



PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH

Dear Brothers,

We hope this letter finds you well in light of the interesting times we have been facing as Christians, churches, and consistories. Our Lord said he is coming quickly, and in our day, we have the privilege to behold the clear impress of one of his footsteps. “For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places,” Matthew 24:7. With the people of God in all places and all times, we add our fervent petition, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus,” Revelation 22:20.

We send you this letter to express our concern regarding your recent decision to resume holding public worship services in disobedience to the government’s temporary restriction on public assemblies. Given the disruptive nature not only of the coronavirus pandemic itself, but also of the national response to that pandemic by federal and state governments, it was inevitable our various PRC consistories would apply different measures to shepherd their flocks in the meantime. Having faced many of the same questions you have, we recognize the difficulty of providing sound, principled leadership in these troubling times. Thus, we do not send our concerns from a sense of superiority or greater wisdom. We love Jesus Christ whose church we serve, notwithstanding our human weaknesses and frailties. In our attempt to lead our congregation we have come to very different conclusions than you about how to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting measures our government has taken. It is in that spirit we pray you will hear our concerns and, we hope, change your recent decision to hold public worship services while the temporary restriction on public assemblies remains in effect.

We ask you to consider the following grounds which we judge to establish the necessity of obeying the civil government in this instance.

1. According to LD 40, obedience to the sixth commandment means loving the neighbor to the extent that we “prevent his hurt as much as in us lies.” We are aware that in recent days some of the public discourse has begun to argue that the threat posed by the coronavirus has been overblown. Such arguments do not, however, change the fact that the consistent

message coming from qualified medical professionals is that the coronavirus is a threat we ought to take seriously. It may not be a threat to us personally if we are under a certain age and do not have a compromised immune system, but it is a threat to certain vulnerable segments of the population. Until a vaccine or other medication is developed, we are told by the same qualified professionals that the best way to keep the spread of the virus under control is by following the practice of social distancing, which includes *not assembling in large groups of people in enclosed spaces, as in a public worship service*. Taking certain precautions such as encouraging the elderly to stay home, maintaining six-feet of space between people, and washing hands are advised only as supplemental to the main advice, which is, *stay at home*. This argument, of course, raises another legitimate question. At what point may we begin to worship once more as the word of God calls us to in Hebrews 10:25? There will always be threats to the health of the neighbor which come with public assembly of many, potentially germ carrying, people. This brings us to the next ground.

2. According to LD 39, obedience to the fifth commandment means “That I show all honor, love, and fidelity to...all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.” It was on the basis of the information from the same medical professionals mentioned above that our civil rulers made a decision to declare a national state of emergency. It is in consultation with those medical professionals that our civil rulers have mapped out their strategies of response to the coronavirus pandemic, which includes *temporarily* prohibiting public assemblies to ensure proper social distancing practices are followed by the whole population. The stated goal is and has always been to lift those restrictions when the threat has passed. As a consistory, we consider the medical professionals who are advising the government to be in a much better position to make judgments about the threat posed by a contagious virus than ourselves. But regardless of what we personally may think about the actual threat posed by the coronavirus, or what precautions we think might mitigate its spread, that decision has been taken out of our hands by the civil rulers. *They* have decided the threat is sufficient to warrant such a temporary restriction, and it is our obligation according to the fifth commandment to submit “to their good instruction and correction with due obedience.” This would mean that we ought to see their guidance and direction in this case as for our good, since they are the ministers of God appointed for that end (Romans 13:4). On the other hand, if we believe they are mistaken, it is also our duty to “patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities.” If they are sinning in their direction or dealing falsely, as ministers appointed by God, they will answer to him (not to us).

Involved with this second ground is the question whether the state has the right before God to put a temporary restriction on holding public worship services by the church. After all, the church and the state are separate institutions. The three qualifiers below are intended to demonstrate that, yes, indeed the state does have the right before God to call for such a *temporary* restriction in this instance.

