



Introduction

The goal of this paper is to address the nature and purpose of the Church, the purpose of the government, and to address how these God-given institutions should interact during a time of national crises such as a pandemic. Our proposition is that the Church - God's called-out family led by spiritual leaders who administer the ordinances of Jesus, teach the Word of God, and give witness to King Jesus on this earth - should willingly subject herself to, and obey, the governing authorities - God's instituted ministers of authority for the good of society - so long as governing authorities do not ask us to disobey God's clear commands.

The Church

The Church is composed of all those who have placed their faith and trust in the completed work of Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection. To believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Jesus (Col. 1:13). Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). So whenever individuals respond in faith to the good news of Jesus Christ (as in Acts 2:17-47), they are added to the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Church of Jesus Christ only needs three elements in order to function properly: 1) it needs spiritual leaders, 2) it needs the Word of God to be rightly taught, and 3) it needs the ordinances of Jesus to be rightly observed. When the Apostle Paul planted new churches filled with new converts, he immediately went about the task of raising up and appointing elders, or spiritual leaders (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5). Elders are necessary in order to provide oversight to local congregations (1 Pet. 5:2-3) and to ensure that they remain faithful to the Word of God (1 Tim. 4:11-16) and way of Jesus (Eph. 4:20). The Word of God must be central and authoritative over all areas of life (Col. 3:16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Tim. 4:1-2). In it we find the power of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:18; Rom. 1:16) and everything we need to grow to maturity (2 Pet. 1:3; 2 Tim. 3:17; Col. 1:24-29) in Christ. Jesus Himself gave us two ordinances that we are instructed to observe during this Church Age: baptism (Matt. 28:18-20) and communion (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Baptism regulates those who enter the Church, and communion regulates those who remain committed to the Church.

The purpose of the Church is to exalt God by worshipping Him in spirit and in truth (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; John 4:23), to edify believers by building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12-13) until we are able to present every man mature in Christ (Col. 1:28), and to evangelize the lost until all nations have heard the good news of Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20). As a church balances these three purposes, it continues to be faithful to Jesus' calling and mission.

The Head of the Church is Christ (Col. 1:18), and the Body finds its life, power and wisdom from Him alone (1 Cor. 1:23, 30). The Church belongs to Jesus, and He has promised to build it no matter the opposition (Matt. 16:18). Since the Church is a living organism (rather than a building or a program), it is able to be extremely flexible and adaptable to various settings and situations. It can thrive in any culture, in any location, and under any circumstances. There is nothing that can prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

The Church is to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world (Matt. 5:13-16). The Church must proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness (1 Pet. 2:9-10) until the gospel has gone forth to all

nations (Rom. 10:14-17; Matt. 24:14). Once everyone from every tribe and nation (Rev. 5:9-10) has been gathered, Jesus will return and the Church will be His bride forever (Rev. 19:6-8).

The Government

Human government has also been instituted by God to possess authority (Rom. 13:1; John 19:11). Its authority is derived from God, Who is the ultimate authority; therefore, to resist government's authority is to resist what God has appointed (Rom. 13:2). Such resistance will lead to God's judgment (Rom. 13:2, 4). Human authorities are even called "ministers of God" (Rom. 13:6), and as such deserve our submission, obedience, respect and honor (Rom. 13:7; 1 Pet. 2:17).

While both the Church and governing authorities are instituted by God, they have very different functions. The Church is God's agent to bring about His plan of redemption and restoration to the world (2 Cor. 5:16-20; Matt. 28:18-20). Human government is God's servant for mankind's good (Rom. 13:4) and is given authority to punish evil and promote what is good (Rom. 13:4-5; 1 Pet. 2:14). Each institution has a unique realm as made clear by Jesus' statement, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). But they are not two distinct, competing realms. God's power and reign is over ALL, including the things that are Caesar's, and all that is Caesar's has been simply derived from God's authority (Rom. 13:1). That means that no governing authority is in place either by accident, mistake or outside the providential hand of God (Dan. 4:25, 32, 5:21). This would include wicked governments, as in the case of Nero, and tyrannical governments, as in the case of Babylon.

We are to be subject to human governing authorities because we recognize their God-instituted power (Rom. 13:1), we want to do the will of God (1 Pet. 2:15a), we desire to live honorable lives before men that silence unnecessary criticism (1 Pet. 2:15b), we want to have a clear conscience before God (Rom. 13:5), and we greatly desire to avoid God's wrath (Rom. 13:2, 5). This ought to be our default position as we seek to live as citizens of God's kingdom in the here and now.

The Bible does give one clear exception to this general rule of subjection to our governing authorities: when our obedience to governing authorities requires us to disobey God's clear commands we must obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). In both of the cases presented in the book of Acts, the apostles were commanded by their leaders not to teach in Jesus' name. There was no way for the apostles to obey that command without directly disobeying Jesus' command. The Bible does not give us an exception to this rule if we believe that the governing authorities' decisions are unfair or unpleasant. It does not give us an exception if we think that our governing authorities are only acting in their own political interests, or if they are misrepresenting information, or even if their policies are causing more harm than good. Unless they ask us to do something that directly violates God's clear commands, we must submit.

COVID-19

There is a great deal of debate about how believers should react in this current pandemic to governmental policies. Taking them at their word, our governmental officials in authority over us seem to be seeking to protect the lives of those in our city, county, state, and nation – notably for the good of society. We may not all agree on the methods they have chosen, but we should believe the best of them (1 Cor. 13:7) and trust the sovereignty of God. We may not all agree with the threat of the COVID-19 virus as compared to the counteractive steps taken, but it is impossible to deny that COVID-19 is real and spreading. Rather than fighting against our authorities on every mandate, it seems wise to comply wherever possible as they seek to do good in our land.

