



August 10, 2020

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Dear CrossPoint family,

Over the last five months, we have experienced something that I hope we do not ever experience again. Along with you, I have been on an up-and-down battle trying to process the overwhelming flow of evolving facts, science, and opinion vying for my attention.

Each of us must lead those we are responsible for. For you, that may be your family or business or a handful of people you shepherd. For me, God called me to CrossPoint to lead in community with others who have also been called to lead our church. I also want you to know that I do not see this role as something to be grasped, and it is not mine to be owned. I am a steward of this calling for as long as God sees fit.

I lead every day with Hebrews 13:17-18 in mind, meaning I will have to personally give God an account of how I have led, how I am leading now, and how I will lead for as long as I am here. So, it is with that focus that I write to you today. As there are so many voices attempting to tell you how to think, I want to share as fully as I can the thinking and theology behind our decisions here at CrossPoint during this pandemic. I know that this is long, but if you are part of this church family, I'm asking you to read carefully so you can be informed as to why we are doing what we are doing to navigate and process the changing world around us. Of course, you are welcome to agree or disagree, but it's always preferable to know why before you do either. And, regardless of what any of us think, we all have a responsibility to fully account for what the Bible teaches and what Christ demands from us as part of the family of God. Let's walk through this together.

First, I want to walk you through the exercise and teaching around this whole idea of civil disobedience and submission to the governing authorities. So, let's begin in Exodus.

### Exodus

In Exodus 1, we catch up with the Israelites in Egypt where the Pharaoh has heard whisperings that a deliverer will be born. So, he instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill all male babies born among the Israelites. The Hebrew midwives refused the edict of the king because it would require them to actively participate in the taking of innocent life.

### Daniel

We move on to the book of Daniel where we see three scenarios of discomfort and disobedience to the law of the land. In Daniel 1:3-21, we find Daniel and the three Hebrews at a crossroads. They have already submitted to a pagan re-education that included literature, language, and the adoption of names originating from the pagan nation. Babylon was systematically erasing and replacing the Hebrew culture and history! But Daniel took action when he was ordered to eat food from the pagan king's table. He says that he drew an internal line to not defile himself with food that went against the covenant law. His first move, however, was not to execute civil disobedience but rather to ask permission to try an experiment. God gave him favor, and it turned out that he gained credibility and influence in that kingdom.

Interestingly, in Daniel 6:1-28, he behaves quite differently. This was when the king decreed that no prayer can be prayed unless it is to the king himself. Daniel didn't ask for permission this time. He went about his worship routine, prayed to Yahweh, his God, as he always had, in the open, knowing that this was against the law passed by the king. He was arrested and thrown to the lions. God rescued him and pronounced judgment on the evil men who hatched the plot.

Something to notice in this passage is how Daniel treated this arrogant and abusive king. When exiting the lion's den, Daniel's address to the king was, "Oh king, live forever! ... I was found blameless before [God]; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." His speech to the king was full of honor and respect even though he boldly disobeyed the king's edict.

Also make note that on the issue of the food from the king's table, Daniel asked permission, and we cannot be sure that he would have disobeyed a negative answer. But when it came to prayer, he did not have to think for a second. The difference between those two scenarios is that food was an issue of uncleanness and ultimately becomes an issue of liberty, but we pray to God alone and no human or other created being deserves our prayers.

### The Fiery Furnace

Another event in the book of Daniel had to do with the three Hebrew slaves (Daniel 3). These Hebrew young men faced another order of the king that at the signal, all people had to worship an idol representing him. Again, like Daniel, there was no ask for permission but a quick refusal to bow down to the king. They were thrown into the fire and, we know the redemption at the end of the story. As we think about this and Daniel's prayer issue, both of them had a real and immediate cost. There was no protection for them outside their trust in God, and they did not demand a specific outcome. They just practiced quiet obedience to God over man in the area of worship.

