

Facing COVID-19 Without Fear

by John MacArthur

Introduction

We get many requests from church leaders around the world asking for advice as they deal with COVID-19 lockdown orders and other government-mandated restrictions on worship. This is a short record of how our church responded to the government's efforts to keep our congregation from gathering, an index of some things we have learned, and a few important biblical principles to bear in mind as you consider how you and your church must respond biblically.

We are convinced that governmental encroachment on basic human freedoms constitutes a more intimidating threat to individuals, a greater impediment to the work of the church, and a larger calamity for all of society than any pestilence or other natural disaster. These are difficult times, calling for a thoughtful, biblical, and wise response from church leaders and their congregations.

A Short History

COVID-19 began to make international headlines in early 2020, and by mid-March, state and local governments across America were issuing emergency orders restricting large gatherings of people. At the time, health officials were warning that COVID might cause a wave of death and disaster ranking high on the spectrum between the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic and the Black Death in 14th-century Europe. Major media outlets reported that people were literally dying on the streets in China. One report featured a morgue in New York City where bodies were stacked like cordwood. Naturally, such stories provoked a high level of public fear.

In mid-March, Californians were put under a statewide mandatory lockdown. Initially, government health officials said they expected a two-week quarantine (*"fifteen days to slow the spread"*). The original goal was not to eliminate the virus completely (epidemiologists knew that was impossible), but to make sure hospitals were not overwhelmed until more treatment facilities could be set up. Since the true gravity of the threat was still unknown and the quarantine was supposed to be reasonably short, Grace Church's elders decided to suspend public services while we continued live-streaming sermons from the pulpit in the Worship Center auditorium.

More than six weeks passed with no letup on the government-ordered quarantine. While media reports and health department predictions continued to be dire, the actual impact of the virus on our congregation was only mildly worse than the annual flu. Relatively few congregants tested positive, and those who did typically recovered quickly. It was soon obvious (and CDC statistics

proved it¹) that healthy people in their fifties or younger were not in imminent mortal danger from the spread of COVID-19.

By mid-May, large numbers of worshipers began returning on Sunday mornings spontaneously. The auditorium was well filled by early June. Hardly anyone came wearing a mask, and because of limited space on the church campus, social distancing was not an option. So county health officials stepped up their efforts to close the doors of Grace Church to worshipers. On July 24, faced with new emergency mandates aimed specifically at tightening restrictions on churches, Grace Church's elders issued a statement, "Christ, not Caesar, Is Head of the Church" (see the Appendix). The statement gives a brief biblical rationale for why the church *must* gather, and concludes, "We cannot accept and will not bow to the intrusive restrictions government officials now want to impose on our congregation."

The aftermath featured a protracted court case in which the church argued that the state has no legal authority to impose such a long-term closure on places of worship. Almost exactly a year after the elders' statement was published, the court case was settled in the church's favor, thus vindicating the stance Grace Church took.

The course of action we followed reflects our unshakable biblical conviction that we must not render to Caesar that which belongs to God. The Lord has not granted to civil government any authority to regulate the terms and circumstances of the church's worship. That prerogative belongs to Christ alone.

What follows is a brief digest of some facts about COVID that convinced us the virus, while not negligible, is not so much of a threat that it warrants churches to refrain from gathering as the people of God.

COVID Facts

The death rate from COVID is nowhere near the original dire predictions. In early 2020, most policy makers were citing predictions from a researcher named Neil Ferguson, a professor at Imperial College London. Ferguson confidently predicted that more than 2.2 million people in the United States would die from COVID within three months' time.² Even though that prediction quickly proved to be grossly overblown, government officials continued to cite the Ferguson model as justification for prolonging the lockdowns. Rather than acknowledging that COVID-19 is not the doomsday pandemic so many had foretold, they claimed the diminished numbers were proof that the lockdowns were working.³

To put the facts in perspective: Ferguson's model predicted that more than 81 percent of Americans would be infected with the virus, and at least 1 percent of those infected would die. It was a colossal overestimate of the virus's

1. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid_weekly/index.htm

2. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-NPI-modelling-16-03-2020.pdf>

3. <https://www.cato.org/blog/how-one-model-simulated-22-million-us-deaths-covid-19>

severity. More than eighteen months later, cumulative statistics for the state of California showed that fewer than 12 percent had tested positive for the virus, and the death rate among infected people was only about one-tenth of what Ferguson’s model predicted.⁴

Furthermore, the figures currently on record are likely inflated and certainly over-sensationalized by the media in comparison with recent flu epidemics, as well as the SARS and MERS outbreaks. Researchers acknowledged early on that a relentless pattern of exaggerated reports and inflated statistics was unnecessarily elevating public fear and fostering bad government policy. A paper published in April 2020 by the US National Library of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) listed a dozen ways false, sensational, and exaggerated media reports were making it difficult to assess the COVID situation objectively. In part, the paper said, “This year’s coronavirus outbreak is clearly unprecedented in amount of attention received. Media have capitalized on curiosity, uncertainty and horror. . . . Other coronaviruses probably have infected millions of people and have killed thousands. However, it is only this year that every single case and every single death gets red alert broadcasting in the news.”⁵

Childhood mortality from COVID is significantly lower than normal flu levels. More than eighteen months after nearly all schools in the country were closed (and with many still not yet open), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) counted just over 400 young people (0–17 years old) who died from COVID.⁶ By comparison, during just six months at the peak of the 2017–18 flu season, an estimated 643 from that same age group succumbed to the flu⁷—meaning the typical flu bug is about five times more deadly for children than COVID-19.

