

Dear Brothers and Sisters

I'm writing this letter on a matter of some urgency, a matter about which I believe we as the Body of Christ must be aware and respond to. Please forgive the length of what I have written here, but I do believe the issues addressed within this document are pressing and in grave need of being expressed. I pray that you will take the time to read this to the end.

I understand that we are all under enormous pressure at the moment from all and sundry, and we are all scrambling to find sources that are trustworthy to help us discern what is at the root of our trouble, and how we are to respond as the Church in faith, love, and with Godly wisdom.

In this letter my hope is not to burden anyone with more information, but instead to shine a light on the real issues before us.

The world we live in today is radically different to the world we lived in two years ago. Even if we were to go back to before the lockdowns of 2020, we are in a very different world from the rose tinted optimism of those days, when we believed the lockdowns would be fleeting, that life would soon return to normal, and that we were playing our part in the team of 5 million.

Here we are at the close of the following year and we are dealing with a country in an economic crisis, with small and medium sized business collapsing as a result of the measures implemented in an attempt to eradicate COVID. We are however also dealing with a social crisis as families are being torn apart, divided asunder along lines of clean and unclean, where families across the country will not be getting together at Christmas because of the fear of mixing with those who have not been vaccinated.

There has never been such division, fear, animosity, and pure open vitriolic hostility towards one group of people in this country, and it is tearing us apart.

The fear is palpable, the social fabric torn in tatters, hanging on by the mere threads of the memory of how it used to be, and the pretence that all must surely return to normal soon, shouldn't it? And all the while the air is heavy with foreboding as we await the inevitable wave of Delta and now Omicron as they surge from the North to the South of our land, drenching us all in the fine mist of this airborne pathogen, and finally sinking our already stricken health system.

As all of this has been taking place I have sat back and watched the events unfold, trying to get a handle on where the truth lies with regards to COVID, how severe it really is as an illness, what risks it poses, and how I, as a husband, father, and Christian leader, should respond.

I've watched with a growing sense of alarm as governments across the West, including our own government here in NZ, have run roughshod over our democratic process and our country's laws, treating as light freedoms won at the price of the blood of our forefathers,

All of this has caused me to wrestle with a number of questions with the Lord; what is happening here, what's really going on, and in light of this, how are we, the Body of Christ, to respond. What is the nature and source of the government's authority? What is the Church's responsibility, and therefore relationship to the government? Who are we as the Church, and what is our responsibility in the cultural moment into which God has called us?

In addressing these issues I will begin with the question of government and authority.

Romans chapter 13 verses 1-7 are so often the go to verses when thinking about government and authority. These passages have been used in a variety of different ways down the ages, often as a justification for passivity in the face of evil regimes, and inactivity in the face of societal oppression.

Do these passages commit the Body of Christ to total and unreserved obedience to the governing authority of their day? Do these passages commit us to obeying even evil regimes so that, even if Emperor Palpatine was in power, we would have to obey him, and simply live a quiet life, not engaging in the issues of our day or seeking to have influence so as to bring cultural and societal change?

When we look at the context of the rest of Scripture we would surely have to say no, of course not.

Had Moses simply obeyed Pharaoh, leaving the Israelites to their government mandated slavery, there would never have been an Exodus.

Had Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego simply obeyed the governing authorities, bowing down to the golden statue, acknowledging Nebuchadnezzar as the ultimate authority, then we wouldn't have the fiery furnace with the one like a Son of Man walking in the fire with them.

And if the first disciples weren't relentless in their preaching and proclamation that Jesus is Lord, refusing to bow to Caesar as the ultimate authority, then they would never have suffered the persecution mentioned in the likes of Peter's Epistle

As Paul was certainly well aware, Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments, is replete with examples of believers deliberately disobeying the governing authorities of their day. To say that Romans 13 commits us to unreserved obedience to the governing authorities is to commit us to a position contrary to the teaching of the whole council of God. In doing so, such a reading drives a wedge through the consistency and coherence of Scripture.

That particular reading of Romans 13 doesn't only create problems for us in our reading and understanding of Scripture however, it also creates problems for us in our reading and understanding of our times and the flow of history that has brought us here.

If we were to take such a line, that Christians are to obey the governing authorities in our day, then we must obviously conclude that the underground churches in China and Iran, for example, are in sin, because they refuse to obey the dictates of the governing authorities in their countries, they continue to meet in spite of it being illegal. They refuse to acknowledge that the government is the ultimate authority, obeying Christ as Lord and meeting together at His command in spite of what the governing authorities have to say.

The history of the Church, in many ways, is a history of refusal to submit to the governing authorities of the day as ultimate. That refusal has taken many forms, civil disobedience as in the examples above, private disobedience in terms of continuing to meet for corporate worship behind closed doors, but it has also included actively agitating for change to unjust laws.

