

May 13, 2020

Dear brethren,

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for your letter in which you expressed your concern regarding our recent decision to resume public worship services in disobedience to the governor's temporary restriction on public assemblies. We very much appreciate your coming to us with your concern, and we are delighted for the opportunity to learn from your instruction and to explain our position to you. We thank you for the humble way that you addressed your concerns to us, and we reply to you with that same humility and brotherly love. We are happy that Zion and Byron Center can endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace in this matter.

As we read through your letter, we found ourselves in basic agreement with almost all of your points. For example, we wholeheartedly agree with you regarding God's calling to love our neighbor and prevent his hurt, and God's calling to be a faithful and good witness in the world. We differ in how we would *apply* these principles in this instance, but not in the principles themselves. We are thankful for this unity. The one place we see a principle difference between us is "the question whether the state has the right before God to put a temporary restriction on holding public worship services by the church." You say yes; we say no. Therefore, before addressing your specific points, we thought it might be valuable to explain our thinking on that question.

The principle at issue is the royal government of Christ over his church. We appreciated your clear expression of this principle in your letter: "The church is a spiritual kingdom, fundamentally separate from the kingdoms of this world." And, "The church is governed by the rule of Christ and not by the rule of the magistrate." You went on to qualify that principle, whereas we believe that principle must stand unqualified. Our Lord has given the state authority over many things, including the physical safety of the citizens. The authority of the state even extends to the earthly circumstances of the church, such as the church's property. However, our Lord has given the state absolutely no authority over the spiritual life of the church, including her worship. We believe you would agree that the state has absolutely no say over the doctrines of the church, the discipline of the church, or the elements of the church's worship. We would include in this the *fact* of the church's worship, or to say the same thing differently, *whether* the church may worship. The Lord Jesus Christ alone calls his church to assemble for worship through the elders of the church. The state has nothing whatsoever to do with that call to assemble. The state does not issue that call to assemble, and the state may not forbid that call to assemble. The assembly of the church for worship belongs to her essential spiritual life, not to her earthly circumstances, and thus is not subject to the decrees of the state.

We find Article 28 of the Church Order to be very helpful in explaining this principle of the royal government of Christ over his church. The strength of the article is that it distinguishes between the church's earthly circumstances on the one hand – property, earthly peace, and earthly order – and the spiritual life of the church on the other hand – the royal government of Christ over his church. In earthly circumstances, the church answers to the magistrates and may claim their protection. However, in spiritual, ecclesiastical matters, the church may not suffer the magistrates to infringe on the royal government of Christ over his church even for the sake of the earthly circumstances of the church. We take this to mean that there is no earthly reason whatsoever, including the physical lives of the citizens,

that would allow the magistrate to rule over the church's worship. For your convenience, we quote Article 28 here and a portion of VanDellen and Monsma's commentary on it.

The consistory shall take care that the churches, for the possession of their property and the peace and order of their meetings, can claim the protection of the authorities; it should be well understood, however, that for the sake of peace and material possession they may never suffer the royal government of Christ over his church to be in the least infringed upon. (CO 28)

We stated above that Article 28 does not mean to attribute supervisory authority to the Government, and that the Churches of Jesus Christ are inherently free from State domination. This is certainly correct. The Churches know no King but Jesus. Under Him they are sovereign within their own sphere. However, we do not mean to deny that the State has certain regulatory rights, which also touch the domain of the Churches. Civil authorities, for instance, may insist, for the safety of all concerned, that the general rules of fire prevention be observed as we erect our church buildings. For the protection of the health of the church-members, as well as for the community, they have a right to insist on proper sanitation. In matters as these the State authorities have a certain God-given responsibility, also regarding Churches. But as to matters of faith and confession; the internal arrangement of congregational activities; the government of the Church in spiritual matters, etc., these matters are strictly ecclesiastical, and not political. And concerning these matters the Church may and must say to the State: Hands off! (VDM 129).

