

Our Present Dilemma: Dealing with the Coronavirus Pandemic

Introduction

In the early days of Israel, the nation was comprised of twelve rather distinct tribes which dwelt in their respective land grants that God had given them. Each tribe seemed to have its special and unique characteristics. There are various lists found in Scripture which identify these traits.¹ In 1 Chronicles 12 we have a list of the men who joined with young King David in the formation of his army. Of his army there were men of the tribe of Ephraim “who were “mighty men of valor, famous men throughout their father’s house” (1 Chron. 12:30). The men of Zebulun were those, “who go out to battle, expert in war with all weapons of war” (1 Chron. 12:33. And the men of Dan were ones, “who could keep battle formation” (1 Chron. 12:35). A rather interesting and significant trait characterized the men of the tribe of Issachar. These men were of a different nature, but were also essential to the expansion of David’s kingdom. It is said of them, “*the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do*” (1 Chron. 12:32). They were ones who had the ability to assess present dangers and threats to David’s kingdom and were capable of leading and directing others in waging warfare.

I recall having been drawn to this verse by the publishers of the Banner of Truth Trust, in their preface to the book by **D. Martyn Lloyd Jones** (1899-1981), entitled *Knowing the Times*.² They wrote of the special abilities of Lloyd-Jones to speak to the issues confronting Christendom in the 20th century. His collection of articles in this book are quite good and remain relevant today. He was one of these men whom God raises up from time to time who can see the present scene and speak quite clearly to it in the light of Holy Scripture. Of Lloyd-Jones the editors wrote:

Along with other leaders of the Christian church the influence of Martin Lloyd-Jones will live in the future as well as in the past. Many of the issues raised in these pages continue to affect the lives of churches and are by no means settled. It could be wished that several of these addresses had been in print much earlier. They remain in a real sense ‘tracts of the times’. It is to be fervently hoped that they will be owned of God in this present form and used to prepare another generation like “the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do’ (1 Chron. 12:32).³

We could use some folks in these days like the sons of Issachar who know what Israel ought to do respecting the matters that are confronting us in today’s world. May the Lord raise up such men and women.

For some time we have considered our need to address the issues and implications that our church has faced with respect to the coronavirus and the expectations and demands that our government and communities are imposing on us. I have been hesitant to do so, however, for it seemed that insufficient time had lapsed to assess the events that have transpired and the actions of those in authority. I wish I was a man of Issachar that I might better understand the times and know what Israel ought to do. But I confess that I feel inadequate to speak clearly and authoritatively on these matters, but perhaps we see things now a little more distinctly than earlier.

I would like us to consider the course of action that we have taken and why we have done so and why we have not acted in ways that some believe that we should have done or should be doing. We need wisdom

¹ Cf. Genesis 49; Deuteronomy 33; Judges 1; 1 Chronicles 12.

² I highly recommend the articles contained in this book. They are very relevant and may be seen as formative of a sound gospel ministry.

³ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, **Knowing the Times; Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions, 1942-1977** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. x.

that God gives to His people, the ability to see the world and the events that take place from God's perspective and according to His purposes. We might consider the words of Proverbs 1:1-7 in our reflection on these matters.

¹The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

²To know wisdom and instruction,

To perceive the words of understanding,

³To receive the instruction of wisdom,

Justice, judgment, and equity;

⁴To give prudence to the simple,

To the young man knowledge and discretion—

⁵A wise man will hear and increase learning,

And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel,

⁶To understand a proverb and an enigma,

The words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
But fools despise wisdom and instruction.***

We need wisdom to face the trials that we encounter in this fallen world. And thankfully we have the Lord's promise in James 1:2-7, which reads,

²My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:2-7)

Our greatest desire and our greatest concern is that we fear God above all else, that we desire to know Him and His ways and to govern our thinking and order our lives according to His Word that He has graciously set before us. May He help us in this endeavor.

Perhaps we can best address these matters by making certain assertions and then defend or justify those assertions with biblical instruction and illustration. I believe that we can begin by rehearsing and reaffirming the nature of God and how He works in history.