William Wilberforce could have simply sat back and lived a quiet life, obeying the laws of the land, recognising the authority of the government over his life as well as that of those enslaved, but he would not. He agitated for decades to end unjust laws implemented by the governing authorities of his day.

Martin Luther King Jr marched to bring to an end the injustice carried out by the governing authorities of his day. He could have led a quiet life of obedience to the authorities but he would not. He understood that there was an authority higher than that of his land and he would not yield to any other than that authority.

These two examples are the obvious ones, but there are many, many others that could be mentioned.

We know these stories from history and we celebrate these brothers and sisters in the faith, and rightly so. In doing so, we implicitly acknowledge that we know Romans 13:1-7 doesn't mean that we must blindly obey the governing authorities in everything, regardless of what it is we are being asked to do. We know that there are situations in which obedience to the governing authorities would be disobedience to the ultimate authority, the LORD.

So what can we take from Romans 13? What is the nature of the authority granted government if it is not absolute, requiring total obedience?

When we look at the text of Romans 13:1-7, the context of the authority granted is obvious and stated repeatedly. The authority granted to the government is not ultimate, their authority is a derived authority, it is derived from God Himself.

In verse 1 we are told that God institutes all governing authorities, and in verse 4 we are told that the ruler is a servant of God.

The context is clear, governing authorities are granted their authority by God. Theirs is not an absolute or ultimate authority, it is derived, and so governments are to rule under God as His servants, to cause nations to flourish by promoting righteousness and justice (Vs 3-4), and by punishing evil (Vs 4).

For centuries, Western governments have understood that their authority is not absolute but derived. Their rule is not ultimate, but they are to rule under the ultimate authority, namely God.

This understanding is the fruit and byproduct of the influence of the Christian faith in the West. Whether you look to the Magna Carte, the Declaration of Independence that formed 'One nation under God', to the singing of our national anthems, or to the democratic system itself, they all rest heavily on the foundation that government is not ultimate, God is, and government's authority is not absolute, it is derived from God.

This has been such an instrumental foundation of Western thought, politics, and cultural institutions because implicit in this idea are two things, firstly that, because governments derive their authority from God, they are accountable to God for how they use that authority, and secondly, because if it is God who institutes the governing authorities then governments rule at the will of God, as such, they can be removed by that same will.

Alongside this Western conviction, that governments rule under God, is the centrality of the view that all people are created in the image of God. This view gave rise to universal human rights, because if all people are made in the image of God, then all people have innate value, dignity, and worth. This innate value, dignity, and worth not being the result of their own good breeding, academic learning, social standing, colour of skin, gender or anything else, nor is that value bestowed upon them by rulers or governments. People have value because God has created them in His image. Every human being is an image bearer whose value dignity, worth, and rights are bestowed by God.

This passage in Genesis 1:26-27 also underpins our modern understanding of what democracy is, after all, if everyone is made in the image of God, being possessed of inalienable rights (rights from which you cannot be alienated), and having innate value,

dignity, and worth, then everyone should have a say in the political process, everyone's voice should be heard in the determination of who governs.

These are massive ideas that underpin all of Western civilisation, but they are now antiquated, out of date, and cast upon the discard heap of history in favour of more modern beliefs.

How has this happened?

Well, in the interests of keeping this document as short as I can while covering all that I believe needs to be said, I will give a brief overview of the historical flow that has led us to this pivotal moment in history.

The process of secularisation can be described as the process by which religious beliefs, ideas, and institutions lose their cultural credibility and influence. Secularisation has been in play for a number of centuries, but really finds an engine to provide it momentum in the period known as The Enlightenment, a cultural movement taking hold in the 17th century.

The mood of The Enlightenment is often summed up in the phrase 'Faith in Reason Alone'.

Among its aims, The Enlightenment sought to redefine the way we come to know. Reason was King for the Enlightenment thinker. Revelation took a back seat and reason was brought to the fore as the primary means by which we must come to know and understand.

However, if reason was King in the Enlightenment then scepticism was his champion. If we are to ever truly know, then everything we think we know must be subjected to scepticism, stripped back to its most basic elements and then rebuilt upon the sure foundation of pure reason.

It was onto this stage that Rene Descartes strode, a titanic figure who in his Promethean endeavour would radically reshape our very understanding of what it means to be human.

Descartes sought to apply this scepticism to his knowledge, and went about it with the determination of Sisyphus and his proverbial rock.

Descartes came to the conclusion that, if we are to apply scepticism to everything we think that we know, then the only thing I cannot doubt is the fact that I am doubting.

And so his famous maxim was born, *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. The only thing that I cannot doubt is that I am doubting. The only thing I cannot be sceptical of is the fact that I am thinking in the first place.