One reason that God has not given the state any authority over the spiritual life of the church is that the state is not a spiritual institution, but an earthly institution. The state can only judge earthly things. When Governor Whitmer consults the experts and weighs her options, she and the experts can only account for physical and psychological factors. They cannot measure spiritual factors. The state does not and cannot take account of the spiritual health of Christ's sheep. The state does not and cannot take account of the need of the flock to hear their Shepherd's voice and feed on him through faith in the gospel preached. The state does not and cannot measure the effect on God's people of being absent from the house of God for eleven weeks and counting. Only the elders are able to do this, for only the elders are called to watch for the souls of the flock (Heb. 13:17) and feed the souls of the flock with the preaching of the gospel (I Pet. 5:2). If the church binds itself to the governor's timeline for when the church may assemble for worship, it binds itself to a purely earthly judgment that cannot have regard to the spiritual health and life of the flock of Jesus Christ. We do not say this to pass judgment on any elders or consistories, for we know that every Protestant Reformed consistory and congregation wants with all its heart to return to worship. We also know that PRC pastors and elders are going to great lengths to provide spiritual care other than preaching to their members. We see with our own eyes the great love and concern of the undershepherds for the flock and are thankful for it. That love and care in other PR Churches is an example to us as elders at Byron Center, and it teaches us to care for the flock which is among us here. We only say this to explain our position, and why we feel such urgency in taking the position that we did.

We believe that all of the above addresses the one principle on which we differ, which is whether the government has any authority regarding the church's assembling for public worship.

What follows is our comment and thought on the specific points that you raised. The numbering corresponds to the numbering in your letter.

1. We wholeheartedly confess with Lord's Day 40 that we are to love the neighbor by preventing his hurt as much as in us lies. We are opposed to any reckless endangerment of the neighbor's health or life, whether within our own congregation or in the broader community. The consistory faced the question what it means to prevent the neighbor's hurt as much as in us lies during a pandemic. One option is to cancel services, which Byron Center did for several weeks. But is canceling services the only way to prevent the neighbor's hurt? As we continued to monitor the situation, we judged that if we can go to Home Depot or Meijer on Saturday while taking precautions, then we can also go to church on Sunday while taking precautions. We are taking these safety precautions very seriously. They are enumerated in an attached letter from the consistory. We consider our churches' different approaches here to be a different *application* of the sixth commandment, but not a different *principle*.
2. We wholeheartedly confess with Lord's Day 39 that we are to submit to the government in all things and obey it in all lawful things. We understand that the government's stay-at-home order is temporary and that its purpose is the protection of physical life. We also understand that the government does not answer to us but to God. Nevertheless, we do not believe that the authority of the government extends to the church's assembly for public worship. We consider our churches' different approaches to the fifth commandment here to be a different *principle* and not merely a matter of *application*. We trust that our explanation above shows our thinking on this question.
 - 2.a. We disagree that the state's *intention* should have any impact on the church's obedience to the state. We believe the only determining factor is the state's *authority*. The state has real authority from God himself (Rom. 13:1; I Pet. 2:13), which authority has nothing to do with the goodness of the magistrates or the goodness of their intentions. Therefore, the church must obey the state's authority in all lawful things, regardless of whether the state intends good or evil by it. God himself places limits on the state's authority. He does not give the state authority over doctrine, the preaching of the gospel, or any other spiritual matter of the church. For the state to rule on such things is not lawful. When the state does rule on such things contrary to the command of God, regardless of the state's intention, the church must obey God rather than men. Even then, we are not revolutionary or rebellious. We submit to whatever penalties may come. Our submission to the state is absolute; our obedience to the state is limited to lawful things. We believe that this is the meaning of "due obedience" (LD 39) and obeying "in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God" (Belgic Confession 36).
 - 2.b. We acknowledge that the church "takes a visible, institutional form *in this earth*." Your reference to church buildings is a perfect illustration. However, we believe that the public assembly of the church for worship does not fall under the category of her physical, earthly circumstances. Her building is part of her physical, earthly circumstances. Her calling upon the state for protection from the fire or from the shooter is part of her physical, earthly circumstances. But her meeting and assembling for worship is not. The *fact* that she assembles is just as spiritual as the *elements* in which she participates in her assembly, and therefore just as untouchable by the state, even in an emergency. We notice that the state is beginning to forbid singing in church in parts of Germany and in one county in California (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/05/07/church-reopen-sing-masks-service/>). The ground for the state's prohibition of that worship element is the COVID-19 emergency. From what you write, we believe your position on this would be that the state does not have the right to decide the elements of worship, even in an emergency. That is exactly our position on the fact of worship. The state's authority is limited by God himself, and simply does not extend to the worship of the church.

- 2.c. We are in basic agreement with your point about the fourth commandment. We acknowledge that there are exceptions to the rule that we go to church. We also like your thoughtful suggestions for how pastors and elders can provide resources for the congregation's spiritual care. We find those to be very pastoral and imagine that they would be profitable for Byron Center too. Having said that, we believe, as you do, that LD 38 ought to carry tremendous weight with churches. The norm, including the "new normal," must not be that we stay home from church. Whatever exceptions there might be, the fourth commandment to keep the sabbath day holy requires that we diligently frequent the church of God.

