

# The Exercise of Authority in Matters of Public Health

by Virginia

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By Chris Whiting

## The Problem

The exercise of authority in the life of the Believer has been the focus of much thought and prayer over the centuries. The relationship between Church and State was at the core of persecution of the early church because the Christian confession “Jesus is Lord” was a direct contradiction to Rome’s requirement that “Caesar is lord”. A Roman citizen could worship whatever gods met with their acceptance so long as they were prepared to burn incense to Caesar as the supreme authority. [It is possibly for this reason that Paul writes “no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3), this being the baptismal confession used by the early church and to make such a dangerous public declaration would have necessitated a genuine work of the Spirit in the life of the believer.] Thus from the outset, Christian persecution has been political as much as it has been religious.

The fact that Christians today struggle to come to terms with the God-appointed authorities in their lives is because so much of our preaching is evangelical and pietistic. We have trained Believers to see Christ as Lord of their hearts but have neglected to set before them a Christ who is Lord of all. We have failed to teach what it is to hold a Christian worldview.

So when it comes to discussion about the Corona virus and related vaccinations, many Christians are uncertain about what are the rights of the State and what are the rights and responsibilities of the Individual.

## Sphere Sovereignty

One man who had necessary and practical reasons to think through the relationship between church and state was Abraham Kuyper (1837 - 1920), for Kuyper served Christ as both a Dutch pastor and Prime Minister of The Netherlands. His starting point was not Christ as Lord of my life but Christ as Lord of all, saying:

“In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch concerning which Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare; 'Mine!'”

Kuyper’s contribution to Christian worldview was to argue what has become known as “sphere sovereignty”. He saw that the Word of God appointed authorities across the three spheres of family, church and state. Thus is Christ, our Brother, High Priest and King.

Moreover, in the exercise of authority, each sphere has areas of independence (but not autonomy since every sphere is bounded by the Word of God) and each sphere has points of overlap, in which cooperation or accommodation must be found.

## Responsibilities of the State

Scripture affords limited responsibilities to the State. At the crudest, most simplistic level one might say that State has the task of defending the common good, or as used to be known, the commonwealth. Such defence is both:

- **External**– the authority to wage war and form alliances
- **Internal**– the authority to prevent disturbance of the peace and to uphold good moral order

It is concerning this Internal Authority that Paul writes in Romans 13. On the one hand Paul teaches that government authority is appointed by God (Rom 13:1) and that to resist the government is to resist God (Rom 13:2). But in two ways he then defines the limits of state authority. He explains that government:

- is not a terror to good conduct but to bad (Rom 13:3),
- carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer (Rom 13:4).

Thus government has authority to punish those responsible for evil works but it has no authority to punish those who do good works. As an example, governments are not acting within their God appointed authority by allowing abortion clinics to operate freely, since abortion is a breach of the Sixth Commandment, an evil work. Neither are they acting within their God appointed authority by prohibiting those who would offer an alternative to abortion, because in so doing the government is opposing a good work.

### **Biblical Law, Quarantine and Isolation**

Biblical Law has much to say about quarantine, mask wearing and isolation. Leviticus 13 & 14 describe 21 different diseases all of which are covered by the generic term of leprosy<sup>[1]</sup>. In respect to preventative measures Biblical Law indicates that:

- Quarantine is required but only after a positive diagnosis (Lev 14:3 & 35).
- Isolation for seven days is required where a firm diagnosis as to infection cannot at first be confirmed (Lev 13:5-6).
- Masks are required as a means of protecting the community from an infection which may be spread by the breath (Lev 13:45), where ongoing infection is evident.

Thus if the State is to protect the common good it might seem fair that quarantine, isolation and mask wearing are appropriate. However three things need to be born in mind:

1. Given that it is a requirement in criminal justice that the punishment must fit the crime (Deut 19:21), by extension it would seem appropriate that in the case of the protection of public good, measures taken which restrict personal liberties must be consistent with the risk involved.

As at 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021 i) case fatalities in Australia for those under 50 is <0.034% (i.e. 16 out of 47,897 cases) and that ii) the hospitalisation rate for current Covid cases is 4.6% (1,278 out of 27,797 cases) and that iii) ICU admissions for current cases have been 0.8% (220 out of 27,797) cases<sup>[2]</sup>; it would therefore seem that the measures, and their impact, currently being taken far outweigh the risks involved. (This is to say nothing of the fact that in Queensland and Victoria fewer people have died this year of COVID than died last year of influenza.)