On the basis of The Enlightenment's commitment to pure reason and the famous maxim of Descartes, human beings become redefined as thinking creatures. What separates Man from the animal? Man is a thinking creature, animals are not.

However, when you define human beings purely in terms of our ability to think, you inevitably reduce humans to something far less than what we are or were ever intended to be. We are thinking creatures, yes, but we are so much more than that.

In The Enlightenment with its ugly offspring rationalism and modernism, human beings are reduced to something far less than what we are in reality. However, the consequences of such a reduction inevitably radiate out like a stone chip in a windscreen.

When you reduce human to being simply thinking creatures, and the only valid knowledge that which is produced by the application of scepticism and pure reason, then only that which can be apprehended by the senses and comprehended by the reason can be admitted as knowledge, can be admitted to our view of reality and the world in which we live.

Because this is the case, Western thought become locked into a naturalistic worldview, a worldview where everything must be assessed by pure reason, where the world is explainable by appeal to the observation of cause and effect, and everything explained by recourse to purely natural causes.

In defining ourselves as thinking beings, we became locked into a naturalistic view of reality, and in the process locked out the very biggest and most important ideas that drive and motivate us as humans, ideas of God, love, meaning, purpose, and of course objective truth.

The 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put it this way. "There are many sets of eyes, and consequently, there are many truths, and consequently, there is no truth".

Nietzsche is more famous for his statement that God is dead, however the above is simply an outworking of that statement.

God is dead, there's no one set of eyes that look out over all of reality and define it. Instead there are only the many sets of eyes, and every set of eyes sees reality from a slightly different vantage point, from a slightly different perspective, and so each person has their own view of truth.

Truth becomes subjective. There is no one truth that we are all accountable to, each person has their own truth. You have your truth, I have my truth. Your truth is not more true than mine, nor is my truth any more true than yours. Everyone's truth is equally true.

This understanding of truth really took hold in the 20th century in a movement widely known as Post-Modernism and later the concept of Post-Truth.

Under this cultural mood we see the deconstruction and destruction of all big stories that claim to have any authority over the individual. Now the individual can, no must, define all of reality for themselves. The individual becomes the god of their own universe, and as such, in their universe they get to determine not only external reality, but also their internal reality, the truth about themselves.

Freed from any mooring in objective reality the individual is cast adrift on the ocean of meaninglessness while at the same time, as Atlas in the cautionary tale of old, having to carry the weight, not only of their world, but their entire reality on their own shoulders. Crushing.

There is then no objective sense of meaning, meaning is whatever the individual determines it to be for them. There is no objective sense of hope, the individual creates their own hope to live by. There is no objective definition of love, love is whatever feels right and whatever serves the needs of the individual. There is no objective sense of morality, morality is whatever the individual deems right or wrong for them. As agent Smith in the Matrix films said “Me, me, me, it’s all about me”.

The question then becomes, how do you hold together a society whose entire view of reality is built on the foundation of the individual. How do we hold together a society where everyone does what is right in their own eyes, where the individual is god of their own reality and they determine what is right or wrong, good or evil, where there are no objective truths that bind us together and to which we are accountable.

The short answer is, you can’t.

In the 18th century Jean Jacques Réseau wrote his famous work *The Social Contract*. His basic premise was that societies come together on the basis of covenant. There is a shared vision to which every member of a society must agree in order to participate in that society. This shared vision is at base a moral vision to which each member of society agrees implicitly by participating.

Where there is no social contract, where there is no shared vision, and particularly a shared moral vision, there can be no society.

We have reached the point in Western culture where the shared moral vision has been so thoroughly eroded that it has become vanishingly small. There is little, if anything that is holding us together as a culture any more, other than the common agreement that society exists to cause the individual to thrive, whatever that looks like for them.

So how do we build or hold together society under these conditions? Well, the answer is that, under the old way of democracy, which was underpinned by the belief in God, truth, and objective morality, you can't.

There needs to be a social contract to hold society together. There needs to be a shared moral vision in order for society to cohere. However, as the process of secularisation has unmoored us from any such objective truths to which we are all accountable, all shared vision being ejected in the process, then it is down to the government to provide it.

Francis Schaeffer once said that in a culture with no absolutes, the culture is absolute. But if we take it to its logical conclusion, in a culture with no absolutes, the government becomes absolute. It is for the government to define our shared moral vision and impose their moral vision upon the culture through legislation. The government defines what constitutes a good and just society and they impose this view upon the people through economic and other political mechanisms.

In a culture with no absolutes it is not God who bestows rights upon the individual, it is the government, and if the government gives you your rights, then government can withhold or remove those same rights as and when they please.

This is the real challenge that the West is facing. In the abandoning of its Christian roots and foundations Western culture has eroded the very base upon which it stands and which has caused it to flourish. It no longer has a solid foundation, and as such, it is teetering on the verge of total collapse.