This is God's law for all time, including the last days, when there will be increasing pestilences, pandemics, and plagues. In fact, it is especially God's law for the last days in the midst of devastating plagues and death that we assemble for public worship: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). As the day of the Lord approaches, there will not be fewer pestilences, but more (Matt. 24:7). The death toll will not be measured in tens or hundreds of thousands, but hundreds of millions or even billions (Rev. 6:8). The lockdowns from the magistrates will likely be many and lengthy. It is in those days of seeing the Lord's approach so clearly that the church is called "so much the more" not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together." In the PRC, we all recognize the coronavirus to be a sign of the Lord's return. Our reflexive response to it should be: Assemble! Now so much the more! Again, we are not accusing you of lacking this reflex. We know that you long to assemble. Our only point is to remind our own selves first of all how the world's demands will more and more run contrary to the Lord's calling. The world's demands will look more and more legitimate and more and more reasonable and more and more necessary as hospitals are overrun and health care crashes and every family suffers the death of loved ones. In those days, the demand of the world will be: Do not assemble, for assemblies spread the virus! But the calling of the Lord will be: Assemble! So much the more as ye see the day approaching!

3. We agree that Christians must be law-abiding in all lawful things. We agree with your exegesis of I Peter 2. We disagree with your application that it is a poor witness to disobey the government in this instance. By God's grace, no one can accuse us of being lawless in our personal lives. Nor can we be accused of being disorderly as a church even in this disobedience. We are making no protest by it, nor are we seeking to change anything by it. It is not civil disobedience in the sense of being a political tool. We believe this exonerating statement from your letter applies in our case: "If the foolish men will speak anyway, the church is not responsible for giving them an occasion."

The witness of the church in her worship is a good witness, regardless that the world hates it and speaks against it. The worship of the church testifies that the Lord's Day is holy (Exodus 20:8-11). It proclaims that the assembly of the church is essential (Hebrews 10:25). It declares that the souls of Christ's sheep must be fed (John 21:15-17). And it joyfully, lovingly, humbly witnesses that there is nothing more precious in this life, including life itself, than God's lovingkindness in Christ, which is proclaimed in the gospel in church (Psalm 63:1-4). We would encourage you not to be concerned about this witness as Protestant Reformed, but rejoice in it!

4. We are thankful that you deliberately put this concern last. Our own observation of things is that almost every Protestant Reformed church in Michigan has decided to disobey the stay-at-home order of the governor on Sundays. The stay-at-home order does not allow for even two or five or ten people to gather in the sanctuary of a church on Sunday to live-stream a message, but most of our

churches are doing just that. It does not allow ministers to officiate at weddings, but several of our ministers have done just that, apparently with the knowledge and tacit approval of their consistories. We are not expressing disapproval of these actions, only pointing out that Byron Center's decision is not essentially different from the rest of the PR Churches in Michigan when it comes to disobeying the stay-at-home order on Sundays.

Brethren, with regard to the rest of the churches in the world, we urge you and ourselves to be cautious. You wrote approvingly: "The example of Christianity worldwide at this time, almost to a man, has been to follow the instructions of the governments for the sake of the neighbor." You have captured reality by that statement. You are absolutely correct that all of Christianity in the entire world almost to a man has followed the instructions of the governments. Caution, brothers! All of Christianity is currently in agreement that it must obey the state. All of Christianity is currently in agreement that it must not worship publicly. When all of Christianity in all of the world is obeying the state in anything, we ought to be cautious. When all of Christianity in all of the world is obeying the state in abandoning public worship, we ought to be alarmed. For the sake of man's physical life, every government in the world shut down the public worship of every church in the world. Something is afoot, brothers. Beware! The beast out of the sea is rising and begins to exercise himself (Rev. 13:1). He makes war with the saints, though he does not yet call it war (13:7). The beast out of the earth is rising, too, and all churches in the world shall soon be united in service of the antichrist (Rev. 13:11). We do not say that you are serving antichrist. But we urge you to examine your own correct observation about the example of Christianity worldwide and evaluate it in light of our calling to watch for the return of our Lord.

Finally, we include in this response two documents that explain our position. The first is a letter from the consistory to the congregation. The second is a letter from Rev. Lanning to the congregation.

Thank you again for writing. It was helpful for us to wrestle with our decision again and with your concerns so that our consistory could come to a better understanding of things. We pray that you also have profited from this exchange.

God's blessings on your labors, brethren, as you care for the flock in Zion PRC. Pray for us, even as we pray for you.

In Christ's service,
Consistory of Byron Center PRC