1. Our God is sovereign and has sent this coronavirus upon our world at this time in history.

This does not remove human responsibility and culpability, but as Christians with reformed convictions we should begin here. This is the overarching principle that we affirm, that our God has called this virus into existence at this time in history and has caused it to spread throughout the world. And in doing so we do affirm that while God causes both blessing and calamity, He is righteous in all of His ways. And so, God could declare to Israel,

So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten,
The crawling locust,
The consuming locust,
And the chewing locust,
My great army ***which I sent among you.*** (Joel 2:25)

Basic to our understanding of our God is that he is the Sovereign Ruler of history, that all things are ordered by Him in order to accomplish His purposes. **Arthur Pink** (1886-1952) commented on the verse, "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

Has God foreordained everything that comes to pass? Has He decreed that what is, was to have been? In the final analysis this is only another way of asking, Is God now *governing* the world and everyone and everything in it? If God is governing the world then is He governing it according to a definite purpose, or aimlessly and at random? If He is governing it according to some purpose, then when was that purpose made? Is God continually changing His purpose and making a new one every day, or was His purpose formed from the beginning? Are God's actions, like ours, regulated by the change of circumstances, or are they the outcome of His eternal purpose? If God formed a purpose before man was created then is that purpose going to be executed according to His original designs and is He now working toward that end? What saith the Scriptures? They declare God is One "who worketh *all things* after the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11).⁴

This would seem to be such an obvious truth that few would take issue with asserting it. And yet even those in "Christian" churches seem to be ignorant or forgetful of this fact. God is the sovereign Ruler over history, calling events to take place in history in order to accomplish His purposes. Consider these few verses:

Amos 4:7-10

"I also withheld rain from you,
When there were still three months to the harvest.
I made it rain on one city,
I withheld rain from another city.
One part was rained upon,
And where it did not rain the part withered.

⁸So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water,
But they were not satisfied;
Yet you have not returned to Me,"
Says the LORD.

⁹"I blasted you with blight and mildew.
When your gardens increased,
Your vineyards,
Your fig trees,
And your olive trees,
The locust devoured them;
Yet you have not returned to Me,"
Says the LORD.

¹⁰"I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt;
Your young men I killed with a sword,
Along with your captive horses;
I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils;
Yet you have not returned to Me,"
Says the LORD.

Jeremiah 29:17-19

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Behold, I will send on them the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, and will make them like rotten figs that cannot be eaten, they are so bad. ¹⁸And I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence; and I will deliver them to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth-- to be a curse, an astonishment, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations

⁴ Arthur Pink, **The Sovereignty of God** (Baker Book House, 1975), p. 135.

where I have driven them, ¹⁹because they have not heeded My words, says the LORD, which I sent to them by My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them; neither would you heed, says the LORD. (Jer. 29:17-19)

There was a time when the leaders of our country understood this truth, that trials and troubles of a nation were the work of a sovereign God who must be sought and appeased, if remedy and restoration were to be seen. If our leaders understood this spiritual reality, they would not be relegating church gatherings as “non-essential.” They would be calling and requesting that we gather safely to seek our God on their behalf and pray that He would deal mercifully and graciously with our land. They would be as the pagan king, Cyrus of Persia, who called for the return of the Jews to Jerusalem and bankrolled them to rebuild the temple, asking only that they pray for him and his sons. Here are the words of Cyrus:

Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king’s expense from taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered. ⁹And whatever they need—young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem—let it be given them day by day without fail, ¹⁰*that they may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons.* (Ezra 6:8-10)

But we are living in godless times in which godless men and women are “governing” our federal and state governments with a wholly secular world view. But at the same time we know and affirm that our God has called them to their positions in office to govern us in the way that they are in these times. And so, perhaps in spite of them, and maybe even by using them, the Lord in His sovereignty has called forth this coronavirus and has spread it across our world. Again, this does not take away human responsibility and the culpability of those who allowed this to occur through their failure or incompetence. But ultimately whether this virus originated in a Wuhan laboratory or wet market, or if some other means was the initial cause, and even though its spread and devastation may be due to the failure of people in authority on every level, God has in His providence brought this upon our world and we are to react and respond to these events with this knowledge. The result of this biblical world view may look something like this:

(1) We are not to be fearful of what we see transpire about us.

As Christians we have a good God who has our best and eternal interests at heart and He will not allow anything to happen to us that He has not ordained. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). We are not as those who are “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Yes, there are times when we may think that we are but in a small ship tossed about and we think that we, too, might perish, but we should not fear. We read in Matthew 8:

Now when He (Jesus) got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. ²⁴And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. ²⁵Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

²⁶But He said to them, “*Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?*” Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. Matt. 8:23-26)

Our God is in sovereign control of all that happens, and we should not fear even when we might be experiencing what may appear to be significant danger to us.

(2) We are to fear God only, and not fear what man can do or has sworn to do to us.

“The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe” (Prov. 29:25). We desire to know and do the will of God in our assessment and response to the events of our times. Wisdom of knowing what God would have us to do first lies here: “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools*

despise wisdom and instruction. And that wisdom is found in His Word as it reveals God and His nature to us and displays the ways of His working in His world.

2. God has various purposes that He accomplishes in His providence. God both punishes evil workers even as He brings salvation and deliverance to His people. **Abraham Lincoln** saw the great slaughter during the days of the Civil War as the acts of Providence. Here are the words of John Piper regarding Lincoln:

Similarly, the horrors of the dead and wounded soldiers assaulted him daily. There were fifty hospitals for the wounded in Washington. The rotunda of the Capitol held 2,000 cots for wounded soldiers. Typically, fifty soldiers a day died in these temporary hospitals. All of this drove Lincoln deeper into the providence of God. “We cannot but believe, that He who made the world still governs it.”

His most famous statement about the providence of God in relation to the Civil War was his Second Inaugural Address, given a month before he was assassinated. It is remarkable for not making God a simple supporter for the Union or Confederate cause. He has his own purposes and does not excuse sin on either side.

“Fondly do we hope—ferently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war might speedily pass away.... Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid with another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”⁵

3. God both saves and sanctifies His people through calamitous events in their lives. By His chastisements the Lord sanctifies His people, producing in them humility, reliance upon Him, and devotion to Him. Here are some more words regarding Abraham Lincoln and his conversion to Christ:

In 1862, when Lincoln was 53 years old, his 11-year-old son Willie died. Lincoln’s wife “tried to deal with her grief by searching out New Age mediums.” Lincoln turned to Phineas Gurley, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington. Several long talks led to what Gurley described as “a conversion to Christ.” Lincoln confided that he was “driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I have nowhere else to go.”

This week we committed to the earth the body of one who was a member of what is often called “the greatest generation.” What made that generation “great”, if it could be called that? Certainly it was the ordeal of the depression era of the 30’s in which their values were shaped, and their experiences equipped them to endure and overcome a great world war of the 40’s from which they came forth victoriously. It is through great trial that good character is molded. This is a paradoxical matter. What is thought would ruin and destroy is the Lord’s instrument for growth and strength.

The Soviet Union was built upon the oppression and exploitation of slave labor of millions. **Alexander Solzhenitsyn** endured decades of hardship in the Stalinist prison system. But through his experience, he not only was converted to Christ, but his entire Christian world view took shape. One wrote of him:

“His imprisonment in Joseph Stalin’s ‘corrective labor camps’ led not to despair but to the discovery of goodness:

It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor

⁵ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/abraham-lincolns-path-to-divine-providence>

between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts... That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: ‘*Bless you, prison!*’ I ... have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: ‘*Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!*’” (The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956, pp. 615-617).⁶

If we took this to heart then our greatest concern and desire would be that we learn and benefit from what our Lord is taking us through at this time. To desire primarily “to get back to normal” is not a very godly or biblical pursuit. Again, to cite James, “My brethren, *count it all joy when you fall into various trials*”, for what the Lord produces in us through those trials (Jam. 1:2).

4. God works in the souls of both His people and His enemies to accomplish His purposes.

God is sovereign over all people everywhere, whether they believe and belong to Him or if they deny Him and live in defiance of Him. Through them all God accomplishes His good purposes. Here are the statements of **Arthur Pink** regarding this matter:

A. God’s Method of Dealing with the Righteous

(1) God exerts upon His own elect a *quickening* influence or power. [In other words the Lord imparts spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead.]

(2) God exerts upon His own elect an *energizing* influence or power. [This enables His people to serve Him acceptably.]

(3) God exerts upon His own elect a *directing* influence or power. [This speaks of His control of them inwardly, not just through outward circumstances.]

(4) God exerts upon His own elect a *preserving* influence or power.

B. God’s Method of Dealing with the Wicked

(1) God exerts upon the wicked a *restraining* influence by which they are *prevented* from doing what they are naturally inclined to do.

(2) God exerts upon the wicked a *softening* influence disposing them contrary to their natural inclinations to do that which will promote *His* cause.

(3) God exerts upon the wicked a *directing* influence so that good is made to result from their intended evil.

(4) God also *hardens* the hearts of wicked men and *blinds* their minds.⁷

Knowing that God works in people’s hearts to accomplish His purposes should not result in us being totally passive in our attempts to resist and correct wrongdoing and our efforts to promote truth and justice. But a knowledge of God’s sovereignty over all people both in their outward behavior and their inward thinking should enable us not to be unduly disturbed or distressed when we observe what people do or what they fail to do.

5. God’s purposes in the details of history are beyond our ability to predict or to assess.

What we mean by this is that God more often than not accomplishes His ends using the evil of men and the dark actions of His providence. God often works in ironic ways. We think that some event portends disaster, but instead God brings His deliverance through that event. Job could write of God at work in his

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Arthur Pink, **The Sovereignty of God** (Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 140-152.

suffering, “He does great things past finding out, Yes, wonders without number” (Job 9:10). This is why we are to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

The Word of God is full of ironic events and ironic sayings that fall out to the furthering of God’s purposes. Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery into Egypt, but God exalts Joseph in Egypt so that he becomes the deliverer of his brothers and their offspring. David is the youngest and least of Jesse’s sons. He was but a shepherd following his father’s sheep. No one would have thought God would direct Samuel to him, and even Samuel did not think so initially. But God made David become the shepherd of Israel and one of the clearest types of the Lord Jesus Himself. And in the New Testament there are examples of the Jewish leaders making derogatory comments about Jesus, but God turned them about that they were glorious truths and promises of His character and work. The Pharisees and scribes sought to discredit Jesus, “This man receives sinners and eats with them”, but this became unintentionally a word of hope and encouragement to many sinners from that time until today. God accomplishes His most notable work in ironic ways, in order to humble mankind and to demonstrate to the world that He alone is God.

We have told the little fable of the Chinese farmer who wisely taught his neighbors that we are incapable of assessing what events are actually good and what events are actually detrimental to us.

There once lived an old wise Chinese man who was a farmer in a small village. One day his only horse for which he was totally dependent, ran away. His neighbors came to him to console him in his loss. But to their surprise he asked the question, “How do you know it was bad?” The next day, his horse returned with two wild horses following it. When the neighbors heard this, they came to the old man to celebrate his good fortune. But the old man responded to them, “How do you know it was good?” The next day the old man’s only son attempted to break one of the horses, but instead fell off the horse and broke his leg very severely. The neighbors again gathered to offer their sympathy. But the old man asked them, “How do you know that it was bad?” And then the very next day, the warlord came through the village and took away all of the able-bodied young men. The old man’s son remained with his father.

This fictional story illustrates the truth that I would hope all of us would understand and affirm: ***We are incapable of discerning the will of God based on our observance and assessment of events that transpire in our lives.*** We should affirm that the Scriptures alone are the only reliable guide for us in matters of faith and practice.

And so, even though we may have to deal with the errant and capricious designs and dictates of people in authority that encroach upon our lives, we should be careful in drawing conclusions and making declarations that we may later need to modify or even withdraw when what God has planned has unfolded before us. Certainly we should be patient, not anxious, or unduly angry, but trust ourselves to our God who is not mismanaging the events that come into our lives. Our peace should not be contingent on circumstances, but should be grounded in our understanding of who our God is and what He has promised us in Jesus Christ.

Let us now deal with a matter that is not an easy one to work through:

5. How are we to react and respond to the government authorities who place restrictions upon us and obstacles before us that limit our liberty and hinder our serving and worshipping our Lord?

(1) What kind of opinion and attitude should we have toward the authorities in government?

First, let us consider the “state” and its relationship to the (local) church. Is our secular government the adversary of our church, or is it our friend? The fact is that God has ordained them both. God has established four arenas of authority in the lives of His people. There is ***the church, the state, the family, and the work place*** (or in educational institutions). The Scriptures give very clear instructions on how Christians should regard and respond and react to these categories of human authority. Within the local church Christians are to submit to the church leaders that God has ordained for them.

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” (Heb. 13:17)

Within the family wives are to submit to the leadership of their husband. “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). And children are to submit and obey both their parents. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph. 6:1). In the work place the employer or supervisor is in authority and should be obeyed.⁸ And citizens are to submit and obey the laws of governing authorities over them. For example, we read 1 Peter 2:13-17:

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme,¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—¹⁶as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. ¹⁷Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

We are to obey the civil authorities, even “every ordinance of man”, doing so for “the Lord’s sake.”

Our submission to civil authorities is not conditioned on whether or not we perceive that they are doing rightly or that they are concerned for our best interests. God has established the powers that be, not only has He ordained their offices and the degree of authority that they exhibit, but He has placed the very ones who are in those positions of authority. They are there due to the appointment of God. They may not be concerned at all for the best interests of the ones that God has entrusted to them, but we are to obey them because God in His sovereign purposes has moved them to command us, as He has determined that they do. And so, even if the human authorities are godless, unjust, and unloving, we are to submit to them because God has appointed them and is controlling them in His sovereign power in order to accomplish His ends and purposes for which you or I may be clueless. The apostle wrote of this manner of total subjection in 1 Peter 2:18-25:

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, *but also to the harsh.* ¹⁹*For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.* ²⁰For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. ²¹For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

²²“Who committed no sin,
Nor was deceit found in His mouth”;

²³who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. ²⁵For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

(2) Are we to obey all laws uncritically? Of course not.

Of course we are not to obey man’s laws if in doing so we would disobey God and His laws. I do not know of anyone who would suggest we should. Peter responded to the Jewish authorities who challenged the apostles: “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” Peter and the other apostles replied, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:27-29). But can it be legitimately said that the governing authorities are presently “strictly commanding us not to teach in His name”, when they are restricting all citizens from gathering in groups of more than 10 people? As one rightly said, “They are trying to protect us,

⁸ Commonly those verses that speak of “servants” being obedient to their “masters” are cited to illustrate that an employee is to submit to his supervisor or business owner.

not persecute us.” And even if what they are dictating to us may seem to be rather capricious and useless, it is within their God-given jurisdiction to do so.

There is a popular reformed blogger, **Tim Challies**, who wrote the following words recently. Consider his attitude toward governmental authority reflected in his comments.

I was asked the other day what I was thankful for in the midst of a pandemic. My answer surprised even me. “I’m thankful for government.” It was surprising, but true. Even as I sit at home during a long, forced lockdown, even as I wonder whether anyone really has a master plan, even as I scratch my head at some of the measures being enacted, even as I grow in my concern about some of the liberties being curtailed, I’ve never been so thankful for government. I’d even say, “I’ve never been so thankful for *God’s good gift of government.*”

As Christians, we understand that God is the ultimate authority over all that is. We understand as well that rather than exercising this authority directly, God delegates it to human beings. He delegates some of it to civil governments, some of it to the church, some of it to parents, and so on. As Paul insists at the beginning of Romans 13, “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” This puts a clear calling on each of us: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” If we wish to submit to God, we must submit to the authorities he has established. Said otherwise, obedience to God manifests itself in obedience to government.

Christians may dispute the exact parameters of governmental authority, but surely we can at least agree that matters of public health fall under the jurisdiction of the state. It is the role of government, not church, to enact policies that protect and preserve the health of the nation. And when the government enacts such policies, it falls to us to submit to its authority. After all, whether our governmental leaders know it or not, they are acting out an authority that has been conferred to them by God. And right now, I’m thankful that God had the wisdom to institute government for times and situations like this. I’m thankful government has accepted the responsibility and is acting on it. I’m experiencing the joy that comes with obeying God’s duly-appointed authorities as they act within their mandate.

That’s not to say I necessarily understand every decision or that I necessarily agree with every action the various levels of government have taken. But that’s the very nature of submission. God doesn’t call us to follow leadership only when we fully agree with it. It has struck me that the New Testament’s posture toward civil leaders is generally positive. It seems to nudge us toward the assumption that governments are acting wisely, not foolishly; that our opinion toward their actions should generally be favorable, not skeptical; that our words about them should be supportive, not rebellious; and that our response to their decrees should generally be submissive, not resistant. Romans 13:1-7 is not about the limits of governmental authority, but about the goodness and necessity of Christian obedience. The same is true of 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Titus 3:1, not to mention Matthew 22:21.

Of course there are times when obedience to a higher authority means we must disobey a lower authority. “Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men’” (Acts 5:29). But we may do this only when that lesser authority is overstepping its bounds or when obeying government would be disobeying God. For every other occasion, God gives us a sober warning: “whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” When government acts within its mandate, we must obey. When we fail to obey, we risk judgment—God’s own judgment as it is carried out by the state. But, conversely, when we obey, we gain joy—the joy that always comes with obedience.

But even then, we owe more than mere obedience. We also owe respect and honor. As every parent learns from their children, it is possible to act in strict obedience, yet in a way that is disrespectful and dishonoring. It is in the context of the Christian’s relationship to government that Paul commands, “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, *respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*” In the very same way that we must pay the full measure of our taxes, we must “pay” the full measure of respect and honor.

When I put all of this together—God’s delegated authority, the necessity of submission, the role of government in acting to protect and preserve the health of the people, the call for respect and honor—I find myself joyful, grateful. I am joyful to obey the mandates of my government as it tries to lead through a grueling, opaque situation. I’m grateful for God’s good gift of government, and grateful even for my

government. Behind it, I see him. In its authority, I see his. Of course this government will lead imperfectly. They will make poor decisions. They will make mistakes. They will even act sinfully at times. They are, after all, human beings and subject to every kind of frailty, sin, and limitation. But God was not unaware of what was in the heart of men when he commanded through Peter “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him” (1 Peter 2:13-14).⁹

I am generally an anti-government kind of guy. But I think that this writer is probably closer to the spirit of the Scriptures than I tend to be. Let us ponder these matters and not be too quick to pass judgment and make pronouncements, lest we find ourselves fighting against God.

The belief that you only need to submit to someone in authority if he/she is leading you rightly and lovingly is not biblical. True submission is demonstrated when you comply even when you disagree, perhaps vehemently so, with the motivations or the wisdom of leadership. Can you imagine how our military would function if servicemen only submitted and obeyed the directives of officers when they agreed with their commands?

But may we never resist or rebel? We cannot address that here and now, but we can say that the first step to be taken is to learn how to appeal to authority in a spirit of humility, while showing respect and rendering honor.¹⁰ The individual in authority may not personally be worthy of honor. He may be “a fox” as was Herod (Luke 13:32). But the position that he occupies is ordained of God and God has placed that man or woman in that position, and therefore due regard is to be given to him/her. Yes, in a spirit of humility and respect it is appropriate to call an authority to his God-given responsibility and accountability. That is what our Lord did with Pontius Pilate, who had said to Him,

“Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?”

Jesus answered, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.”

¹²From then on Pilate sought to release Him... (John 19:10-12)

It was to the church in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, that the Apostle Paul wrote these words:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. ***For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.*** ²***Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.*** ³For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵***Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.*** ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, ***honor to whom honor.*** (Rom. 13:1-7)

It had only been about 8 years earlier when Emperor Claudius exiled from the city all of the Jews, as well as the Christian Jews of the time. We read of this in Acts 18:1 and 2,

⁹ I received this daily email blog from **Tim Challies** on 4-29-2020.

¹⁰ Last week a group of about 260 pastors signed a letter sent to Governor Baker of Massachusetts. It was a well written letter that both appealed and sought to change the direction that the governor has taken toward churches. <https://newbostonpost.com/2020/05/07/260-clerics-tell-massachusetts-governor-that-church-is-essential-and-its-time-to-re-open/>

After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (*because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome*); and he came to them.

This edict had brought great hardship and no doubt loss of goods and loss of work to the Lord's people.¹¹ But Paul, nevertheless, commanded submission and obedience to every ordinance.

