

Lock-down and Christian Worship

Brief answers to commonly asked questions

1) Do restrictive regulations on Christian *gatherings* require us to disobey the government in order to obey God?

The key word in the question, and in the next two questions as well, is the word "require". For us to be *required* by God to disobey government (example, Dan 1, 3, 6; Acts 5:17-29), we need to find a very clear, directly-applicable-to-us command or prohibition that we will be breaking if we obey the government order. The *only* command for Christian gatherings in the New Testament is Hebrews 10:25. However, it does not have the strength of a full imperative. Instead, it is a participle ("not neglecting") following a subjunctive ("let us" in verse 24). In simple terms, it does not have nearly the same force as, for example, the "come" commands in the Psalms that were part of the prescribed Temple worship of the old covenant. Instead, the emphasis in Hebrews 10:24-25 is on the "one another" commandment (see question 4 below) that should not be tainted by habitual neglect, but should rather be characterised by increasing excellence. To obey this subjunctive-participle does not *require* all the regular attendees of the church to come together in one building on the same day during the same time. It is truly a wonderful blessing to gather *all* together, but it is not as clear a *sin* as some make it out to be if the saints *gather* in different forms during a national lock-down.

2) Do restrictive regulations on Christian *corporate singing* require us to disobey the government in order to obey God?

Like the question above, we need a clear command regarding *corporate singing* to put it in the possible civil disobedience category. Although Old Testament worship was very clearly defined by corporate God-ward singing (all the "sing" commands in the Psalms for example), and individual singing clearly characterised the practise of the Lord (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26) and that of the first Christians (Acts 16:25; Rom 15:9-11; 1 Cor 14:15; Jam 5:13), the *commands* in the New Testament regarding *corporate* singing emphasise that it ought to be from the heart (Eph 5:19) and for the spiritual service to one another (Col 3:16). It does not have the same primary force of God-ward exaltation that is so clearly visible in the Old Testament. Christians, individually, ought to, and will always, be characterised by singing, but to claim that God *requires* of believers in the new covenant to sing corporately while gathering is to exaggerate the emphasis on corporate singing given to us in God's own Word.

3) Do restrictive regulations on Christian *worship* require us to disobey the government in order to obey God?

This is in many ways the umbrella issue that includes the previous two questions. The first question was about *gathering*, the second about *singing*, this one is about *worship*. This is perhaps where the clearest and most explicit mention needs to be given about the difference in expression between old covenant and new covenant worship. Jesus clearly taught that His coming—fulfilling the old covenant (Mat 5:17) and bringing about the new covenant (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 12:24)—is bringing about a significant (though not indiscriminate) change in how true worshippers worship God (John 4:20-24). Among the rich expressions of Old Testament

worship, the physical gathering of the worshippers at a God-appointed location was emphasised (Dt 14:23; 16:16; 18:6; 31:11). Corporate worship at a specified location is certainly not forbidden in the New Testament, and it is clearly practised by believers (Acts 24:11 for example), but the *emphasis* is on holy living (Rom 12:1 and the following context of Heb 12:28-29). We are disobeying the tenets of Christian worship when we think like the world and act like the world in our responses to our times (Rom 12:1-2), not when we don't gather for a church service. Again, precision and clarity on what the Bible actually *requires* and *emphasises* is very important. If the government forbids us from *worshipping* by forbidding thanksgiving to God, punishing personal obedience to God, and enforcing conformity to the sins of the world, then we would be *required* to disobey the government to obey our Lord and bear the consequences (Daniel 1, 3, 6; Acts 5:17-29). But since all the current COVID-19 regulations still permit faith in the true God, striving for personal holiness, one-another fellowship (see question 4), evangelism, following a Christian world-view, and the like, we ought not to think that the Church is under persecution.

4) What are the non-negotiable *Church* activities that we need to obey even if the government prohibits us from doing so?

