

**HERE I STAND**  
**Our Grounds for Gathering as a Church**  
By Pastor Ed Reed

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**INTRODUCTION**

Open your Bible to the Book of Acts this morning, and we will be looking at Acts 4.

We are in a new season and perhaps headed for some difficult days. I did not plan to step away from the Book of John so soon, but circumstances have dictated that we change course for a time. Lord-willing, we will soon return to the Gospel of John.

But at least for this week, and probably next week, we are going to cover some other passages and topics.

I did not expect to come to Acts 4, and I did not plan to preach this message. I did not plan to suspend our worship gatherings and be separated for 9 weeks. I did not plan to live with the threat of a virus impacting my every move. I did not expect to preach to an empty church week after week – I can't tell you how difficult that is. The practical, physical side of preaching to an empty church is one difficulty, but the greater difficulty is to be preaching and knowing that the family of God is not in here with me.

I did not expect to remove two-thirds of our chairs – and I cannot explain to you how painful and emotional it is. I did not plan to leave the flock that God has entrusted to me, unattended for more than 2 months.

I often wondered if the day would ever come when I would be forced to stand opposed to government officials. But when I wondered, I always thought it would be in a more direct way – that it would relate to an issue that was more clearly defined. Like the situation of Daniel 3 – when the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, ordered all people to bow down to his golden image – and if

anyone refused, he would be thrown into the fiery furnace. This is when Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – or as you might better remember them, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – refused to bow down and were thrown in the furnace. But God spared their lives.

I always envisioned things being more clearly defined than the present situation. But today, I find myself in a position where my conscience does not allow me to continue to follow the mandates of our Governor.

Please don't misunderstand me: I am not trying to minimize the danger of Covid-19. I think it is a serious virus – and we need to be careful and take precautionary measures. There is a great deal of uncertainty with the virus. That is why we have limited capacity in the church building, we are sanitizing between services, and we are encouraging face masks. That is why we have a safety plan in place.

I don't think we should live in fear of the virus, but we should use wisdom. Consider your health – and decide what is wise and prudent for you and your family. There are several members of our church family that are staying home today because of their health – that is wise. For some the virus is a greater risk than it is to others. There is fine line sometimes between wisdom and fear – but that will be another message for another day.

Today, I want to talk about “Civil Obedience”. I am not referring to the general sense of *civil disobedience* as we often use the term – we will probably look at that next week, from Romans 13.

But today I want to talk about “Civil Obedience” – particularly *my civil obedience*. I will further explain the term a little bit later.

The decision to call the church together for corporate worship against the Governor's order has been a weighty decision that has been bathed in prayer and filtered through a multitude of counselors. The Elders of Christian Bible Church are in full unison on this decision.

I know that there are other pastors who are confident that God will direct them to gather their flock through the governing agencies. In some measure, I envy them. I almost wish I could wait – but my conscience will not allow it.

When news of the virus broke, we acted swiftly as Elders. Without any mandate from government, we suspended in-person gatherings for the physical health of our congregation. At that time the physical risk of meeting was greater than the spiritual risk of not meeting. Not meeting was the right thing to do.

But on April 9, things took a drastic turn. That is the day when the Governor stepped over the boundary that separates church and state. He decided then to ban all worship services – in both houses of worship as well as in homes. This decision was not his to make. It violates the inalienable rights that God has given to all mankind. It tramples the spirit and letter of the constitutional law. He deemed the church “non-essential” – a designation that we vehemently oppose.

Still, at that time, we deemed it best to refrain from gathering for the health and safety of our congregation. The goal, remember, was to flatten the curve and not overwhelm the hospitals. We needed to learn more so that we could establish some safety protocols.

But now, all of those goals have been met – and still the Governor does not release the authority he has seized. The church is conspicuously absent from the Governor’s re-opening plan. When I pressed a government official about the re-opening plan, I was told that the church will re-open in phase 4 with “the other entertainment”.

Please understand, the church is not entertainment. It is not on par with sporting events, movie theaters, and concerts. It is not something that you attend and observe. The church is, in fact, a sacred and holy gathering where the people of God – the Body of Christ – actively worship the living God together. We are corporate participants in the worship. There is a sacred nature of worship that cannot be satisfied “online”. My conscience will not allow us to remain separate any longer.

So this morning, I will walk through the familiar account of Acts 4. Then I will show you the three grounds on which we stand for gathering as a church right now. And hopefully you will understand why I cannot do anything else but defy the Governor’s mandate – and why this is “Civil Obedience”. And above all, I hope

that you see the Providential hand of God – governing all his creatures and all their actions.

### **THE SCRIPTURAL TEXT**

Let's take a look at our text together. God's Holy Word says:

<sup>1</sup>And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, <sup>2</sup>greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. <sup>3</sup>And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup>But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup>On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, <sup>6</sup>with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup>And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" <sup>8</sup>Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. <sup>11</sup>This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. <sup>12</sup>And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

<sup>13</sup>Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup>But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. <sup>15</sup>But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, <sup>16</sup>saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup>But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to

anyone in this name.”<sup>18</sup> So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge,<sup>20</sup> for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”” (Acts 4:1-20)

## **OVERVIEW AND APPLICATION OF THE TEXT**

Now I need to give you some background to the passage, and then talk about how it connects and how it doesn't connect with our current situation.