In this passage the apostle declared that for one to "resist" the government authority, he "resists the ordinance of God." In other words, God regards the one, who resists the government's authority and the laws that the government has instituted, as resisting Him. Of course we understand that we are not to obey governmental authorities if in doing so it would mean disobeying God. That is the exception.

But there are those who disregard the instruction or edicts of authorities because they disagree with the manner that they are being led. The Word of God says with regard to our attitude toward government authorities: "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:7). But I have heard some Christians literally disparage Romans 13 mocking its language, and in so doing certainly they were not rendering "honor to whom honor" is due. It would seem that they show no regard or honor for government authorities, which is itself a violation to the teaching of God's Word. They seem to exhibit a vitriol and disgust for any and all human authority within the government realm. But when I read and hear the manner that some Christians speak regarding the government and its authorities, I do not hear the words or witness the attitude that should be theirs as Christians. Their spirit does not align with that of Joseph and Daniel who both had to live within oppressive political conditions. Honor is not to be rendered to government officials because their actions are necessarily honorable or righteous. Honor and respect are to be rendered through our speech and attitudes toward government authorities because God has ordained their position of authority and has appointed every one of them to their positions.

Public health is a legitimate responsibility of government. God has given the responsibility and the authority to government to preserve and protect the life of its citizens. And though they are blatantly inconsistent in that they promote abortion as an "essential service" even when they declare gathering for church as "non-essential", we cannot set aside their edicts easily. And God may have in His providence directed them to impose those very sanctions for our good, even if it was not their intention to do so. And by the way, quarantine is biblical. Quarantine has been a historical practice throughout the world and throughout history, including biblical history (cf. Lev. 13).¹²

(3) What of the clear command of Hebrews 10:24 and 25, not to forsake the assembling together as a church?

It is said by some that we are sinning by obeying the government rather than obeying God: "We are sinning by not meeting to worship on the Lord's Day." They look at Hebrews 10:24f as a "game changer." There we read:

¹¹ This is one of four verses in the book of Acts that describes an event that can be tied to a specific year in the first century. This event happened in AD 49. There is speculation as to why the Roman Emperor Claudius issued this edict. A Roman historian, **Suetonius**, wrote a history of Claudius about 75 years after the event. He wrote, "*As the Jews were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Crestus, he banished them from Rome.*" This would have meant, more than likely, the loss of property and goods as the Roman authorities required the Jews to leave abruptly. Now the speculation is that Suetonius got the name wrong of the instigator of the Jewish riots. Instead of **Crestus**, it was due to **Christus**, the Latin name for Christ, that had caused the dissension and riots. This is speculation, of course, but it is certainly possible, even likely that this was the case. It is reasoned that the Jews' expulsion from the city of Rome was due to riots caused by the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Jewish community and the subsequent division of people when some embraced the gospel and others rejected it. This was a common occurrence. When Jews of a certain city had embraced Jesus Christ as their Messiah, the unbelieving Jews often became hostile and sometimes violent toward the Christians. But through this event, God brought Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth where He used them greatly in their service alongside the apostle Paul and in their instruction to Apollos, whom God then used greatly in the proclamation of the gospel (Cf. Acts 18:24-28).

¹² People with contagious diseases were confined to their homes for periods of time, generally a week or two at a time.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

They argue that we are forsaking the assembly of ourselves as churches, and therefore we are blameworthy. But it may be that they have taken this passage of Hebrews 10:24f and made it say more than it does. They would define “forsaking the assembling” as any refusal or failure to attend church on the Lord’s Day; therefore, not to meet due to this pandemic is to *disobey* God.

And so, the charge that we are sinning is one that we take seriously, but considering all the factors, I do not believe that it is a legitimate charge. First, precisely speaking, we are not violating Hebrews 10:24f for what it was addressing. The verse was not speaking of those who simply failed to meet regularly, but it was addressing those who had refused to meet because they were fearful of being seen and associated with Christians in the church for they would as a consequence suffer political persecution, maybe personal danger. There were Jewish Christians who were afraid of persecution for being Christian. Increasingly Rome perceived Christianity not as a Jewish sect, which would have been permissible, but as an illegal religion. These Jewish Christians could avert hostility and persecution by distancing themselves from the church and its gatherings, returning to practice Judaism only. They were literally forsaking the Christian faith in their failure and refusal to gather in their churches. We are not guilty of this. We are not racking up sin week to week by obeying governmental directives. We are providentially (God directing our civil authorities) to limit the assembly of people, churches or otherwise, for a time, until they determine it is safe for society. If we knew that a hurricane was to strike us next Sunday, and we decided not to meet because of the danger in doing so, we could not be legitimately charged with transgressing Hebrews 10:24 and 25. And if we have been prohibited from gathering for a limited time due to the danger it would pose to one another, it would not necessarily mean we were violating Hebrews 10:24 and 25.