Where do we go from here? How do we hold together the tatters of Western culture? Well there are only two options. Either you rebuild the foundations upon which it once stood, or you tear it down and redefine the lot.

This is the path that governments across the West have chosen. They cannot advocate a return to the ancient paths to walk in them, and so, in the absence of any absolutes, government has become absolute and is imposing its will upon the people in order to bring about their vision of what society should look like.

Dear brother, dear sister, I want you to see what is really going on here. We are not fighting COVID, we are fighting a drive towards tyranny.

Now, in saying this, I'm not denying that COVID is real. There are many across the world who have suffered as a result of COVID. What I am saying is that COVID has been and continues to be used as a perfect Trojan Horse for bringing about a new foundation upon which to build a new culture, a foundation where government is at the centre determining right from wrong, truth from lies, fact from fiction, information from misinformation,

approved and un-approved, clean from unclean, those who can participate in this new society from those who cannot, and the social contract by which we participate.

Just last week I read this article and watched this clip from TV 3's morning show <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2021/12/jacinda-ardern-tells-world-leaders-our-model-of-democracy-is-being-challenged-across-globe.html>

On the surface this looks like a sound defence of our democracy, but take a close look at the language being used.

*"To thrive, Ardern said democracies needed high quality institutions, a **clear social contract to bind people together and which underpins their relationship with government**, an "unwavering commitment to human rights and the rule of law", a voice for marginalised people, and the ability to respond to pressing issues."*

Who is it that is going to provide this clear social contract which will bind us together and underpin our relationship with the government? You guessed it!

In this speech Jacinda Ardern also talks about 'democratic renewal'. Now what might that mean? If recent history gives us any light to go by then we can read 'renewal' as deconstruction and redefinition.

Make no mistake here friends, we are not fighting COVID 19, we are fighting a titanic culture wide lurch that is tearing us loose from democracy as we know it and driving us headlong and wilfully towards tyranny.

This is where we must be concentrating our efforts, fighting tyranny and the oppression that inevitably follows.

This brings me to my next question, who are we as the Church and what is our relationship to the government.

In 1 Peter 2:9-10 we see the classic statement of who we are as the Church.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

ESV

One of the driving themes of this passage, and so many others in the New Testament is that we, as the Church, have been taken from the nations of the world and brought together as a new people.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people”, what a statement! The Church are a people chosen and formed by God in Christ, and as such, a people belonging to God. It is this fact that binds us together, not our bloodlines, our ancestry, our ethnicity, or race. We are a people brought together by God and bound together by the blood of Christ. It is this fact that brings us together as a ‘chosen race’, and it is this fact that binds us together as a ‘holy nation’.

Our unity as the Church, the Body of Christ, is held before us continually throughout the pages of the New Testament. On the basis of Christ’s sacrificial death as our substitute we have been saved, individually, yes, but not only individually, we are saved and formed into a new community, a community under the rule of King Jesus, where none of the defining and identifying or qualifying marks so common in the world apply. We are qualified in Christ and in Christ alone.

“For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.”

Galatians 3:27-28

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

1Corinthians 12:12-27 ESV

It is abundantly clear in our current climate that the unvaccinated are considered 'less honourable and 'less presentable', their presence being barred from many public spaces and businesses, as well as from families, friendships, and the homes of their loved ones at Christmas and beyond. On top of this, the government would have us segregate them from our church services as well.

This must never be.

Is Christ divided? Absolutely not. Can the body amputate a foot and expect not to forever walk with a limp? Of course not.

Any church leader who accepts the government vaccine mandates as a governing priority on the basis of which it is determined who can and who cannot gather, brings damage to the body. This division cannot be accepted in any form, not in separate services, segregated spaces, or any other conjuring. All are merely a capitulation to the spirit of the age and a betrayal of that which scripture clearly teaches.

In Christ, the dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. As such, all of the identifying and defining markers used in the world are abolished, Jew Greek, slave free, male female, rich poor, socially accepted and social outcast (James 2), clean and unclean. All are now one in Christ.

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul confronts Peter on this specific issue.

Peter, a Jew, had been freely mixing with gentiles until certain men came representing the circumcision party. On the basis of his fear of them and for his reputation, Peter withdrew from the unclean Gentiles, separating from them and eating only with clean Jews.

Paul's argument to him is that he, Peter, was not walking in step with the Gospel. Peter was implicitly through his actions, communicating that justification was by law, not by grace. Now I'm sure Peter would've balked at the suggestion, believing that his actions were merely prudent, that the Gentiles were still saved, he was simply not going to have anything to do with them.

In his actions, Peter had betrayed the very heart of the Gospel. By his actions he was preaching a false Gospel of salvation by law not by grace, and he was creating division in that which God has brought together and called to unity.