- a. It makes a significant difference what the *intention* of the state is in making this restriction. If the purpose of the state was to silence the gospel or to prohibit the church from ever assembling again, it would be necessary to reply with the apostles in Acts 5:29, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Then it would be our calling to suffer for Christ's sake the penalty of our disobedience to man, because we are constrained by a higher authority than the state. As it is, the state *has not yet crossed this line*.
- b. Though the church is a spiritual kingdom, fundamentally separate from the kingdoms of this world, and though the church is governed by the rule of Christ and not by the rule of the magistrate, the fact remains that the church takes a visible, institutional form *in this earth*. In so far as the church exists in this earth, her actions can and do sometimes carry consequences with regard to the personal safety and well-being of the citizens of the nation which the government is appointed by God to care for. For instance, we would never argue that the government has no right to demand that our church buildings follow building codes. Even in the narrow instance of the church's worship service, the state has a legitimate interest. There are living, breathing, human beings in the building while the worship service is taking place, and those living, breathing bodies are each capable of carrying germs and viruses which can infect another person. No one would argue it is illegitimate to dial 911 in order to summon the fire department if the church building catches fire *during a public worship service*. No one would argue the police should not be summoned if a shooter barges through the church doors *during a public worship service*. Why is it any different in this case, where the threat of a virus concerns the well-being of the flesh and blood people over whom the state has a legitimate interest and calling? Yes, of course, the state has no authority to dictate to the church which elements belong to the worship of God, or what will be the content of the preaching. The state has no authority to forbid the church from worshipping God indefinitely or permanently. But when it comes to taking measures the state deems necessary to facilitate the well-being of society at large *in an emergency*, it is not illegitimate to demand a temporary restriction. There is no disobedience to God in preference to man in this case, but rather a willingness to submit "to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" (I Peter 2:13).
- c. But maybe the argument is, "The government is not at this point persecuting the church or attempting to silence the gospel, but we would be disobeying the fourth commandment if we followed its restrictions. So still, we must obey God rather than men." It is true that obedience to the fourth commandment requires that we "diligently frequent the church of God...as becomes a Christian," (LD 38). However, the commandment itself says, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy," (Exodus 20:8). Jesus taught us that the principle of the sabbath does not preclude having a care for the physical wellbeing of the neighbor in love for him. Jesus healed the sick on the sabbath day (Matt. 12:12), and allowed his disciples to pick corn (Matt. 12:1) exactly to make this point. Sometimes churches cancel worship services because of inclement weather. In

the past, worship services of Reformed churches have been canceled for weeks on end because of plagues and diseases, such as 14<sup>th</sup> St. CRC during the 1918 Spanish flu. In all of these cases, the sabbath day is still kept holy even while refraining from public worship temporarily for the good of the neighbor. It is also possible to keep the sabbath day holy during our present pandemic in our homes, worshipping as families or even as private individuals. It is possible for pastors and elders to aid their congregations in keeping the sabbath day holy by providing them with resources for their spiritual care, such as live streaming sermons or writing meditative letters. It is not ideal, of course. But it is not either disobedience to the fourth commandment.

3. In addition to the above grounds, we believe it is a poor witness to disobey the government in this instance. It would be a good witness to disobey the government if the government was attempting to persecute the church. Then the witness would be, "We have only ever done well with respect to our neighbors and the authorities appointed over us as we have lived out our faith in Jesus Christ, and these men are overstepping their bounds to silence us, or to drive us out, or to compel us to disobey God's law." Such a witness is often used by God to build his church, for "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." It is a poor witness, however, when the government is disobeyed even though there is no persecution, no attempt to silence the gospel, and no requirement that we disobey God's law. The inspired Apostle used exactly the ground of the church's witness to compel Christians to submission to human governments in I Peter 2:15, "For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." The will of God is not disobedience of human government, unless absolutely necessary. Disobedience when obedience is due gives foolish men occasion to speak ignorantly about the church and the Jesus Christ whom she represents. The will of God is submission, exactly so that such foolish speaking will be silenced. At the very least, if the foolish men will speak anyway, the church is not responsible for giving them an occasion.

We are very concerned about the witness Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church is giving to the people who drive past and see the many cars in your parking lot. We are concerned about your witness as a local congregation, but we are also concerned about your witness as a *Protestant Reformed* congregation. Because your sign reads Protestant Reformed just like ours, your witness is our witness, and vice-versa. Consider that your decisions in this matter necessarily affect all the other churches in the denomination and our collective witness to this generation.

4. Finally, we wonder why you would choose to go in the direction you have, when that direction is the opposite of all the other Protestant Reformed congregations. We put this ground last deliberately, because we understand just because the majority is doing something does not make it right. The grounds above we consider determinative. Nevertheless, we also take seriously the instruction of Proverbs 24:6, "For by wise counsel

thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counsellors there is safety.” And it would be one thing if it were only all the other Protestant Reformed congregations whose example is contrary to your own, but it is more than that. 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. Surely the combined example of so many churches and consistories, including all of your neighboring PRC consistories, ought to carry some weight.

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Brothers, we all want very much to return to the way things were before the coronavirus pandemic and resulting government actions descended upon us. We all feel the pangs of the psalmist when prevented from our regular worship services, “When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday,” Psalm 42:4. We all desire to minister the word of God to his people in troubled times, and have been doing so to the best of our ability with the means available to us.

Please consider our grounds carefully, as we do not bring them to you lightly. May our collective witness to our Lord Jesus Christ, who holds all authority in heaven and in earth, be to his honor and glory.

In his service,

The Consistory of Zion PRC