

The Church's Authority & Mask Mandates

“All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may make laws to bind the conscience. All church courts may err through human frailty, yet it rests upon them to uphold the laws of Scripture though this obligation be lodged with fallible men” (BCO Preface, II.7).

Do churches have the right to ask members to wear masks? I want to say with Paul “Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you” (Phm 8–9). That sounds odd to us. Do churches have the right to *command* such things? Doesn’t that go beyond what Scripture says?

The job of the elders is to apply scripture to the life of the church. That is, we declare what scripture says to particular circumstances. But make no mistake, in that we declare what it says in particular circumstances, we are of necessity applying scripture to those circumstances. This can be seen in the most mundane things the elders do. For example, the elders set the time for worship. There is nothing in Scripture that says we ought to meet at 10:30a. That is something the elders decide. It is an application of the Biblical principle that we are to gather together. We could have decided worship was at 10a or 11:30 or 9p. Similarly, as a church, we ask people to wear a shirt to worship. There is no command in Scripture demanding that people wear a shirt. Israel as they came out of Egypt and gathered around Mt. Sinai—the original worship service, the original ecclesia/church—were slaves. As such, many of the Israelite men, slaves as they were, would not have been wearing shirts, both because of their economic condition and because of the hot desert sun. So, it would not be strictly *unbiblical* to come to worship without a shirt. But, we consider wearing a shirt a culturally appropriate application of the biblical principle of modesty. But note. It is not an explicit command in Scripture, but a culturally appropriate application. If someone didn’t have a shirt, we would certainly provide one so that no one would be hindered from coming to worship. But we would indeed ask that they put it on. Whether we would ask someone to leave if they refused is another matter. But I would question what it says about someone’s heart if they should refuse to abide by such a simple request from church leaders.

It is abundantly clear from James Bannerman (who wrote *the* book on church government, first published in 1869) that the church is not to create “new laws,” but simply to declare what God commands in his word. But it is equally clear (especially in his discussion of The Rule or Law of

Church Power, specifically pp. 222–228, and in Appendices E & F) that church leadership has the authority to and *must* apply Biblical principles to particular circumstances.

Now the laws framed and announced by the Church, or by Church courts, as binding in matters ecclesiastical, are declaratory and not enactive, involving, if they be valid at all, no new exercise of authority on the part of the Church, but limited to the object of explaining and applying the law previously uttered by Christ in reference to such matters. The office of the Church in relation to the laws of her Divine Head, is to explain, to declare, and to apply them, in reference to every fresh case that may occur, warranting or requiring her interference. ...To declare and apply these, to administer and enforce the authority of Christ within the bounds of His own appointment,—this is the office of the church in the way of legislating for the guidance of her office-bearers and members. (Bannerman, Church of Christ, 228–229; italics added)

Determining what is a culturally appropriate application of biblical principles (worship at 10:30a, wear a shirt) is part of the binding and loosing authority of the church. We take Biblical principles and apply them to the life of the church. There must be some governing body that ultimately decides for any given congregation what the application of biblical principles will look like for the life of that congregation, otherwise everyone does what is right in his own eyes. There are limits to this governing authority, but this authority extends at least to determining appropriate guidelines for behavior in gathered worship. The elders may be wrong. Ten thirty may be a bad time because the majority of the people work night shift and their “day” doesn’t start until noon. Shirts may not be an application of the principle of modesty (applying that to certain warmer, tribal cultures may just be silly). But that doesn’t make it any less binding. Otherwise, authority and submission lose their meaning.

One particular biblical command which must be applied is the command not to murder, the sixth commandment. The constitution of our denomination says “The sixth commandment requires all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others” (WSC A. 68). It does not say that the sixth commandment *suggests* all lawful endeavors, but *requires* them. The larger catechism similarly says that what is forbidden in the sixth commandment includes “neglecting... the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life.” Why would the Westminster Divines interpret the sixth commandment to mean not just refraining from taking a life, but doing whatever is lawful to preserve a life? Because this is the Scriptural standard. In Deuteronomy, Israel was told that “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, *that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house*, if anyone should fall from it” (Dt 22:8; italics mine). You don’t have to do anything to be guilty of murder, you just have to fail to do what you can do to protect the life of your neighbor. The apostle John goes so far as to include in this failing to share what we have with our brother if he is in need.

