

Children of God and COVID-19

*A Resource for Christians Navigating a Global Pandemic
Some Scriptural and Confessional Insights*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic swiftly brought many changes into our lives. Interacting with family and friends, shopping, running a business, going to school, and in some cases, even going for a walk in the park have all changed since this global pandemic began. It has been hard on everyone. Members of congregations have not all agreed on how we should act and react in the midst of this crisis. We all confess, though, that nothing—not COVID-19 either—comes to us by chance, but everything “by his Fatherly hand” (LD 10, *Heidelberg Catechism*).¹

For the most part, this resource focusses on one specific, yet very significant, matter: how COVID-19 has affected our public worship services and how we, as God’s people, should continue worshipping him throughout the pandemic. With respect to worship services (“religious gatherings” in the language of many government regulations), COVID restrictions, in general, and lockdowns, in particular, have severely restricted in-person worship. Many congregations, therefore, have made extensive use of livestreaming their worship services. In the Lord’s providence, at the moment of writing (mid-January 2021) and here in my home province of Ontario, the statistics (e.g., case counts, positivity rates, hospital capacity) are still not trending in a consistently favourable direction. We may well be facing more months of restrictions. Perhaps it is the same, or somewhat different, where you live. And, not to be pessimistic, but even if the second wave of COVID flattens and declines, there may be more waves to come, whether from the coronavirus or some other contagion.

Our hearts cry out, “How long, O Lord, how long?” Our minds cannot help but wonder: does there come a point when, out of reverence for the Lord and for the spiritual well-being of his people, we say, “We simply *must* go back to church in a responsible manner and worship in-person”? Is this the time to “obey God rather than man” and just go back to church?

This is an understandable question that deserves a comprehensive answer that is faithful to the very Word of God himself. In the pages that follow I have endeavoured to be guided by the truth of Scripture, as this is also summarized in the continental Reformed confessions, especially the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession. I have also drawn insights from the church order of Dort and some key Reformed theologians. The main goal in all this is to help each other walk together in a *steadfastly balanced approach* to the fourth, fifth, and sixth commandments of our gracious and covenant LORD.

It is my sincere prayer that this resource may help us all, as adopted children of the heavenly Father, to navigate this pandemic with his Word as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps 119:105).

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¹ All quotations from the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession are taken from the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2014).

Note about Revised Version

The first version of these notes (January 19, 2021) was put together—in the midst of other, regular duties—over the course of one week. Various brothers in the Lord looked them over, offering valuable correction and advice.² Rather than taking time to iron out all the wrinkles, it was felt that the urgency of the situation required putting that initial draft in the hands of readers sooner rather than later.

In the meantime, a month or so has passed. Numerous brothers and sisters have expressed gratitude for the document, and some have offered constructive criticism. Iron sharpens iron, and their comments have led to some various changes, and hopefully improvements, throughout the document. Most notably, a new opening thought was added, “Maintain Unity,” and the section on the fourth commandment underwent a significant reworking.

At this point in time (February 10, 2021), I do not plan to revise this resource further. It remains a “resource,” a document that aims to help but certainly does not claim to have all the final answers.

The major changes in this revised version are indicated by a vertical line (|) in the left-hand margin. This may be helpful to those who have already read the first version and wish to see more clearly where the changes were made.

² I wish to sincerely acknowledge the assistance of Drs. A.J. de Visser, W. den Hollander, and C. Van Dam for their helpful interaction on this topic, both before and while writing this document. Discussions on Zoom with Canadian Reformed and United Reformed ministers and elders during the week of January 11, 2021, also assisted greatly in refining this material.

How to Use this Resource

There are two main sections in the pages that follow. The first section contains some brief excerpts from articles that I wrote on the topic of COVID-19 in the *Clarion* magazine in 2020. From time to time I have reflected on those articles and had some further thoughts. For this reason, each excerpt in Section I is preceded by a *key thought* and followed by *one additional reflection*.

Some readers responded to the original articles with appreciation but also asked for further details. The second section of this resource contains that added information.

These two main sections are followed by an attempt to pull it all together in a one-page summary. Sometimes it is helpful to see it all at a glance.

Finally, there is also an appendix. This appendix represents some brainstorming on the practical details of how congregations can best continue to worship during a pandemic that has led to rather severe restrictions on public gatherings. *Please note:* this brainstorming occurred at a particular time (January 2021) and in a particular place (Southern Ontario). The severity of the pandemic and the government regulations concerning COVID are constantly changing. Different brainstorming may be required at different times and in different locations.

Next, some disclaimers are in place.

1. It says too much

This document might contain more than you want to read. You might prefer a blog post or three-page article that provides all the guidance needed on all the questions and concerns that have arisen within church life after the pandemic began. However, COVID is complex; it takes time to work through the different aspects and angles. Furthermore, writing more succinctly also takes more time. Right now, time is of the essence. Many of us are wrestling with the question of whether we are doing the right thing before our God. Unity in our congregations has, in many cases, been strained. Taking time to produce a more concise document will need to wait for another occasion.

2. It says too little

This document does not say much about how to continue with Catechism classes, elders' visits, Bible studies, and outreach activities under COVID restrictions. There may well be other topics that you have wrestled with during this pandemic, but they are not covered in the pages that follow. Undoubtedly, they are all important topics, but they are simply beyond the scope of this guide.

3. It speaks inadequately

That is completely correct! This is a *collection of notes* on a complex topic. Precision of expression, as well as covering all the nuances and angles, is always a challenge when writing—let alone when the topic is COVID-19, an issue that has impacted us all deeply and emotionally. This document shows evidence of weakness and less-than-fully-refined expression. Hopefully, the remaining blemishes and oversights will not hinder its usefulness too much.

4. It speaks of a certain time and a certain place

Different provincial, state, and federal governments have used different approaches and different terminology in dealing with COVID-19, leading to different decisions

concerning worship services (or “religious gatherings,” as they tend to call them). These local differences impact, sometimes significantly, how we read, understand, and react to things. *This paper was written in the first two months of 2021 and in the province of Ontario. You may be reading this paper in a different province, or even a different country. Please keep the geographical and chronological differences in mind as you read this resource.* Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 are very fluid. Some details in this paper may be obsolete by the time you read it.

This document is not officially copyrighted, but I sincerely ask that it be kept all together as one, complete document. You are welcome to print it for your own personal use or to distribute the digital copy to your family, friends, and fellow believers. It is meant to be shared.

What I would like to prevent, though, is snippets of this document floating around on their own. Reading just an excerpt or two of this document defeats, in large measure, the whole purpose of writing it. Too much confusion and consternation has crept into our congregations, and even our families, because people emphasize *one aspect* of how God’s commands apply to COVID realities at the expense of other valid aspects. As mentioned in the Introduction, this resource promotes a *steadfastly balanced* approach to obedience, but then it also needs to be read *all together*. Thank-you for your understanding and co-operation in this regard.

Section I – Opening Thoughts

Maintain Unity

Key point: In dealing with COVID-19, the past months have been stressful. Through it all, let us be eager to maintain the unity of the church and give no opportunity for the devil to divide.

Difficult circumstances can either push us apart or pull us together. Let us earnestly pray that it would be the latter.³

Further reflection

Public health orders related to COVID-19 have reached far into our lives, regulating how many people are allowed in our church buildings, where and when we can shop, and even what we put on our faces (e.g., masks). What do we do? Comply with them? Reject them? Trust them? Doubt them? Not every child of God answers those questions in the same way. Spiritual siblings, equally sincere in their faith, have found themselves disagreeing, at times vigorously, with each other. Words such as “opposing camps,” “polarization,” and “loggerheads” are scattered about in our conversations and blog posts. Most, if not all, do not *want* to use these terms. In fact, they deeply grieve how issues surrounding COVID have caused distress and division within the church. But how do we restore and heal relationships within the body of Christ? There is no better place to start than the Word of God itself.

In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul issues a command: “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” This worthy manner includes being “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (vv. 1, 4). Clearly, the source of this good, pleasant, and precious unity (Ps 133:1-2) is divine not human; just as the LORD knits the body of a baby together in its mother’s womb (Ps 139:13-15), so the Spirit of God weaves each believer into body of Christ, the church. Recognizing this, we ought to find our hands more fervently folding in prayer than tapping out responses on our keyboards.