Shootings of children in Chicago alone have greatly outnumbered pediatric COVID deaths across the state of Illinois. In the first eight months of 2021, 35 children died from gun violence in Chicago. In the entire state during that same time span, 15 children died from COVID.⁸

Meanwhile, government-imposed lockdown policies have been catastrophic for the mental health of children. Harsh restrictions imposed on common childhood activities impede every child’s normal physical, spiritual, and intellectual development. The mandatory closure of churches, schools, playgrounds, and even beaches has therefore done far more actual damage to the well-being of children than COVID by several orders of magnitude. According to the CDC, suicide attempts by girls aged 12–17 rose 50.6 percent between February 21 and March 20, 2021.⁹ Virtually all public school children missed more than a year of in-person instruction, and a host of other physical

4. <https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/>

5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7163529/>

6. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid_weekly/index.htm

7. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden-averted/2017-2018.htm#table1>

8. <https://www.outkick.com/more-children-have-been-shot-this-year-in-chicago-than-have-died-from-covid-in-the-entire-u-s/>

9. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>

and mental health problems rose by large margins as well. A plethora of statistical information exists to show that among children and teenagers the lockdowns have caused a dramatic rise in drug addiction, alcoholism, depression, self-harm, and other unhealthy compulsions—including eating disorders, sleep disorders, clinginess, irritability, and inordinate fear.¹⁰

Nationwide statistics also reveal a precipitous rise in domestic violence and child abuse (including neglect) during the COVID quarantine.¹¹

In short, while COVID-19 was not the fierce pandemic that was originally forecast, the lockdowns have been highly injurious to public health on numerous levels.

To be clear: COVID is indeed a dangerous virus for people in certain demographics. It can cause serious (potentially fatal) pulmonary, renal, and cardiovascular impairment, especially among those who are elderly, infirm, obese, or afflicted with other co-morbidities. But the threat posed to the general public by COVID is not an emergency sufficient to warrant the quarantining of healthy people, the isolation and virtual imprisonment of children, the permanent closure of countless businesses, the destruction of whole economies, or the indefinite suspension of public worship and face-to-face fellowship.

The public has repeatedly been force-fed misinformation from the media and government officials—not only about COVID, but about other matters as well. In March 2020, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Chief Medical Advisor to the White House, famously said on “60 Minutes” that masking the general populace would not help slow the spread of the virus and could even be detrimental to the wearer. “There’s no reason to be walking around with a mask,” he said. “Often there are unintended consequences—people keep fiddling with the mask and they keep touching their face.”¹² When Fauci reversed himself a few months later, he explained that he had discouraged the wearing of masks because he didn’t want to say anything that might diminish the supply of masks for medical workers. In an interview with *InStyle* magazine, he said, “We were told in our task force meetings that we have a serious problem with the lack of PPEs and masks for the health providers.” He indicated that his task force had met and agreed to be less than candid with the public. In Fauci’s words, concerns about a shortage of masks “led all of us, not just me but also [U.S. Surgeon General] Jerome Adams, to say, ‘Right now we really need to save the masks for the people who need them most.’”¹³ That is an admission that truth was not health officials’ first concern; public policy was.

10. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7368647/>
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7682947/>
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0143034320974414>
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx>

11. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7264607/>

12. https://youtu.be/PRa6t_e7dgl

13. <https://www.eatthis.com/fauci-covid-what-went-wrong/>

By January 2021, Fauci was advising people to wear layers of multiple masks.¹⁴

The fundamental question of where the COVID-19 virus originated was either deliberately obscured or handled with gross ineptitude in 2020 by Dr. Fauci and other leading scientists, government officials, health departments, and the major news media. At the time, common sense and publicly known facts seemed to point to what officials did not want people to see—namely, that the virus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology.¹⁵ Many experts now acknowledge that is probably where the virus came from. But for nearly a full year, those who even wondered aloud whether the virus originated in the Wuhan lab were automatically silenced or suppressed in virtually (if not literally) all major scientific, academic, and social media forums.¹⁶

Dr. Fauci also gave a misleading and possibly false reply in sworn testimony before Congress when asked about how US taxpayer money was being used to fund research at the Wuhan lab.¹⁷

Vaccines began to be available near the end of 2020. For weeks, health officials assured the public that the new vaccines were effective and life would soon return to normal without masks. But in July 2021, the CDC released a report saying, “Emerging evidence suggests that fully vaccinated persons who do become infected with the Delta variant are at risk for transmitting it to others; therefore, CDC also recommends that fully vaccinated persons wear a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high transmission.” Rather than providing data to support the revised opinion, the CDC document gave this citation: “CDC COVID-19 Response Team, unpublished data, 2021.”¹⁸

We now have ample evidence (including data from the CDC’s own reports) that the vaccines *don’t* work as advertised.¹⁹ By September 2021, 70 percent of Californians had been vaccinated,²⁰ but statewide numbers of people who tested positive were still rising.²¹ In August 2021, 364 people at Duke University tested positive for the virus. Only 8 were unvaccinated. All the rest—356 people—were *fully* vaccinated but became infected with the virus anyway.²² The university’s response was to tighten their mask mandate.