### Jesus' Example

Shifting into the New Testament, we find Jesus in a treacherous conversation with the religious leaders in Matthew 22:15-22 (also referenced in Mark 12). They try to trap Him and get Him in hot water with the Roman government. This is when Jesus flips the script, uses a Roman coin as an object lesson, and famously says, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The question we often ask next is, "Then what belongs to whom?" Technically, everything belongs to God as Creator and Sustainer of all that is seen and unseen. What Jesus is contrasting are the God-appointed responsibilities of the government and the things that are specifically reserved for God alone. The government, according to Scripture, is called to preserve life, provide justice, provide protection for the good of all people, and create a social space for the display of good conduct. It also is used by God in the process of sanctifying God's people. The government basically creates a context for health and wellbeing of people to the best of its ability. There are a few things that Scripture tells us that belong solely to God - such as our prayers, our worship, and our ultimate loyalty. The passages we just saw in Daniel perfectly illustrate that.

Jesus recognizes God's active role in the authority of governments and how every action they take is defined by God Himself. In John 19, Jesus is taken illegally before Pilate. As Pilate questions Him and exercises his governing authority over Him, Jesus says that Pilate has authority because it was granted not ultimately by Rome but by God Himself (v. 11). This actually struck fear into Pilate and from that point he tried to wash his hands of Jesus but to no avail.

### The Apostles

In the book of Acts, we see a few examples of the apostles defying the governing authorities over them. Beginning in Acts 4, Peter and John are seen preaching the name of Jesus with boldness. This concerned the leaders, and they decided to forbid the apostles to speak of Jesus in public. In verse 19, they respond to the leaders saying, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Simply put, they would speak of what they have witnessed from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the authorities were free to pass judgment on them. This time, they went on their way without further incident.

Later in Acts 5, there is another run-in with the authorities regarding preaching in Jesus' name. The apostles were arrested and placed in a public prison. This is that awesome story of how God sent an angel to open the prison doors and then sent them to the temple to continue preaching the name of Jesus. The leaders were furious and strongly reminded them of their demand that they do not preach Jesus. In verse 29, Peter says, "We must obey God

rather than men,” and then goes into a mini sermon that was not received well by the Jewish authorities. Ultimately, the apostles were sent away with a beating and warning to not use the name of Jesus anymore. By the way, the apostles didn’t complain or demand anything, but rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. And, they continued to preach Jesus boldly.

Finally, in Acts 16, Paul and Silas were preaching Jesus in Philippi and ended up beaten and imprisoned. They prayed and sang until God responded with an earthquake that shook the doors wide open. Rather than escaping, they remained and led the jailer from a near death experience to being alive in Christ. This is where Paul relied on his rights as a Roman citizen to call out the governing authorities. Paul had not been condemned but was publicly beaten anyway, which was illegal to do to a Roman citizen. Paul informs them of this fact, and they want to quietly send him away, but Paul makes them apologize for their behavior. What is most interesting in this situation is that Paul chose to suffer before claiming his right as a citizen. His priority was on glorifying God, not immediately demanding his rights.

### Romans 13 (yeah, that passage)

Now we come to Romans 13:1-10 (repeated also in Titus 3). I encourage you to read it for yourself, but I’ll just summarize it: the government is one of God’s tools for transforming His people and ordering His world. He uses good and bad governments alike. In verse 10, we find the linchpin of our freedom we have in Christ; that we love our neighbor and do no wrong to them. Our neighbor includes those in authority over us. This message is supported in 1 Peter 2 where Peter writes, “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” This is fairly straightforward.

### Four Conclusions from Scripture

Whew! That was quite the whirlwind through much of the Bible’s teaching on God, government, and when they collide. I have four things that I want to point out in light of the witness of Scripture:

