

Theological and Practical Considerations for the SVNC Covid-19 Pandemic Response

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the SVNC has chosen to follow the governmental orders and public health guidelines issued by state, local, and federal governmental agencies.

As the pandemic persists, questions have arisen by some related to our rationale and motivations for doing so. This paper will outline the underlying drivers of our practice and attempt to answer some of the most commonly raised questions.

Primary Theological Considerations

The primary driver of our decision and practice is our theology. We believe that the Scripture is the authoritative rule of faith and life. As such, our life practices should conform to the guidance provided to us in the Scriptures. In respect to Covid-19, there are several biblical imperatives that inform our decisions and practice:

1) As followers of Jesus, we are instructed to submit to governmental authorities.

1 Peter 2:13-17 NIV *“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.”*

Romans 13:1-2 NIV *“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”*

Titus 3:1-2,9-11 NIV *“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone... But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.”*

Hebrews 13:17 NIV *“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.”*

These imperatives are very clear. We are instructed to submit to those in authority.

What if the government treats Christians and churches unfairly? The government referred to by these biblical authors was Rome. In the first century, it was illegal for Christians churches to exist or hold property under Roman law. Christians were routinely rounded up and beaten or killed. Rome put on public displays of Christians being eaten alive by dogs or other wild animals and even used Christians as human torches to light sporting events. The biblical writers who wrote these

passages had personally experienced beatings and imprisonment by the authorities, so they were aware of these facts and yet did not use the government's treatment of Christians as a rationale to disobey the authorities.

The restrictions American Christians are facing under this pandemic response are not equivalent to persecution. Claiming persecution for being required to adhere to public health and safety laws is dishonoring to the millions of Christians around the world who are being beaten, jailed, and killed for sharing the gospel. Crying wolf now when persecution is not happening will diminish the voice of the church when and if real persecution comes. It is worth noting that in most all states, church have been given less restrictive guidelines than other similar types of organization or gatherings in respect to the size of gatherings.

What if we do not agree with the government's pandemic response? Obedience is not predicated on agreement. We obey and we work for change. Americans live in a representative democracy and as such can register public comment on government actions, lobby legislators to change the laws, and vote for representatives and leaders that reflect the ideals they hold. In this way they can effect change, while still submitting to the current authority. The primary loyalty of the believer and the church as a whole, is to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. Together we proclaim the gospel to everyone and avoid aligning ourselves with any one candidate or party so that we can represent Jesus clearly to everyone. Jesus tells us to seek first the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33) and reminds us that the kingdoms of this world are not the focus of his followers (John 18:36). Participate in the democratic process and vote your conscience; and remember your primary identity and loyalty is in Christ.

What if other churches in my community are choosing to ignore the laws? One of the early leaders of the church, Augustine of Hippo said, *"Right is right even if no one is doing it; wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it."* King Saul responded to the pressure of his army and disobeyed God's instructions and the prophet Samuel noted to Saul that *"to obey is better than sacrifice"* (1 Samuel 15:22 NIV). We are not responsible for the actions of other churches or followers of Jesus, only our own actions. The Apostle Paul put it this way, *"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall"* Romans 14:4, NIV. The actions of others will not be the basis upon which we are called to give an account before Christ. It is our own motivations and actions for which we will have to give account.

What if the laws are oppressive and interfere with our individual rights? Jesus spoke specifically to this issue in Matthew 5:41 NIV *"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles."* Jesus is referencing the oppressive Roman law that allowed Roman soldiers to compel anyone at any time to carry their gear (70-100lb pack) for one mile. Nobody wanted to be subjected to that, to be treated like a pack animal, yet Jesus teaches that his followers should willingly bear the burden, not just the required mile, but a second mile.

From beginning to end, the Bible addresses how God gives people laws and commands and ways they are to organize themselves and live together in society. The Hebrew word for this is tzedakah. It is the ethical obligation to do what is right and just, specifically by being charitable and giving towards others – with emphasis on the poor and marginalized. Most familiar to us are the 10 Commandments given in Exodus 20 that begins by God reminding the people of their freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." The way that

freedom is upheld is through the commands that follow that all prioritize love and care for others over the individual.

Galatians 5:1,13-14 (CEB) is a New Testament example of the same idea: "Christ has set us free for freedom...You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself."

The Bible never speaks of individual freedom or rights as we speak of that today. It always speaks of freedom in reference to how we put others before ourselves and lay down our lives for others as Christ did for us.

Is it ever acceptable, biblically, to defy governmental authority? Yes. The scriptures talk about three instances where civil disobedience is warranted:

- a) **When we are asked to commit sins by our actions.** Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to commit idolatry when commanded to do so by the king in Daniel 3. The Israelite midwives refused to kill male babies at the order of Pharaoh in Exodus 1.
- b) **When we are asked to sin by omitting behavior commanded by God.** Daniel refused to stop praying when commanded to do so by the law in Daniel 6. Throughout the book of Acts the apostles refused to stop proclaiming the gospel when ordered to stop by the authorities saying, *"We must obey God rather than human beings!"* Acts 5:29, NIV.
- c) **In order to advocate for justice for the poor, oppressed, widows, orphans, and immigrants.** To not advocate for the vulnerable and the marginalized is a sin of omission. In Isaiah, God says, *"Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow"* Isaiah 1:16-17, NIV. Psalms 82:3-4 challenges us to *"Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked"* NIV. *"This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place."* Jeremiah 22:3, NIV. The Apostle James says, *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."* James 1:27, NIV.

