

In late 2019 and early 2020, a novel strain of coronavirus (designated “COVID-19”) spread rapidly across the world, soon becoming a pandemic that posed significant risks to the health and lives of many people. As a result, national, state, and local governments initiated quarantines and stay-at-home orders on an unprecedented scale. In submission to these decrees, and in a desire to protect the lives of their members and communities, many churches, including the churches of Evangel Presbytery, decided to cancel all in-person services and functions for an extended time.

In the context of these governmental orders, and the social and economic upheavals that followed, many discussions arose throughout the evangelical and Reformed world about the appropriateness, extent, and even legitimacy of such orders, and more broadly the nature of ecclesiastical and civil authority in God’s economy. It is from this context that the following statement arose; we trust it will help provide wisdom and application in the days and years to come.

STATEMENT ON SPHERE AUTHORITY, WORSHIP, AND COVID-19 QUARANTINES

Whatever title then men may hold, they are to be listened to only on the condition that they do not lead us away from obeying God. So we must examine all their traditions by the rule of the Word of God. We must obey princes and others who are in authority, but only in so far as they do not deny to God His rightful authority as the supreme King, Father, and Lord.¹

According to the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, all authority is delegated by God (Matt. 28:18; Rom. 13:1b). Thus the Christian is under obligation to God to honor and obey those God has placed over him. God’s Word says, “Whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God” (Rom. 13:2a). The sovereignty of God, therefore, is the essential source of all authority among men.²

These authorities appointed by God have jurisdiction in three spheres, exercising familial authority, civil authority, and ecclesiastical (church) authority.³ Each sphere has some territory it claims sovereignty over which is uncontested by the other spheres, some it acknowledges sharing with the other spheres, and some territory it claims sovereignty over which the other spheres contest or deny.

¹ Calvin, John, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 1 (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*), ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom36/calcom36.xi.iv.html.

² Kuyper, Abraham, “Calvinism and Politics,” in *Lectures on Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 90.

³ *Westminster Larger Catechism*: “Q. 124. Who are meant by father and mother in the fifth commandment? By father and mother, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God’s ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth.”

Familial authorities (husbands, fathers, mothers) preside over the household while civil authorities (employers, councilors, military officers, police officers, public officials, governors, kings, presidents) preside over the city gate and church authorities (pastors, elders, deacons) preside over the Church. While it is a long-established principle of tradition, law, and wisdom that the authorities presiding over each of these spheres should, so far as possible, avoid intermeddling in the other spheres, one man's duty is another man's intermeddling and another man's oppression. Thus, much of the history of the Western world is an account of conflicts over and between these spheres' authorities and the ways one or another of the three spheres has thrown its weight behind another sphere in its conflict with the third sphere.

As to this Christian doctrine of sphere authority as it pertains to civil authorities, Scripture says:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-8).

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king (1 Peter 2:13-17).

As it pertains to familial authorities, Scripture says:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22).

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you (Exodus 20:12).

And as it pertains to Church authorities, Scripture says:

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19).

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account (Hebrews 13:17).

Some believe, speak, and act as if the boundaries between these spheres are easily seen and maintained such that, for instance, the exercise of authority inside the home is none of the business of civil or church authorities, the exercise of authority in the civil realm is none of the business of church or familial authorities, and the exercise of authority in the church is none of the business of civil or familial authorities.

Not true. For instance, fathers and mothers are accountable, principally to civil, but also to church authorities, for violence committed within their home. Pastors and elders are accountable both to familial and civil authorities for sexual sin and crimes committed within their church-house or during church activities. Civil authorities are accountable both to familial and church authorities for failing to protect worship from suppression through violence or police action. There are endless such examples that could be listed, but the point to be acknowledged is that, whether that authority recognizes it or not, each sphere is accountable to the other two spheres for its exercise of authority when that exercise is inimical to the well-being and proper function of one or both of the other spheres.

Even so, there are boundaries which limit the authority of each sphere. God has limited the Church to enforcing Her authority through the administration of sacraments, moral suasion, and excommunication,⁴ whereas He has granted the civil authority the sword to enforce its authority.⁵ God has denied familial authority the administration of the sacraments and the sword in the enforcement of its authority,⁶ but granted fathers and mothers corporal punishment of children as well as instruction and moral suasion.⁷

Exercising the power of the sword, the civil authority has authority to protect life through quarantine.

⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 25.3: "Unto this catholic and visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto."

⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 23.1: "God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers."

⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 27.4: "There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained."

⁷ *Westminster Larger Catechism*: "Q. 129. What is required of superiors towards their inferiors? It is required of superiors, according to that power they receive from God, and that relation wherein they stand, to love, pray for, and bless their inferiors; to instruct, counsel, and admonish them; countenancing, commending, and rewarding such as do well; and discountenancing, reproving, and chastising such as do ill; protecting, and providing for them all things necessary for soul and body: and by grave, wise, holy, and exemplary carriage, to procure glory to God, honor to themselves, and so to preserve that authority which God has put upon them."

