



July 16, 2020

An Open Letter to Our Elected Officials:

Thank you for your service to our state during this difficult time of upheaval and uncertainty. We realize that you are facing problems each day which are complex and complicated. We consistently pray for your own health, as well as that of your families, and for wisdom in making decisions. The Scripture commands us to pray for those in authority so we “may live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” Indeed, this is our objective.

We are compelled to share our concerns about what we believe is an unwise and unscriptural overreach of government into the free exercise of religion.

Last week the Ohio Department of Health issued an order which, in certain counties, specified who would be permitted to attend a church service and who would not. Throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, the Governor has exempted religious organizations from every previous executive order; yet the greatest majority of independent Baptist churches in Ohio complied anyway. **The free exercise of religion is a matter of conscience** and the majority of our brethren, for sake of conscience, have shown great care as they ministered to their flock.

Most of us closed our doors and conducted online services for months. As we have begun to meet again, most congregations have scheduled multiple services in an attempt to keep safe distances and restrict the number of attendees per service. We are still encouraging the most vulnerable, as well as anyone who does not feel safe, to follow their conscience and join us online. We have made masks available to our congregations for those who desire to use them.

We do not oppose safety and vehicle regulations, fire codes and zoning laws. None of these delineate who is permitted to attend a service and who is not.

We do not oppose the regulation of businesses within the state. Our citizens should be confident that when they pay for a gallon of gas that it is measured correctly. Our churches are not businesses, for we are ministering to the spiritual needs of others. In fact, there are many churches in Ohio which are incapable of providing a pastor a salary, yet those good men actively attend to the needs of their congregation.

We do not oppose the position that the ODH plays an important factor in the well-being of our State. We do oppose the notion that they can set the boundaries of an individual's conscience. Believers have proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ for



centuries in the face of peril and danger; being led only by their conscience and a directive from Almighty God. They have preached boldly in leper colonies and in communist nations which outlawed the Gospel; they have met for worship during wars, plagues, and natural disasters; they have ministered to numerous tribes of hostile souls around the globe and in so doing, they have weathered tremendous dangers to travel to each outlying region. The Apostle Paul recorded in Scripture the numerous hazards he had willingly faced for the cause of the Gospel.

We are compelled to voice our concerns over this intrusion. Even though this order may have been given with the intent of good and not the intent of harm, intent does not excuse any breach of government into the conscience of its citizens. We have been told it is only a “small” directive, and not a “great” demand; but to us, it would seem like attempting to convince our patriot forefathers that it was “only” a small tax on tea. The issue then was not a tea tax, but overreach by King George. **The issue now is not masks, but overreach by the State of Ohio.** No intrusion into our worship services can be permitted, whether it is the State of New Jersey which forbids churches to meet, the State of California which forbids churches to sing or the State of Ohio which forbids someone to attend. **Our government has instructed us as preachers to forbid someone attendance to a church service based on what they are wearing.** One can only imagine the outrage if we posted a sign on our doors that men could not enter if they were not wearing a tie, or children who are wearing tennis shoes were not permitted to meet.

Those documents which Americans hold most dear remind us that our Creator endowed us with certain inalienable rights and that our government must refrain from any laws which restrict the free exercise of religion. In our estimation, an edict from the state which restricts who may attend a worship service certainly falls into that category.

Our organization attempts to communicate with, but does not officially speak for, over 400 independent Baptist churches in our state. It is a Baptist distinctive that we believe in the autonomy of each church; that each body has the freedom to decide for itself all matters of doctrine and practice. **On behalf of a multitude of pastors who echo our concerns, we urge you to consider and correct this grievance. We further implore you to do all within your power to keep our churches free from such violations of conscience through any other future orders or laws.**

Respectfully Yours,

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