1. The government of each nation is ordained by the vast wisdom of God. It is there because He has allowed it to be, but God is our ultimate authority. This means that if we are going to disobey and stand in opposition to the governing authority over us, we need to make sure that it is on the solid foundation of God’s Word alone.
2. The default position of a Christian is to live in obedience to their government. We see this in Exodus, Daniel, and throughout the New Testament. In fact, even when not in obedience, there is a respect and honoring of even arrogant and evil leaders as we see in Daniel and the Apostles.
3. There is no “Christian nation” or government. Therefore, as Christians we should expect opposition and understand that we are living in exile in our own “Babylon.” Remember that the apostles rejoiced in their mistreatment, and Paul even went so far as to choose suffering before claiming the rights he had as a citizen. It seems that the apostles recognized their heavenly citizenship over and above their earthly citizenship.
4. Christians are not called to stand up in protest against every law that allows sin but must wrestle with their response to laws that compel sin. In every nation that God’s people have inhabited throughout history, there have been laws that allow sin. We don’t see Daniel, the apostles, or anyone else making it their first priority to confront all of those issues. Where we see those people take definitive stands is when something that belongs solely to God is demanded by human authorities. The Hebrew midwives were required to murder baby boys, Daniel was forbidden to pray, the three Hebrews were expected to bow down to and worship a statue of the king, and the apostles were ordered and threatened with bodily harm to not preach or speak in the name of Jesus. In all of these cases, the people of God chose to humbly and boldly, without concern for themselves in the face of real and present danger, disobey authority and give God what only God deserves.

### What This Means for CrossPoint

Based on the testimony of Scripture and the witness of God’s people presented therein, we at CrossPoint will continue to honor the authorities over us during this pandemic to the extent that Scripture demands it. Thus far in

the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has not interfered with the content of our message, to Whom we pray, or Whom we worship. Yes, there was the mention of singing, but as we confirmed with the state authorities, that was documented in a section of recommendations, and therefore was not necessarily to be read as an edict. And whether it is an edict or a recommendation, it does not stop us from worshiping. Lifting our voices individually and corporately in worship is something that belongs to God alone, and we are still able to worship Him. This is not to downplay the importance of corporate worship. It IS important ... very important. We must wisely consider the context of what is being asked.

What the government has done is temporarily changed one method of how we practice our worship. I do not see anything in Scripture that would give me cause to refuse what the government is asking us to do currently. Physical distancing, wearing masks, and eliminating all large indoor gatherings have been put into place for the safety and health of society. While we may or may not agree that this method is effective or that COVID-19 is as serious as the government says it is, it is not something that crosses a biblical line and therefore calls us to civilly disobey. The only way we can currently arrive at a place of resistance and disobedience is by exercising our rights as citizens of the United States of America, and even that is debatable based on recent court decisions. If I see any path given by Scripture on that, it is where Paul chose to suffer before he claimed his rights. Frankly, I don't see us there yet.

It seems to me that many churches and Christians argue resistance because of what they assume the government is doing behind the scenes and what the long-term impacts of their decisions might be. In spite of what may or may not be true, basing my actions on my assumptions about tomorrow is not something that Scripture teaches. In fact, James 4:13-17 says, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit' – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

This brings us to the million-dollar question, "What are the right things to do?" Well, Jesus says that the whole Law is fulfilled in this: that you love the Lord your God with everything that you are and that you love your neighbor as yourself. The present dilemma is all about how we can best glorify God during this season, and Jesus clearly points us in the direction of loving God and loving others. We believe, based on what Scripture teaches about what belongs to God alone, and based on Jesus' words about loving God and neighbor, that we are on the right course with the things we are doing. Our decisions have not come from fear, a lack of courage, or a lack of boldness, but on the contrary, they have come from a willingness to lay our lives and agendas down for the sake of the Gospel. And, they have come from strong Scriptural conviction that also includes continuous humble prayer to remain surrendered to the will and wisdom of God as things continue to unfold. I believe there will come a time when the content of our message and the object of our worship will be challenged. This is not that time.

I recognize that other pastors will choose to lead differently, and it is not my responsibility to judge their ministry. They are responsible to God for their decisions the same as I am. I also recognize your freedom to see differently too. I believe we can agree or disagree and still remain a family united in Christ, spurring each other on to be transformed into the image of Jesus. My prayer is that in years from now, as we look back on this chapter, we'll see that not only did we pass the test of faithfulness to Scripture, but we also passed the test of biblical unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17.

I am thankful for you and honored to lead at CrossPoint, eagerly anticipating the day that we will once again gather together without masks, embracing one another, and singing with all that is in us!

Christ Is All,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt Whiteford". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Matt Whiteford