

- A. For a while in our country, concern and even objection has been expressed in various places about “shelter in place” orders issued due to the coronavirus outbreak. What do you make of these, and what should we keep in mind as we try to evaluate the news concerning these things?
- a. To speak theologically, we start with the Bible. A basic passage on obedience to authority is, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. . .” (Rom. 13:1-2a). Yet, as the apostles told the authorities in Jerusalem, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). So we should obey the government, unless it is directing us to sin – ordering us either to do something that God has prohibited or to omit something He has commanded.
 - b. Theologically, we also distinguish between what we call God’s right-hand rule and His left-hand rule, a distinction that basically arises from the distinction between Law and Gospel. God’s left-hand rule entails Law and compulsion to bring about righteousness in this world. His right-hand rule comes about through the Gospel and forgiveness, which grants the righteousness that avails before God to all eternity on account of Christ. These two have to be kept distinct. The government has no business determining doctrine in the church, or even church customs, let alone domineering over the consciences of Christians.
- B. Things get a bit more complex for Christians and churches in the U.S. because on the legal side the government itself recognizes a right to the free exercise of religion. Where does that fit in to all this?
- a. It’s a secondary consideration. Not that it is unimportant -- for it is important, in its own place. As we exercise our religious freedom, we are in a great position to love God and serve our neighbors. But the first thing for us Christians has to be what God says, not what the Constitution says.
 - b. “Shelter in place” orders, in general across the country, have not singled out the church or any other religious groups. Our state’s current executive order explicitly recognizes religious worship as an essential function in society, which constitutes a big improvement over the order we had in place during part of March and April. Nationwide, there have been instances of overly zealous officials ticketing people at drive-in services where everyone stayed in their cars, for example, but the courts have generally found against such measures. As long as the restrictions, say, on the number of people who can gather in a place are applied across the board – to both non-religious and religious gatherings – religious freedom does not seem to be in jeopardy.
- C. Speaking of legal challenges, shelter-in-place orders themselves (not just particular applications of them) have been challenged.
- a. Such challenges often arise over questions of whether the orders came from legitimate authority. In Wisconsin, the State Supreme Court struck down an order because it ruled that the state’s Human Services Department secretary did not have adequate authority to extend the governor’s order.
 - b. Here in Illinois there have been legal challenges. But, without a successful challenge, the governor’s executive order stands for the rest of this month, which is almost over. We’ll see about next month.
- D. So here is maybe the big “take-away” question: what should we think about the state government telling us when and how to conduct church services?
- a. The Illinois executive order says nothing directly about *when*. It says religious services are an essential function, and we could have face-to-face services tomorrow. However, the order does carry the restriction to groups of 10 or fewer people. That would require multiple services.
 - b. At least as far as I can see, though, this feature of Illinois’ executive order does not single out the church. It applies across the board, limiting the size of gatherings to control the spread of disease. The order does not tell churches what should be preached, which practices are to be followed, or even the vestments that ought to be worn. As citizens, and in service to our neighbors, church members should obey it – and pray for the time when larger gatherings become a reality.