

Dear Byron Center Congregation,

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the blessed and only Potentate.

In light of the decision of the consistory to hold worship services Sunday, I wanted to take a few moments to write to the congregation regarding one particular aspect of the consistory's decision. One of the grounds for the consistory's decision was this:

The current Executive Order 2020-11 limits assemblages to 50 people or less. Nevertheless, the consistory judges that Byron Center PRC is free before God to meet with our full congregation for worship during the entire period of this executive order. Our disobeying the executive order is not rebellion or insubordination to the state, but simply a recognition that the state has required something contrary to the Word of God in this instance. We heartily confess that the state has real, God-given authority over the lives of its citizens (Rom. 13:1). We willingly and cheerfully submit to the state in all things and obey it in all lawful things (Belgic Confession, Article 36). However, the state has no authority over the worship of God's church, and therefore we must obey God rather than man in this instance (Acts 5:29). Rev. Lanning will be sending out a separate paper explaining these principles more fully.

The question is whether the consistory is correct that the state has no authority over the worship of God's church. Is the consistory correct that the state has no authority to forbid or to limit the assembling of the church for worship?

There are four principles that will help us answer these questions. The first principle has to do with the nature of the church. The church is the body and bride of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 5:22-33). Therefore, the church is not an earthly institution, but a spiritual and heavenly institution. Although the church is gathered on the earth, meets in earthly buildings, and is made up of God's elect who live their earthly lives as citizens of earthly kingdoms, the church is not earthly. It is not of this world, but has its source, its existence, and its nature from its heavenly Head, Jesus Christ. The Word of God testifies to this heavenly nature of the church. Jesus: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Paul: "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 14:17). As the heavenly kingdom, the church is unique and distinct from every other kingdom in the world. The church does not exist *under* the authority of any earthly kingdom, but *in* and *alongside* earthly kingdoms. This is the teaching of the footnote to Article 36 in the Belgic Confession. "The New Testament does not subject the Christian church to the authority of the state, that it should be governed and extended by political measures, but to our Lord and King only, as an independent territory alongside and altogether independent of the state, that it may be governed and edified by its officebearers, and with spiritual weapons only."¹

The second principle has to do with the nature of the church's assembling for worship. The church's assembling for worship is a holy and heavenly meeting with God himself. The church's assembling for worship is unique and distinct from every other assembly of men on earth. It is not like the book club at the library. It is not even like the Bible study on Wednesday night. In the assembly of the church as church for worship, God himself brings his congregation before his own face. Leviticus 23 calls the

¹ There is some question about whether the footnote in Article 36 is binding on the Protestant Reformed Churches. Regardless of that debate, what the footnote says here about the church being an independent territory alongside and independent of the state is true. The underlining is mine.

assembly of the congregation for the feasts “holy convocations.” Exodus 39:32 calls the tabernacle the “tent of meeting” (translated in the KJV as “tent of the congregation”). Hebrews 10 teaches that we as the church in worship “enter into the holiest” (v. 19), that is, into heaven itself, through the flesh and blood of Jesus. This flesh and blood of our Lord is the “new and living way” for the New Testament church in her worship to come right into God’s presence (v. 20). This is one reason it is so important for us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (v. 25).

These first two principles show that the church is a heavenly institution and that her worship is a heavenly activity of meeting with God. Therefore, it is not only unlawful, but impossible, for the civil state to try to rule over the worship of the church. The civil government may rule over our earthly church buildings by imposing fire codes, and over our earthly church property by imposing or exempting us from taxes; but the civil government may not and cannot touch the spiritual activity of worship by the heavenly body of Christ. This position is implied in Article 28 of our Church Order, which recognizes the civil government’s authority when it comes to the church’s earthly possessions and order, but also firmly maintains the absolute authority of Jesus Christ over his spiritual body. “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.”

