

Just Because the Government Says So?

Some might be questioning: Should we stop worshipping together as a church just because the government says so?

I think this question was ably answered by Puritan pastor and theologian Richard Baxter when London was afflicted by the Great Plague in 1665.

Question:

May we omit church-assemblies on the Lord's day, if the magistrate forbid them?

Answer:

It is one thing to forbid them for a time, upon some special cause, (as infection by pestilence, fire, war, etc.) and another to forbid them statedly or profanely.

...

(1) If the magistrate for a greater good, (as the common safety,) forbid church-assemblies in a time of pestilence, assault of enemies, or fire, or the like necessity, it is a duty to obey him.

(a) Because positive duties give place to those great natural duties which are their end: so Christ justified himself and his disciples' violation of the external rest of the sabbath. "For the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath."

...

(2) If princes profanely forbid holy assemblies and public worship, either statedly, or as a renunciation of Christ and our religion; it is not lawful formally to obey them.

(3) But it is lawful prudently to do that secretly for the present necessity, which we cannot do publicly, and to do that with smaller numbers, which we cannot do with greater assemblies, yea, and to omit some assemblies for a time, that we may thereby have opportunity for more: which is not formal but only material obedience.

[Source: *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, Vol 5 of *Christian Ecclesiastics*, Q109, emphasis added.]