14. <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20210126/double-masking-makes-common-sense-fauci-says>

15. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/the-media-called-the-lab-leak-story-a-conspiracy-theory-now-its-prompted-corrections--and-serious-new-reporting/2021/06/10/c93972e6-c7b2-11eb-a11b-6c6191ccd599_story.html

<https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/fact-check-how-the-wuhan-lab-leak-theory-for-pandemic-origin-suddenly-became-credible/>

16. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/05/lab-leak-liberal-media-theory-china-wuhan-lab-cotton-trump.html>

17. <https://www.newsweek.com/fauci-untruthful-congress-wuhan-lab-research-documents-show-gain-function-1627351>

<https://theintercept.com/2021/09/06/new-details-emerge-about-coronavirus-research-at-chinese-lab/>

<https://amac.us/a-timeline-of-faucis-covid-19-deception/>

<https://forbesalert.com/news/entertainment/movie-review/sen-cotton-wants-probe-into-fauci-after-report-exposes-chinese-lab-lie/>

18. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm>

19. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7034e4.htm>

20. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/coronavirus-covid-19/vaccine-tracker>

21. <https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/>

22. <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article253851373.html>

Oddly, the people in our community who seem most fearful of the virus are those who have already been vaccinated—many of them now clamoring for more mask mandates and renewed restrictions—which indicates that they do not trust the vaccination to protect them as they were promised before they took it.

No wonder. Sources purported to be reliable voices of authority have repeatedly shown themselves untrustworthy. Heads of state impose rules on the populace that they themselves refuse to submit to.²³ The rules suddenly change on someone’s whim.²⁴ It turns out even “the science” is not very dependable.²⁵ There is even reason to doubt the accuracy of COVID testing.²⁶

Major media sources are notoriously biased and inaccurate. Narratives aggressively touted by the media about this (and practically every politically charged subject) *often* prove false.²⁷

Large pharmaceutical companies, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the World Health organization (WHO), and various influencers in government and media have actively tried to suppress discussion about the usefulness of drugs like Ivermectin, chloroquine, and hydroxychloroquine as early treatments for COVID-19—even though many physicians report using those compounds successfully.²⁸ It is widely understood that the debate over these medications (more precisely: the lack of any open exchange of information about them) is largely driven by economic and political concerns, not scientific studies. In fact, the WHO halted their studies of hydroxychloroquine, and the FDA revoked their Emergency Use Authorization for the drug²⁹ just days after President Trump announced it had been successfully used to treat him for COVID.³⁰

Support for and opposition to the vaccinations have changed with the transition from one political party to the next in the Oval Office. In 2020, Democrats were openly contemptuous of Donald Trump’s efforts to develop a vaccine quickly, saying they would refuse any vaccination Mr. Trump recommended.³¹ But shortly after a Democrat moved into the White House, they suddenly began lobbying for a nationwide mandate and vaccination passports.

<https://www.wral.com/coronavirus/virus-cases-among-vaccinated-students-prompt-duke-to-widen-mask-mandate-tighten-restrictions/19849861/>

23. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/elected-officials-criticized-covid-19-advice/story?id=74486861>

24. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-reopen-covid-children-masks-vaccine-delta-surge-mandates-texas-california-florida-11631287882>

25. <https://www.wired.com/story/scientists-need-to-admit-what-they-got-wrong-about-covid/>

26. <https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/safety-communications/risk-false-results-curative-sars-cov-2-test-covid-19-fda-safety-communication>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/lab/resources/antigen-tests-guidelines.html>

27. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-teeny-tiny-scientific-screwup-that-helped-covid-kill/>

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/02/22/jussie-smollett-empire-attack-fired-cut-video-chicago-fox-column/2950146002/>

28. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7534595/>

29. <https://www.fda.gov/media/138945/download>

30. <https://www.wired.com/story/hydroxychloroquine-covid-19-strange-twisted-tale/>

31. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/gop-rips-dem-candidates-for-suggesting-they-might-not-take-coronavirus-vaccine>

Notice, also, that virtually nothing is ever said by health officials or reported by the media regarding the natural immunity people develop once they have actually been infected by the virus and recovered. Natural immunity is God's design for our protection. It is robust, durable, and long lasting. It's how we normally survive and ward off illnesses in a world of microscopic dangers. But to suggest that natural immunity is sufficient protection against reinfection would undermine the push for a universal vaccine mandate.

Ideologically-driven propaganda and government pressure are *routinely* paired with efforts by Big Tech companies to squelch all dissenting opinions. Meanwhile, throughout most of the Western world, government agencies have worked hand in hand with the media to cultivate open hostility toward biblical values while actively promoting the normalization of abortion, homosexuality, transgenderism, and various other assaults on the family structure. It is no wonder that public trust in government and media has severely eroded over the past decade.

Reasonable people know that they are being lied to. They recognize the tools of indoctrination. When what is deemed "truth" constantly changes, it is an insult to people's intelligence to expect them to swallow every new truth claim put forth by agencies and institutions that have frequently distorted or outright denied the truth.

How Should the Church Respond?