All who impose division upon the body of Christ on the basis of the segregationist policies of the government, or on any other basis are guilty of this same sin. By their actions they are preaching a false Gospel, preaching a gospel of justification by law not by grace, and creating division in that which God has called to unity.

Let no man divide asunder that which God has brought together.

Our common unity in Christ is promoted again and again in the New Testament. We are one because we have been made to be one in and through Christ. As such we are consistently called to maintain our unity as the Body of Christ.

It is our common unity that lies at the heart of the communion. As we take the bread and wine, the emblems of the broken body and shed blood, we engage in a physical demonstration, a declaration and reminder that we are united to Christ through His sacrifice on our behalf. But in the same act we are also declaring our unity together as the Body of Christ, the people of God, the sons and daughters of the living God, and the family of God our Father through Christ.

It is for this reason that Paul addresses the issue of the Communion with the Corinthian church.

In 1Corinthians 11:17-19, Paul states the reason that he brings his teaching on the Lord's Supper is because he has heard that there are divisions in the Body. He addresses these divisions by reminding that the Lord's Supper is a physical proclamation of the Gospel and our abiding hope in Christ, and as such, that it should not be taken unworthily.

The Communion has always been recognised in the Church following the reformation as one of the defining marks of the Church. Where is the Church? Where the Word is taught, the Sacraments rightly administered, and where there is Church discipline.

The Sacraments have traditionally consisted of Baptism and the Communion. Why?

Because in both of these visible actions there is a physical proclamation of our unity with Christ, and our unity with each other as the Church. As many as were baptised, Paul declares, were baptised into Christ. And in the Communion we physically demonstrate and proclaim our common union with Christ, and therefor our common union together as the Body.

It is for these reasons that I want you to understand the severity of what I am about to say, because this has always been the understanding of the Church from the first disciples, to Nicaea, and today. **Where there is no common union (communion) there is no church.**

To impose a division dictating who can and who cannot attend the gathering of the saints is to impose a division upon the Lord's table. Those who impose a division upon the Lord's Table nullify their legitimacy as a church.

I implore you, if you have made the decision to segregate your worship services, it is not too late. Repent, turn back from this division. Explain to your congregation why it is necessary to maintain our unity even in the face of government mandates. Demonstrate through repentance what true leadership looks like, a willingness to admit when we are wrong and not fight to be seen to be right. Ask for forgiveness from those who have been ostracised as a result of these mandates and welcome all back to the Table.

I understand, these are difficult times requiring difficult decisions. What do we do with regards to the elderly or the immunocompromised? How do we cater to the whole of the Body?

There are no easy answers, but we must be directed by the Word of God. We must let our theology drive our action, not pragmatism, and certainly not politics.

Some might say 'But I haven't imposed such a division. We have a separate room for the unvaccinated and they can take the communion together.'

This is to segregate the body into classes along lines outside of Christ and the grace of God extended us through His Son. This is in and of itself a division of the body and the proclamation of a false gospel. The clean may well be able to take communion together and the unclean may well be able to take communion with each other but you have implemented a division under which they cannot take communion together.

Christ is not divided and neither should His body be.

I have heard it said by some that this is a health issue not a theological one.

Firstly, I believe I have demonstrated above just how serious, severe even, this issue is for our Ecclesiology.

The question of imposing divisions upon the Body of Christ cuts to the very core of who we are and have been made to be as the Church. As such, it also has implications for our missiology, as it obviously impacts our witness before the watching world. This in turn impacts our discipleship, as this issue forces us to think about what it means to be a disciple of King Jesus and the cost of following Him.

These issues couldn't be more theologically relevant or significant.

Secondly, to say that this is a health issue rather than a theological one is to swallow the sacred secular divide.

Earlier in this piece, I outlined the secularisation process as it relates to government, the gradual process of unmooring government, its authority, and accountability from the foundations in the Christian tradition and from God Himself.

This process is of course not limited to government, but through government to all public institutions.

As the process of secularisation has eaten its way through our public institutions it has given rise to the process of the privatisation of faith. Faith, being sacred, is about your private life and is to be practiced as such, behind closed doors. Your beliefs are about what you think, believe, and do at home, or on a Sunday at church. Don't bring your private sacred views into our secular public spaces or institutions.

This cultural mood has been a major contributing factor in producing anaemic disciples, disciples who live one way on Sunday and behind closed doors, but who fail to see that their private beliefs impact or influence their public lives.

The twin moods of secularisation and privatisation have produced a way of seeing and interacting with the world that is compartmentalised, broken down into categories, the sacred and the secular. These categories don't intersect or interact and influence each other. This however, is not the way Scripture teaches or understands what faith is.