(4) Prudence and Scripture require us to submit to our civil authorities in this matter.

Frankly this is not my personal preference, for by nature I am a rebel, but in my conscience I must bow to God’s Word and providence in this matter. I admit I am clawing and scratching while being drug in this direction, but it must be so. If the time came that we became convinced that the state was deliberately attempting to silence our testimony of the gospel, we would change course. We do not what we do out of fear (although I have been falsely so charged). Ultimately, love for God and for others directs us in our course.

Out of concern for our Christian brothers and sisters, particularly our senior and vulnerable members, we must act cautiously. Consider the Skagit Valley Chorale in Washington State. Perhaps they wished that they had a prohibition of 10 in assembly for when their choir gathered for practice fairly recently. One of the choir members felt ill. He met with the group anyway. Within two weeks 52 of the choir members tested positive for the virus and two had died.¹³

But we must also be concerned for our church’s testimony in our community. Without condemning the actions some others have chosen to take, we believe that our testimony for the gospel would be damaged if we acted in defiance of current restrictions placed upon us. We would be perceived as not caring for others in our community, perhaps even being complicit in the spread and continuance of this disease. If a qualification of a pastor of this church is that “he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:7), should this not also be true of the local church itself? We have a good name in our community. Through our food and clothes closet ministry, the assistance we give to many, and the involvement of our church in community events, we have been established in the minds of many outside of this church to be a positive source of strength and health to our community. We have non-Christians recommending our church to people in need, for in doing so they know that people will be well taken care of by us. If we were to defy governmental restrictions regarding meeting at this time, how would the people in our community view us? It would appear to people that we are being callous with regard to one another and to them. Not only are we not doing what we can to arrest and diminish this virus, they would

¹³ See the AP article at the end of the notes.

regard our actions and behavior to be contributing to the problem and placing them in greater danger as well. We would in effect damage our witness for the gospel by our insistence to do what we want to do. Let us pray that our Lord lift these restrictions upon us. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov. 21:1). Let us pray to that end.

SHORELINE, Wash. (AP) — Disease trackers are calling a choir practice in Washington state a superspreader event that illustrates how easily the coronavirus can pass from person to person.

The act of singing itself may have spread the virus in the air and onto surfaces, according to a report from Skagit County Public Health published Tuesday.

“One individual present felt ill, not knowing what they had, and ended up infecting 52 other people,” said lead author Lea Hamner, calling the outbreak a tragedy.

Two choir members died of COVID-19 after attending the March 10 practice of the Skagit Valley Chorale. The rehearsal was held nearly two weeks before the state’s stay-at-home order.

Other superspreader events are known: A Chicago cluster of 16 cases, including three deaths, stemmed from a funeral and a birthday party. South Korea is investigating an outbreak linked to nightclubs reopening earlier this month.

The singers sat 6 to 10 inches apart in different configurations during the 2 1/2 hour rehearsal at a church in Mount Vernon, Washington, about 60 miles north of Seattle, according to the report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Choir members had no physical contact, although some snacked on cookies and oranges or helped stack chairs, they told investigators. The virus could have spread when exhaled droplets landed on those items.

Another theory? A fine mist of virus particles emitted during singing could have contributed, the report suggests. Some people emit more particles than others and such emissions can happen with loud talking or, possibly, singing.

The virus is thought to primarily spread through droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

The singers felt their first symptoms — cough, fever, muscle pain or headaches — one to 12 days after the practice. The sick singers’ average age was 69 and most were women, nearly matching the demographics of choir practice attendees.

Understanding how the coronavirus spreads is important for preventing and tracking the disease it causes. The CDC recommends avoiding large groups, wearing cloth masks in public and staying at least 6 feet apart from others.
