

## **The Church and Government**

### **Appendix**

### **August 2020**

Twenty years ago, we published a position paper entitled “The Church and Government” where we taught the obligation of our submission to our governing authorities according to the Scripture, along with the exceptions to this command of Romans 13:1-7. This year has brought new opportunities for the application of this passage with the Covid-19 pandemic. Health concerns have led to governmental restrictions that have brought great challenges to life as we have known it. Businesses have closed, people have lost jobs, and relationships have been greatly reduced if not eliminated. The difficulties that our world has faced have been great even apart from those who have suffered illness and the loss of loved ones.

This suffering has led some to question whether we ought to ignore the governmental restrictions in order to return to a sense of normalcy. This desire has even led some Christians to advocate for civil disobedience. This has brought a need to expand upon our position paper to include additional aspects that have become even more relevant now as the Elders of Valley Bible Church seek to bring care and ministry to the members of Valley Bible Church.

#### **Church is not defined by the form it takes.**

The church is literally the “called out ones” and exists whether together in one place or apart in many places. There is the universal church, which the gates of hell will not prevail against, and there are local churches, which are made up of the wheat and the tares and may cease to exist at some point.

Local churches may be very large or very small and there is no greater value of one church of 1,000 people over 100 churches of ten people. Churches with elaborate buildings have no greater worth in the sight of God than churches with no building at all. The particular form the church takes may vary due to governmental restriction but these changes in form do not negate the essence of the church that the Lord said the gates of Hades will not overpower (Matthew 16:18).

#### **A church building is not necessary to obey the command of Hebrews 10:25 to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.**

*We have been able to assemble ourselves together as often as we wish, whether virtually only in the Spring or personally since the end of May. Currently, in addition to our small group ministry that is expressed in various forms, we are able to join together as a church for a worship service outside as often as we would like.*

We were also able to assemble ourselves together virtually during the entire pandemic as often as we would like. While less satisfying than meeting in person, it nevertheless is a form of gathering that allows us to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.

Meeting in a church building is not required to follow Hebrews 10:25 since Hebrews 10:25 was written when church buildings did not exist.

**Undesirable limits placed on us by the government do not negate our responsibility to follow the commands to submit to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7).**

In the restrictions placed upon us during the Covid-19 pandemic, the governing authorities have not prohibited us from practicing righteousness, nor have they ordered us to sin. There has been no mandate from any governing authority that has crossed this threshold.

While we are under certain restrictions, the government may limit our freedom without forbidding us from practicing righteousness or forcing us to sin. Our entire society is limited in various ways (zoning, traffic laws, criminal statutes, etc.) and has additional limitations in the present pandemic. Limitations do not prohibit obedience.

Simply because we may not agree with the government laws does not give us the right to disobey because we think they have gone too far in our opinion, unless they necessarily force us to disobey the Lord.

**We have not yielded our spiritual authority under God to the secular government.**

Not only have we not submitted our spiritual role in overseeing the church to the government, we have done the opposite of this charge. It is our responsibility before God to teach the Bible. The Bible teaches us to honor those in authority and to submit to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13-17). By encouraging the application of Scripture the elders of Valley Bible Church are shepherding the church to obey the truth of God's Word.

**Seeking to adhere to governmental restrictions does not thwart real ministry to people.**

Our ministry to people is only in the power of the Holy Spirit. Unless the Lord builds the house they labor in vain who build it (Psalm 127:1). By obeying the governing authorities as instructed by God's word, we believe the ministry that God intends will be served. We prefer to do God's work in accordance with God's revealed will even if it may seem to hamper ministry from an earthly perspective.

**There is no time limit for our submission to perceived unfair government restrictions.**

The perspective that the church is being singled out and persecuted unfairly is questionable in light of the fact that we were granted the right to assemble during the month of June while other assembling was prohibited. We are still allowed to meet in a large assembly outside while other entities are prohibited. Examples include sports teams, concerts, plays, and clubs.

If we believe that the government's restrictions are unfair and biased against us, we must recognize that this is the very reason for the command to submit in Romans 13:1. Submission to something to which we agree is easy, but submission to that which we disagree, especially that results in perceived unjust persecution, follows Christ's example and gains favor with God (1 Peter 2:20). There is no timeframe for obedience to the commands of Scripture.

If we fail to submit according to the will of God because we become weary of inconveniences, what is our future if we suffer under more oppressive restrictions than most Christians have endured?

“For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God” (1 Peter 2:17). 1 Peter 2:17 is in the context of “submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution” (1 Peter 2:13).

**The first amendment of the US constitution does not grant us the right to practice our religion in any way we wish without restriction from the government.**

Beyond crimes such as fraud and abuse committed by leaders of churches, the government also restricts churches on the basis of health and safety. Examples include building construction codes, occupancy limits, zoning restrictions and noise ordinances.

Nevertheless, specific governing authorities are potentially limited by the state and national constitution. However, we do not have the right to decide if a specific order has violated the constitution, as this responsibility has been given to the courts. The interpretation of the US Constitution ultimately belongs to the US Supreme Court. Yet if we believe a law is unconstitutional we are able to appeal to the courts. Yet we cannot ignore laws until they have been suspended or overturned by the courts.

Our responsibility to the government is independent of the US Constitution as the words of Romans 13 were written to a people under a far more oppressive government than we live under.

**We must disobey the governing authorities only when there is no other way to obey the commands of God.**

Civil disobedience is a last resort if there is no other way forward to live righteously. If we arrive at this point, we should seek to maintain faithfulness to 1 Timothy 2:1-6 by praying for those in authority and by seeking to lead a tranquil and quiet life, with godliness and dignity. This will lead to quiet resistance rather than loud protests for the sake of the gospel. We should refuse, but not revolt.

The reason that 1 Timothy 2 gives us to pray for our leaders and pursue a peaceful and quiet life is because it is good in the sight of God, who desires all men to be saved and come to the

knowledge of the truth. If our disobedience brings unnecessary conflict and criticism, this may well become a barrier to communication of the gospel.

## **Conclusion**

Obedying the revealed will of God is essential to fruitful ministry. We cannot expect the Lord to bless rebellion against His will. However, the goal of loving the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves is not achieved simply by obeying the governing authorities. We have a far greater mission for Christ, to proclaim Him by warning and teaching every man with all wisdom, for which we toil according to His power which powerfully works with us (Colossians 1:28-29).

Our submission to the government is for the sake of righteousness and we seek to live at peace with these authorities so that we can fulfill the Lord's mission for us to preach the word.