

Gathering, Government, and Grace for the Vulnerable

By King's Harbor Church Elders | May 28, 2020

Introduction

The novel coronavirus began shifting the way the world operated in late 2019. Every institution of our society has been forced to rethink their standard practices. With quarantine restrictions, the Church was thrust into virtual gatherings. While the technology to do so has been a gift of the Lord's common grace, the Church and its members feel a deep longing to physically be together again. In Los Angeles County, the safer-at-home restrictions continue, which has created a conflict between our desire to gather and local policy. We now have a couple of questions to answer: What is the responsibility of an individual believer or church in regards to obeying local, state, and national governments? Second, is the current situation an instance of government persecution of the Church? A related question is what is our responsibility to those who are vulnerable in this season. We will seek to answer these questions through the lens of the Scriptures.

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Responding to the Government

There is no doubt that every pastor wants to return to gathering in person with the people of their congregation as soon as reasonably possible. It is central to the heart of a shepherd to laugh, cry, and be near to those of whom the Lord will require these pastors to give an account.¹ However, we are faced with a public health order that directly prohibits the church in our region from pursuing this desire. As individuals begin to fall deeper and deeper into "quarantine fatigue", a conversation has begun

¹ Hebrews 13.17a

about exercising civil disobedience in the name of our faithfulness to the Lord and the First Amendment freedom to gather. In recent weeks, citizens have staged protests, and pastors have begun to rally churches to stand against the protective orders by holding public worship services. Rather than leaning on our own understanding and desire, the elders of King's Harbor want to submit ourselves to the wisdom of the Scriptures regarding our response to governmental authority.

The most direct text regarding a conflict between an individual's responsibility to both the Lord and government centers in the life of Jesus himself. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke², we read parallel accounts of the Pharisees sending insincere spies to set up Jesus as either being disloyal to his people or to the Roman government. After attempting to flatter Jesus, they ask him whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Beneath this question is a history of conflict and subjugation. The specific tax being referenced is called a poll tax. The poll tax was paid directly to the Roman emperor as a means of honor³. Embedded in this question is this challenge, "Jesus, who will you honor and show your devotion to? Will you honor a foreign governmental power that does not honor our worship, our customs, or our personhood? Or will you break the law, but honor God?"

Jesus' response shifts the paradigm. Instead of falling into the trap of choosing either-or, he responds by simply saying both. His response 'to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God'⁴ removes the notion that an act of compliance with a non-righteous government has to be an act of disobedience to the Lord. Theologian Darrell Bock explains it this way-

Jesus has avoided the trap by saying that we have duty to the state and to God (Fitzmyer 1985: 1297). Honoring God means that one cannot refuse the state's right to function. Jesus does not address the issue of what to do when the two spheres are in direct moral conflict. What he does say is that the character of a state is not grounds for challenging the state's right to organize itself at the political and social levels.⁵

Certainly, this text does not completely answer our question, but it sets a foundation for our thinking. When the government is acting in the sphere of public interest, it is not inherently evil. Jesus doesn't just answer a theoretical question. He submits to

² Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17, Luke 20.19-25

³ Bock, D. L. (1996). Luke: 9:51-24:53 (Vol. 2, p. 1613). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

⁴ Matthew 22.21, Mark 12.17, Luke 20.25

⁵ Bock, D. L. (1996). Luke: 9:51-24:53 (Vol. 2, p. 1613). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

himself to the jurisdiction of the Roman government⁶, even though it results in his crucifixion. The apostles followed this example in the way they live and teach. The New Testament is replete with narratives⁷ and exhortations⁸ that show deference to the Roman government, though none of these faithful examples would ever exalt Caesar above Jesus.

