

Scripture and the Church

A Report on John MacArthur's Statement, “Christ, Not Caesar, Is Head of the Church”

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From the **TeachingtheWord** Bible Knowledgebase

We have received several inquiries concerning the recent statement issued by Dr. John MacArthur and his church in response to governments' COVID-19 restrictions on churches and their worship. While the statement in itself is excellent, we cannot commend Dr. MacArthur or his ministry to our readers because he denies and confuses the truths of the Gospel.

August 2020 - State and local governments in many parts of the United States have used the COVID-19 panic to impose un-Biblical as well as un-Constitutional restrictions on churches and other religious institutions and organizations. Governments are forbidding churches to hold services, restricting the size and location of their gatherings, and in some cases forbidding them to have congregational singing, recitation of the Lord's Prayer, or reading of the Scriptures. Government are threatening pastors, elders, and even members of congregations with arrest, fines, and imprisonment. Governments have threatened to turn off water, gas, and electrical service to their buildings. In many places, police and other government officials have come to churches to disrupt their services.

Many of these governments have, at the same time, permitted and even encouraged anti-Christian, anti-God rioters to rampage and destroy public and private property (in some cases burning or vandalizing church buildings and physically abusing church-goers), without even a hint of punishment of their law-breaking.

COVID-19 Restrictions and Church History

Some churches have adopted the attitude that the COVID-19 restrictions upon them are temporary, for the good of public health, and therefore legitimate, even in a nation whose Constitution stipulates the passage of "no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

But I fear that many such churches are forgetting or ignoring history: In 20th-century Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain, China, Korea and many other places, churches submitted to

government restrictions on assembly, worship, and the general conduct of their affairs in the name of what was called the "public good" or "public safety" or in order to maintain peace. But is it well said that governments, once having been "given an inch" in curtailing freedoms, will soon "take a mile" by imposing much greater limits.

That is precisely what happened in the last century. The government leaders who imposed what at first seemed relatively harmless restrictions on 20th-century churches had darker agendas. Having seen how easily the churches "gave an inch" to such restrictions, they soon "took a mile" by imposing far greater ones - eventually shutting down many churches permanently and allowing only officially-sanctioned ones to remain open under the intrusive eye of the state. Often "crises" were created as an excuse for imposing such restrictions. These evils happened even in countries that had guarantees of freedom of religion in their constitutions and law codes.

Many churches, then and now, have cited Scripture passages commanding submission to governmental authority as the basis for their compliance with restrictive governmental edicts. In the present COVID-19 panic Christians are deeply divided, and individual believers often personally conflicted, as to the proper Biblical response. I am familiar with many churches that have fully submitted to government control, in some cases suspending services and all forms of fellowship. Others have used the Internet as a stop-gap. Other have quietly continued to hold services and otherwise physically meet - some without further governmental interference, others suffering penalties for their actions.

The Issue Is Scripture, Not Merely the First Amendment

What is the proper Biblical response? I believe that Dr. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, has produced an excellent statement of the Biblical case for churches' conducting their worship and other affairs, at this and all other times, without government interference. It is titled "Christ, Not Caesar, Is Head of the Church" and may be read in full [here](#). It is worthwhile reading - but with extreme caution, as I will explain below. The statement begins:

Christ is Lord of all. He is the one true head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18). He is also King of kings - sovereign over every earthly authority (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16). Grace Community Church has always stood immovably on those biblical principles. As His people, we are subject to His will and commands as revealed in Scripture. Therefore we cannot and will not

acquiesce to a government-imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship or other regular corporate gatherings. Compliance would be disobedience to our Lord's clear commands.

Some will think such a firm statement is inexorably in conflict with the command to be subject to governing authorities laid out in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Scripture does mandate careful, conscientious obedience to all governing authority, including kings, governors, employers, and their agents (in Peter's words, "not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable" [1 Peter 2:18]). Insofar as government authorities do not attempt to assert ecclesiastical authority or issue orders that forbid our obedience to God's law, their authority is to be obeyed whether we agree with their rulings or not. In other words, Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 still bind the consciences of individual Christians. We are to obey our civil authorities as powers that God Himself has ordained.