As a general law of neutral applicability, a quarantine at times interferes incidentally with the worship of God. This incidental interference in itself does not necessarily exceed the civil sphere's authority as long as it is understood to be temporary and localized, lasting no longer and extending no farther than the conditions that gave rise to it.

Yet, through a protracted, extensive, and comprehensive quarantine whose sway over the lives of the people is nearly absolute, the civil sphere does exceed its authority. When a sphere exceeds its authority and acts *ultra vires*, its acts are void.⁸ Even for acts that are void from the beginning or become void over time, familial and ecclesiastical spheres must approach the proper response thereto through prayer, wisdom, humility, and honor, if not exact obedience, to the civil sphere.⁹

One exercise of *ultra vires* power in the current crisis is a declaration from the civil sphere that the church is an essential or inessential entity. The civil sphere has no authority to confer or withhold essential status regarding an institution that God Himself ordained for the gathering in,

⁸ Calvin writes, "If [the civil magistrates] command anything against [the King of Kings], let it go unesteemed." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.32.

William Blackstone recognizes that (1) revealed law is "infinitely" more authoritative than natural law; (2) both are "foundations" of human laws; and (3) "no human laws should be suffered to contradict" them:

The doctrines thus delivered we call the revealed or divine law, and they are to be found only in the holy scriptures. These precepts, when revealed, are found upon comparison to be really a part of the original law of nature, as they tend in all their consequences to man's felicity. But we are not from thence to conclude that the knowledge of these truths was attainable by reason, in its present corrupted state; since we find that, until they were revealed, they were hid from the wisdom of ages. As then the moral precepts of this law are indeed of the same original with those of the law of nature, so their intrinsic obligation is of equal strength and perpetuity. Yet undoubtedly the revealed law is (humanly speaking) of infinitely more authority than what we generally call the natural law. Because one is the law of nature, expressly declared so to be by God himself; the other is only what, by the assistance of human reason, we imagine to be that law. If we could be as certain of the latter as we are of the former, both would have an equal authority; but, till then, they can never be put in any competition together.

UPON these two foundations, the law of nature and the law of revelation, depend all human laws; that is to say, no human laws should be suffered to contradict these.

William Blackstone, 1 Commentaries *42.

⁹ Calvin writes, "If anything in a public ordinance requires amendment, let [private citizens] not raise a tumult, or put their hand to the task—all of them ought to keep their hands bound in this respect—but let them commit the matter to the judgment of the magistrate, whose hand alone here is free. I mean, let them not venture on anything without a command." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.23.

sanctification, and protection of His people.¹⁰ Instead of the word “status,” prior generations would have used “station,” a word that communicates solidity, dignity, and a God-ordained assignment of an individual or institution.

Of course, the civil authority might recognize the church as essential in the same way it would recognize any other truth declared by God, but such recognition does not “create” the truth or confer the station. And it should never be understood to do so. No one creates the moon by observing it.

When the civil authority assigns essential status to the church as it would to any number of nonprofits, businesses, or social gatherings, it has arrogated to itself authority not delegated by God. It communicates to the public things that are untrue. The church, to use another legal expression, is *sui generis*. The church is an institution of God so unique, so long-standing, and so destined for the blessed and eternal work of worshiping God that to describe it as just another “business,” “nonprofit,” “social gathering,” or “religious entity” is to subject the church and Her Head, Jesus Christ, to abject denigration.

This isn’t to say the civil sphere’s quarantine must exempt the church. But it is to say there are limits to its authority. No reasonable person would claim the civil sphere has authority to quarantine its people, including the church, in perpetuity. The question becomes what period less than perpetuity and what conditions would render a quarantine *ultra vires* at the point of interfering with the duties of the familial and ecclesiastical spheres in their worship of God? More broadly, what period of quarantine and what conditions are inimical to the well-being and proper function of the familial sphere and ecclesiastical sphere?

Given the unprecedented crisis and worldwide quarantine that has proceeded for several months, with some signs in some quarters of indefinite continuation, it is proper for the familial sphere and ecclesiastical sphere to consider how far their obligations of obedience to the civil sphere extend in the matter of worship. In other words, the civil sphere has no authority to render the familial and ecclesiastical spheres so deteriorated and prostrate under quarantine they have no ability to fulfill their God-given duties which themselves are spiritually necessary and thus life-sustaining since man lives not by bread alone.

¹⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 23.3: “Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in His Church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”

There is no strict formula possible to answer the question for each sphere in each locale laboring under various levels of quarantine stringency and infectious risk. With wisdom and prayer and a humble posture, the familial shepherd and ecclesiastical shepherd must assess the condition of the flock under their respective care and the condition and risk of the open pasture. If those flocks are languishing because of lack of physical food or spiritual food or are at risk of wandering away from the fold towards the cliff, then the shepherd must see to it that the sheep are fed and protected, obeying the civil authority where possible, and disobeying where such obedience would cause them to disobey God. It is hoped that such shepherds exercised submission to the civil authority, modeling it for the sheep, when the crisis was in its early stages and no one knew the degree to which a clear and present danger existed.

May God have mercy on us, forgive our sins, and lift this judgment from our land.