Sacred can be defined as that which can rightly be offered to God as an act of worship while secular is that which is of this world. However, when we put these two notions side by side we see that secular is not the opposite of sacred, profane is.

In Scripture there is no sacred/secular divide, the divide is between sacred and profane; that which can rightly be offered to God as an act of worship, and that which cannot.

In 1 Peter 2:9 the Church is not only described as a 'chosen race' and 'holy nation', but also a 'royal priesthood'.

According to Peter, this priesthood is to offer 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (vs 5). What could this mean?

Paul gives a more full explanation in Romans 12:1-2

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

As followers of Jesus we are to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, or to put it another way, for the believer, all of life is to be lived as an act of worship.

For the disciple of King Jesus the whole of our lives are to be an act of worship. We can tolerate no sacred/secular divide, either in our thinking or in our actions. Jesus is Lord of all or not Lord at all.

As believers we need to cultivate a worldview where our faith, as taught through Scripture encompasses the whole of life. The Christian faith is a whole of life belief system that should apply to the totality of life, producing a unity of thought and action as opposed to a compartmentalised worldview producing contradictory actions.

Because this is so, health issues must be seen as theological issues. We must think about health through the lens of theology, not subordinate our theology to our health concerns or to the government or any other party.

So what then, is the Church's relationship to the government?

In Romans 13:3-4 we are told that governments are servants of God to cause good to flourish and to punish evil. Government has been instituted and granted authority by God with the purpose of producing a just society amidst the reality of a fallen world

In verse 6 Paul states that the government serves as ministers of God. This context is highly significant for our case.

The Church also has authority. We are to be an outpost of heaven, an embassy of the Kingdom of God. Believers are to be ambassadors of Christ, a community under King Jesus where all of life is lived as a proclamation of the Gospel, both in words and deeds, in service to our King.

So here's the rub, the Church and the Government exist to serve the same boss. We are both to serve God.

So what is the Church to do when the government has denied the one who has granted them authority, and at whose will they serve? How should the Church respond when the government institutes laws that oppress the people, setting themselves up as tyrants, ruling over the people as if their authority were ultimate?

Firstly we must recover our prophetic voice, and the prophetic voice must start in the pulpit.

Luther once said something to the effect of 'if you are preaching the gospel at every point except that at which it is most fiercely contested, then you are not really preaching the

Gospel'. However, preachers are often reticent to address political issues from the pulpit as they see their calling to be teaching scripture not talk about politics. This however, is all too often another example of the sacred/secular divide, as if the Scriptures and the Gospel have no implications for politics.

If a preacher means that they are unwilling to support one particular candidate or advocate for one particular party, then I agree, this would be out of place at the pulpit. However, we cannot kid ourselves that the Gospel of Christ and the politics of our world are in any way separate, or are not, in fact, all too often, in conflict.

We must address political issues from the pulpit because we are called as followers of Jesus to stand for truth and against falsehood. We are called to stand for justice and against injustice, and stand for freedom against tyranny.

The political arena is where the battle rages hottest in our day. If we are not engaging in that arena then we are not truly engaging.

We see this theme again and again throughout Scripture. We see it in Moses confronting Pharaoh, telling him to bring to an end his unjust tyranny over the people of God. We see it when the Prophet Nathan confronts King David after his deplorable actions involving Bathsheba and Uriah. We see it with Daniel confronting Belshazzar with the prophetic word of the writing on the wall.

Throughout Scripture and throughout Christian history there is a clear thread of speaking truth to power through the prophetic word. This prophetic voice must be recovered.

The prophetic voice must spill out beyond the pulpit however, and be embraced as an essential aspect of our calling as the Church to the fallen world to turn from sin and to faith Christ.

As a body, we must band together and publicly stand against tyranny, for our identity and unity granted us in Christ, as well as for the freedoms that our Christian faith grants those who live in Western cultures basking in the glow of the fires of the Reformation.

We must speak prophetically, publicly and also directly to the government, calling them to account to the God from whom their authority flows.

All too often the Church has settled for being the ambulance at the bottom of the hill, picking up the pieces of those crushed by an unjust society. In Proverbs 24 verses 10-12 we are told that we are to "Rescue those who are being taken away to death" and to "hold back those who are stumbling towards the slaughter" we are told in vs 23-26 that we have a responsibility to speak out against wickedness.

According to the Word of God we cannot settle for being the ambulance at the bottom of the hill. We must ascend the hill to the top of the cliff and proclaim that, to go this way is death, there is a cliff ahead, the fall from which will be great indeed and to the destruction of many.

Furthermore, in verse 12 of Proverbs 24, we are told in no uncertain terms that God holds us accountable for what we know, and for what we did with what we knew.

We cannot kid ourselves into thinking that we can turn a blind eye to all that is going on in the world and live a quiet life of faith behind closed doors. God will judge us according to what we knew and what we did with what we knew. We must speak and act, and do so publicly.

