

CREEKSIDE, COVID AND GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS

This document expresses, through a series of questions and statements, WHY Creekside Church has approached this “Covid” season as we have. We welcome your feedback, challenges, questions, and encouragement as together we navigate this unique and difficult time to the glory of God.

1. What are the pertinent Biblical passages that address our present situation as it relates to government and the church?

Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” And they marveled at him.

Mark 12:17 ESV

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”

John 18:36 ESV

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

Romans 13:1-7 ESV

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.

Acts 5:29 ESV

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 to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

1 Peter 2:13-17 NIV

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25 NIV

(See also Luke 20:19-26; Matthew 17:24-27; 1 Peter 2:13-17)

2. What does the bible say about the relationship between the government, the church and me?

There are three separate spheres of authority in life. They are government, church and family. The leadership in each sphere is responsible to direct and protect those under its authority. Relative to this document, the government must not seek to control those areas the church is responsible for and the church must not step into the sphere the government is responsible for (Mark 12:17, Acts 5:29).

So, where do we draw the line between the government and its control over the church?

There are circumstances where individuals and churches must refuse to submit to the government. Scripture illustrates this. The midwives refused Pharaoh's orders to kill the male Jewish boys at birth (Exodus 1:16-17); Rahab refused to reveal the location of the Israelite spies (Joshua 6:25); Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship anything or anyone other than God (Daniel 3:16-18); and Peter and the apostles continued to share the gospel (Acts 5:29) when ordered to stop.

But what of our present situation? Does the government have the right to call us to wear masks, sanitize our hands, keep six feet away from others and in the case of the church, restrict attendance at various ministry events, including worship services?

The primary passages that speak to this question are Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Both passages drive home similar key points. (The bolded statements are direct quotes from those passages.)

1. The government has authority.
2. Government authority has been given to it by God.
 - a. **there is no authority except from God,**
 - b. **those that exist have been instituted by God.**
 - c. **whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed**
 - d. **he is God's servant**
 - e. **he is the servant of God**
 - f. **who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer**
 - g. **for the Lord's sake to every human institution**
3. We are to honour and submit to the governing authority over us
 - a. **be subject to the governing authorities**
 - b. **whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed**
 - c. **fear of the one who is in authority**
 - d. **be in subjection**
 - e. **Be subject for the Lord's sake**
 - f. **Honor the emperor.**

The government has been put in place by God as an authority over us and our first response to the government is to honour and submit. When we honour and submit to the government we are honouring and submitting to God. Therefore, when the government's authority touches down on our personal life or on the life of the church, we need to ask the key question,

"How can we honour and submit to the authority of the government in this specific area without violating our ultimate allegiance to God?"

There are areas where it is easy to submit to governing authorities and there are others where it is clear that submission would be wrong. And there are areas where there are no biblical narratives or specific instructions that help define the boundaries. Often those are areas where good people differ.

3. Should we honour and submit to the government when it comes to wearing masks, washing our hands, keeping six feet apart and following the capacity restrictions for church worship experiences?

While individuals may argue that some of these restrictions are unhealthy, we would be hard pressed to suggest that all of them violate one's loyalty to God.

But what about capacity limits on church worship and ministry services?

At Creekside we believe we can both submit to and honour the government in the area of restricted attendance and at the same time not violate our allegiance to God.

But there are challenges to our position. Here are some of those challenges and our response to them.

4. Hebrews 10:24-25 calls on us to "not give up meeting together". By submitting to the government restrictions, particularly during a lockdown, are we guilty of disobeying God?

The Hebrews passage is a call to meet together. Some see it as a command to attend Sunday worship services on a regular basis. Some suggest it could just as easily refer to small group gatherings or one to one experiences that serve the similar purposes of mutual encouragement and the motivating of one another to love more deeply and serve more readily.

Does the Hebrews 10:24-25 passage call on us to defy the present government worship service capacity restrictions? We do not believe so.

We have always made exceptions to the Hebrews 10:24-25 call. We have regarded sickness, surgery, accident, disease, aging, and such as viable reasons for not enforcing the mandate of Hebrews 10:24-25 on individuals as far as Sunday worship attendance or attendance at any other church function. Some circumstances such as war and viruses and personal illness have historically kept individuals from Sunday gatherings for months if not years at a time. Were those people living in disobedience?

In addition, most of us agree that some people (seniors, people with significant health concerns etc.) would be wise, given their present personal health concerns, to isolate themselves from any possibility of catching the virus. By doing so we would not accuse them of living in disobedience.