However, while civil government is invested with divine authority to rule the state, neither of those texts (nor any other) grants civic rulers jurisdiction over the church. God has established three institutions within human society: the family, the state, and the church. Each institution has a sphere of authority with jurisdictional limits that must be respected. A father's authority is limited to his own family. Church leaders' authority (which is delegated to them by Christ) is limited to church matters. And government is specifically tasked with the oversight and protection of civic peace and well-being within the boundaries of a nation or community. God has not granted civic rulers authority over the doctrine, practice, or polity of the church. The biblical framework limits the authority of each institution to its specific jurisdiction. The church does not have the right to meddle in the affairs of individual families and ignore parental authority. Parents do not have authority to manage civil matters while circumventing government officials. And similarly, government officials have no right to interfere in ecclesiastical matters in a way that undermines or disregards the God-given authority of pastors and elders.

When any one of the three institutions exceeds the bounds of its jurisdiction it is the duty of the other institutions to curtail that overreach. Therefore, when any

government official issues orders regulating worship (such as bans on singing, caps on attendance, or prohibitions against gatherings and services), he steps outside the legitimate bounds of his God-ordained authority as a civic official and arrogates to himself authority that God expressly grants only to the Lord Jesus Christ as sovereign over His Kingdom, which is the church. His rule is mediated to local churches through those pastors and elders who teach His Word (Matthew 16:18-19; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:2).

Therefore, in response to the recent state order requiring churches in California to limit or suspend all meetings indefinitely, we, the pastors and elders of Grace Community Church, respectfully inform our civic leaders that they have exceeded their legitimate jurisdiction, and faithfulness to Christ prohibits us from observing the restrictions they want to impose on our corporate worship services.

Said another way, it has never been the prerogative of civil government to order, modify, forbid, or mandate worship. When, how, and how often the church worships is not subject to Caesar. Caesar himself is subject to God. Jesus affirmed that principle when He told Pilate, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). And because Christ is head of the church, ecclesiastical matters pertain to His Kingdom, not Caesar's. Jesus drew a stark distinction between those two kingdoms when He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17). Our Lord Himself always rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, but He never offered to Caesar what belongs solely to God.

As pastors and elders, we cannot hand over to earthly authorities any privilege or power that belongs solely to Christ as head of His church. Pastors and elders are the ones to whom Christ has given the duty and the right to exercise His spiritual authority in the church (1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:7, 17) - and Scripture alone defines how and whom they are to serve (1 Corinthians 4:1-4). They have no duty to follow orders from a civil government attempting to regulate the worship or governance of the church. In fact, pastors who cede their Christ-delegated authority in the church to a civil ruler have abdicated their responsibility before their Lord and violated the God-ordained spheres of authority as much as the secular official who illegitimately imposes his authority upon the church.

Later the statement says:

Notice that we are not making a constitutional argument, even though the First Amendment of the United States Constitution expressly affirms this principle in its opening words: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The right we are appealing to was not created by the Constitution. It is one of those unalienable rights granted solely by God, who ordained human government and establishes both the extent and the limitations of the state's authority (Romans 13:1-7). Our argument therefore is purposely not grounded in the First Amendment; it is based on the same biblical principles that the Amendment itself is founded upon. The exercise of true religion is a divine duty given to men and women created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27; Acts 4:18-20; 5:29; cf. Matthew 22:16-22). In other words, freedom of worship is a command of God, not a privilege granted by the state.

The statement later concludes:

But again: *Christ is the one true head of His church*, and we intend to honor that vital truth in all our gatherings. For that preeminent reason, we cannot accept and will not bow to the intrusive restrictions government officials now want to impose on our congregation. We offer this response without rancor, and not out of hearts that are combative or rebellious (1 Timothy 2:1-8; 1 Peter 2:13-17), but with a sobering awareness that we must answer to the Lord Jesus for the stewardship He has given to us as shepherds of His precious flock.

