

Beloved Saints,

The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

As you know, Governor Evers issued a statewide masking requirement for the state of Wisconsin through the end of September. Masks have become a point of debate during the past several months. Sometimes, that debate has risen to combative levels, and it has afflicted consciences—that is, it has troubled hearts and minds, one way or another.

I am therefore writing this letter to set the question within the redeeming light of our faith in Jesus Christ. I will address: 1) how we understand this kind of mandate in light of Scripture, and 2) how it affects worship and life at Zion. As you, faithful children of God, know so well, the Church does nothing in the name of either civil freedoms or public health. We do all things in the Name of Jesus, our true health and freedom. He gives us a path to travel as a way of abiding in faith during times such as these.

His teaching on civil law, handed down through the apostles, has three clear, guiding principles that led our congregations' decisions from March to the present day:

**1) Christians are subject to the governing authorities.** As the apostle Paul wrote, at a time when Christians were often persecuted by the government:

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 whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment . . . Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”  
(Romans 13:1-5)

The Christian faith teaches us to obey the authorities “that we may live a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Timothy 2:1).

**2) Christians resist the government where it requires us to deny Christ.** We resist any authority that may command us to deny faith in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? If a government tries to alter Christian teaching or prohibit and eradicate its belief and behavior, then the Church has no choice but to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), though it should mean our imprisonment, dispossession, or death.

**3) Christians must love and welcome each other in the midst of disagreement over earthly and civil matters.** St. Paul writes about this subject in detail in his letters to the Corinthians and the Romans (1 Corinthians 8-9, Romans 14). At that time, people argued over whether or not eating meat was a sin. St. Paul spoke a clear word from Christ on the matter: don't quarrel over it and set aside your own opinion and practice for the sake of gathering in the faith, love, and hope of the Christian Church.

How do these three principles apply to the mask mandate? At this time, the Wisconsin government's actions do not rise to the level of altering Christian teaching or prohibiting its beliefs and behaviors. A time may come when we, in partnership with other Christian churches, might determine that it does so. But at present, we may continue to confess, teach, worship, and follow Jesus Christ, our Savior and God.

Moreover, our Lord commands us to welcome one another in kindness and patience, whatever our opinions on the civil nature of this mandate may be. To be sure, the members of Zion's staff all have our opinions about how the government has handled the COVID-19 pandemic. We have our opinions about how the media handles information, scientific and otherwise. But our opinions on these matters are not

the guidance of the Church. That right belongs to Jesus Christ alone. Only His Word is infallible and absolutely authoritative. He commands us to “look to the interests of others,” “in humility counting others better than yourselves,” after the manner of Christ Crucified (Philippians 2:1-11).

Now, what does this mandate mean practically for Zion? It means the following:

**1) Legally, this mandate is an *individual* mandate, and not a *corporate* one.** Each individual citizen bears responsibility for following it or not. Zion is not responsible for enforcing or policing it.

**2) There are exemptions in the mandate for worship.** Those exemptions are for 1) speakers at religious services, 2) those who are speaking with the deaf or hard of hearing, 3) musicians in a public setting, and 4) eating and drinking. Preaching, praying, care, singing, and Holy Communion will continue among us without conflict with the government.

**3) You will see pastors, kantor, and singers with masks and without masks at various times.** We’re not making a statement, and we’re neither capitulating nor resisting. Remember: our path is Jesus Christ, who bore the cross to redeem the world and who now says, “Take up your cross, and follow me.” Therefore, we are seeking to 1) press forward in our callings faithfully and 2) “look to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).

**4) There are exemptions for individuals, too.** Those exemptions include 1) speaking to someone hard of hearing, and 2) health or other sensitivities to masks. Zion will not police your decisions on this matter, nor is it our place to do so. We trust you to know what this mandate requires of you.

In closing, I share with you these words of Pr. William Marler of Trinity Lutheran Church in Springfield, Missouri:

“Brothers and sisters in Christ and in His absolute Truth, let us not get too caught up in the politics, especially when we are assembled here to fellowship in the Word. The political divide is very important—a lot is at stake for our children and grandchildren. But we all know that America has been engaged in civil war since the late 1960s, a cultural war. Prayer, patience, and perseverance is the witness we want to give. We Christians should model the ability to respect each other’s opinions, to discuss and debate, and to base our unity on our confession of Christ and His Word.”

They are good words for a complex time. Please know that your pastors, kantor, and the rest of Zion’s staff will remain dedicated to your care in the grace of Christ and the sharing of His Holy Word, come what may. It is our privilege and honor, and we give thanks for your continued support, love, and goodwill during a difficult time.

Peace!



The Rev. Dr. Steven K. Gjerde  
Senior Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church-Wausau