During the pandemic many churches do not have access to a facility to meet in because the schools, community centres, movie theatres and so on are closed. Are they disobeying this call on the church? We would, I trust, all agree that extenuating circumstances justify different activities and we are convinced that our present circumstances are just such a time.

Given that the capacity limits allow us to meet, even if in smaller numbers; and given that capacity restrictions are intended to be short term; and given that restrictions are applied to more than the church but include the marketplace and families and so on; and given that the intent of such restrictions are for the good of the community at large; and given that technology enables us to fulfill in large part the purposes for meeting together as described in Hebrews 10:24-25 so that we can continue **to stir up one another to love and good works** and continue **encouraging one another**; we believe we can submit to the government in this way and still be in submission to our Heavenly Father and His call on the church.

5. Aren't the restrictions adding negatively to health concerns?

There is significant evidence that both covid without restrictions and covid with restrictions poses many sociological, economic, physical, mental and spiritual health concerns. Finding the right measure of and placement of the restrictions is a challenging decision based often times on a moving target. There is little doubt that the government has made mistakes, has been inconsistent and has, at times, added to the fear Ontarians are experiencing during this time. But there is also no doubt that this is a very complex situation. Seeking to find the right balance is challenging and yet vital. The government needs to be sensitive to all these values. The church needs to do its part as well. Creekside must continue to seek to meet the spiritual, mental, social, and economic needs of our church family and as we are able, continue to reach out to those living in our local community.

In a democracy it is important that we carry some of the weight as citizens and share our concerns and ideas with our representative MPPs. But we must do it with grace. The way some Christians and Pastors have communicated with those in positions of leadership over us has been a far cry from the kind of content and attitude God calls us to. Remember Colossians 3:12. **Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.**

6. I have heard some people claim that the church is being targeted. Do you agree?

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Some maintain that many retail establishments can open up, with fewer if any restrictions, while churches are treated less favourably. But that's not a fair comparison. We need to compare church gatherings, where people sit in rows all facing the same way, to other similar contexts such as play houses, Stratford theatres, movie theatres, and sporting events. When that comparison is made it is clear that churches have been able to gather at higher percentages than most if not all similar gathering formats.

Some go as far as to claim that Christians in Ontario are being persecuted. This assertion is deeply concerning. Consider what our brothers and sisters are experiencing around the world. Some are watching their churches burn to the ground. Some are fired from their work place only because they are Christians. Some are denied entrance into University. Some are beaten, imprisoned, raped, and murdered, only because they follow Jesus. Our situation isn't at all like theirs. We are not experiencing persecution for our faith. People who disobey the law, whether pastors or not, and experience the penalty for that breaking of the law are not being persecuted. They are being penalized in the same way others who break those laws are being penalized.

7. Aren't the capacity restrictions stopping us from gathering as a church

While lockdowns allow only a ten-person capacity, if a church is smaller it can make that work with multiple services. When the numbers reach 15% capacity it allows for more attendees. And when it gets to 30% capacity it is quite possible, in many churches, to run as many services at 30% on a Sunday as they are able, so that everyone who wants to attend can. It is a lot more work. At Creekside there was a time when we had four Sunday morning Services. There are churches which at the 30% capacity limit are able, by adding a second service, to accommodate everyone in their entire congregation who want to attend without violating any covid restrictions. We feel that churches breaking the limit protocols when they could make them work if they added more services, are disobeying the submission calls of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2.

8. What if I don't believe the pandemic is real or anywhere near as bad as the government is making it out to be?

Some churches violating the restrictions do so, in large part, out of a belief that the virus is not real or not as dangerous as is claimed or that the better way of addressing it is to let it run its course without any restrictions and thereby allow for herd immunity. They will often support this position with quotes from some in the medical community or use some other statistical evidence. Some have used data to show that churches are not a danger for the spread of the virus given that very few are contaminated from attendance at church and therefore church attendance should not be restricted. (The counter argument is of course that the numbers are low because the vast majority of churches are following the protocols.). One wonders if the health concerns were of greater impact (ie The Spanish Flu) if this response to the government restrictions might be different.

There is no doubt that viruses have come and viruses have gone and the future will bring more of them. Each one is unique both in terms of its spread and its death rate. At Creekside, it is our belief that while there are dramatically different opinions as to the danger of the virus, we have chosen to accept the recommendations made by those identified by the government as experts in their fields. This allows us to more readily comply with the Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 call to submit to the government. The pattern of authority that God has put in place. And quite frankly we are not smart enough or educated enough in these fields to know otherwise.