Intense disagreements have swirled among evangelicals since March 2020 regarding how the church should respond to government-mandated COVID restrictions. The clash of opinions only compounds the bewilderment of Christians already confused by conflicting media reports. It has generated a firestorm of contention on social media. And it has caused unexpected division in churches. Oddly, some of the same evangelical leaders who insisted the church must shut down on orders from the state also published essays affirming the duty and priority of congregational worship. No wonder churchgoers are confused.

Here are four non-negotiable precepts about church life that are always apropos but seem particularly suited for the current circumstances. Every sound, biblically minded congregation should affirm these principles without uncertainty or indecision:

1. The church must stand firm on the truth. Scripture says the church is "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). In that role we are often pitted against popular opinion and media narratives. It's a task that normally calls for boldness rather than subtlety.

It would be sinfully negligent for any church to remain passive or pliant when waves of misinformation dominate popular opinion and deliberately foment anxiety. What makes the current case especially urgent is the way officials have intentionally fueled public angst with relentless propaganda, then exploited the public's fears *in order to justify banning public worship*—even

while bars, strip clubs, and casinos remain open, and radical political protestors are permitted to swarm the streets.

If we truly believe Scripture, we cannot automatically go along with the prevailing values and beliefs of the rest of the world—especially in a culture (like ours) where biblical righteousness is constantly under fierce attack, militant unbelief dominates public discourse, and diabolical ideologies routinely influence public policy. God’s people *must* contend earnestly for the faith. We are to be aggressively engaged in the battle to liberate people from every falsehood and every lofty argument that is raised against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:4–5). And we must bear in mind that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God” (1 Corinthians 3:19).

Indeed, the average person today doesn’t even believe truth can be known with any degree of settled certainty. Nothing is deemed authoritatively true; truth itself is seen as merely a matter of personal perspective. That brand of skepticism permeates our news media, politics, the secular academic world, the entertainment industry, and most people’s religious beliefs.

Bible-believing Christians, on the other hand, know that the Word of God is not only absolutely true; it is the ultimate standard by which all other truth claims must be tested. Christianity begins with this conviction. Jesus affirmed it in his high-priestly prayer: “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). The Psalms declare it repeatedly: “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” Psalm (19:7). “The words of the LORD are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times” (12:6). God’s Word is more sure and more trustworthy than any other witness. Anyone who does not affirm such a high view of Scripture is not really a follower of Christ.

Again, authentic Christians cannot allow either majority opinion or government edicts to determine what we believe, especially at this moment in history. Anyone with a modicum of biblical discernment ought to be able to see that Western society has purposely waded into a deep cesspool of immorality and unbelief, just as Romans 1:22–25 describes: “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image . . . [And] they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.”

That passage goes on to outline precisely what we see happening in contemporary Western society. And the point of the biblical text is that this moral meltdown is a judgment from God against a willfully depraved culture: God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and

although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:26–34)

Churches should be the last place on earth where purveyors of immoral values, half-truths, lies, and tyrannical abuses of authority find any kind of approval.

2. Joy, not fear, should dominate the fellowship of believers. The New Testament is full of instructions and encouragements for Christians to cultivate joy, even in the midst of persecution and distress. “Rejoice always” (1 Thessalonians 5:16). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). One mark of a faithful church is that they are “rejoicing in hope” (Romans 12:12), not cowering in fear.

Fear of death is abject enslavement, and that is the very thing Christ came to liberate us from. The purpose of Christ’s incarnation was so “He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14). As Christians, we “have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again” (Romans 8:15).

When the congregation of Grace Community Church was gathering for worship in defiance of the state’s lockdown orders, virtually all observers (including reporters and health officials who weren’t necessarily sympathetic with the church’s position) remarked on the joy that permeated our services. Despite the threats and legal stratagems that were brought against the church every week, the spirit of our services was exuberant—not angry, anxious, or apprehensive. That is as it should be. “God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

In today’s troubled world, perpetual fear has been made to seem normal, even noble. Life itself has become all about avoiding risk. But to cultivate that kind of fear, especially at the government’s behest, poses a grave danger to the long-term spiritual health and ministry of the church. If young people are taught that the preservation of their own lives is more important than corporate worship and evangelism, who will go to the mission field?

Christianity does not flourish, and our collective testimony loses all credibility, when the church cowers in fear. Christians should enjoy liberty from the fear of death, hope in the midst of tribulation, and joy and gladness in all circumstances.

The dark cloud of melancholy and anxiety that COVID has brought over the world signifies an extraordinary opportunity for the church—but only if congregations can resist adopting the frame of mind that currently dominates our culture.

3. We must be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). The COVID crisis has been (and continues to be) a malignant source of division and conflict in otherwise sound churches. It is frankly preposterous and deeply troubling that any church leader would regard

COVID as a greater threat to the church than disunity. Researchers say the recovery rate among those infected with the virus is as high as 99.75 percent.³² Many who test positive for COVID have no symptoms at all. The vast majority who do show symptoms are only mildly ill.

Yet some church leaders have said they will henceforth forbid worshipers to attend if they cannot show proof of vaccination. Others sequester unmasked or unvaccinated worshipers apart from the main congregation. Thus they literally rebuild a middle wall of partition between diverse groups of believers, defying the principle of Ephesians 2:11–22.