In order to do this we must hold a national gathering of Christian leaders to plan the way forward and to organise ourselves for unified action. We will need to band together so that the prophetic word of God can be proclaimed in the land, and we will need to be united together in prayer.

Secondly, we must also prepare ourselves to meet the real physical and practical needs of those who, due to the vaccine mandates, are now refugees in their own country.

We must show love, support, solidarity, and practical/financial care for these people who have been deemed unclean by government and the wider culture.

This will be a costly and painful exercise in sacrificial love poured out in gratitude to our God evidenced through our love of the lonely, the marginalised, the oppressed, the hurt, the poor and downtrodden.

This has always been the call of God upon His people. His call is abundantly clear in passages of Scripture such as Isaiah 58:6 and following, in the Sermon on the Mount, or in the Lord's reading of the scroll in the synagogue. Let us not shrink back from demonstrating to the world the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light as we pour ourselves out in love for the other.

Thirdly, we must prepare the people now for the road that lies before us

Earlier in this document I have argued that the real fight is not against COVID, the real fight is against tyranny. As a culture, the West is on a downward spiral that is leading us towards our government and governments across the West assuming total control over every aspect of life, a culture where government is the ultimate authority.

We are being convinced by the continual flow of government sponsored propaganda to see COVID as The Issue, the Only Issue; it is not. COVID must be seen as a part of a much bigger set of data.

For example, here in New Zealand, the government has taken control of the nations water infrastructure, which, until recently, was owned by the rate paying citizens of each local council. Now, with the government's Three Waters policy, they have duped the local councils into thinking that they actually had a choice as to what happened to the assets the rate payers owned, the government effectively having seised control of those assets.

Alongside this, the government has taken it upon themselves to centralise many of our institutions. Remember Ardern's comments in the clip earlier about providing quality institutions, what she really meant was government owned institutions, after all, we all know that the best way to take something that is broken and make it a thousand times worse is let the government run it.

Some other examples of those institutions that we can add to our water infrastructure include, so far, the polytechnic institutions which will now be run out of Wellington, and the health system, once run by the individual health boards, will now be run out of Wellington.

Rest assured that these are not the only examples of infrastructure and institutions that the government want to control, and we will, no doubt, see more added to the list so long as this government continues on its ideological course.

As well as the centralisation programme that the government has committed itself to, they have also deemed it within their jurisdiction to determine what is permissible speech and what is not. We are still to see exactly what the hate speech bill will contain, but we can be sure it will not be favourable to the preaching of the exclusivity of Christ or to the Christian view of marriage as between one man and one woman, and perhaps against the very idea of man and woman at all.

Running in tandem to these policies, the government is also in the process of granting themselves extraordinary powers in the digital landscape as well, producing legislation that will allow them to determine what is permissible for public viewing on the internet and what is not, and of course, this bill will lean heavily on the hate speech bill which will determine what is lawful to say/publish, and what is not.

As a part of a whole move of government to wrest greater levels of power and control for itself, the COVID 19 emergency provisions have rewritten the level of power the government has, and more importantly its powers to limit or remove the freedoms of its citizens.

The days ahead are likely to be hard ground to plough in the proclamation of the Gospel, and we need to begin to disciple our people so that they expect suffering as a consequence of following Jesus, so they are prepared to follow Him no matter the cost.

This will require focussed teaching and preaching, demolishing the easy believism that has so marked the church of recent decades, and the cheap grace of the self absorbed consumeristic church and culture of our time, preparing the people for the coming suffering and persecution.

So many of us have grown up in the faith under messages like 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'. When we hear messages like these, our imagination immediately goes to what the culture has trained to us see as a wonderful plan for our lives, fame, fortune, success, acceptance, praise, popularity etc etc

God does love us, and He does have a wonderful plan for our lives. That plan is that we are conformed to the image of Christ so that in and through our lives, we reflect Christ more and more faithfully to God, to each other, and to all creation.

As I look at Scripture, it seems to me that the means by which God most often achieves this in His people, is through suffering.

If this is indeed the case, and God's highest, most wonderful plan for our lives is that we are conformed to the image of His Son, and that the means He most often uses to achieve this is through suffering, then doesn't it also follow that that which is for our ultimate blessing may in the short term appear to be a curse.

Think about that for a minute...

The Lord Jesus crucified on the cross, blessing or curse? Cursed is He who is hung from the tree. Curse, right? But it was for our ultimate blessing.

Mary, pregnant unwed teenager in first century Israel, blessing or curse? Curse; oh but the blessings spoken over Mary, and the blessing brought about through what must surely have been perceived in the short term to have been a curse.

Over and over again we see this through Scripture, that which is ultimately for our blessing may in the short term appear to be a curse. And this brings me to another reason why God is sovereign over the authorities He institutes.