This is very important, and sadly a question that too few are asking. The non-negotiable Christian activities, especially for corporate gatherings, are simply the clearly stated commandments in the New Testament. By very definition of "non-negotiable", this looks past traditions, examples, opinions and preferences, to the clear *commands* from our Lord to us in the New Covenant. I'm not aware of any *corporate* (i.e., not personal faith and godliness imperatives) commandment in the New Testament that cannot be categorised under what is perhaps best summarised as Christian *fellowship*. All the corporate commandments given to those in the Church are the 'one another' commandments (see Romans 12 for a concentrated collection of some of them). Each of these, though difficult to varying degrees, can be obeyed under current lock-down regulations. Even under stricter regulations in the early months of COVID-19, pastors were allowed permits, and to issue permits, to minister to the saints in person. If anything, many a small faithful church has proven that though the government might enforce regulations that are considered by some to be highly irrational, that the faithful saints have simply found many other expressions of their love for one another, perhaps more so than before. We *must* do all the 'one anothers' (love, serve, pray, admonish, bear with, prefer, etc.) faithfully, irrespective of government regulations. Though some regulations require greater creativity from the saints, no regulation has yet forbidden any one of the one another's as stated in the New Testament. I fear that we are only now realising how much true fellowship we have neglected until COVID-19 regulations forced us to examine what the Lord has actually commanded.

5) Should we disobey the government if they do not fulfil their God-appointed role or if their laws are not applied consistently and fairly?

The God-appointed role of the government is clearly given in passages like Romans 13:1-4 where the subsequent command to believers is to submit in various ways (Rom 13:5-7). There is no conditional linking words between the two sections. Irrespective of how faithful the government is to God regarding *their* role, *our* role is to submit simply because they do indeed have a God-

appointed role. Irrespective of the government's faithfulness to their roles given by Him, God Himself will judge *all* evildoers.

It might be helpful to add that if the constitution of a country permits religious gatherings, that citizens do indeed have a right to do so, but now it is a political argument, and no longer a uniquely Christian argument. As Christians we are always more obliged to fulfil the *responsibilities* clearly addressed to us (like Rom 13:5-7), than we are obliged to evaluate the faithfulness of others, or insist on our *rights*. We are not to be surprised that true believers will always be a minority with no fair consideration and justice in this life (1 Peter 4:12).

6) What if you disagree with the decision your elders made?

The clear verses that address the relationship between believers and their pastors/elders are Hebrews 13:7 and 17. Start by submitting yourself to God's commands to you in those verses. If then, you still feel that your elders have made a decision that goes against your conscience, then follow the advice in Romans 14 to mature your conscience. If, as your conscience is better informed, you realise that the elders are requiring of you to sin (disobey a clear command intended for you, either by disobeying the government or by complying to all regulations), then seek shepherds under whom you can humbly grow (1 Pet 5:1-5).

7) If you had to pick one passage to help us keep our focus right during lockdown, what would it be?

I, personally, have frequented 1 Peter 2:12-17 during this time. The reminder of my required outward witness guards me from partaking in the fears and follies of the world (verse 12). The clear imperative to submit to government regulations keeps my mind prioritised (verse 13-14). The wisdom of God's will reminds me to excel in good and kind deeds to all (verse 15). The freedom of being a Christian liberates me from conspiracy theories, allowing me to obey what God has revealed (verse 16). "Honour everyone" keeps me from mocking those whom I disagree with; "love the brotherhood" keeps me from being distracted from the one another's; "fear God" keeps me from forgetting Who is Lord over all, and "honour the emperor" keeps me from slandering the government (verse 17). I therefore recommend that you befriend Peter 2:12-17.

8) What if other churches decide differently to your church?

A few principles are important here. First, submit to those who are watching out for *your* soul. Every group of elders need to consider their own congregation's needs, fears, risks, and resources (Rom 13:17). Secondly, do not draw lines of division between churches who remain faithful to the Gospel but make different decisions to your own church (Phil 1:17-18). Third, be slow to rehearse such differences in your mind, and especially your mouth, knowing that God is the Judge of all matters. Rather learn to remain steadfast in your own faithfulness to the Lord as long as these regulations persist (Jam 5:9-12).

9) How should we think about the various conspiracy theories?

Recognise that there are always two sides to every story (Pro 18:17), that not everything said is worth your fear (Is 8:12-13) and that God's Word is our source of facts that we are truly obliged to know and understand (Ps 56:3-4).