Ample data demonstrate conclusively that cloth masks cannot stop the spread of the virus.³³ There is good reason to think the hazards of constant masking outweigh whatever benefit the masks might afford. Masking has nevertheless become the most visible and universal symbol of the COVID era. It is also the primary instrument for virtue signaling among those most fearful of the COVID virus. In some circles, masks serve as a kind of secular substitute for religious vestments. They have become the chief symbol of popular culture's sanctimonious devotion to a secularist credo.

In the context of a church gathering, masks are an obvious impediment to congregational singing, face-to-face-fellowship, and normal human interaction. Regardless, the question of whether to wear a mask in church should be treated as entirely a matter of personal conscience. Churches must not canonize rules of behavior that have no basis in Scripture. On all such matters not addressed either explicitly or by precept in Scripture, "each person must be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). On matters where the law of God is silent, "Who are you who judge your neighbor?" (James 4:12).

Those same principles hold true on the question of vaccines. If the vaccines worked, those who have been vaccinated would have nothing to fear from exposure to those who haven't. Ironically, as noted above, some of the most fearful people speaking out today are people who have already been vaccinated.³⁴ But both the safety and the effectiveness of the vaccines is another question that is clearly debatable.

The CDC's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) was established to collect statistics on side effects and health crises that people experience after being vaccinated. In 1976, when three people died after receiving vaccinations for swine flu, nine states immediately halted the immunization program.³⁵ Nine months after COVID vaccines became available, VAERS had received 7,899 reports of people who had died after receiving vaccines. Nevertheless, the same CDC webpage that reported those figures led with the statement, "COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective."³⁶

32. <https://www.webmd.com/lung/covid-recovery-overview>

33. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4420971/>

34. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/even-after-being-fully-vaccinated-many-still-wrestle-fear-catching-n1265086>

35. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/13/archives/swine-flu-program-is-halted-in-9-states-as-3-die-after-shots.html>

36. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/safety/adverse-events.html>

One leading virologist says, “Scientific analysis of the data from pivotal clinical trials for US COVID-19 vaccines indicates the vaccines fail to show any health benefit and in fact, all the vaccines cause a decline in health in the immunized groups.”³⁷ After reporting the world’s highest percentage of people who have taken a third booster, Israel was experiencing record rates of infection.³⁸ Mongolia recorded fewer than 1,000 cases of COVID in the first nine months of 2020 (among the lowest in the world), but the infection rate spiked precipitously a year later, *after* the Mongolian government had “administered more COVID-19 shots relative to its population than any country in Asia.”³⁹ So again, *the vaccines clearly cannot even promise immunity against COVID.*

Nevertheless, several policy makers in health departments across the country are recommending universal vaccination mandates with no exclusions (even for those who have had the virus and acquired natural immunity). Governors and local health officials intend to require churches to monitor and enforce our people’s compliance.

What is the church’s duty under those circumstances?

The question of whether to get a vaccine should be a personal, private medical decision, between each individual and his or her physician. It is not a matter where either the church or the government ought to intrude, especially by force of law. Personal medical decisions are not something we are obliged to render unto Caesar, and the church cannot become an enforcement agency for Caesar.

For a church to demand proof of vaccination is to set a legalistic standard that is not authorized by Scripture. Again, the church is a place where the people of God come together as one, without passing judgment on one another over questions of conscience. And the issues of masks and vaccines are nothing if not matters of personal conscience. So the choice of whether to be vaccinated or not and whether to wear a mask or not should be left entirely up to each individual (Romans 14:1–23; 15:7).

4. A company of believers is not a “church” if they don’t gather. The word for “church” in the original New Testament manuscripts is *ekklēsia*. Even before the founding of the New Testament church, that word signified an assembly, a gathering of people. It comprises two Greek roots that literally mean “called out,” and more specifically, it refers to a body of people called out from their homes (or summoned out of a larger group) in order to muster together. Like the English word *congregation*, the concept of a group coming together is built right into the term.

37. <https://www.scivisionpub.com/pdfs/us-covid19-vaccines-proven-to-cause-more-harm-than-good-based-on-pivotal-clinical-trial-data-analyzed-using-the-proper-scientific--1811.pdf>

38. <https://www.nbc.com/2021/08/30/israel-doubles-down-on-covid-booster-shots-as-breakthrough-cases-rise.html>

39. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/COVID-vaccines/Mongolia-s-mass-jabs-fail-to-suppress-COVID-spread>

The church specifically comes together *for worship*, but the vital benefits of the assembly include fellowship, instruction, mutual encouragement, and accountability. Believers are commanded not to forsake the assembly (Hebrews 10:25), and that command comes immediately before the New Testament's most somber warning about apostasy.

Fellowship and corporate worship are therefore absolutely essential aspects of spiritual health for individual Christians, and they are also (obviously) vital for the very life of the church.

Believers may be forced by illness, imprisonment, warfare, natural disaster, necessary travel, or some other significant emergency to abstain from the corporate gathering *temporarily*. But there is no justification for quarantining healthy people, and certainly no warrant for having the entire church suspend congregational worship on a prolonged basis. Plagues, pandemics, and persecution have frequently (if not constantly) threatened the people of God since that first Pentecost. Never have faithful churches responded to such obstacles by simply shutting their doors for months at a time and declaring distance-learning technologies a sufficient substitute for corporate worship.