Furthermore, since a vaccinated person remains capable of acquiring the Covid virus and therefore remains capable of spreading it to others, it would seem that the State imposition of mandatory vaccination is only marginally beneficial in reducing community risk of infection. In which case minimal risk reduction does not warrant such a significant incursion on individual liberty.

1. Decisions for handling plague were not the realm of the State alone but belonged to the Church's representatives, the priests (Deut 24:8).
2. This because it was the Church's role to advise the State in difficult and contentious matters (Deut 17:8-9) as can be seen by the fact that the cities of refuge were also Levitical cities.

### **Responsibilities of the Church**

The Levites had a much wider responsibility than ministering in the sanctuary. They were involved in godly education, music, welfare, assistance to judges in the handling of civil matters and, as we have seen, participation in matters of public health.

The current reluctance of the State (and the community) to receive input from the Church as to the role of government and its authority is hardly surprising. This is because over the last several hundred years, numerous responsibilities have been ceded to the State, which according to Biblical Law were the province of family and church. The State has taken to itself ultimate responsibility in two areas that cause it be revered as the saviour of the populace and the determinant of society's moral code: welfare and education.

- Welfare is the responsibility of the individual (Ps 41:1), the Family (1 Tim 5:8) and the Church (Acts 6:3-5), not the State. The State's task is limited to ensuring that equitable justice is available to the poor and not biased toward the rich

(Ps 82:3-4).

- Education is the responsibility of the family (Eph 6:4, 2 Tim 1:5 & 3:15) and the church (Lev 10:9-11, Deut 33:10).

Broad community acceptance of the State as saviour means that many, including Christians, are happy to accept State policy and guidelines in matters which are outside its province.

### Who gets to go to Church?

Decisions about who is healthy enough to attend church do not belong in the State sphere. This is for a number of reasons, the two main ones being:

*First* - The State is meant to be a terror to evil works not to good works. Attending church is not an evil work but, as Scripture presents it, a good work. The book of Hebrews was written to a church under persecution and governmental restrictions. There were those who seemed in danger of abandoning the faith altogether (Heb 10:32-35). Instead of submitting to State and community expectations, the Church was encouraged "not to forsake the assembling of themselves together" (Heb 10:25). The State has no authority to prevent Christians from meeting.

*Second* - When it comes to participation in worship, it is up to the Church to decide who is a health risk and who isn't. Jesus told the healed leper to present himself to the priests and then offer the sacrifice required by Moses (Matt 8:4, Luke 17:14). This is because those who were physically infirm were deemed in Scripture to be (covenantally) dead. They were not permitted to take their place in the congregation of Israel (Lev 21:17-20). However, once healed of their infirmity, they were assessed by the priests and, via an offering, rededicated as a covenant member.

### Summary/Conclusion

In short:

Scripture assigns limits to the authority of Family, Church and State.

State Authority in matters of community is to be God's minister for good, hence it has authority to be a terror to evil works but has no authority to be a terror to good works.

When determining punishment for an evil work the severity of the penalty must be commensurate with the severity of the crime. By extension, when seeking to protect the public good; the measures taken (especially those which restrict personal liberties) must be consistent with the extent of risk to the public good.

Biblical Law places the authority for decisions about public health with the Church and not the State. As such it can be argued that a Christian is not bound by Scripture to adhere unthinkingly to State decisions in this regard.

In particular, it is the province of the Church and not the State to determine health guidelines pertaining to participation at church.

### Chris Whiting Bio:

Chris pastored *The Open Door Christian Church* in Melbourne for 23 years. He also served on the team of the *Daniel 2:44 Conference* for a number of years. This conference was dedicated to proclaiming the lordship of Christ over all aspects of life, and was held annually in Canberra. Having seen the Church and his own witness marginalised by superficiality and a limited understanding of the sovereignty of God, Chris is passionate about seeing "the applicability of God to everything".

Holding a Bachelor of Commerce from Melbourne University, he has also served as a business owner, consulting in the areas of information systems and business improvement with a particular focus on human resource development, quality management, and environmental management.

Notes:

[1] R J Rushdoony *Commentaries on The Pentateuch - Leviticus*, Ross House Books, Vallecito, 2005, pg 134

[2] Figures as published in the Australian Government Department of Health *Coronavirus (COVID-19) case numbers and statistics* and reported in the Australian Spectator on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2021

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