The third principle has to do with the Christian’s obedience to the civil state in all lawful things. Civil government is an earthly institution with very real authority from God himself. The government officials are ordained of God (Rom. 13:1). Our calling as citizens of the United States and the State of Michigan is to be subject to these authorities (Rom. 13:1). We are forbidden from resisting these authorities, which would be to resist the ordinance of God and to receive to ourselves damnation (Rom. 13:2). We are required to *honor* civil government in all things without exception, and to *obey* civil government in all things that do not conflict with the Word of God. As Reformed Christians, our heartfelt confession is that “it is the bounden duty of every one, of what state, quality, or condition soever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers, that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (Belgic Confession, Article 36).

However, the authority that God has granted to the state does not extend to the worship of the church. When the civil government by executive order forbids the congregation of Jesus Christ from assembling for worship, it infringes on the royal government of Christ over his church. God says, Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together (Heb. 10:25). The civil government says, Forsake the assembling of more than 50 in the congregation together. We recognize that the government is not forbidding us from preaching the gospel. We recognize that the government is not explicitly persecuting the church. We also recognize that the government’s motivation is the honorable desire to contain COVID-19. Nevertheless, in banning the church from assemblies of more than 50 people, the government has usurped authority that belongs to Christ alone. The state has required something, even unwittingly, that is “repugnant to the Word of God” (Belgic Confession, Article 36).

When the state tried to intrude into matters of worship in the New Testament, the apostles steadfastly refused to cede the government that authority (Acts 4:17-20; Acts 5:29). So also today, regardless of the government’s reason for denying the church her call to worship, the church must not cede that authority. She “may never suffer the royal government of Christ over His church to be in the least infringed upon” (Church Order, Article 28).

It is of some significance that the government itself feels its own limitations here. The executive order of Michigan's governor explicitly exempts the church from any penalty for noncompliance. From the State of Michigan website: "A place of religious worship is not subject to penalty under section 3 of Executive Order 2020-11." https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98178_98455-522357--,00.html

Our disobedience of the government's directive is not rebellion. We still submit to the government's authority, even though we may not obey the executive order. Submitting to the state means that we would not prevent a police officer from investigating our actions. If there were a penalty for noncompliance, we would suffer that penalty. We will also obey the executive order in non-worship events, such as postponing the young people's fundraiser and the temporary closing of our schools. But in matters of worship, we must obey God rather than men.

Only the church itself, under the authority of Jesus Christ, may decide matters of worship. It may do this for reasons of persecution or the safety of the members (Matthew 10:23). The individual child of God is also free to stay away from church for his own protection and physical safety, as David left Jerusalem in his flight from Absalom (II Samuel 15). Under the authority of our Head and by his wisdom, we may decide to have live-stream services or some other arrangement. However, if the church judges that it is safe to worship, then the command of the Lord to Byron Center PRC is, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy" by "forsaking not the assembling of ourselves together."

The fourth principle is the love of our neighbor. The state overstepped its authority in forbidding the churches to assemble with more than 50 people, but the purpose behind the executive order is to minimize the transmission of COVID-19, which is now a worldwide pandemic. As the church, we are also interested in limiting the transmission of this disease. We may not willfully expose ourselves to danger (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 40, QA 105), and we must also prevent our neighbor's hurt as much as in us lies (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 40, QA 107). This means that our assembling for worship must not be done in reckless disregard for our physical health or for that of the neighbor in our broader communities.

Looking around at what constitutes appropriate caution, we notice that the state itself has exempted many industries from the executive order. Hundreds and even thousands of people are allowed to work or shop in one place. The state places a value on keeping these institutions open, and apparently does not consider it to be reckless endangerment of the public to do so. Precautions must be taken, but their doors may be open for business. Applying this to the worship of the church, we place a high value on the assembling of the congregation. If this can be done without recklessly endangering the public, then it is good and not evil to assemble. For this reason, and with a firm desire to protect our neighbor, the consistory has taken many precautions in line with what the experts in the health community recommend.

Perhaps some members would apply these principles differently or come to different conclusions. That is fine, but I believe the principles themselves are sound. If anyone would like to discuss these things, I would welcome that.

May the Lord bless you in these uncertain times, and may the gospel of our Savior be a balm to our souls in this too.

Warmly in Christ,
Rev. Lanning