What about situations where the government's actions are, in Bock's words, in direct moral conflict with our relationship with the Lord? We see examples of this in the stories of the Hebrew young men- Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego⁹, and Daniel¹⁰. All are forbidden to pray by Nebuchadnezzar, and all of them civilly disobey and submit themselves with no fight to the resulting punishment. How do these situations relate to our public health order? In both of the Biblical cases, the edicts of Nebuchadnezzar are solely intended to fully suspend the worship of Yahweh in exchange for the worship of the earthly king. It is targeted and even seeks to prohibit personal, private devotion. Our current case differs greatly.

The current stay-in-place orders are not a specific targeted attack against Christianity. The shutdown of schools, shopping centers, restaurants, and other venues makes this much more pervasive than just a veiled attempt at religious persecution. Second, unlike Nebuchadnezzar's decree, all forms of Christian practice have not been constrained. Churches are free to host virtual gatherings with no censure. Individual believers are free to worship, pray, and proclaim the Gospel through any available means that do not endanger public health or violate the public health ordinance. In fact, the government has provided aid for small businesses including religious non-profits and new benefits to them, which were normally unavailable previous to the COVID-19 shutdown. The current actions of the state of California and Los Angeles County do not hold a close parallel to the Old Testament accounts of religious suppression by governmental powers.

Grace to the Vulnerable

Beyond the question of our relationship as believers to the government, we also must address our relationship to one another. In particular, what is our responsibility to our

⁶ Three times in Luke 23 (v. 4, v. 14-15, v. 22) Pilate declares there is no guilt in Jesus. It is notable that an unbelieving government official could bring no charges of civil disobedience against Jesus.

⁷ See Acts 16:37-39 (Paul appeals to his citizenship as a Roman), Acts 25-26 (Paul appeals to Caesar when being accused by Jews).

⁸ Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13-14;17

⁹ Daniel 3:8-30

¹⁰ Daniel 6:6-24

brothers and sisters who are more susceptible to the effects of the coronavirus? Luke 10 is a helpful text for us.

Jesus is being questioned by scribes about what is required to inherit eternal life. This leads to a conversation about what it means to love your neighbor. Jesus launches into a parable that is familiar to many of us- the parable of the Good Samaritan. Interestingly, Jesus picks two characters known for their piety and righteousness as those who are not faithful neighbors. Instead, he chooses the Samaritan, who slows down and cares for the man, who had been accosted. This Samaritan tends to his wounds, allows him to ride his animal to safety, and leads him to a place of care at a cost to himself. What is the lesson? Good neighbors are defined, not by their religious activity, but rather by their ability to slow down and care for the vulnerable among them.

We want to faithfully fulfill this call to be good neighbors. Our entry plan cannot be suitable for only those who are strong and leave those who are at a higher risk to fend for themselves. We must slow down and give grace to the vulnerable, even if it costs us.

Our Philosophy Pertaining to Re-Entry

With these thoughts to guide us, our approach to re-entry will be shaped by two factors- 1) safety and 2) care for the most vulnerable in our congregation. Defining safety can be difficult, but one thing is clear, we will not rush coming back. We will pay attention to the wisdom of medical and government professionals. We will work to develop measures to comply with re-entry guidelines for large gatherings. We do not need to be the first church back to be faithful. Safety requires both patience and prudence when the circumstances are as fluid as they have been during this season.

Second, we want to be wise to care for the most vulnerable by minimizing risk where we can. While it is true that the most vulnerable population can choose to just stay home until it is safer for them, many of our volunteer teams are comprised of men and women, who are at higher risk because of their age or underlying health conditions. In addition, it is very likely that early in the return process, guidelines will not allow for children's ministry to take place. This will place those who are potentially high risk in close proximity with children, who are most likely to be asymptomatic and the least capable of maintaining proper social distance. It is worth our consideration to take the time necessary to re-enter in a way that has these brothers and sisters in mind, even if it delays our return beyond when it is first allowable.

We desire to provide a worship experience that honors the Lord without the long shadow of COVID-19 distracting us. This means we do not need to be first, and we do not need to be fast. We just need to be faithful. We will take the time necessary to serve the body of King's Harbor to the best of our ability.