Still, as the ancient proverb reminds us, it is *ora et labora*, pray and work. In our current circumstances this “work” involves the very things that the apostle mentions in Ephesians 4:2-3.

- Humility – The little word “*all*” precedes humility in verse 2. This call to humility includes *all* of us (no matter what our stance on a COVID-issue may be), at *all* times, with *all* our brothers and sisters in the Lord, and in *all* forms of communication (whether it is a face-to-face conversation or a Facebook reply). After all, there was nothing partial about the humility of our Saviour Jesus Christ (Phil 2:3-8).
- Gentleness – Passion and gentleness can be challenging to combine, but it is not impossible. Our convictions concerning public health orders may well run deep, but the LORD also teaches us to choose our *tone* of interaction wisely, especially when our relationships as God’s children have been strained. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov 15:1).

³ An excerpt from Jason Van Vliet, “More Birds than Believers” in *Clarion* Vol. 69 (June 26, 2020): 351-54.

- Patience – It has been said by many, “People are just fed up with COVID! They just want to get back to normal!” That feeling is understandable. Yet let us not become “fed up” with each other as fellow believers. Yes, it has been approximately one year since COVID started to affect our lives; our patience runs thin. Looking to our God, who is so long-suffering with us, we receive strength to remain patient with all our fellow saints (1 Thess 5:14).
- Bearing with one another in love – If we agree with other people, bearing with them is easy. If we disagree, it is much harder. Yet this is precisely how we maintain unity during these difficult days. To be concrete, let us challenge ourselves: “What act of Christ-centred love have I shown lately to a brother or sister who takes a different stance on a COVID-issue? Have I prayed for them? Prayed with them? Called them up? Sent them an encouraging card?”

But what about when our differing opinions become matters of the conscience? In the midst of this pandemic, there may be times when the mind of a child of God cries out, “I simply *cannot* follow that government directive (any more) because in my heart of hearts I feel that if I do, I am *sinning* against my God!” Meanwhile, a fellow believer might not like the government directive either, might even think it is foolish, but he does not regard it as a *sin* to submit. What now?

When it comes to dealing with each other’s consciences, let us begin by focusing on our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We love each other, not in the first place because we see eye-to-eye on every, single issue but because we all, sinful wretches that we are, have been redeemed graciously by the same precious blood.

Next, we are guided by God’s Word in Romans 14. Also in the days of the apostles, sincere believers came to different conclusions on certain practical aspects of living the Christian life. Yet through it all, our Lord instructed them not to pass judgment on each other (vv. 3, 10), not to put any stumbling block in each other’s way (v. 13), to be sensitive toward each other’s consciences (v. 23), and above all to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (v. 19).

In this respect we need to be careful with each other’s consciences, while at the same time remembering that we are members of local congregations, and our actions as individual members often have an effect, for good or ill, on the rest of the body (Eph 4:16). Following the apostle Paul’s instruction in Romans 14, let us think the best of each other’s intentions, uphold each other in prayer, and exert ourselves to find practical solutions that allow room for members with different convictions to act according to their conscience, while at the same time promoting greater unity within the congregation and avoiding any further stress or strain in our congregations. This will require *much* wisdom. Our consciences are subservient to God’s Word, and it is important that we respect and follow our office bearers (Heb 13:17), whom the Lord has appointed to lovingly shepherd the flock (1 Pet 5:2).

Circling back to Ephesians 4, let us also take to heart the Holy Spirit’s warning in the second half of the chapter (vv. 25-32). If we allow “camps” to drift apart, or if we allow frustration, or bitterness, or slander, or anger to fester, we are giving the devil “an opportunity,” or literally, a *place* in the church of Christ (v. 27). Our spiritual warfare is *against* the devil—and the world and our sinful flesh (LD 52)—not with each other. As we make every effort to maintain unity, let us show the devil his place: *outside* the church of our Lord.

God Preserves his Church through Pandemics

Key point: Although plagues and pandemics vary in scope and severity, even significantly, our God has always preserved his church through them. We can be confident he will do so this time as well.

Between 1576 and 1578, during the plague of Milan, fifteen percent of that city's population died. At the peak of the infection curve, the city closed all "non-essential shops" and put into effect a "general quarantine," which also meant that public worship services were not permitted.⁴ Sound familiar?

The archbishop, a certain Carlo Borromeo, co-operated with local officials and organized the publication of booklets containing penitential Bible passages, prayers, and songs. These were then distributed, free of charge, to the citizens. At set times, when the church bell rang, everyone was to come to the doors and windows of their homes. Together the city recited prayers and sang songs. The cobbled streets of Milan, rather than the marbled nave of its cathedral, resounded with congregational singing. Can you imagine?⁵

Further Reflection

No doubt, in spite of the deadly plague, it must have been quite an experience: listening to, yes, participating with, all the citizens of Milan singing praises to God. But as profoundly beautiful and eminently edifying as congregational singing is, it is not a key of the kingdom of heaven. Preaching of the holy gospel is the first key of the kingdom (LD 31). At the end of the sixteenth century, Milan did not have gospel preaching livestreamed into the living room of every quarantined household. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we do. It will never be the same as attending a worship service in person; neither should we begin to regard virtual worship as some kind of comfortable, new norm. Nevertheless, as his children, who do not deserve any of his generous gifts, we ought to thank our Father in heaven that preaching of the holy gospel has continued. "The Word of God is not bound!" (2 Tim 2:9)

⁴ Remi Chiu, "Singing on the Street and in the Home in Times of Pestilence: Lessons from the 1576–78 Plague of Milan," in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Corry, Maya (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 28.

⁵ An excerpt from Jason Van Vliet, "More Birds than Believers" in *Clarion* Vol. 69 (June 26, 2020): 351-54.

Stepping Beyond Dilemmas

Key point: Sometimes God's children feel as if obeying one of God's commands leaves them with no choice except to break another one. That feeling arises from us—our misunderstandings, our limitations, even our corrupt desires—not from God's law itself.

One believer quickly zeroes in on the fourth commandment: God calls us to assemble for worship, therefore, we must assemble for worship. The heart of the next child of God, though, is gripped by the truth of the fifth commandment. God warns that if we resist the authorities he has put in place, we will incur judgment. Surely, we need take that seriously, don't we? Then, yet another brother or sister in the Lord feels the burden of the sixth commandment, being concerned that he or she might seriously endanger someone else's health. Asymptomatic transmission is a reality, after all. Different people emphasize different commands, and if they do it too aggressively, they may inadvertently push us apart from each other. We will need to have patience with each other and be mindful of each other's consciences.

Beyond that, though, be assured that there is no three-way dilemma in the Word of our God. Just as surely as Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), it cannot be sub-divided either. The whole law is fulfilled in one key word: love (Matt 22:37–40; Gal 5:14; LD 2). Intertwined love for God and our neighbour will provide the unifying departure point for us all.⁶

Further Reflection

Perhaps part of the challenge here is keeping our convictions running in the right direction: *from* the unchangeable Word of God to the ever-changing and often confusing realities of a global pandemic. Too frequently, and often unconsciously, we turn it around. Almost frantically at times, we try to sort out what this new reality called COVID-19 really is. We peruse hundreds of media headlines, medical statistics, government guidelines, blog posts, WhatsApp messages, and YouTube videos. We discuss, we debate, at times, we despair. But rarely, if ever, do we find it all crystal clear. Constantly we are reminded that the first to speak seems right until another comes along and questions what he says (Prov 18:17).

Then, with our minds overflowing with all this perplexing pandemic data and our hearts torn by a few emotional, COVID-related experiences, we go to the holy Word of God and search for an answer. Yes, we have come to the right place... but rather late in the game, as they say. God's Word is the *starting* point, not the *last* resort.

Our hearts need to run *from* the divine truth *into* the miseries of a broken world. Not vice-versa. Getting our directions straight from the start is vital.

⁶ An excerpt from Jason Van Vliet, "More Birds than Believers" in *Clarion* Vol. 69 (June 26, 2020): 351-54.

