

Dear Sovereign Grace family,

Every generation believes it lives in “unprecedented times,” but certainly we feel our moment in history has some particularly intense challenges. The Coronavirus epidemic has had a large impact in our world. Thankfully – though it has at times strained the ties that bind us together in Christ – our congregation has largely remained unified in faith, hope and love through it all.

A new chapter of challenge now opens before us, brothers and sisters. This last week, in response to the effects of the new strain of the virus in our county, a new Mecklenburg County Mask Mandate came into full effect. It is structured differently than previous state-wide mandates, and – from the legal counsel we have received – we believe it will stand up to legal challenges. This new law now upon us was issued by a legitimate authority with the stated purpose of promoting “health and safety,” which falls within the normal sphere of governmental regulation. (You are encouraged to read the entire mandate here: [Mecklenburg County Board of Health Rule requiring face coverings.pdf \(mecknc.gov\)](https://www.mecknc.gov/health-rule-requiring-face-coverings.pdf))

The mandate requires all organizations in our county use masks in most circumstances indoors, with some narrow exceptions allowed. It is tied to a health metric in our county, and it will be in effect until a certain improvement in that metric is attained. There is no exception allowed for a religious institution in this mandate. Since it is addressed to organizations, our session *must* make a decision and respond to the mandate.

There are a wide range of opinions about almost everything related to the virus, and the use of masks is no exception. A number of us believe this mandate is either not necessary or has aspects to it that could be improved. Having said that, our personal opinions about the law are not the most important factors to be considered.

As a general rule, all Christians are required to submit to the civil authorities God has placed over them. This is quite clear from many New Testament passages. When Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7 and Titus 3:1, and when Peter wrote 1 Peter 2:13-17, for instance, the authorities that were being spoken of were the Roman government, in all its idolatry, caprice and cruelty. Yet still, the general principle was to be “submissive to rulers and authorities” (Titus 3:1). Biblical submission is proved not by compliance with what you agree with, but what you disagree with. Jesus himself said that God had given the rulers their authority (John 19:11). In the reformed tradition, we understand that obedience to all God-ordained, lawful authorities is an aspect of keeping the 5th Commandment – that is, obeying God himself – and that idea is reflected powerfully in our Westminster Larger Catechism Questions 126-128. (<https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-larger-catechism/#126/>)

Yet, there are biblical exceptions to this general rule. We note that Peter, in response to a priestly and governmental effort to stop Gospel preaching, declared “We must obey God rather than men”(Acts 5:29). And in Mark 12:17, Jesus teaches that we should “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Additionally, the Lord has also appointed the elders of his church to guard her particular interests, while honoring the right of the state to govern its citizens, including ourselves. So, we believe that the essential question here is this: “Is this an Acts 5:29 moment, where the mandates of men conflict with the

directions from God and therefore require civil disobedience?” In answering *that* question, we have found it helpful to ask ourselves *this* question: Does complying with the mask mandate cause us to sin by either failing to do something Christ commands of us or by doing something that Christ forbids us to do? Your session, along with every other like-minded church with whom we have talked, believes the answer to that last question is “no.” We do not believe complying with a temporary, health-related mask mandate causes us to sin against the Lord. Neither do we believe we were in sin when we used masks earlier in the pandemic.

Is it vexing to have to put on masks again? Yes – none of us are glad to do this! Even if there is some health benefit to doing so, no one disagrees that it is restrictive and, to a minor degree, hinders the fullness of worship (at least as it is expressed in the fellowship of the saints in worship, and singing to God). Worship, for us, is the center of the bullseye in terms of importance, so we are right to be concerned about this. Indeed, it is hard to think of anything that could lead us closer to an Acts 5:29 moment without actually doing so! Be assured that if the authorities ever try to stop or control our Gospel preaching, or the administration of the sacraments, or our faithful Sabbath observance – or if they ever interfere with our freedom to determine for whom our pastors will perform marriage ceremonies – we are prepared to defy any power on earth to preserve those Gospel privileges, at any cost to our persons. And make no mistake: it could well come to that. The appalling advance of a wicked social agenda in our nation is something we have all observed with alarm. As one of our elders said at our meeting this week, “We must be ever vigilant to ensure that a mask today does not become a muzzle tomorrow!”

The session therefore urges you to honor the authorities God has placed over us in following this mandate and to wear your mask when you are at church. Please show respect for the county authorities as they try to limit the effects of the virus. Also, if anyone in our fellowship decides not to wear a mask because they believe they will be in sin by doing so, do not judge them harshly for that honest belief. As elders, we are zealous to protect the consciences of our fellow believers – particularly when it involves a hard-to-discern matter like this – and a matter which touches on something as sensitive and central as public worship on the Lord’s Day.

Above all else, dear brothers and sisters, love one another, knowing that our whole church is striving together to please the Lord. Anyone who allows personal differences over something like a county mask ordinance to become a barrier between us will not be fulfilling the vows we all took to preserve the peace and unity of our congregation. May our Lord Jesus Christ help us to pass this test! And, in the words of another PCA pastor in our city to his own congregation, “Let’s keep praying for our doctors and nurses, for the sick and the vulnerable, for those facing possible job loss, and for all of us who are tired and weary of the pandemic and all that it entails. May God give us grace to persevere together.”

Your servants in the Lord Jesus Christ, *The Session*