

Is It Time for Christians to Defy the Governor Regarding Public Worship?

Do we truly need to choose between honoring God and honoring the governor?

So is there a point where it's right to defy our leaders?
If so, where is that point?

The two connected questions dropped into the comments on one of my Facebook posts. To know the context is to better understand the questions, so here you are:

- Broad: Gubernatorial executive orders restricting some normal freedoms during a pandemic.
- Narrow: Restrictions on a variety of public assemblies, including church services.

I gave two brief answers (“Yes” and “Not yet”) in a follow-up comment and promised a more thorough answer later. This is it.

Heroes of the Resistance? Relevant Bible History

We should not build doctrine or theology from historical events, of course, not even those in the Bible. However, such Bible history is “*written for our admonition*” (1 Corinthians 10:11). So here you have some historical instances from the Scriptures of God’s people disobeying the commands of state or ecclesiastical authorities:

- Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15-17)
- Amram and Jochabed (Exodus 1:21-2:3)
- Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3,4,13)
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3)
- Daniel (Daniel 6)
- Peter with the other Apostles (Acts 4:18,19; 5:28,29)

In every case, those with authority over them expressly commanded them to go against God’s will. Each of those commands required them to do one or both of these:

- Do something God didn’t want them to do.
- Not do something God wanted them to do.

Review the record and you will find people who chose to...

- Object without being obnoxious.
- Defy without being defiant.
- Disobey without being rebellious or disrespectful.
- Resist without being subversive.
- Go God’s route while accepting any retribution meted out to them by the authorities.

In each of these examples, we praise the godly for having done the right thing. Rightly so, but what made each of those actions the right thing to do?

Foundations for Resistance: Applicable Scriptural Principles

We know the clear Biblical commands to submit to those in authority over us:

1. *“Be subject unto the higher powers”* (Romans 13:1-17). All authority emanates from God; He establishes the powers that be. Those who resist authority resist what God has done.
2. *“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man”* (1 Peter 2:13). Do this for the Lord’s sake; that is, not only to honor Him but to acknowledge the realities of the first command.
3. *“Be subject to principalities and powers...obey magistrates”* (Titus 3:1).

In “tension” with those commands, we have two statements by Peter and his fellow Apostles:

- *“Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye”* (Acts 4:19).
- *“We ought to obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29).

As with all “exception clauses,” we need to handle these in Acts with extreme care and conscientiousness.

Before invoking them, we must ask ourselves at least these key questions:

1. Is my application of them faithful to their context in Acts?
2. Am I otherwise faithfully subject to authority?
3. Does my life demonstrate a consistent God-first posture?

Now you know *why* I think there is a point where it’s right to defy specific orders by authority figures. But *where* is that point?

Triggering Resistance

I offer four additional questions to help us further in discerning when Christians may righteously disobey a government order in the process of obeying God:

1. Is the order targeted solely at the church?
2. Is the order against us because of our faith in Jesus?
3. Is the order meant to suppress the Gospel and restrict Christianity?
4. Is disobedience to God one *effect* of abiding by the order?

If all the answers are correctly in the affirmative, it seems to me we have a clear Biblical case for disobeying human authority in order to faithfully execute God’s commands.

What if the fourth answer is affirmative but one or more of the first three are negative? What we should do will depend on factors such as these:

- the nature of the governmental order.
- the Biblical command or principle or admonition which the governmental order “rescinds” or attacks.
- the foundational principles and concepts I gave in the previous sections.

So how does all this work out in our current circumstances of gubernatorial executive orders which restrict certain types of public gatherings, including church services? When we dispassionately evaluate the orders, we recognize that...

- Their target has never been churches only.
- Their expressed objective has always been about health, not about opposition to Jesus, the Gospel, or even Christians.
- They have provisions that allow limited assemblies with limited restrictions.

Therefore, I do not think we have reached the point where it is right to defy the governor’s orders.

Addressing Objections and Counterarguments

I do not trust the governor's statements about objective or intent. I'm sure you don't. But until the church can righteously discern selective, evil intent against the people of God, we would be unwise and unjust to defy the governor's orders.

OK, but the *effect* of the orders has been to halt or restrict Christian fellowship in public assembly. True, but only to some degree. These effects are only provisional, just like the orders. Besides, this effect has impacted far more than church services.

The United States Constitution declares our freedom of religion and our freedom of public assembly. Yes, in the First Amendment. Your state constitution probably "gives" you those freedoms as well. (In Oregon, it's Article I.) I suspect other portions of one or both of these constitutions make provision for the authorities to temporarily suspend those freedoms in extreme cases. If the church has to stand on an earthly constitution to defend a Biblical mandate, something has gone terribly awry...with her.

President Trump declared church services essential and warned the governors about restricting church services. Yes. What of it? He did not issue a federal executive order. And even if he were to do so, we do not know if it would withstand Constitutional scrutiny in the American judicial system. You see, the President does not have unrestricted authority over state governors. A federal republic such as the USA...

- has no supreme, unlimited civil authority endowed to one person.
- has no governors over whom the President wields final authority in a wide range of matters.

Local law enforcement has said they will not enforce the orders against any church in their jurisdiction. I'm sure that's a relief, but did you remember the other law enforcement teeth that could bite you? You may want to make sure they are self-muzzling also. Local law enforcement does not speak for the county sheriff, the state police, the district attorney, and the state attorney general. You remain in judicial jeopardy, vulnerable to legal woes and prosecution. You should probably go consult with them also. Actually, I recommend you not bother...because their non-enforcement does not change the governor's orders. (Ditto for speed limits, seat belt rules, and on and on.) Look at it this way: Before God, the fact an enforcer won't enforce an order is on him; our actions relative to the order are on us. Now let's shift the focus here to close out this paragraph: How will other groups restricted by the orders respond when they learn the enforcers have given you a pass? Remember this angle when you get to the inconsistent-application issue below.