To government officials, we respectfully say with the apostles, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge" (Acts 4:19). And our unhesitating reply to that question is the same as the apostles': "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

A Warning: John MacArthur's Doctrinal Confusion

While the Grace Community Church statement is in itself commendable, we cannot commend Dr. MacArthur or his ministry to our readers. On the contrary, we must state several serious warnings.

1. Dr. MacArthur has long taught what is called "lordship salvation" - a false doctrine that is not rooted in a Biblical view of salvation by grace through faith alone, but in fact

makes man responsible for his own salvation. For a detailed discussion of this issue, we suggest reading the essay titled ["The Gospel According to John MacArthur"](#) by Dr. John W. Robbins.

2. As far back as 1983 Dr. MacArthur taught the heresy that Jesus is not the Son of God from all eternity, but that He *became* God the Son when He came to earth, took on human form, and died on the cross. He re-stated his denial of the eternal sonship of the Second Person of the Godhead in his commentaries, books, and articles for many years afterward. In 1999 MacArthur published a statement supposedly retracting his previous position. However, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, and the doctrinal statement of The Master's College and Seminary (of which he was long president) continue to contain statements that indicate that "sonship" was a *role* or a *place* that Jesus assumed in coming to earth, not His settled position in the Godhead from all eternity. Christ's eternal sonship is an essential element of His deity and of the plan of salvation. We discuss this issue in more detail in a series of articles titled ["Theology: The Doctrine of God"](#) and in the article ["Can You Answer Islam's 'Irrefutable' Objection to Christ?"](#), both in our Bible Knowledgebase.

3. Dr. MacArthur has made repeated statements that effectively deny the saving efficacy of the blood of Christ. He has spoken of the shedding of the blood of Christ as merely "the fulfillment of an Old Testament model" and has stated that "it is not the blood of Jesus" that saves sinners, but "His death" and that His blood "does not cleanse from sin." One of the passages he cites in support of this view is Revelation 1:5. In the Received Text of the Greek New Testament, the authentic original used to produce the Authorized and New King James versions of the Bible, this passage states that Jesus "loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood." In the counterfeit Critical Text which is the basis for the Revised Standard Version and its lineal descendant the English Standard Version (which MacArthur uses in preaching), the wording is changed to say merely that Jesus "freed us from our sins by His blood" - which in MacArthur's view means that Jesus' death was efficacious, not His blood. But many passages, including Matthew 26:28, Romans 3:25, Romans 5:9, Ephesians 1:7, Ephesians 2:13, Colossians 1:20, and Hebrews 9:12 clearly and specifically declare the necessity of the blood of Christ, shed on the cross and applied to the heavenly mercy seat, as the means of our redemption.

4. During the current crisis, Dr. MacArthur and Grace Community Church have entered into an un-Biblical ecumenical partnership. They are under continued legal attack by government authorities who want to shut down the church and make it an example of what government can do to others that do not submit to its ungodly edicts. I would wish that churches that preach the true Gospel (unlike Dr. MacArthur), would rise up and resist the intrusions of Caesar into that which is Christ's alone. Some churches are doing that, with a degree of success. They are generally being represented in court by attorneys who are members of evangelical churches. But who is representing Dr. MacArthur and his church in the courts? Attorneys from the Thomas More Society, a Roman Catholic non-profit organization based in Chicago, which is named for a Roman Catholic "saint" who opposed the coming of the Protestant Reformation in England and died a martyr for the cause of the papacy. This sends a message of ecumenical cooperation which should be anathema to all those whom God has commanded, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers," and "come out from among them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

May Christ's true church obey our Lord and not men in matters of the faith - and may we exercise discernment in avoiding partnerships in that effort with those who deny the faith.

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