Christ above COVID

Key point: Our Saviour uses trials to advance our sanctification. Therefore, whatever else we may say or think about COVID, let us all take time to consider how our Lord is using this trial to refine our faith.

Thankfully, all things were not only created through the Son, but they are also held together by him (Col 1:17). A good ruler has a clear plan. The Ruler of heaven governs everything, including this pandemic, with cohesion and coherence, a trajectory and a telos.

Coherent purpose is exactly what seems to be missing in these days. No mere human knows where this is all going. Second wave? Third wave? No more waves? Governments react to new data and scramble to develop policies and financial packages. At times one initiative ironically undermines the next one. Where are we going with all of this? Earthly rulers do not really know, and the honest ones are the first to admit it. But the Ruler of the Universe does know. What seems chaotic to us is all coherent to him. We can sleep well at night.⁷

Further Reflection

During this pandemic God's people have frequently turned to Psalm 46. It resonates with familiar phrases that we need to hear: "God is our refuge," "a very present help in trouble," "therefore we will not fear," and perhaps most famously, "Be still, and know that I am God." At the same time, there is a less frequently quoted verse that also deserves attention: "Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth." Considering how it has impacted economies, stress levels, relationships, health systems, and so many more aspects of daily life, COVID-19 is one such desolation. Certainly, through it all the God of Jacob continues to humble us. Undoubtedly, the LORD is also bringing a certain temporal judgment upon the nations. After all, by and large, they have been ignoring his holy truth in increasingly flagrant ways. When the world is afflicted, the church does not go untouched. Assuredly, "Your people you, O God, have tested / as ore is in the furnace tried" (Ps 66 stanza 4, *Book of Praise*). Through COVID, our Father in heaven is prompting his children to reflect, to repent, where needed, and to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God (1 Pet 5:6). Are we doing that?

Being refined is not a particularly pleasant process. Yet Christ not only rules over us and redeems us, but through his Spirit he also renews us (LD 32). In fact, the apostle Paul, who spent days locked up in dark, dank dungeons, teaches us that we may even rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that they produce endurance, character, and hope (Rom 5:3-4).

⁷ An excerpt from Jason Van Vliet, "Christ before COVID" in *Clarion* Vol. 69 (Oct 2, 2020): 531-33.

Section 2 – Steadfastly Balanced Obedience

As mentioned in the introduction to this resource, we need to work through COVID-related questions with a *steadfastly balanced* focus on the fourth, *and* the fifth, *and* the sixth commandments, all the while keeping the larger issues of love and mercy as the Spirit-given wrapper that envelopes them all.

Other commandments could be added. For example, the second commandment involves how we worship our God, the third speaks of the honour of God's name, and the ninth commandment includes loving the truth and avoiding the devil's deceit. To work out how those commandments applied to the current pandemic would be entirely valid and helpful. The only reason they are not included in this resource is that every author needs to draw the line somewhere, limiting the scope of his writing. Not every aspect of God's Word as it applies to COVID-19 can be covered in 30 pages. It seemed best to this author to focus on the fourth, fifth, and sixth commandments. Perhaps other writers will concentrate on other commandments.

The order in this resource begins with the fifth commandment. You might have expected it to begin with the fourth. To be sure, it could have started there. In fact, the first (unpublished) draft did begin with the fourth, and it would not take much to edit this document and return to that order. As it stands, though, this resource begins with the fifth because of the central question posed at the beginning: *is this the time to "obey God rather than man" and just go back to in-person worship?* (p. 3). In the history of Reformed ethics, "Obeying God rather than man" is a fifth commandment question. So we begin there.

That being said, this does *not* mean that the fourth commandment is subsumed, or put under, the fifth commandment. It does *not* mean that honouring the government is more important than worshipping our God. Not at all! Our sovereign LORD calls us to obey all his commands. During this pandemic, we have struggled to see how the various commands mesh with each other. To that challenge, therefore, we now turn.

The Fifth Commandment and Submission to the Government

I. **What precisely is the Lord's command?**

The discussion around recent government directives concerning worship is commonly framed in these terms: "Do we continue to *obey* (or *follow*, or *acquiesce to*) the government regulations concerning religious gathering that severely limit in-person worship? And how long do we continue to *obey* these regulations? Where is the line in the sand at which point we say 'Enough is enough,' and we start to *disobey* government regulations (with a proper COVID safety plan in place)?" Once we focus on the verb *obey*, the question of civil *disobedience* is readily at hand. It is noteworthy that the Lord himself adds slightly different verbs: *honour* and *fear* (or it could also be translated as *revere*).

- Exod 20:12 - "*Honour* your father and mother" and by extension the governing officials
- Prov 24:21 - "*Fear* the LORD and the king"
- 1 Peter 2:17 - "*Fear* God. *Honor* the emperor"

This, then, is reflected in LD 39, where we confess, "That I show all *honour*, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me." See also the Belgic Confession Art. 36, where we agree to "hold them in *honour and respect*." This is

echoed in the church order of Dort which speaks more than once about “respect” (Art 28).⁸

To be sure, this honor includes obedience and submission (Rom 13:1-5; LD 39 “due obedience”; Church Order Art. 28 “obedience”), but the broader term “honour” is crucial for at least two reasons:

- it speaks to a certain attitude or disposition with which the obedience is given;
- it focuses on the *person* in authority, and the God-given office that he or she holds, not just the particular law or COVID regulation that is presently under scrutiny.

In short, it is not just about the *what* but also about the *how* and the *who*. In the context of COVID we also need to think of, and show love toward, our governing officials as *people*. Perhaps it is helpful to put their names before ourselves. In my own geographical context of Ontario, Canada, names like Mr. Doug Ford, Dr. David Williams, and Dr. Barbara Yaffe come to mind. In your locale names of other politicians and public health officers dominate the headlines.

Whatever we may think about the regulations concerning religious gatherings that have come from their hands, we must remember to treat these governing officials as real, finite people, struggling to fulfill their responsibilities in a situation that is rapidly changing and does not have easy, textbook answers. In short, the question “to obey or not obey?” may be helpfully re-cast as “how can we best fear God and honour the governing officials in a complex situation?” Fundamentally, there is no conflict between fearing God and honoring the governing officials because it is God himself who has “instituted” their authority. For this very reason, the apostle also warns that “whoever resists authorities resists what God has appointed” (Rom 13:1-2). This is indeed a sobering truth!

2. **Many different governing officials**

The Lord mentions different levels of governing officials in his Word: emperors and governors (1 Pet 2:17; see also Rom 13:1-5 and the frequent plurals in that passage). In our contemporary terms, we can speak of federal, provincial, and local officials. We also have different branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial. According to God’s command, we need to honour *all of them*, focusing on each one’s *specific* role and responsibility.

Therefore, if a higher official is not listening to the pleas of the church concerning overreaching or unjust regulations, the church will honour lower magistrates by trying to speak to them rather than ignoring them or charting a course around them. This is the so-called “lower magistrate” approach advocated by John Calvin (*Institutes* 4.20.31) and other Reformers. As an added advantage, the lower magistrates are often much more accessible to us as well. We can “gain their ear” more readily.

⁸ I refer here to the [Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches \(canrc.org\)](http://canrc.org). Other church orders that trace their historical roots to the Synod of Dort 1618-19 will likely have a similar article concerning the civil government.

By extension, if the legislative branch is unjust in its regulations, we should honour the judicial branch by using the means available to us. After all, that is why God has “instituted” (Rom 13:1) judges and judicial boards.⁹

In all of this, we should be prayerful rather than pessimistic. Admittedly, it is easy to think, “What’s the point? The government will never listen to our appeals anyways.” Sometimes, though, the Lord surprises us. Recent, positive experiences of fellow believers with the Vernon city council remind us that the magistrate’s heart is still a stream of water in the hand of the LORD (Prov 21:1).¹⁰

3. ***The How and the What of Honouring the Governing Officials***

In the circumstances of COVID, how specifically should we honour our governing officials?

a. ***Love and Communication***

Love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13:10). It is striking that one of the most famous passages in the Bible about submitting to the government (Rom 13:1-7) is immediately followed by some verses about love and God’s law (Rom 13:8-10). That juxtaposition may well be purposeful. In part, the Holy Spirit is reminding us that even though governing officials are often not necessarily the people we naturally love the most, we must nevertheless do that very thing, strengthened by the sanctifying Spirit.

Love involves communication. If we, as churches, are convinced that government regulations regarding religious gatherings are unjust, or overreaching, or alarmingly detrimental to the church of our Lord, love demands that, through the proper channels, we speak earnestly to them about it. There may well be logistical hurdles in such communication and patience will be required. However, to quietly disobey government regulations and resume in-person worship *without first interacting with the government* does not fulfill the obligation to love them.

Love also includes getting our facts straight and complete. Because governments have been scrambling to respond responsibly to this pandemic, most of us learn about new regulations and restrictions through short (social) media articles, or even tweets, and perhaps government-issued guidelines. But what, in precise terms, are the *legal orders*, the laws, that our governors have enacted? They are not always easy to find, but it is worth the effort to find the *official* emergency orders or by-laws under discussion. Sometimes (but not always) we discover that the official documents contain important nuances, or even noteworthy exemptions, that the media never bothers to report but which help us, as God’s children, find our way through this crisis and continue activities within our congregations that are so important to us.

b. ***Our Actions and Their Wider Effects***

The Lord also speaks about *the manner* of our interaction with governing officials and how that impacts our overall relationship with them and the society over which they govern. In the context of praying for governing officials we read “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:2).

⁹ In various provinces some form of judicial review has been initiated by Reformed church members.

¹⁰ See [Make church an essential service: Vernon council – BC Local News](#).

Along the same lines, in 1 Pet 2:15 we remain subject to human, governing institutions “that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Pet 2:15). In other words, the Lord requires us to interact with the government in such a way that, to the best of our ability, we are at peace with them and they with us.

More than that, Scripture directs us to interact with our government in such a way that even foolish people—who are ignorant of Scripture and what it really means to worship our God—may not have bad things to say about us (“silence,” 1 Pet 2:15) or, more positively, may even have good things to say about us (“so that they may see your good words and give glory to your Father who is in heaven,” Matt 5:16).

All this to say that we may not simply say, “We must contradict the government orders and resume in-person worship, and so far as what the government, or our neighbours, or the media thinks or says about this, we just have to let the chips fall where they may!” True, we cannot control what other people think and say, especially biased media channels. It is also true that we must not be driven by what others may think of us. Then the world would be turning the steering wheel of the church. But we do need to take the wider effects of our action into consideration and do the best that we can, also in this respect. This is not pragmatism; it is also obedience to the Word of God. Along these lines, Art 36 of the Belgic Confession and Art 28 of the Reformed Church Order encourage us strongly to maintain good relations with governing officials:

All office-bearers are in duty bound to impress diligently and sincerely upon the whole congregation the obedience, love, and respect which are due to the civil authorities; they shall set a good example to the whole congregation in this matter, and endeavour by due respect and communication to secure and retain the favour of the authorities towards the church, so that the church of Christ may lead a quite and peaceful life, godly and respectful in every way.

4. The Unjust Governors

In his book, *The Ten Commandments*,¹¹ Dr. J. Douma writes about a more recent interpretation of Romans 13. This particular understanding suggests that since human governors are servants of God, so long as their laws line up with God’s law, they are to be obeyed. But if human governors legislate things that are unjust or do not fall directly in line with God’s law, then by that very fact they have immediately abrogated their authority, and their laws and regulations no longer need to be followed. Douma interacts with this interpretation and finds it wanting, or at least too simplistic (pp. 197ff).

Similarly, from Scripture John Calvin points out quite emphatically that God requires us to respect and obey unjust rulers as well as the just ones (*Institutes* 4.20.24-29). This coheres

¹¹ Douma, J. *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996.

with LD 39 which reminds us to bear patiently with the weaknesses and shortcomings of those whom the LORD has put over us.

Of course, there is a limit here. The authority of human governors is *not* absolute. We also confess in BC 36 that we “obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God.” This exception lies close to the heart of our current struggle and needs further attention under point #6 below.

Douma also makes a helpful comment when he defines authority as “*the authorization for the (appropriate) use of power*” (p. 185). As he explains, the parentheses in his definition are significant. God authorizes officials to use the power he gives them appropriately. Due to their sinfulness, they do not always do that. However, *inappropriate action* on their part does not immediately negate their *authorization*. They are still authorized, and therefore they must still be honoured and obeyed. However, if their *inappropriate action* persists then, with due process, their actions may be corrected, or ultimately, their authorization may be removed. In the church, for example, inappropriate action by an office bearer leads to verbal censure and perhaps even suspension and deposition. But until such a point, the elder remains worthy of the respect due his office.

5. **Sphere Sovereignty**

This is not the place to go into all the details of sphere sovereignty as developed by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd. But it is relevant in these circumstances when it is said: “The state has no jurisdiction to tell the church *how* she will worship.” This “*how*,” then, is further defined as: worshiping in-person or online. This matter deserves more nuanced consideration.

At present the government is not regulating *in general terms* how the church should worship. It is not making proclamations about how the gospel should, or should not, be preached or what should, or should not, be included in the order of liturgy.¹² Rather, for the most part, due to public health concern, the government is regulating matters of “building capacity” during worship services. Here in Ontario we have gone from 100% capacity in church buildings (pre-COVID), to five in total, to 30% of building capacity, to ten in total, and back to 30% in most regions (at the time of writing, Feb 10, 2021). To be sure, these fluctuating building capacity numbers have had a great impact on our manner of worship, so far as livestreamed or in-person worship is concerned. But to be precise, the government is regulating in the *sphere* of “building capacity with a view to public health and safety,” not worship in general.

Building capacity with a view to public safety is the proper jurisdiction of the civil government. We recognize this, for example, with adherence to fire codes. If a church auditorium has been approved for a capacity of 300 in the fire code, and a congregation regularly puts 350 people in the building Sunday after Sunday, the fire department, with the

¹² There are some jurisdictions in which congregational singing is not recommended, or perhaps even forbidden, due to the transmission of the coronavirus. Obviously, in those situations government regulations do impact the order of worship. Whether through the use of masks during singing, or some other arrangements, earnest effort should be made to maintain the dialogical, covenantal character of Reformed worship. Also, the government may need to be educated on the difference between *performance* singing and *congregational* singing.

backing of the state, may say: “Something has to change here with your worship services because you cannot pack 350 in the building every Sunday; it’s not safe.” That is not a case of a confusion of sphere sovereignty, or the state telling the church how to worship. It is the state exercising its God-given jurisdiction. True enough, and this cannot be ignored, limiting the number of people in a church building due to the fire code can have a significant impact on worship and the congregation has some (hard) decisions to make. But it is not a transgression of sphere sovereignty.

Granted, comparing a local fire code to a severe, lockdown-style COVID regulation may feel like a stretch. Indeed, there are differences. From a number of different angles, the consequences of COVID regulations are so much more challenging to deal with, but in principle there is an overlap with the situation of the local fire codes. So, the comparison is meant to illustrate a point: there are certain areas within the life of a congregation over which the government does properly have jurisdiction.

6. **Obey God rather than Man**

All the same, God’s Word speaks of occasions when God’s people were called upon to disobey the command of a human governor in order to obey God instead. In these cases, the governing official demands that God’s people directly, blatantly, personally, and grievously transgress a divine command(s). Here are some examples:

- The Egyptian mid-wives are commanded to transgress the sixth commandment and murder babies. They refused, and God rewarded them (Exod 1:17, 20).
- Daniel’s three friends are commanded to transgress the first and second commandments by worshiping the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar. They refused and God miraculously saved their lives from the fiery furnace (Dan 3:12).
- Daniel is commanded to transgress the first and second commandment by praying to King Darius, and him alone. He refused and God miraculously saved his life from the lion’s den (Dan 6:10).
- The Sanhedrin instructed Peter and the apostles to stop preaching the gospel in direct contravention of Christ’s explicit command to preach (Acts 1:8). They do the right thing by obeying God rather than man (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

This raises the question: is the government today commanding us to break one or more of God’s commands? Actually, looking at it from one specific angle, by limiting the capacity in our church buildings during COVID, the government points us in a similar direction as the truth of the sixth commandment: “protect [our neighbour] from harm as much as we can” (LD 40). Now we can discuss, and even dispute, whether limiting building capacity actually accomplishes that goal of protecting our neighbour from harm. Moreover, there are certainly more angles to be considered. Nevertheless, we want to pause here for a moment and notice how the *intention* of the government is in line with the sixth commandment.

But what, then, about the fourth commandment? The government has not told us to stop worshiping God. In fact, in their public documents they have explicitly *permitted* us to continue worshiping our God, albeit through “drive-in” or “virtual” services.¹³ Of course,

¹³ [Provincewide Shutdown \(ontario.ca\)](#), pg 8.

this immediately forces upon us the urgent question of whether drive-in or livestreamed services are legitimate. But that will be dealt with under the next main heading concerning the fourth commandment. For the time being, though, we may say that, in terms of the government's intentions, their stated goal is not to cause or coerce us to break God's commands. Using the familiar truths of the decalogue, we may say that the current COVID regulations contain instructions that are in line with the sixth commandment while still making room for upholding the fourth commandment. Therefore, it is hard for us to argue, on the basis of Scripture, that current COVID regulations are *clearly* one of those occasions in which we need to "obey God rather than man."

Also, because it is hard to argue that this is *clearly* an exception (like it was for Daniel or Peter), there is the possibility that engaging in civil disobedience would further fracture our congregations, some of which are already experiencing a degree of internal tension over matters related to government restrictions and regulations due to COVID.

7. *The legitimate problems and concerns*

This does not mean that all is well, and we have no problems here. Far from it! In its regulations, governments have consistently lumped religious gatherings together with other social gatherings. This fundamentally misunderstands what worship is. For the most part, governments have regarded worship as non-essential rather than essential. These two, improper categorizations are certainly problematic and have led to various misplaced priorities and unjust actions in the government's COVID regulations.

There is also the problem that, generally speaking, the government has developed wide-ranging regulations for religious gatherings without consulting churches—at least not confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

In addition, there are more potential problems down the road if, in other areas, the government starts to make more regulations concerning churches that tend, more and more, to force us to do things, or adopt positions, that flatly contradict God's Word. Here we can think of the areas concerning sexuality and the dignity of life. These are all valid concerns that should be dealt with wisely, respectfully, but also with a renewed sense of urgency.

In this regard, it may be that we have been lax in our commitments under Article 28 of the church order concerning "Civil Authorities" (see paragraph #3 above). If that is the case, now is the time to do, personally and communally, what we have committed to do in our church order. By the same token, if we have been active in these commitments, then we should do what we can to maintain, and even increase, our good favour with the governing officials.

8. *A proposal*

With a view to the legitimate problems and concerns (#7 above), as they pertain to both the shorter term and longer term, our church leaders, in particular, should not remain silent or be complacent. Too much is at stake! If we have not done so already, now is the time for the church to speak up respectfully and address these matters. In so doing we will honour our God and, when we think about it some more, also honour our governing officials. One day they, too, will have to give an account of their actions before God, and

we show love to them by telling them about God’s standards *now*... while there is still time for repentance.

In the meantime, we must avoid disobeying the COVID-related government regulations, so long as we can find a way to continue legitimately worshiping our God, thus fulfilling the fourth commandment (see the next heading below). Speaking of civil disobedience, J. Douma has some forthright words¹⁴ that merit consideration: “A Christian must stay far away from such activities. For this kind of behavior has little in common with the good style required from us toward those in authority. Each of us has the right and the duty to use every legal means at our disposal... in order to fight against regulations and laws that we consider unjust” (pp. 204-205).¹⁵

9. Also, and especially, honour our office bearers in church

Although we are focussing on the honour that the Lord requires of us for our civil officials, we should also take a moment to reaffirm our love and respect for our ecclesiastical office bearers: our ministers, elders, and deacons. Navigating the often-changing COVID regulations and recommendations that come from our government officials has made life very busy and challenging for these ambassadors of Christ. Even in the best of times, it is not uncommon that certain members of the congregation will not be pleased with certain decisions that the consistory takes—let alone when COVID issues are on the table! Now, more than ever, the words of Hebrews 13:17 ring true: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. *Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*”

Let us all do everything that we can to ensure that our office bearers can fulfill their duties with joy, even in these difficult days. Our love for our God and for them demands nothing less.

¹⁴ Calvin also speaks forthright words: “But we must, in the meantime, be very careful not to despise or violate that authority of magistrates, full of venerable majesty, which God has established by the weightiest decrees, even though it may reside with the most unworthy men, who defile it as much as they can with their own wickedness. For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord’s to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer” (*Institutes* 4.20.31).

¹⁵ The “good style” of which Douma speaks is described on pp 175-78 of his book, *The Ten Commandments*.

The Fourth Commandment and Corporate Worship

1. *What the Church is and How the Church worships*

We confess that the church of Christ is the “holy *assembly* and *congregation* of true Christian believers” (Belgic Confession Art 27). This is grounded in Scripture. In the OT we often hear of the *assembly* of Israel (e.g., Exod 12:6; Heb. *qahal*) and in the NT we read of the *church*, which also refers to an assembly (e.g., Matt 16:18; Gk. *ekklesia*). The church of God is not some loose association of people with common religious convictions. It is an *assembly* of believers. Assembly involves *coming together*... not remaining apart. This is abundantly and joyfully obvious when a congregation gathers on Sunday in a church building for worship, or as Lord’s Day 38 says, the saints “diligently attend the church of God.”

Next, we confess that individual believers are joined together as members of the body of Christ “in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (BC Art 27). In other words individual believers do not become the body of Christ *because they arrive* at the same physical address on Sundays. Rather, *because the Holy Spirit unites* them by the power of faith into one body, they gladly go to that same physical address each week for worship (Ps 122).

Finally, to choose one more significant aspect, the faithful church of our Lord Jesus Christ is identified by three marks: the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline (BC Art 29). Therefore, if she is to remain faithful to her Eternal Husband, the church of Christ must maintain a steadfast focus on these marks, both in normal circumstances and abnormal circumstances.

With all this in mind, we must recognize that the present restrictions on worship services due to COVID-19 are not just an inconvenience; they give reason for genuine concern. So long as we keep worshipping in our family rooms week after week, we can quite easily erode, also in our own hearts and minds, that the church is an assembly, yes, *a body* of Christ. If we do not watch out, we can become that “loose association of people with common religious convictions,” mentioned above.

Furthermore, how can elders exercise oversight, especially over worship attendance if people are worshipping anonymously via YouTube? Reading “137 views” below a YouTube livestream does very little to help an elder fulfill his important task with respect to church discipline. In this respect some of the ideas in the Appendix seek to overcome, at least to some degree, these challenges and maintain a stronger connection between what the church of Christ truly *is* and how she *acts*, also during a global pandemic.

2. *Defining our Terms Carefully*

Personal, Family, and Corporate Worship

In Reformed circles, we often distinguish between personal, family, and corporate worship. We also commonly refer to the first two as personal and family devotions. Although all three include activities through which we honour our God (e.g., reading of Scripture and prayer), they are not the same. The circle of worshippers differs: one person, one household, or one congregation. Moreover, corporate worship begins with the consistory calling the congregation to a public worship service (Church Order Art 52), in which the

means of grace—the preaching of the gospel and the use of the sacraments—are officially administered.

Participating in a livestreamed worship service during COVID restrictions feels as if it is suspended somewhere between family worship and corporate worship. On the one hand, the physical location is where we normally have family worship: our own homes. In addition, with the exception of the minister on the screen, the group of people we see around us is the same as family worship: our household. On the other hand, if the whole congregation logs in at the time that the consistory regularly calls us to public worship, and if the regular liturgy is followed in the livestream, with the possible exception of the sacraments, it is certainly not regular family worship either. At first glance it appears to be some kind of hybrid.

For this reason, some have concluded that livestreamed worship is *not* public, corporate worship. Instead, it may be described as *family worship assisted or enhanced* by a livestreamed message from the pastor, as well as some other elements of worship. Alternatively, some have chosen to refer to it as a *chapel worship*.¹⁶ In some congregations, the order of worship is altered in various ways to make it clear to all who log in that this is *not* public, corporate worship via a digital means. We will look at this matter more closely under the next heading, but first a few more definitions.

*Livestreamed, Online, or Virtual Worship?*¹⁷

Long before COVID-19 became part of our vocabulary, we did speak of livestreamed worship services. On their websites, many congregations had a link to a *live* audio or video feed of their worship services, rather than just posting a *recording* of it later. By livestreaming a worship service various groups of people can participate, even though they may not be physically in the church building. Common examples would be guests who might be reluctant (for whatever reason) to cross the threshold of a church building, parents who stay home to babysit an infant, or members who are sick or elderly to the point that going to the church building is not feasible or responsible. During this pandemic, the meaning of “livestreamed worship services” has remained essentially the same. But the numbers have changed dramatically! Previously a handful of members used the livestream, while the vast majority worshipped in the church building. Depending on local regulations, the opposite may be true now: a handful in the church building and the vast majority worshipping via livestream at home.

Livestreamed worship services is still a good term to use. Other terms are now in circulation, but they are not as helpful or accurate. *Online* worship suggests that the worship service is exclusively online and that no physical, in-person gathering is happening at all. Government regulations certainly vary from area to area, but at least in Ontario and many other areas, some combination of in-person worship and livestreamed worship is possible, even if the numbers for in-person worship are very low. Therefore, online worship is not the best term to use. *Virtual worship* is not any better, and quite possibly worse. A similar term *virtual reality* is becoming increasingly common these days. It refers to something that

¹⁶ [Why Our Church Is Only Sort Of Streaming Our Services | Tim Challies](#)

¹⁷ The first version of this resource (Jan 19, 2021) used these terms interchangeably. Upon further reflection, that was not helpful. It has now been corrected.

appears to be a real, physical thing but, in fact, is nothing more than computer-generated image, perhaps using holographic technology. In a livestreamed worship service, our preachers are not holographic images.

“Watching Church”

Leaving more formal terminology aside, one other phrase has unfortunately become popular. Members of our congregations can be heard saying, “Yes, because of the restrictions I stayed home and *watched church* today.” Our rightful yearning to participate in in-person worship may prompt such language, but even if we are joining from our homes, we do well to *participate* in the livestreamed worship service. If the minister invites the congregation to rise for votum and salutation, let us rise... also at home. If our congregation uses a communal “Amen,” let us say it... also at home. When our local liturgy calls for a song of praise, let us sing... also at home. To be sure, it feels abnormal, yet this is the blessed character of covenantal worship: our gracious God speaks to us, and we gratefully respond to him.

3. *Is livestreamed worship truly corporate worship? Coming together*

In the OT the Lord clearly told his people step out of their homes and *go* to worship him in the city of his own choosing (Deut 12). The Psalmist rejoices in *going* to the house of the Lord (Ps 122). Also in the NT, the Holy Spirit not only *describes* God’s people coming together on the first day of the week (1 Cor 11:20; 14:6), but he also *prescribes* that we do so, not neglecting to meet together but rather doing so all the more as we see the Day approaching (Heb 10:25). *We cannot gloss over this aspect lightly.* Without a doubt this is what we miss the most in lockdown. More than that, it is what burdens our consciences because it is part of God’s command. In connection with the fourth commandment, LD 38 also speaks of “diligently attending the church of God.” My family room is not the church of God, is it?

This is indeed a serious matter, not only for the present but also for the future. It is all too easy to become complacent, content to remain within the comfort of our homes and leather sofas, even if and when COVID restrictions are lifted. Consistories and congregations alike must be vigilant, ever guarding against this inclination.

Gathering together *in a traditional church building*, or some other rented building, is certainly the norm for public worship. The physical space of a church building serves and enhances the activity of worship in so many ways.

At the same time we recognize that there are circumstances in which gathering *in a church building* is not possible, whether for a shorter or longer period of time. To begin, in cases of serious sickness the Lord himself required that some of his people would *not* come to the tabernacle or temple, the designated place of worship. The most obvious example of this is the instruction concerning lepers in Leviticus 14. Lepers had to remain outside the camp, quarantined as it were, until they were healed.¹⁸

¹⁸ For more detail on how leprosy laws apply to *general* quarantines, as we have experienced in COVID, please see John Smith, “COVID-19 and the leprosy laws,” *Clarion* 69 (July 24, 2020): 403-6.

But there are more examples. On some mission fields, gathering for worship *in an open field or under the shelter of some trees* is commonplace. Times of persecution have also driven God's people to gather in fields or forests. Turning to different circumstances, very elderly residents in a Christian old-age home may gather in the common area of their residence to join a worship service that is being livestreamed from the church building of a local congregation. Worshiping in these kinds of circumstances is not the same as gathering in a church building. They may even pale in comparison to worship in a church building. Nonetheless, inferior is not the same as illegitimate.

In all of life, but certainly in *worship*, the principle expressed by Oswald Chambers applies: my *utmost* for his Highest. During the pandemic, we must do our utmost to come together while at the same time honouring the regulations of the government. The appendix of this resource contains some brainstorming ideas of how to maximize coming together, using physical spaces that respect government guidelines, as well as utilizing the technology with which the Lord has blessed us. Just as soon as the pandemic is over, the Lord willing, we must do our utmost to go back to our church buildings, those places that are so much better suited for the public worship of our Most Holy God.

4. *Is livestreamed worship truly corporate worship? Elements of corporate worship*

In LD 38 we confess that we participate in four main activities in corporate worship: 1) hearing God's Word; 2) using the sacraments; 3) calling publicly upon the LORD; 4) giving Christian offerings for the poor. As we consider these worship activities within our current circumstances, let us recall what we confess at the end of Article 27 of the Belgic Confession. Even though individual believers may be "spread and dispersed" in the world, we are joined together as members of the body of Christ "in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith." Normally, we apply this to the catholic (worldwide) church, and rightly so. But it also applies locally. To give just one example, if a mother is staying home on Sunday because her child is sick and she joins in the worship service via a livestream, she experiences how the Holy Spirit unites her with her local congregation, even though at that moment they are in two different locations.

Concerning the four activities of worship, then, via livestreaming technology and e-transfers it is possible, with relative ease, to participate in #1, #3, and #4. But what about using the sacraments? To begin with, it helps to discern between *neglecting* the sacraments and *postponing* the sacraments. During times of war or due to a shortage of ministers, it has happened in some congregations that baptisms and Lord's Supper celebrations had to be delayed for months, sometimes even more than a year. These postponements were difficult to endure. God gives sacraments to strengthen our weak faith (LD 25 Q&A 65; BC 33) and, oh, how our faith needs strengthening in times of calamity! Nevertheless, also in the past, the church understood that the need to postpone the sacraments does not, by that very fact, render the worship services as less pleasing in God's sight during the time of waiting.¹⁹

Next, let us reaffirm that sacraments are *visible* signs and seals (LD 25 Q&A 66). It is true that sacraments involve other senses. For example, baptism involves the *touch* of water for

¹⁹ If the sacraments need to be postponed for a significantly long time, due to extended lockdowns, a local council may have to consider in more depth how this situation should be addressed.

the one being baptized, and especially the Lord's Supper involves the *taste* of bread and wine for those who partake. However, in the first place the Holy Spirit uses *sight* to strengthen our faith in the sacraments.

Concerning baptism, the challenges presented by government restrictions are less difficult to overcome. Under normal circumstances, when baptism is administered, only one member actually receives the sacrament, yet the Holy Spirit uses that *visual* sign at the baptismal font to strengthen the whole congregation. Similarly, under abnormal circumstances such as a cap of 10 worshippers in the church building, it is still possible that the sacrament of baptism is administered as part of an official worship service: the minister, the elder(s), the brother running the tech equipment, and the family of the infant being presented for baptism may be the only ones in the building. Nonetheless, those who join this worship service via a livestream can still see the sacrament and be strengthened through the working of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, there is a difference between baptism and Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper communicant members *actively participate* by eating the bread and drinking the wine with their physical mouths, but more importantly, "by faith, as the hand and mouth of our soul," we eat and drink "the true body and true blood of Christ" for the nourishment of our souls (Belgic Confession, Art 35). If government regulations only allow 10 or less members into the church building each Sunday, the consistory can certainly postpone the sacrament and in many cases that may be the best solution. However, if there is a cap of 25 or 50 worshippers or a percentage of building capacity, the sacrament may be celebrated with the communicant members present in the building. Depending on the size of the congregation, the other communicant members will need to be patient, perhaps even very patient, waiting for the time when it is their turn to actually participate in the Lord's Supper again. However, in the meantime, along with the non-communicant members, they can certainly look at the visible sign of the Lord's Supper being administered, trusting that the Holy Spirit also uses that to strengthen their faith.

In short, we can conclude that with careful thought and extra effort, it is possible to maintain all four key elements of corporate worship, admittedly in a diminished or perhaps postponed manner, during a pandemic.

5. ***Singing and fellowship***

In addition to the four elements of worship listed in LD 38, singing must also be included. It is such a central part of our Reformed, covenantal worship. The Holy Spirit also commands it (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19). Indeed, if our worship livestream does not include singing, and if our members are not singing along in their homes but rather just listening in, something vital is missing. The flipside, though, is that we *can* include singing in our livestream and we can sing along in our homes, even if there is only one person there. Thankfully, in most provinces COVID regulations allow a single person, or perhaps even a number of people, to join another household. As fellow believers we should use these opportunities to their full potential. All of this is *far from ideal*, but it is possible. (For the topic of government regulations concerning singing *during in-person worship within church buildings* please see footnote #12.)

Furthermore, although post-worship fellowship is not scripturally required, it is a treasured and edifying aspect of congregational life. If we all spill into a fellowship hall or parking lot after worship, such fellowship is easy and convenient. By the same token, if we tried a little harder with the technology that the Lord has given us, we could retrieve it, at least to some measure. Once more, the Appendix provides some brainstorming ideas in this regard.

6. Summary

None of the comments, or suggestions, made above takes away from the fact that livestreamed, corporate worship is vastly inferior to unencumbered, face-to-face public worship in a church auditorium. Yet there is a difference between *inferior* and *illegitimate*. During a pandemic that includes severe restrictions (e.g., reduced building capacity, stay-at-home orders), the consistory can legitimately call the congregation to worship together via technological means such as a livestream. Furthermore, the consistory should patiently yet purposefully guide the congregation with a focus on the following points:

- Livestreamed worship is an *exception*, due to the circumstances, not the norm for our public worship.
- During the pandemic, all legal opportunities for *the best possible mode of gathering together* should be wisely pursued.
- Everyone should be encouraged to *participate* in livestreamed, corporate worship, as much as possible. We are not just “watching church.”
- Concerning other important aspects of congregational life (e.g., informal fellowship, care for fellow children of God, Bible studies, outreach activities), *extra effort must be put in by everyone in the congregation* to find ways and means that build up the communion of saints while respecting government guidelines. Even little things can make a big difference in the lives of our fellow saints. In this regard, we should remember what was mentioned in the section under the fifth commandment (paragraph 3.a): a careful reading of the actual government orders, perhaps with the help of those who have legal expertise, may reveal more possibilities for congregational life than a first glance, or a media article, might indicate.

The Sixth Commandment and Protecting our Neighbours

1. Protecting our Neighbour from Harm

In our common confession, we have all agreed to protect our neighbour “from as much harm as we can” (LD 40). This is part of loving our neighbour by obeying the sixth commandment. Generally speaking, common sense goes a long way in determining how to protect our neighbour from harm: we drive safely when we are on the roads; we make sure we shovel and salt our sidewalks; and we even help an elderly lady get up the steps by lending a hand lest she should break a bone.

We also confess that there is a limit to all this: “*as much harm as we can.*” If I never leave my house at all, presumably I will never infect anyone with a contagious sickness that I may contract. But at a certain point, I need to get some food, otherwise I will recklessly endanger myself, as we also recognize in LD 40. Furthermore, I will do my best to prevent my neighbour from getting the common cold by coughing into my elbow or staying home for a few days. At the same time, I realize that it is a very different thing if I pass on the common cold, which is inconvenient but hardly fatal, as compared to Ebola virus, which has an average mortality rate of about 50%.

2. COVID complicates matters

Hopefully common sense still applies when it comes to fulfilling the sixth commandment in the COVID pandemic, but an honest look at the situation demands that all concerned remain humble about pinpointing *the best way* that we can protect our neighbour from harm. Although we have been living with this reality for almost a year, even some doctors and public health officials will admit that this virus still perplexes them.²⁰ For some a COVID-19 infection is little more than the common cold, while for others contracting the virus can cause death within days. What causes the symptoms to be mild for some and fatal for others is being investigated intensely but, at this point, remains largely unanswered.

That is what makes this all so difficult. If COVID would consistently cause mild symptoms, we would much more easily figure out how to protect our neighbour from harm, also within the setting of corporate, public worship in church buildings. Conversely, and may the Lord graciously prevent it, but if COVID infections consistently caused death like in Ebola outbreaks, it would be much more readily obvious how to deal with it. But the Lord humbles us, and the medical community, and the public health officials. We simply do not have it all figured out. Moreover, just when our society thinks that they are getting a handle on it, new variants cause more uncertainty (e.g., B.1.1.7 in England, 1.351 in South Africa, and P.1 in Brazil)

This also means, then, that we must exercise extra caution and pre-caution. Obeying the sixth commandment in love means that we will need to go an extra mile or two in doing what we can to prevent the spread of the virus. At the same time, our society needs to be reasonable about public health measures. There remains a very real “as much as we can.”

3. Most of us are not doctors

As in many other areas of life, the Internet has invited us all to become experts in whatever area we would like. Heaps of information are but a click away. Almost instantly we can find

²⁰ I have personally heard two qualified MDs state, in a moment of sincere honesty, “This virus is just weird. We really don’t have a handle on it yet.”

the studies or the statistics we prefer. But just as we would not want to learn about how to do open-heart surgery by watching YouTube videos, so we ought to be careful about determining for ourselves the kind, or the extent, of public health protocols that are most effective to curb the coronavirus. If our doctors are struggling to figure this out, why would the rest of us think we have a firm grip on what is appropriate or responsible?

Also, interpreting statistics can be complex. If a certain statistic is lower than might be expected during a pandemic (e.g., death rate or ICU occupancy), does that prove that the public health orders were unnecessary from the start, or that they have been effective in keeping the numbers low? Or does some other set of factors best explain the numbers? Interpreting statistics well is a complicated business. Therefore, if there are brothers and sisters in the Lord who have expertise in health and/or statistics and who can help the rest of us interpret the data in the best possible way, this would greatly benefit our congregations.

In short, we need to listen attentively to those who have expertise in health and statistics, while at the same time not naively swallowing everything that comes our way from them through the media. Yes, there is a need for that constructively critical and respectfully contrary voice that questions whether the presented facts are all correct, and correctly interpreted. By the same token, even if the government officials present incomplete or skewed data, this does not give us reason to stop obeying God's commands concerning them. We may certainly seek to correct them, but we must not stop honouring them.

4. Health is holistic

It has been said by many, but health involves physical, mental, emotional, and above all, spiritual well-being. Since we are a fearfully-made, mysterious combination of body and soul, we need to keep all these health aspects in mind as we chart our course in obeying the sixth commandment. To begin with, let us do what we can to encourage our governing officials and public health officers to give greater recognition to the importance of mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. At least at the beginning of the pandemic there appeared to be an almost singular focus on physical health. To some degree that has changed in the intervening months. However, in many respects it still has a long way to go, especially when it comes to an acknowledgment of the importance of spiritual health.

Yet we need not wait for the government to pinpoint the right balance. When it comes to mental, emotional, and spiritual health the church has so much to offer: the hope of the gospel, the support of the communion of saints, the emphasis on family, and the desire to help those who suffer. The ways and means of conveying this Christ-centred love will change in a pandemic, but the pandemic need not stop it in its tracks. Let us find alternate ways and carry on with the care.

5. Charting a Way Forward

Obeying the sixth commandment means protecting our neighbour from as much as harm as we can but also not recklessly endangering ourselves in any way. There is no quick and easy template for what that concretely looks like in every given situation. Love-infused, well-informed, common sense is often the guide we need to follow. By "well-informed," I mean, trusting the medical experts, not blindly but nevertheless humbly. By "love-infused," I mean, thinking about the well-being of others before rushing ahead with my own desires

and pursuits (Phil 2:3-4). In the end, the golden rule provides helpful guidance, as it always does: do unto others as you would have them do to you (Matt 7:12).

Overall Summary

Taking into account these Scriptural, confessional, and church order considerations, four key points come into focus.

1. Civil disobedience in connection with COVID regulations is not warranted *at this time*,²¹ but the status quo in many of our congregations also remains insufficient at this time. What “remains insufficient” varies from congregation to congregation, and from location to location, yet there remains room for further repentance and improvement among us all.
2. Concerning the COVID regulations and our government, we should continue to ramp up our use of the political and judicial avenues open to us in order to address the legitimate problems listed under #7 under the heading “The Fifth Commandment” above. This should be done personally and communally.
3. Concerning worship services during this time of COVID restrictions, many (all?) of our congregations have made a start in continuing to honour our God through an adapted yet sincere form of corporate worship. We can do more, though, especially in the area of honoring the Lord’s command *to come together*, to the very best of our abilities, under the circumstances. Some brainstorming in this regard is found in the appendix. We should probe these possibilities, while firmly adhering to scriptural principles, as they are also summarized in our Reformed confession, and in this way, do our utmost for our Lord.
4. We need to constantly remind ourselves, and each other, that exceptional circumstances do not make good norms. Due to the pandemic, certain aspects of how we worship our God has been altered. These exceptional circumstances are fraught with inadequacies and encumberments. Yet as soon as our heavenly Father’s hand sends us different—we might also say, more normal—circumstances, let us eagerly rush to return to a far more adequate and edifying approach to holy worship.

One final thing lingers in our minds: the government always speaks in terms of *temporary* restrictions (e.g. two weeks, 28 days, etc). We sincerely pray that it will be so. But, if we are honest, there can be a gnawing sense of *indefiniteness* to all this temporariness. In the meantime, our councils and congregations are suffering, weakened, discouraged. We see the bride of Christ in her travail and we say, “How long?” At a certain point, before the bride becomes too wounded, do we just have to do something more... for the sake of the bride?

In terms of “something more,” let us focus zealously on summary points #2 and #3 directly above. In this way, we will care for the church of Christ, in the shorter and longer term. Under the Lord’s blessing, may our understandable question “How long?” soon be accompanied by our earnest exclamation, “Oh, how the church has been humbled, and yes frustrated, too. But behold the works of the LORD! Look at how the God of Jacob is purifying the bride of Christ, teaching her anew dependence, repentance, resilience, and perseverance!”

²¹ This phrase is placed here intentionally. By saying that civil disobedience is not warranted *at this time*, this does not rule out the possibility that in a certain place, at a certain time, the actions of the government would prohibit worship in such a direct and targeted manner that the church would have to obey God rather than man, *at that time*.

Appendix – Meeting Together during a Pandemic

Before anything else, allow me to repeat what I stated at the beginning, in “How to Use this Resource.” The brainstorming ideas below occurred at a particular time (January 2021) and in a particular place (Southern Ontario), where only 10 people are permitted for a religious gathering. The severity of the pandemic and the government regulations concerning COVID are constantly changing. Different brainstorming may be required at different times and in different locations.

Let me also add that brainstorming is precisely that: swirling ideas around in one’s mind, thinking out loud, trying to generate some possibilities, some of which may turn out to be helpful, others which are better discarded. The other thing about brainstorming is that it is best done with others. Iron sharpens iron. The ideas below may be discussion starters. They are certainly not the final word.

Furthermore, all our brainstorming remains subservient to the Word of God, and it ought to be done with full respect for the office bearers of our local congregations. *They* are the ones who are responsible for guiding us through the complexities of the pandemic. Let us respect the work they do and the decisions they make.

Having said that, this appendix takes another look at how to best “come together” in worship, when physical distancing and stay-at-home orders seem to make this nearly impossible. Perhaps part of the problem is that we have made insufficient sacrifices and/or less than optimal use of the technology available to us. Even within current lockdown restrictions, it is possible to bring a significant measure of “assembly” back into our corporate worship, if we are willing to go the extra mile in honoring our Lord, as we certainly should be. At least two options exist:

1. More Gathering Together: Drive-in worship services

Normally we assemble in a church auditorium. In so many respects such a building suits the purposes of public, corporate worship. Within current (Jan 2021) lockdown restrictions in Ontario, only 10 can assemble in the auditorium but many more could assemble within a few hundred feet of the auditorium... in the parking lot. Subject to certain conditions, drive-in services are permitted.²² If every household had, or acquired, a tablet with a data plan, we could gather in the parking lot of the church, or perhaps in two different parking lots, and everyone could worship via the livestreamed service, only assembled at church rather than staying on the couches in our living rooms.

Another possibility would be to have the audio of the worship service transmitted over a FM signal that can be picked up by the radios of our vehicles. It might even be possible for the minister to stand outside, even if the weather is sufficiently mild or a proper shelter can be temporarily constructed for him.

Yes, it would be different, and take some convincing and getting used to, but even under current regulations it seems possible and permissible. Indeed, some congregations are trying it.²³

²² [Provincewide Shutdown \(ontario.ca\)](#) pg 8.

²³ I personally know of at least two Reformed congregations that are doing this.

Furthermore, after the worship service, the congregation could be encouraged to communicate with those in the car next to them via cell phone, and post-worship fellowship could also be enjoyed, even with a direct visible contact. Drive-in services would also allow elders to have a somewhat greater measure of oversight, although they may have to become accustomed to recognizing cars rather than faces.

Yes, this is all far less than ideal, but perhaps still possible. It would test us, as God's people, to see if we would be willing to give up the comfort of the couch for the pavement in the parking lot. But testing need not be avoided. Christians in other eras and ages have made far greater sacrifices than these!

2. More Gathering Together: From YouTube to Zoom

Many (but perhaps not all) congregations that have initiated online worship have used a livestreaming service, often YouTube. It is convenient and commonplace, but is it the best we can do? YouTube is a platform for consuming video content. Subconsciously, the platform encourages us to just sit back and watch rather than participate. After all, that's what we normally do with YouTube. YouTube is not meant for two-way, visible and audible, communication.

Yet our covenantal worship is inherently dialogical and we are to participate, not merely consume. Also, our post-worship fellowship is interactive. So, why don't we choose a digital platform that is better suited to those realities? A video-conferencing platform, such as Zoom, may well be a better fit. Here is how it could work. Rather than just seeing the pulpit and the minister at the front of the building, before the worship service the tech person would place the Zoom session in "gallery view." Everyone in the congregation could see each other on the screen, albeit in little Zoom windows. When the worship service begins, the tech person switches the Zoom session to "pin active speaker," and only the minister is in focus. This is not unlike the beginning of a worship service in the auditorium where people may be looking around before worship, but once worship begins, all focus is (or at least, should be) on the front. Once the worship service is complete, the tech person could return the session to "gallery view," and even use the "Breakout Rooms" feature to randomly assign members of the congregation to groups of 5 (or whatever number), not unlike the small circles that form in fellowship halls and parking lots. In these digital breakout rooms, members can converse, encourage, and comfort each other.

Once again, elders can now have a somewhat greater measure of oversight of the congregation, being able to see who is attending in the gallery view, as well as encouraging members in the breakout groups. It would even be possible to pre-load wards for the breakout rooms on certain Sunday and allow a ward elder to check-in with his ward and encourage the sheep specifically entrusted to him. If properly set up, a Zoom session could also assist our ministers, since a large screen could be placed in front of them while they preach and they could see *many* of their sheep in front of them, not just 8 or 9 of them.

We need to *emphasize and maximize* the Lord's call to come together, albeit in different ways than we have been used to. In this way we follow Heb 10:25 and still *assemble* in a better and greater measure.