Christians in America and other Western democracies have been blessed and privileged to thrive for more than two centuries under governments that formally affirm and have seldom challenged the right of worshipers to assemble freely. But COVID is a wakeup call and a reminder to believers of how tenuous that liberty is. Pastors in supposedly free countries were literally jailed for weeks because they led worship services during the 2020 lockdowns. Despite court decisions favorable to churches, a strong current of public opinion favors giving governments more power to force churches to comply with restrictions inhibiting attendance, fellowship, and congregational singing. Many also think churches should be compelled to require vaccine passports and strict segregation between vaccinated and unvaccinated worshipers.

Again, the world's opposition to the church and her teaching should not catch believers off guard. "Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you" (1 John 3:13). Jesus said, "Because you are not of the world . . . the world hates you" (John 15:19). We are citizens of heaven—mere sojourners and aliens here in this world (Philippians 3:20). And even the world sees the church that way when we are faithful to our calling.

That is one of the main reasons why the people of God need to come together regularly for mutual encouragement and instruction—and *all the more as we see the day of Christ drawing near* (Hebrews 10:25). Times of crisis and hardship don't make the church assembly expendable; that's when it is most essential for believers to congregate. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Faithful churches must assemble even if they have to go underground to do it. That's how churches in the first three centuries survived and flourished despite intense opposition from Caesar. It's how the church in Eastern Europe overcame communist persecution in the twentieth century. It's how many churches in China and elsewhere meet even today.

Scripture gives us several examples of godly people who resisted the ungodly tyranny of rulers who hated biblical truth. Under a despotic Pharaoh, the Hebrew midwives “feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them” (Exodus 1:17). Elijah opposed Ahab and was labeled “troubler of Israel” because of the stance he took (1 Kings 18:17). John the Baptist rebuked Herod to his face and was ultimately killed for it (Mark 6:18-29).

Western evangelicals now need to have that same resolve—and prepare ourselves for more pressure from the government and more persecution from the rest of society. When COVID has run its course (if it ever does) other crises are already lined up for government officials to exploit, claiming “emergency powers” to assert more and more regulatory authority over the church. Fears over climate change, the campaign to normalize sexual perversions, imaginative applications of “social justice,” and a host of other major ideological shifts have speedily and dramatically changed the climate of virtually every Western democracy already. Some of the people who now wield power for making public policy believe the gospel and its truths are a form of “hate speech.”⁴⁰ Churches in this part of the world have already lost much of our civic freedom.

Now is not the time to forsake our own assembling together. The church must be *the church*—a pillar and buttress for the truth. We cannot cower in fear. We cannot hide our light under a bushel. We are not called to feed the fears of a world that is perishing. We have been commissioned to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15), and we are soldiers in a spiritual war. “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

It is past time for the church of Jesus Christ to confront the prevailing falsehoods of a depraved society and show hopeless people the way to true hope and abundant life. We are the Lord’s ambassadors, and we must stand confidently in that role, with joy and not fear, in bold unity—and all the more as we see the day of Christ drawing near.

40. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/august5/15.22.html>

Appendix: “Christ, not Caesar, Is Head of the Church”

A Biblical Case for the Church’s Duty to Remain Open

Christ is Lord of all. He is the one true head of the church ([Ephesians 1:22](#); [5:23](#); [Colossians 1:18](#)). He is also King of kings—sovereign over every earthly authority ([1 Timothy 6:15](#); [Revelation 17:14](#); [19:16](#)). Grace Community Church has always stood immovably on those biblical principles. As His people, we are subject to His will and commands as revealed in Scripture. Therefore we cannot and will not acquiesce to a government-imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship or other regular corporate gatherings. Compliance would be disobedience to our Lord’s clear commands.

Some will think such a firm statement is inexorably in conflict with the command to be subject to governing authorities laid out in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Scripture does mandate careful, conscientious obedience to all governing authority, including kings, governors, employers, and their agents (in Peter’s words, “not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable” [[1 Peter 2:18](#)]). Insofar as government authorities do not attempt to assert ecclesiastical authority or issue orders that forbid our obedience to God’s law, their authority is to be obeyed whether we agree with their rulings or not. In other words, Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 still bind the consciences of individual Christians. We are to obey our civil authorities as powers that God Himself has ordained.

However, while civil government is invested with divine authority to rule the state, neither of those texts (nor any other) grants civic rulers jurisdiction over the church. God has established three institutions within human society: the family, the state, and the church. Each institution has a sphere of authority with jurisdictional limits that must be respected. A father’s authority is limited to his own family. Church leaders’ authority (which is delegated to them by Christ) is limited to church matters. And government is specifically tasked with the oversight and protection of civic peace and well-being within the boundaries of a nation or community. *God has not granted civic rulers authority over the doctrine, practice, or polity of the church.* The biblical framework limits the authority of each institution to its specific jurisdiction. The church does not have the right to meddle in the affairs of individual families and ignore parental authority. Parents do not have authority to manage civil matters while circumventing government officials. And similarly, government officials have no right to interfere in ecclesiastical matters in a way that undermines or disregards the God-given authority of pastors and elders.

When any one of the three institutions exceeds the bounds of its jurisdiction it is the duty of the other institutions to curtail that overreach. Therefore, when any government official issues orders regulating worship (such as bans on singing, caps on attendance, or prohibitions against gatherings and services), he steps outside the legitimate bounds of his God-ordained authority as a civic official and arrogates to himself authority that God expressly grants only to the Lord Jesus Christ as sovereign over His Kingdom, which is the church. His rule is mediated to local churches through those pastors and elders who teach His Word ([Matthew 16:18–19](#); [2 Timothy 3:16–4:2](#)).