God often uses the authorities of the day as a means to rebuke His people, bringing correction to them, and teaching them to cling to Him above all else. When His people have wandered away or taken their eyes off of Him, it is often through the rulers and governments of foreign nations as well as the oppressive governments who rule over God's people that He brings correction.

Is this not true of Pharaoh in Exodus? Is this not true of the various captivities that Israel entered into because of the hardness of their hearts? Will it not also be true of us?

The Word tells us that the Lord is returning for a bride who has made herself clean. How is this to come about?

God's judgement begins in the household of God. But His judgement is not for our destruction, it is for our correction. It is not for our removal from the world, but the removal of the world from us His Bride. It is to train us in righteousness, faith, holiness, endurance, perseverance, and ultimately joy through, and in the midst of, suffering.

There are times when we as the people of God must stand against the authorities of our day, even though God has instituted those authorities, because we are to continue to be the people of God even in the face of opposition and under threat of penalty. Being the people of God entails standing for all that God has commanded us to stand for, including justice, righteousness, and mercy and against wickedness, injustice, and oppression.

My brothers and sisters, this is a call to fully be who we have been called to be as the Church, to embrace our calling and identity in our words and our actions, and to do so before the watching world, for the glory of God and for the good of those with whom we sojourn in the world.

My friends, do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

Hold fast to the head, our Lord Jesus. Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. Celebrate all that is beautiful and true, and cast out all lies from among us. And do not bow to Caesar as if he were the ultimate authority, as if government was Lord over us. There is only one Lord and His name is Christ.

Now is the time that we must act. If we are not willing to fight for our very unity in Christ, that unity in Him which defines us as who we are, then what will we be willing to fight for?

Make no mistake, we are at war, every war is won on the basis of little skirmishes and smaller battles. The war is won on the accumulation of wins in the smaller fights. The trouble is, if you refuse to engage in the fight, by the time the fight comes to your front door you may have lost so much ground that there's nothing left to fight for, and that you've lost so many friends that there's no one left to fight alongside.

Don't be confused brethren, the war we wage is not like any other, it is not against flesh and blood to be fought with guns and swords. As Paul reminds the church at Corinth it is against spiritual forces (2 Corinth 10:3-5). But that does not relieve us of our obligation to fight, to hold our ground and even to be willing lose in the short term knowing that the end result is guaranteed. But fight we must.

Paul, in writing to Timothy, speaks of the end times. He describes those days saying that there will be a people who have the form of godliness but deny its power.

Does that not describe so many churches today? We have the form of godliness in our services and Bible readings, and prayer, our attending meetings, and keeping ourselves free of sin and impurity, being good people. However, are we not through our inaction with regards to the real issues of our day, implicitly denying the power of God? Are we not taking our comfort and security in our religiosity, our personal holiness and piety, in our reputations, and in the standing we have in the eyes of others?

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously put it "To refuse to act is to act, to refuse to speak is to speak".

My concern is that in our refusal to speak and act we are implicitly denying the power of God, and in doing so demonstrating that we have greater fear of the government and for our perceived reputation in the eyes of others than we have fear of God.

It is time brothers and sisters to embrace our true identity in Christ, to stand as we truly are, the Church, united in our God, commissioned as ambassadors of Christ, endowed with authority by our God, but also with power through the Holy Spirit.

It is time for us to fight the good fight of the faith as those who have nothing to lose and whose eternal treasure has already been promised to us by our God.

I am not advocating that we fight for our freedom. Such a call would be a denial of the Gospel in and of itself, as Scripture clearly teaches that we are already free in Christ, and whom the Son sets free is free indeed. No, I believe God would call us to be ever more faithfully who God has called us to be, regardless of the cost. To cling to Him as ultimate over and against the authorities of this world and this present darkness. To refuse to place our trust, our hope, our comfort, or our security and safety in anything above Him.

I will leave off this writing with these words from a well known poem that has impacted me deeply over the years. May it spur us on to stand in the light of the truth of the Gospel and all that the gift of God entails, both for us as disciples, but also for the world into which we are called.

The Fellowship of the Unashamed

I am part of the "Fellowship of the Unashamed."

The die has been cast. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still.

My past is redeemed, my present is set and my future is secure.

I'm done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colourless dreams, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, praise or popularity.

I now live by faith, lean on his presence, love with patience, live by prayer, and labour by power.

My face is set, my pace is fast, my goal is His glory, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear.

I cannot be bought, compromised, deterred, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I must go until he returns, give until I drop, preach until all know, and work until He stops me.

Christ has qualified me to become a member of the fellowship of the unashamed. I am his and he is mine.

Yours in Christ



Kristopher Bate
Director
Thinking Faith Ministries
www.thinkingfaith.co.nz

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