



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on August 4, 2020

California Pastor Defies New Restrictions on Indoor Services

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health [said on Monday](#) that officials from its Environmental Health division are “investigating and will be reaching out to the church leaders [at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley] to let them know they need to comply with the Health Officer’s Order” to discontinue singing at places of worship and limit indoor attendance to 25 percent of capacity or 100 people, whichever is lower.



Senior Pastor John MacArthur (shown) already knows about that order, and he isn’t obeying it.

On Friday, July 24, he let them, and the whole world, know why. In his “Biblical Case for the Church’s Duty to Remain Open,” he wrote:

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.

But what about Romans chapter 13 and its admonition, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities”? What about 1 Peter 2:13-14 and its command to “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors”? These scriptures are often used to justify governmental interference in spiritual matters because those government entities were created by God to rule the citizens. MacArthur explains:

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.

But what if those authorities exceed their bounds? MacArthur continued,



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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.

Accordingly, wrote MacArthur, "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."

Consequently, "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."

MacArthur said he isn't relying on First Amendment guarantees in the Bill of Rights (i.e., "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.") Instead he is relying on the God-given right that that amendment guarantees:

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.

MacArthur concluded:

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.



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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).

In an interview with host Shannon Bream on *Fox News @ Night* on Monday, MacArthur reiterated his stand: "Jesus is Lord. He is the head of our church. Governor Newsom is not the head of the church. [Los Angeles] Mayor Garcetti is not the head of the church. We respect them for their temporal officer leadership in our government [but] when they move into the life of the church and tell the church what it can do, they're usurping a role that they don't have. The Constitution doesn't give them the power to do that, and they certainly don't have the spiritual power to do that, to usurp the place that only Jesus Christ has over His church."

Where do other churches stand on Newsom's orders? In late May, following Newsom's initial ban on all in-person church services, "more than 3,000 churches opposed him," reported the *Washington Examiner*, "and threatened to reopen without his consent if he did not loosen up his restrictions. Newsom relented."

Will those 3,000 congregations stand behind MacArthur's scripturally sound decision to reopen and stay open, even in the face of threats from the Los Angeles County Health Department?

Image: screenshot from [YouTube video](#)

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