Therefore, in response to the recent state order requiring churches in California to limit or suspend all meetings indefinitely, we, the pastors and elders of Grace Community Church, respectfully inform our civic leaders that they have exceeded their legitimate jurisdiction, and faithfulness to Christ prohibits us from observing the restrictions they want to impose on our corporate worship services.

Said another way, it has never been the prerogative of civil government to order, modify, forbid, or mandate worship. When, how, and how often the church worships is not subject to Caesar. Caesar himself is subject to God. Jesus affirmed that principle when He told Pilate, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” ([John 19:11](#)). And because Christ is head of the church, ecclesiastical matters pertain to His Kingdom, not Caesar’s. Jesus drew a stark distinction between those two kingdoms when He said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” ([Mark 12:17](#)). Our Lord Himself always rendered to Caesar what was Caesar’s, but He never offered to Caesar what belongs solely to God.

As pastors and elders, we cannot hand over to earthly authorities any privilege or power that belongs solely to Christ as head of His church. Pastors and elders are the ones to whom Christ has given the duty and the right to exercise His spiritual authority in the church ([1 Peter 5:1–4](#); [Hebrews 13:7, 17](#))—and Scripture *alone* defines how and whom they are to serve ([1 Corinthians 4:1–4](#)). They have no duty to follow orders from a civil government attempting to regulate the worship or governance of the church. In fact, pastors who cede their Christ-delegated authority in the church to a civil ruler have abdicated their responsibility before their Lord and violated the God-ordained spheres of authority as much as the secular official who illegitimately imposes his authority upon the church. Our church’s doctrinal statement has included this paragraph for more than 40 years:

We teach the autonomy of the local church, free from any external authority or control, with the right of self-government and freedom from the interference of any hierarchy of individuals or organizations ([Titus 1:5](#)). We teach that it is scriptural for true churches to cooperate with each other for the presentation and propagation of the faith. Each local church, however, through its elders and their interpretation and application of Scripture, should be the sole judge of the measure and method of its cooperation. The elders should determine all other matters of membership, policy, discipline, benevolence, and

government as well ([Acts 15:19–31](#); [20:28](#); [1 Corinthians 5:4–7, 13](#); [1 Peter 5:1–4](#)).

In short, as the church, we do not need the state’s permission to serve and worship our Lord as He has commanded. The church is Christ’s precious bride ([2 Corinthians 11:2](#); [Ephesians 5:23–27](#)). She belongs to Him alone. She exists by His will and serves under His authority. He will tolerate no assault on her purity and no infringement of His headship over her. All of that was established when Jesus said, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” ([Matthew 16:18](#)).

Christ’s own authority is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And [God the Father has] put all things in subjection under [Christ’s] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” ([Ephesians 1:21–23](#)).

Accordingly, the honor that we rightly owe our earthly governors and magistrates ([Romans 13:7](#)) does not include compliance when such officials attempt to subvert sound doctrine, corrupt biblical morality, exercise ecclesiastical authority, or supplant Christ as head of the church in any other way.

The biblical order is clear: Christ is Lord over Caesar, not vice versa. Christ, not Caesar, is head of the church. Conversely, the church does not in any sense rule the state. Again, these are distinct kingdoms, and Christ is sovereign over both. Neither church nor state has any higher authority than that of Christ Himself, who declared, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” ([Matthew 28:18](#)).

Notice that we are not making a constitutional argument, even though the First Amendment of the United States Constitution expressly affirms this principle in its opening words: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The right we are appealing to was not *created* by the Constitution. It is one of those unalienable rights granted solely by God, who ordained human government and establishes both the extent and the limitations of the state’s authority ([Romans 13:1–7](#)). Our argument therefore is purposely not grounded in the First Amendment; it is based on the same biblical principles that the Amendment itself is founded upon. The exercise of true religion is a divine duty given to men and women created in God’s image ([Genesis 1:26–27](#); [Acts 4:18–20](#); [5:29](#); cf. [Matthew 22:16–22](#)). In other words, freedom of worship is a command of God, not a privilege granted by the state.

An additional point needs to be made in this context. Christ is *always* faithful and true ([Revelation 19:11](#)). Human governments are not so trustworthy. Scripture says, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” ([1 John 5:19](#)). That refers, of course, to Satan. [John 12:31](#) and [16:11](#) call him “the ruler of this world,” meaning he wields power and influence through this world’s political systems (cf. [Luke 4:6](#); [Ephesians 2:2](#); [6:12](#)). Jesus said of him, “he is a liar and the father of lies” ([John 8:44](#)). History is full of painful reminders that government power is easily and frequently abused for evil

purposes. Politicians may manipulate statistics and the media can cover up or camouflage inconvenient truths. So a discerning church cannot passively or automatically comply if the government orders a shutdown of congregational meetings—even if the reason given is a concern for public health and safety.

