

From: [Ron Cammenga](#)
Sent: Monday, March 23, 2020 10:18 AM
To: [PRC Ministers](#)
Subject: [PRC Ministers] Extreme and Inconsistent

Brothers,

Over the weekend I've read the various responses of the churches to the Corona virus and the government's mandates. I am troubled by Byron Center PRC's decision to continue to hold services and to continue to call its members to worship. I find Byron Center consistory's position to be extreme and inconsistent. No one should disagree with the principles to which BC appeals. No one. On the matter of the principles, I have no disagreement whatsoever. But it is the application of those principles that I find extreme and inconsistent. I submit the following for consideration.

1. Although Michigan's governor exempts the churches from any penalties for noncompliance, the refusal to abide by the governor's order is *noncompliance*. Although there is no penalty, the fact is that BC's decision *is* noncompliance, as the consistory recognizes. Its appeal to Acts 5:28, that we ought to obey God rather than men indicates that.
2. BC insists that the state has overstepped its bounds by limiting public assemblages, including churches on the Lord's Day. It insists that "the state has *no authority* over the worship of God's church." And further that "[o]nly the church itself, under the authority of Jesus Christ, may decide matters of worship." At the same time, the consistory concedes that the church must honor fire codes and building codes and other similar matters. The fact is that in many ways the state limits the church. The state limits building capacities, the size of the parking lot, where churches may and may not be built, and the kinds of buildings that may be used for public worship. It is simply not true that the state has *no authority* over the church. The state has a lawful, though limited, authority over the church. Disobedience to the governor's order is not per se a matter of obeying God rather than men, as BC consistory contends. It is rather a matter of obeying those whom God has set over us and the lawful authority that they rightly exercise. The governor's order is not a sweeping order that forbids churches ever again to gather for public worship. It is not an order that forbids us to preach Christ, as was the order of the Sanhedrin to the apostles in the book of Acts (Acts 4:18; 5:28). It was *at that point*, that the apostles said that they were obliged to obey God rather than men. The governor's order takes into account exceptional circumstances, and is a precaution aimed, not at silencing the church, but at halting the progress of a deadly virus. The motivation and reason for the governor's decision must be taken into account.
3. In addition, the state is carrying out its calling to protect the citizenry. That is its lawful calling and is the duty to which God calls it. In fact, not only does the governor have the good of the state in view, in reality she has the good of the church in view. The benefit of her executive order is a benefit that the church will enjoy: halting the spread of a deadly disease that threatens its members. All unbeknownst to her, she is functioning as God's servant for the good of His church in the world. We ought to be thankful for that.
4. It is incorrect to insist that the church "is not an earthly institution, but a spiritual and heavenly institution." (Rev. Lanning's letter.) That "[t]he church's assembling for worship is a holy and heavenly meeting with God himself." (Rev. Lanning's letter.) This

is patently false. The church that meets at 1945 84th Street in Byron Center, Michigan is not a heavenly institution, but is clearly an earthly institution. This is not to deny that the church is an altogether *unique* earthly organization. That is certainly true. But the instituted church, the church that gathers weekly in a particular place, for public worship, is very much an earthly organization. That is exactly the significance of the fact that she is the *instituted* church, the church in the world, not the church triumphant and glorified in heaven.

5. If BC is insisting on a call to worship for its congregation, it may not allow its members the freedom to come to worship or to stay home, as it does. This, to my mind, is a glaring inconsistency. “Perhaps some members would apply these principles differently or come to different conclusions. That is fine, but I believe the principles themselves are sound.” (Rev. Lanning’s letter.) “Those who are healthy but who are uncomfortable gathering in an assembly at this time are encouraged to stay home and use live streaming.” (Letter from BC consistory.) This is inconsistent. If BC’s consistory issues a *call to worship*, those who are healthy and able *must* come, or they are in neglect of the means of grace. If this is truly a principle matter, as BC’s consistory contends, no one is left to individual judgment. They are obligated to submit to the authority of the church and attend the public worship services.
6. By making this a principle matter and calling upon its members to disobey the governor’s order, BC is saying something about all her sisters who are complying with the governor’s order. By not disobeying the governor, as BC is, the other congregations are guilty of obeying men rather than God. That is a very serious insinuation! That is the implication of BC’s decision. In that case, BC is obligated to appeal to the individual congregations who have submitted to the governor’s order, pointing out to them their error. And if they are unable to persuade their sisters that they are obeying men rather than God, BC’s consistory must appeal to classis and to synod against her sisters.
7. There are also implications for the Christian schools. We maintain that the Christian schools are *parental* schools. They are governed by covenant parents and the school boards that are elected from the constituency of the school societies. It would be consistent with BC’s principles that the state has no right to dictate whether the schools stay open or are closed. That is the decision of the boards and of the parents. The state may close its own schools, but has no right to close our parental, covenant Christian schools. Consistency would demand, it seems to me, that like the church, the Christian school ought to disobey the governor’s executive order.
8. I am concerned about our witness to the world—in the community where our congregations exist. I am convinced that refusing to comply with the governor’s order is a bad witness in the community. There will most definitely be those who resent the church’s refusal to comply and consider the refusal an unnecessary exposure to the health risk posed by the corona virus. What kind of witness are we leaving before the eyes of the world by the way in which our churches are responding to the present pandemic?
9. And then there is the matter of precedent. During the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic, 14th Street CRC in Holland, MI was closed for three Sundays by order of the governor of the state of Michigan. Herman Hoeksema and the 14th Street consistory submitted to the government order. Will anyone say that Hoeksema was guilty of desecrating the Lord’s Day or that he was guilty of obeying man rather than God? Although a young man at the time, he was not afraid to express disagreement when he disagreed with church or

state. The flag controversy would be an example of that. In the case of the flu epidemic, he wisely complied and in complying has left us a worthy example.

May God keep us all and our Protestant Reformed Churches and sister churches, and all true churches of Jesus Christ around the world in these tumultuous times. May God give us “men that have understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32).

Cordially,
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