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we

ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. 1 Jn 3:15–18

The reformers, similarly, understood the Biblical data in this way. In Luther's small catechism, he says this commandment means, "We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but *help and support him in every physical need*" (italics mine) Similarly, in his Large catechism, Luther says,

This commandment is violated not only when a person actually does evil, but also *when he fails to do good to his neighbor, or, though he has the opportunity, fails to prevent, protect, and save him from suffering bodily harm or injury*. If you send a person away naked when you could clothe him, you have let him freeze to death. If you see anyone suffer hunger and do not feed him, you have let him starve. Likewise, if you see anyone condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him *although you know ways and means to do so*, you have killed him. *It will do you no good to plead that you did not contribute to his death by word and deed, for you have withheld your love from him and robbed him of the service by which his life might have been saved.* (Italics mine)

Calvin speaks in the same way. He says:

The purpose of this commandment is: the Lord has bound mankind together by a certain unity; hence *each man ought to concern himself with the safety of all*. To sum up, then, all violence, injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us. *We are accordingly commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbor's lives, faithfully to employ it; if there is anything that makes for their peace, to see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand...* He who has merely refrained from shedding blood has not therefore avoided the crime of murder. If you perpetuate anything by deed, if you plot anything by attempt, if you wish or plan anything contrary to the safety of a neighbor, you are considered guilty of murder. Again, *unless you endeavor to look out for his safety according to your ability and opportunity, you are violating the law with a like heinousness.* (II.viii.39–40; italics mine)

Thomas Vincent, commenting on the shorter catechism says this, "We may be guilty of the murder of ourselves or others indirectly, by doing any thing that tendeth to take away our own or others' lives. As—1. By neglecting or withholding the lawful and necessary means for the preservation of life; such as meat, drink, sleep, clothes, physic, needful recreations, and the like..." (Vincent, 179). Phi Ryken summarizes, in his commentary on the ten commandments (in light of the story of the good Samaritan): "What this story shows is that sometimes all it takes to break the sixth commandment is to do nothing at all" (Ryken, 143).

The sixth commandment literally concerns matters of life and death. And it is a commandment of God. In our current cultural historical moment, during a pandemic which has killed almost 4.5 million people it is legitimate for the leadership, the shepherds of a church, to take logical precautions to protect the lives of their flock. Given that not everything is known, that scientific findings and data come out daily and so recommendations change frequently, leadership has

to make the best decision with the data they have on hand. It is a matter of wisely assessing risk (there is always some risk to every endeavor in life), and responding to changing circumstances in order to meet the current threat. It certainly may be seen after the fact that our precautions have been unnecessary (i.e. masking, social distancing). We would rather take unnecessary precautions to save a life than roll the dice with the lives of those in our care. But make no mistake, this is a matter of wisely applying *the sixth commandment*. This is not an obscure biblical principle. Calvin says that by this commandment *we are commanded* “if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbor’s lives, faithfully to employ it.” This is nothing less than a biblical command. And again, it is the elders responsibility to declare Biblical commands and then hold people accountable to fulfilling them.

Again, the declarative ministry of the church is a ministry which includes church leaders declaring God’s word in and to specific circumstances. We are called to gather for worship on the Lord’s Day—*worship is at 10:30a*. We should promote modesty and sexual purity—*wear a shirt*. We must seek to promote the physical well-being of our neighbor according to the sixth commandment—*wear a mask in certain circumstances*. Each of those are simply particular applications of specific Biblical principles for the life of our community. We don’t impose that on others outside of our community, that’s not our job. (Who are we to say that every church must worship at 10:30a?). But we are the God given leadership for this church, our job is to apply His word to this church in this time and this place. We do that imperfectly. We do that with limited information. We do that as flawed human beings. But God has entrusted us to do it, and so we do.

On the other hand, grumbling against civil authorities even when one disagrees with them and refusing to submit to ecclesiastical authorities demonstrates a pride and rebellion unbefitting someone who professes faith in Christ. Every citizen of our country and member of a church which requires masks should submit cheerfully *even if they disagree*. Submission is never about agreement.