Taking these courageous stands may have legal ramifications and negative consequences that result in suffering. The scripture teaches us that in such suffering we identify with Christ (1 Peter 4:13, Philippians 3:10, 2 Corinthians 1:5, Luke 9:23).

Aren't the current restrictions on gatherings asking us to sin by omission in violation of Hebrews 10:24-25? Hebrews 10: 24-25, NIV says, *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."* In this passage we are instructed not to stop gathering together for encouragement, worship, and discipleship. The current restrictions do not stop us from gathering. We can gather digitally or in limited size physical gatherings. When this was written churches could not own buildings and so they met in homes and in smaller gatherings than we are accustomed to. Large physical gatherings are

wonderful and meaningful but are not necessary for adhering to the instructions laid out in this passage. Jesus said, *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”* Matthew 18:20 NIV. While meeting in smaller settings – even in twos and threes – is a different experience than gathering with hundreds, we can worship, encourage, learn, experience community, and minister to people far from God in these settings.

2) As followers of Jesus, we are instructed to love our neighbors.

Romans 13:8-10 NIV *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.”*

Matthew 22:34-40 NIV *“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’”*

John 15:12-14 NIV *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”*

Matthew 5:43-48 NIV *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

These imperatives are very clear. All people matter to God and we are instructed to love the people around us, deserving or undeserving, to the point of laying down our own lives. This means that we can and should observe public health guidelines out of love for others. If we can lower the risk of someone else contracting this disease through **temporary changes** (i.e., wearing a mask, physical distancing, service adjustments, etc.), then by all means this is a very small ask to preserve their health or perhaps even their life. Choosing to sacrifice our preferences or convenience for the sake of others is the pathway of a follower of Jesus. Jesus said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”* Matthew 16:24-26, NIV.

Isn’t it living in fear if we wear masks, socially distance, and abide by other public health guidelines? It can be. People can be motivated by fear. The Apostle Paul tells us not to be motivated by fear, but rather by love and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). We do not need to be

afraid for we have nothing to fear in death (Philippians 1:21-26). We do need to practice self-discipline and love by putting aside our own interest and looking to the interest of others (Philippians 2:3-4).

Out of love for others we can endure the temporary inconveniences of this pandemic to show others the love of Jesus. In observing the guidelines, we are not living in response to fear, but boldly living out of love. Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke notes that in Proverbs the righteous are described as those who "are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves." When we disadvantage ourselves for the wellbeing of others, we are following the example of Jesus (Philippians 2) and demonstrating our trust in God and his love for the world.

What if we do not agree with the government's interpretation of the science? We do not have to agree to comply. The government is responsible to protect the populace and we are responsible to obey and effect change by responding biblically and by participating in the process (see above).

Primary Leadership Considerations

While the primary driver of our decision and practice is our theology, there are also leadership considerations:

1) As church leaders we are asked to be good stewards of the health of our people and of our witness in the community.

The Lord has entrusted us with the care of people we lead. Paul exhorts Timothy to "*guard what has been entrusted to your care.*" (1 Timothy 6:20, NIV). Churches all over the world have seen COVID outbreaks in their churches and have experienced the heartbreak of having people die or become severely impacted by the disease. The cautionary stories, in many cases (especially where the church ignored public health guidelines) are filled with regret by church leaders and scorn by the community.

With the increased number of cases in our local community throughout the fall, we recognize the likelihood of having COVID positive individuals at our in-person services (during the month of November the likelihood of at least one positive person in each service has been greater than 95%). At the same time, we have yet to have any known close contacts in our building.

While we cannot guarantee that no transmissions will occur in our building, we can work diligently to prevent transmissions, and we can learn from the experiences of others.

2) As church leaders we have a missional mandate to continue to reach people and make disciples.

Throughout the pandemic, our church's focus has remained the same, we want to know and follow Jesus Christ. Our attitude has not been to hunker down and endure, but rather, to be faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ in the midst of these different and challenging days. How we have done some of this has changed, but the love and grace of God continues to be made known.

Since the pandemic began, we have seen: people come to know Christ, people recommit their lives to Christ, people answer calls to ministry, and new people come to church for the very first time.

This season will pass. The challenges we face now will be replaced with new challenges. The opportunities we have now are unprecedented, and we need to refuse to become distracted and step fully into the opportunities. The harvest is plentiful. Jesus is not deterred. The gates of hell cannot prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18). Let's refuse to become distracted or divided and take to heart these words from the Apostle Paul, *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus"* Philippians 3:12-14, NIV.