**Church & State: Can the State Require Churches to Close?**

As the entire world faces the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, states and municipalities are working to contain the virus, as best as possible, by discouraging (and otherwise doing everything to stop) gatherings of people. In the days to come, it is possible that the government will act even more drastically. As most churches are now not gathering on Sundays for the time being, some are asking if these sorts of health mandates are a violation of religious liberty.

**The Short Answer is No**

First, the question is a reasonable one. After all, we maintain that no government is lord of the church–our only Head is Jesus Christ. And there would be many circumstances in which a government illegitimately could use powers to keep churches from gathering. That said, nothing that is happening right now related to this crisis is, in my view, a violation of religious liberty or the separation of the church from the state.

Our commitment to religious liberty is grounded in what Jesus taught us—that the spheres of the church and the state are different, and the one should not have authority over the other. The state has the “power of the sword,” for instance, to punish criminals and to maintain civic order ([Rom. 13:1-7](https://www.biblestudytools.com/romans/passage/?q=romans+13:1-7)), while the church does not ([1 Cor. 5:9-12](https://www.biblestudytools.com/1-corinthians/passage/?q=1%20corinthians+5:9-12)). The church has the authority to proclaim the gospel and to define the boundaries of the fellowship within that gospel, the state does not.

**Legitimate God-Given Authority to Protect in Crisis**

The current situation facing us is not a case of the state overstepping its bounds, but rather seeking to carry out its legitimate God-given authority. Nowhere, at this point, have we seen churches targeted because of their beliefs or mission. At issue is a clear public objective—stopping the transmission of a dangerous virus by gatherings. This applies to the local plate jugglers association just as much to churches. Because the state must respect the consciences and souls of the people, consciences and souls over which it has no ultimate authority, any action involving religious bodies should have, in the words of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, a “compelling state interest” and must pursue the “least restrictive means” of achieving it.

This is an area—the protection of public health—where the state has not just a legal authority but an authority granted by God himself. Governments are seeking to limit gatherings of people. That is a legitimate public interest, and the government is seeking to do so in the least intrusive way possible. The situation will almost inevitably lead to even stronger and less voluntary government actions. Could these encroach on religious liberty? That is certainly possible, but not necessarily. We can make such exceptions (visitation) without creating jeopardy to lives, just as we have in every other time in human history from the Black Plague to the 1918 influenza crisis.

**Common Purposes**

In the vast majority of places, churches and governments are working in common purpose, and that’s good. After this crisis is over, we will have learned much about the fragility of life, and about our need for one another. The church will be called to bear the burdens of our neighbors as never before. But, in the meantime, concern for public health is not a violation of religious liberty.

Let’s not only obey the laws of our states and cities, let’s seek to do even more than asked in order to shoulder our responsibilities. Let’s wash our hands, stay as far apart as necessary, pray for our medical personnel and our leaders, and let’s pray, like never before. In so doing, we render what is due both to God and to Caesar.

*And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,*

*and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.*

**MARK 12:17**