The church by definition is an *assembly*. That is the literal meaning of the Greek word for “church”—*ekklesia*—the assembly of the called-out ones. A non-assembling assembly is a contradiction in terms. Christians are therefore commanded not to forsake the practice of meeting together ([Hebrews 10:25](#))—and no earthly state has a right to restrict, delimit, or forbid the assembling of believers. We have always supported the underground church in nations where Christian congregational worship is deemed illegal by the state.

When officials restrict church attendance to a certain number, they attempt to impose a restriction that *in principle* makes it impossible for the saints to gather *as the church*. When officials prohibit singing in worship services, they attempt to impose a restriction that *in principle* makes it impossible for the people of God to obey the commands of [Ephesians 5:19](#) and [Colossians 3:16](#). When officials mandate distancing, they attempt to impose a restriction that *in principle* makes it impossible to experience the close communion between believers that is commanded in [Romans 16:16](#), [1 Corinthians 16:20](#), [2 Corinthians 13:12](#), and [1 Thessalonians 5:26](#). In all those spheres, we must submit to our Lord.

Although we in America may be unaccustomed to government intrusion into the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, this is by no means the first time in church history that Christians have had to deal with government overreach or hostile rulers. As a matter of fact, persecution of the church by government authorities has been the norm, not the exception, throughout church history. “Indeed,” Scripture says, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” ([2 Timothy 3:12](#)). Historically, the two main persecutors have always been secular government and false religion. Most of Christianity’s martyrs have died because they refused to obey such authorities. This is, after all, what Christ promised: “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” ([John 15:20](#)). In the last of the beatitudes, He said, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” ([Matthew 5:11–12](#)).

As government policy moves further away from biblical principles, and as legal and political pressures against the church intensify, we must recognize that the Lord may be using these pressures as means of purging to reveal the true church. Succumbing to governmental overreach may cause churches to remain closed indefinitely. How can the true church of Jesus Christ distinguish herself in such a hostile climate? There is only one way: bold allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even where governments seem sympathetic to the church, Christian leaders have often needed to push back against aggressive state officials. In

Calvin's Geneva, for example, church officials at times needed to fend off attempts by the city council to govern aspects of worship, church polity, and church discipline. The Church of England has never fully reformed, precisely because the British Crown and Parliament have always meddled in church affairs. In 1662, the Puritans were ejected from their pulpits because they refused to bow to government mandates regarding use of the Book of Common Prayer, the wearing of vestments, and other ceremonial aspects of state-regulated worship. The British Monarch still claims to be the supreme governor and titular head of the Anglican Church.

But again: *Christ is the one true head of His church*, and we intend to honor that vital truth in all our gatherings. For that preeminent reason, we cannot accept and will not bow to the intrusive restrictions government officials now want to impose on our congregation. We offer this response without rancor, and not out of hearts that are combative or rebellious ([1 Timothy 2:1-8](#); [1 Peter 2:13-17](#)), but with a sobering awareness that we must answer to the Lord Jesus for the stewardship He has given to us as shepherds of His precious flock.

To government officials, we respectfully say with the apostles, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge" ([Acts 4:19](#)). And our unhesitating reply to that question is the same as the apostles': "We must obey God rather than men" ([Acts 5:29](#)).

Our prayer is that every faithful congregation will stand with us in obedience to our Lord as Christians have done through the centuries.

Addendum

The elders of Grace Church considered and independently consented to the original government order, not because we believed the state has a right to tell churches when, whether, or how to worship. To be clear, we believe that the original orders were just as much an illegitimate intrusion of state authority into ecclesiastical matters as we believe it is now. However, because we could not possibly have known the true severity of the virus, and because we care about people as our Lord did, we believe guarding public health against serious contagions is a rightful function of Christians as well as civil government. Therefore, we voluntarily followed the initial recommendations of our government. It is, of course, legitimate for Christians to abstain from the assembly of saints *temporarily* in the face of illness or an imminent threat to public health.

When the devastating lockdown began, it was supposed to be a short-term stopgap measure, with the goal to "flatten the curve"—meaning they wanted to slow the rate of infection to ensure that hospitals weren't overwhelmed. And there were horrific projections of death. In light of those factors, our pastors supported the measures by observing the guidelines that were issued for churches.

But we did not yield our spiritual authority to the secular government. We said from the very start that our voluntary compliance was subject to

change if the restrictions dragged on beyond the stated goal, or politicians unduly intruded into church affairs, or if health officials added restrictions that would attempt to undermine the church's mission. We made every decision with our own burden of responsibility in mind. We simply took the early opportunity to support the concerns of health officials and accommodate the same concerns among our church members, out of a desire to act in an abundance of care and reasonableness ([Philippians 4:5](#)).

But we are now more than twenty weeks into the unrelieved restrictions. It is apparent that those original projections of death were wrong and the virus is nowhere near as dangerous as originally feared. Still, roughly forty percent of the year has passed with our church essentially unable to gather in a normal way. Pastors' ability to shepherd their flocks has been severely curtailed. The unity and influence of the church has been threatened. Opportunities for believers to serve and minister to one another have been missed. And the suffering of Christians who are troubled, fearful, distressed, infirm, or otherwise in urgent need of fellowship and encouragement has been magnified beyond anything that could reasonably be considered just or necessary. Major public events that were planned for 2021 are already being canceled, signaling that officials are preparing to keep restrictions in place into next year and beyond. That forces churches to choose between the clear command of our Lord and the government officials. Therefore, following the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, we gladly choose to obey Him.