Romans 13:1–2 says, “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” (italics mine). And Paul was there speaking of the corrupt, pagan government of Rome! Exodus 16 and Numbers 14, 16, & 17 tell us that grumbling against God given authorities is a serious sin, deserving of death in Israel. God takes submission to governing authorities seriously. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are

keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Note that in these passages, obedience is never dependent upon agreement. Nowhere are we told, if you agree with the statistics you should obey, but if you disagree you should grumble, complain, and take every opportunity to break the rules set in place by civil authorities or ignore the requests of ecclesiastical authorities. We live in a day and age in which submission is seen as a bad thing. But it is something encouraged in Scripture of every citizen and every church member. And so, when a church says worship is at 10:30a and encourages you to wear a shirt for modesty’s sake and wear a mask to protect the health of those around you, you are required to do that in submission to church leadership. You are free to disagree as long as you are willing to obey. Again, submission is never dependent upon agreement. But if you refuse to submit you are in rebellion against God and that is a dangerous place to be.

Appendix

Some quotes by PCA pastor Randy Pope on church authority (don’t let his name fool you!).

“The church’s leadership is granted specific authority “to bind” (to derive from God’s Word and to enforce that which is obligatory) and “to loose” (to determine and allow that which the Word says is permissible). Spiritual authority thus discerns what is required and what is permitted. Why is this so important? Because the teaching of the Bible is often principle-focused rather than case-specific. Thus, wise judgments must be made in applying scriptural principles to particular situations. The “keys of the kingdom” are emblematic of the authority given to the church to determine the proper standards of biblical faith and practice and to carry out biblical discipline when required” (Randy Pope, *The Intentional Church*, 110).

“Unfortunately, clear biblical teaching on this subject is almost extinct today. It is so foreign, in fact, that you may still be scratching your head. The phrase ‘church discipline’ has become a shocking oxymoron. For this reason, perhaps I should address an important issue to further enable you to understand the authority given to elders. There is a distinction, I believe, between what I call the authority to determine the will of God and the authority to determine the wisdom of God. The point is that unless they contradict the infallible Word of God, elders’ decisions regarding moral and ecclesiastical matters always declare the will of God even though they often fail to declare the wisdom of God. Allow me to illustrate. ...how would you answer the following question? If a child chooses not to obey her parents, even though their orders do not

contradict God's Word, has she violated the will of God? Of course she has. She may argue, "Show me in the Bible where it says to be home at ten o'clock at night and I'll do it, because I certainly want to obey God. I don't think it's God's will for you to arbitrarily set my curfew time." If this were your child, your response would more than likely be, "What I say is God's will for you because I am your parent." But what if you gave in to her desires and told her to be home at two o'clock in the morning? If she came in at ten till two, would she be "in the will of God"? I say yes. In this case, you, as the parent, have declared for your daughter what is the will of God. In my opinion, however, you have failed to declare the wisdom of God. Establishing a curfew is your authority responsibility; establishing a right and healthy curfew is your godly wisdom responsibility ...The same holds true for God's other institutions, the civil magistrate and the church. When our church decided several years ago to relocate, I often heard the question, "Are we sure this is the will of God?" I was glad to know that such was the heart and concern of our people. At a meeting to update the people concerning the progress of the effort, I addressed this matter. My comments went something like this: 'In response to the often-asked question, "Is this relocation the will of God?" I have some very important news. Without any question whatsoever, God has made it known with perfect clarity that it is His will for us to attempt the relocation.' I could sense the thoughts of our people as I said this. Man, this doesn't sound like Randy. In what ivory tower has he been meeting with God? So I concluded by saying: 'I can say so with such absolute confidence because our elders voted to do so. They have prayerfully exercised their authority responsibility. Now, although I know it's God's will to pursue the relocation, I have no such certainty that the decision reflects the wisdom of God. Only time will tell' (Pope, 113-115).

"The test of submission to authority doesn't come when that authority tells us we can do what we want but when that authority blocks our will or reaches a conclusion we are sure is wrong" (Pope, 115).