While many of the state and country guidelines have caused us to change the form of our gathering, we are not currently being asked to directly disobey God's commands.¹ We have not been asked to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. We have not been asked to stop sharing the gospel. We have not been asked to do anything immoral. We have simply been asked to do our part in seeking to slow the spread of a particularly virulent and potentially deadly virus in cooperation with many other institutions and businesses across society. With each new guideline given, we have been able to find a way to be the Church as God intended for us to be.

If we are able to fulfill the purposes of the Church (i.e. exaltation, edification and evangelism) and submit to the guidelines given by our human authorities, this seems to be a biblical, and therefore preferable, path to pursue. We do not believe this path is an abdication of any ecclesiastical authority, but rather a path toward pleasing God, protecting our people, and maintaining a good testimony in our community.

Therefore, we will continue to live out the purposes of the Church while also finding creative ways to abide by the guidelines given by our human authorities until such a point, if it were to happen, that our human authorities demand that we disobey our true king, Jesus.

More Questions and Further Examination

1. **Does a restriction on the number of attenders or the location of a service rise to a level where Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than man") comes into play?** We currently do not believe this is the case. A church meeting in segments instead of a whole can still meet and fulfill its God-given purposes. While it may not be easy or convenient, it is not impossible. Furthermore, moving services outdoors is a mild inconvenience, not a matter of civil disobedience. For many churches, including FCC, there is ample room for all who wish to attend, thus removing any real limitations.
2. **Is the Church facing persecution during this pandemic?** Once again, our answer is, "No." The Church has not been singled out or discriminated against. We are facing the same regulations as businesses and other services. We are still able to preach the gospel unhindered, practice our faith as our conscience dictates, and even receive government benefits such as tax-exempt status and a PPP loan.
3. **Safety has never been the highest value in God's Church. Why are we making such a big deal of this virus?** We must always be willing to risk ourselves for the sake of the gospel, face persecution for the sake of Jesus, and dare to do what He asks us to do no matter the cost. However, there is no wisdom in placing oneself in harm's way when there is no need to do so (Prov. 22:3). If we are able to worship the Lord with masks on and significantly lower the risk of illness and death, we would be foolish to do otherwise. We recognize that some are unable to wear a mask based on the direction of a medical professional. If you fall into this category, please let us know so that we might make adequate accommodations to ensure you can worship with us each week.
4. **At what point would FCC willingly refuse to follow governmental regulations?** When our leaders ask us to change our form (e.g. live stream, meet outdoors, wear a mask, practice social distancing, etc.) we will seek to comply. However, if our leaders ask us to change our elements, those things that define a biblical church (e.g. you may not preach the Bible, you may not sing, you may not pray, you may not baptize, etc.), then we will have to respectfully express our commitment to God over any human authority.
5. **Can churches disagree on this matter and still be faithful to Jesus?** Yes! We believe in the autonomy of the local church – that each church must decide before Christ how to govern its

own affairs. Churches may come to different conclusions on how to apply a biblical truth and still remain faithful to Christ. We believe it would grieve the Lord for this matter to divide the Church.

6. **If the governing authorities are overreaching into the affairs of the church, shouldn't the church be able to push back?** If our governing authorities are asking us to violate God's Word, the standard of truth in our lives, we must not only push back, but reject their instruction in order to follow God's truth. But as stated before, we do not believe our governing authorities are targeting the Church in their efforts to address this pandemic. As American citizens, if we are unhappy with their decisions, we are blessed with real power in this great nation – we can vote. Perhaps we are learning that the men and women in office, especially in local offices, really matter. As citizens of this land, we have a course of action if we want to see change.
7. **Aren't these guidelines different than actual laws that must be obeyed?** We are entering into grey area here. Our default position is to be to be subject to our leaders if at all possible. Furthermore, the determination of law versus edict is one that can and should take place with due process in the American judicial system. As a church, we have chosen to partner with our local and state leaders rather than disobey, regardless of the enforceability of the guidelines. Each family in our church must determine, in good conscience, how they will conduct themselves during this pandemic. May we all extend grace to one another.
8. **Do we submit to, and obey, policies with which we may not agree?** Again, the answer is YES so long as those policies do not violate clear biblical commands. When we disagree with the policy/law/edict of our governing authorities, we are still called to submit to them while pursuing legal recourse in the courts of law. Christians can debate policy as citizens of the United States, but we cannot avoid our responsibility to submit to those policies unless they require us to disobey God. In regard to social distancing and wearing masks, we can disagree with the policy but we still must maintain a spirit of submission pursuing legal recourse, if desired. Disagreements on these matters are not doctrinal. Christians should avoid judging one another based on their stated positions.
9. **Shouldn't pastors/elders "rise up" and take a stand to re-open churches with normal operations?** This type of question infers that pastors are not leading by adhering to the policies of local government. It also infers that "taking a stand" would equate to disobeying local governing authorities rather than standing with them to the best of our abilities. The simple answer is NO. Spiritual leaders who seek to subject themselves to governing authorities based on their biblical convictions should not be labeled as cowardly or driven by fear. It always takes courage to stand for your biblical convictions. When the argument becomes polarizing - labeling one side as faithful and the other as fearful - it does nothing but erode the unity of God's Church. May God help us "walk in a manner worthy of our calling with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (cf. Eph. 4:1-3).

¹ The one exception was the ban on singing and chanting in services. In this one case, our governmental leaders went beyond changing our form and removed an element of our worship which we believed to be an essential part of the Church's purpose.