9. The term "church" by definition is a gathered assembly. If the church does not gather it is not a church. Therefore, shouldn't the church gather in defiance of the government restrictions?

The Greek word for church is ecclesia. It means a "called out assembly". The word was used for all kinds of gatherings in public contexts long before it was used for church gatherings. It is true that the local church needs to gather. Some suggest that the church is only the church when it gathers. But that argument is problematic. If that was the case, then we would only be the church for one day in seven and for one hour out of 24 on a Sunday. That's far from the vision Jesus had of the church He is building. The church gathers but the church is more, much more than a gathering. It is the body of Christ living and acting like Jesus 24/7 in the marketplace and in the neighbourhood.

And think of this. There are many, many churches in Canada that do not own their own building. They rent schools, community centres, movie theaters and other such facilities. During the pandemic they cannot meet because their rental facilities are not open. Are they no longer a church?

10. How can virtual church be real church?

Online church is real church for a lot of people, especially for those who are restricted from attending church IRL (In Real Life) because of handicaps, geography, sickness, work schedules, and more. And right now, because of covid, the vast majority of Creeksiders are participating in our services online. We are so thankful for this tool, especially at this time.

Like many churches, Creekside has an Online Campus where we seek to support those who cannot attend and reach those who do not attend. Our overarching goal is to draw people to a local church, whether that is Creekside or another church in their local community. Our Online Campus reaches people from all over the world.

The argument is made that what we are doing online right now is not church, is not a good substitute for church and therefore we need to defy the restrictions and meet because meeting in person is “real” church.

Many of us want to meet. We all believe that church face to face is better than church screen to screen. But, in the meantime, does this internet venue not provide enough of the key elements of church to temporarily enable us to fulfill our mandate as a church? At Creekside we have, while following the protocols, been able to teach, worship, care for others, evangelize, baptize and celebrate communion. Some of our LifeGroups are finding that Zoom provides great small group experiences. This is so much the case that some of our LifeGroups, when the restrictions are removed, are considering a hybrid of online and face to face meetings in the future.

Is something missing when we only do online services? Absolutely. Do we long for in-person services again? For sure. But for now, given the call on us from God to submit to the governing authorities we are thankful for the technology we have.

11. Are the restrictions imposed by the government and the consequent penalties unconstitutional and as a result should we defy them on that basis?

Clearly, no government has the right to circumvent, defy, or ignore the Canadian Constitution. At the present time there are legal challenges to the government’s actions based upon this very issue. We are not constitutional experts and consequently it is our decision to wait and see how the courts respond to these challenges.

12. What’s the most loving thing to do? Is it more loving for the church to follow the restrictions or to defy the restrictions and provide spiritual care through Sunday Services and other ministries?

Some contend that when the church provides “fully live” Sunday Services and other church ministries it is an act of love toward the community. It enables the church to better meet spiritual, social, and emotional needs. Given those advantages the church should defy the capacity restrictions in order to fulfill the greater call to love others. In contrast, many churches respond that the restrictions are designed by the government to help stop the spread of the virus itself, which in turn helps better meet the emotional, social and physical needs of the community. In addition, such an approach helps alleviate the potential stress of front-line workers. Following the restrictions, these churches claim, is the better way to love the community.

While one could argue that both responses are expressions of love, our belief is that by following the government guidelines the church more fully expresses love in a language that is better understood and received by the vast majority of the community. It is seen as far less self-serving and as far more other-driven. We do not believe that following the restrictions hinders us from fulfilling our mission to love people and continue to do that through serving the community with online services, counselling, funerals, weddings, financial donations, food, clothing and other acts of practical care.

So, let's get back to our key question.

"How can we honour and submit to the authority of the government in this specific area without violating our ultimate allegiance to God?"

The responsibility is on us to find ways of submitting to the government without violating our ultimate allegiance to God. Submitting is not easy at times. It involves not only our outward actions but our inner attitudes. But by submitting, when appropriate, we are acting in ways that enable our civil leaders to better fulfill their God-given responsibilities and the church to maintain its God-given mission in the world.

We also believe that should the government, in this situation or in any other, require us, as a church or as individual Christians, to violate our ultimate allegiance to Christ, that we would rebel against such action and pay whatever cost is necessary to do so.

We believe that the approach we have been taking at this time is the right one and that in doing so we are both honouring the government and maintaining our allegiance to Christ while fulfilling our mission to . . .
FOLLOW JESUS. LOVE GOD. LOVE PEOPLE.