Can *anyone* overrule the governor? Sure, and that has happened in at least one state. But here in Oregon, legal challenges have fallen flat. The governor's orders stand here. Recommendations, warnings, and other noises from federal authorities and federal agencies (such as the CDC and the Justice Department) do not of themselves change that reality. Those who live in the governor's jurisdiction are still bound by the orders.

Those orders are illegitimate, or at least based on flimsy "science" and flawed premises! Perhaps. What does that change about God's command to His people to submit to civil authority?

These orders limiting public assembly are applied inconsistently to other groups and therefore no longer apply to churches either. Yes, I know it is neither fair nor just that rioters and looters can get away with going against the orders even as churches are held to them. However, what others do and get away with is irrelevant in terms of God's expectations of His people. I also know that some authorities and public health experts have declared that social justice and the right to protest override the executive orders. Of course all that is unjust, hypocritical, and inconsistent. But the Bible does not have an inconsistency-of-application exception clause for any of its commands regarding our subjection to governmental authority. Besides, how far would we carry this inconsistent-enforcement perspective? For example, speed limits are not enforced consistently. And how would we apply this concept to church rules? No, this looks to me like a dangerous slippery cliff and I intend to stay far away from it. Furthermore, why should I follow the unrighteous (be they protestors or enforcers) in determining how to live out the Scriptures? May I value my witness and God's name far more than that!

So what about the command not to forsake the assembling of ourselves? Well, let's just look at it briefly: *"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is"* (Hebrews 10:25). Too often, the citation of this command stops at the comma. The first six words after the comma help us to properly understand the concern driving the command. Back then already, some Christians had developed the practice and custom of neglecting meeting with the saints. So God inspired the writer of Hebrews to say, "Don't do what they are doing." If we are facing a similar situation today, it certainly is not due to any governor's orders. And even if it were, the inescapable fact remains that since the initial "crisis" passed, we *have* been allowed to assemble ourselves in church services. No, I simply do not see this command as just cause for Christians to defy gubernatorial orders restricting public gatherings in the present circumstances.

Walking As Children of Light

My appeal to churches and Christians across America is that we submit to these orders and cooperate with them. And that we do so in a manner and with a spirit that shows honor for the governor.

We bear Christ's name, folks — do not do it in vain! Let us not bring shame to His name and reproach upon ourselves by defying the orders in question. May the Almighty not tell us that by our deeds we have *"given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme"* (2 Samuel 12:14).

Update

A friend from my home congregation gave me a bit of Facebook feedback on what I wrote above. I replied in that Facebook comment thread. Here's is the bulk of that reply...

Yes, the Constitution is the work of mere mortals. Yes, so is the governor's order. The Constitution "gives" me freedom of religion and freedom of public assembly. The two relevant earthly constitutions "give" the governor certain authority and powers.

In our circumstances, appealing to Constitutional provisions as grounds for defying the governor may come up short if there are also Constitutional provisions that allow the governor to do what she's doing.

The Bible tells me to submit to the governor. The Bible also tells me not to forsake assembling with other Christians (presumably in a public assembly for worship and edification). Along comes the governor and puts limited restrictions on assemblies of various sorts, including church services. Now what?

I look to the Scriptures and conclude that we should obey the governor's order since it isn't "against" us for the name of Christ.

Others seem to look to the Constitution and conclude that they should defy the governor's order because we have the freedom of religion and of assembly (which she is "denying" us). Or because they believe she has exceeded her authority. Or both.

It seems to me that the Constitution is being used to defy one Scriptural command (submit to the governor) in order to obey another Scriptural command (assemble as believers).

If we appeal to Constitutionally acknowledged rights to justify disobeying the governor (even for something Biblical like going to church), are we not putting those rights (freedom of worship and assembly) higher than a Biblical command (submit to civil authority)?

My appeal remains that we as Christians leave the Constitution out of our decision-making regarding our response to the governor's executive orders.

It appears to me that one obedience (to God) requires two disobediences (to God and to the governor). I don't like that kind of balance sheet results.

We have been blessed with the opportunity to score three obediences. The one obedience (temporary limited public worship) isn't as satisfying as we want and are "entitled" to, but I vote for "scoring" a three out of three instead of a "net" one out of three. (1) Obey God in public assembly within the temporary, limited restrictions, (2) obey God in submitting to the governor, and (3) submit to the governor.

You closed your rebuttal by noting that it "is very debatable if she has the authority to indefinitely stop congregation."

I agree. In fact, I don't think it's debatable at all. I do not believe she has that authority. Of course, she hasn't tried to exercise that particular "authority" either -- not in either scope you cite. That is, I'm not aware that there's an "indefinitely" in play and she certainly hasn't targeted these restrictions solely at churches. (PS for the record: I know that *indefinite* and *unending* are not synonymous.)

Regarding her authority, so long as what she has done so far isn't overruled by the legal-political system within which she operates, I believe we Christians are obligated before God to submit.

by Mark Roth

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Posted to the Anabaptists web site at 5:45 am on June 17, 2020:

<https://www.anabaptists.org/essays/articles/christians-defy-governor-for-public-worship/>

Added the update on June 28, 2020.

Amplified "Triggering Resistance" on September 20, 2020.