



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

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On Vaccine Mandates, Christian liberty, and Christian duty

Dear Brothers in Office,

Many of you have contacted me for some guidance regarding how to shepherd people amid the growing divisions and unrest in our society over government and work mandates requiring a COVID-19 vaccination.

Lutherans have seldom, if ever, taken a public position about vaccinations one way or the other. We have regarded them as a valid advancement in modern medicine to prevent terrible diseases and sicknesses. We tend to see vaccinations as a private matter of personal health and Christian liberty, acknowledging that they remain imperfect medical tools and certainly no substitute for our ultimate hope and confidence in Jesus Christ alone. But we live in an era of extremism.

Some resist any and all vaccinations on the grounds that God will protect us from every evil of body and soul. Others are adamantly opposed to COVID-19 vaccinations on political grounds or because they distrust them for various reasons. Despite official assurances about the safety of the COVID vaccines, some point out the numerous concerns being raised by respected medical professionals, virologists, and researchers. Still others insist it is our Christian duty to love our neighbor by taking a COVID-19 vaccination and we are therefore obligated to do so.

In the LCMS we have members who hold every one of these positions. How do we care for our people amid these polarized positions while keeping our heads?

THUS SAYS THE LORD...

To begin with, where we have no “thus says the Lord” it’s our duty as faithful pastors to be clear about that and say nothing more than we are given to say. Admittedly this is hard to do when tempers flare and panic grows.

For many, the near hysteria regarding the coronavirus in our severely politicized nation makes taking the vaccination a badge of honor and an act of moral duty toward our neighbor rather than simply a matter of personal health. Likewise, those who oppose the vaccination and the mandates see refusing to take it and enduring the subsequent consequences as standing on moral conviction. It quickly creates divides of “us” and “them,” where the opposition is now our enemy. This is to Satan’s delight. But it is our pastoral duty to care for each of these blood-bought precious souls. Our care must be rooted in what the Lord says.

REMEMBER YOUR CALLING

So, remember your calling. We are called to care for all souls struggling through these divisive and unsettling times with burdened consciences.

Our core duty as pastors is always to give care to souls by the means our Lord Jesus Christ has given us—His word and sacraments—to provide our people with a good conscience and hope in this world and for the world to come. This also includes teaching the whole counsel of God regarding Christian liberty and duty. Both are central issues regarding vaccine mandates.

ON THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN

The liberty of the individual conscience lies at the heart of our Lutheran theology. Luther wrote powerfully about this in his treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” To act against conscience, Luther reminds us, “is equivalent to acting contrary to faith and sinning grievously.” Therefore, both sides in any controversy must remember that we should not be forbidden from following a probable moral course of action in good conscience. In this case, of whether to take the vaccine or not.

So, when it comes to vaccine mandates, practical reason implies that vaccination is not ordinarily a moral obligation or Christian duty. It should never be coerced by guilt or shame but must be voluntary.

If we as pastors dare to suppress the faculty of reason in our parishioners by invoking Christian duty—despite reasonable, legitimate, and valid concerns to the contrary that burden their conscience—and replace it with our own, we risk the worst form of clericalism—spiritual abuse. That is incompatible with the office to which we have been called.

Therefore, brothers I urge caution on how we speak as pastors regarding vaccine mandates. Instead, be champions of informed, reasonable, Christian liberty—of conscience—which always seeks to serve the neighbor with love and charity.

WHAT ABOUT LETTERS OF EXEMPTION?

Those who request letters of religious exemption would be better served by encouraging them to exercise their own personal freedom of conscience rather than making you the arbiter of what is right for them. We do not want to turn the pastoral office into the *Department of Opinions and Letters Requested by Members*.

Take your stand on the truth of Christ and the good conscience He gives to those who love Him. Do your best to be patient and supportive of everyone, including brother pastors. Be charitable with those who disagree with you. But above all, guard your own soul against the assaults of the evil one who seeks to destroy Christian love and give you a bad conscience. Our Lord Christ has won the victory in this battle and stationed you as His herald sent to announce that victory again and again. He remains the Light in this dark world; and He is your Light too.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.

Your pastor and brother in Him,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford