus, and there are ample outdoor seating spaces where people can hear the sermon, participate in the singing, and still practice careful social distancing if they are bound by conscience to do so. On the other hand, for those (like me) who are not fearful of exposure to the virus, or those who are deeply skeptical of the motives behind this level of government intrusion, they can likewise do what their conscience dictates and gather in the auditorium for worship as usual—with or without masks. If government officials choose to single those people out and enforce rules they aren't enforcing at political demonstrations, let them do so. I for one am willing to suffer the consequences if it comes to that.

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