Peter and John were heading to the Temple, and on their way they passed a 40 year old man who was being carried in so that he could receive alms. He had been lame since his birth, and he relied on the kindness and generosity of others to survive. As the two apostles walked past, Peter said,

“I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (Acts 3:6)

The man then stood, and his feet and legs were made straight and strong, and for the first time in his life he walked. Then he went walking and leaping and praising God with the Apostles all the way to the Temple. By the time they arrived, a crowd had gathered – marveling at what had just occurred. So Peter began to preach.

As he preached, the religious leaders became angry – for he was preaching in the name of Jesus and he was proclaiming the resurrection. So they arrested both Peter and John and kept them over night. The next day they were brought before the court of the high priest and questioned about the power that they had displayed. Where did this power come from?

So, Peter began to preach: this power comes from Jesus Christ – the One that you crucified and who has now risen from the dead. Then Peter says,

“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11-12)

At this point, the religious leaders did not know what to do with Peter and John. They wanted them to stop preaching, but there was a crowd of witnesses there, and so was the man who had been healed, and there was no denying that he was still walking and leaping and praising God. So the religious leaders instructed Peter and John to never again speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

Then we come to the heart of the text and to the bold words of the disciples:

“But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”” (Acts 4:19-20)

This is where I stand.

Whether it is right in the sight of God for me to listen to the government, they must decide – but as for me, I cannot help but gather the flock of God for the worship of the living God.

Now I know that there are some differences between what was occurring in the first century church and what is occurring today. Namely, they were being told not to preach in the name of Jesus at all. This is a clear, cut and dry, issue: for regardless of what the authorities might say, we know that we must preach in the name of Jesus! As for our current situation, we are not being told that we cannot preach the name of Jesus. In fact, we are encouraged to continue to preach – through phone and video and internet. It has even been suggested that this should be the new norm – that there is no need for the church to actually gather.

But here is the problem – and why there are similarities with our passage: **Gathering as a church is essential to worship.** This is why the church in communist countries risks their lives in order to gather together.

It was not that long ago that I was praising God that we still lived in a country where we could meet here, open the windows, fill the parking lot, have our sign out front, and gather together freely and sing, and not worry about the government coming. And within a couple of months that has changed. And here we are, and we have been sternly warned not to gather as a church. We can

gather for commerce down at Walmart – we can gather for press briefings with the Governor – but we cannot gather to worship the living God.

Whether it is right in the sight of God to refrain from gathering, you will have to decide – but for me, I cannot help but gather the church of God to worship the living God.

### **THE THREE BASIC GROUNDS FOR GATHERING**

So my premise is that the church must gather for worship. Now here are the three basic grounds on which we stand as a church here in the United States. And I put them in order of priority – from first to last – meaning that the first one I share is the most authoritative. They are:

- 1) Christian Conscience
- 2) Care for our Community
- 3) Our Constitutional Rights

Let's walk through them.

#### ***The First Ground: Christian Conscience***

The first ground of gathering as a church is *the duty of Christian conscience to obey Scripture*.

The Bible makes it clear that gathering together for worship is essential to the Christian faith. The very definition of the biblical word “church” is the “assembly of the called-out ones.” “Church” does not refer to the building or to an organization. It refers to the gathering of the people – the gathering of the people of God for the worship of God.

It is not a privilege or a convenience to gather – it is a requirement! In order for us to fulfill the instructions of the Scriptures, we must gather together. We are to gather together to observe the ordinances. We are to gather for the Lord's Supper. The Communion Meal is not something that is to be done with Coke and Doritos while staring at a screen. You don't do Communion with coffee and a bagel while you are sitting in your pajamas. The Lord's Table is the Body of Christ gathered together to break bread and to remember the gift of God given to us, to drink the cup and remember the new covenant in Christ's blood. Communion is

an act of worship that is to be shared with the Body of Christ. When Paul teaches about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, he says "when you come **together**" (1 Corinthians 11:17, emphasis added). Baptism is the other ordinance. The baptism of the saints is a public declaration of the work of salvation by God. It is a public declaration – you cannot do it in private.

And in Hebrews 10:24-25 we find the direct command to gather:

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

When the virus was first spreading, we noted that stopping services was not a violation of this verse. We were not neglecting the fellowship – instead we were refraining for health and safety. I likened our situation to that of 1 Corinthians 7:5, in which Paul is instructing married couples not to refrain from their physical union, except in extreme circumstances – and even then, it was to be a season of prayer and they were to resume as soon as possible. This is how I viewed our separation as a church – it was necessary for a time, but it is now possible for us to safely resume.

The determination that it is now safe to gather is not a decision I have made on my own. We have consulted with medical professionals, with governing officials, and with the guidelines that are put forth by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). It is now safe for us to come and to gather again for prayer and for worship and for reading of the Scriptures. For us to refrain from gathering any longer would put us on the edge of violating Hebrews 10.

Paul instructed young Timothy,

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching." (1 Timothy 4:13)

It is important that we obey the Scriptures and gather together for the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. It is important that we gather to worship and encourage one another with "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians



5:19). The priority of the fellowship and the unity of the body cannot be underestimated – we need to be together.

And the authority to call the church to gather or refrain from gathering does not belong to the government. God has given real and true authority to the government – for our good. But He has also given real and true authority to the church. God has given the keys of the Kingdom to the Church (Mathew 16:19), and therefore decisions to meet or not to meet for worship properly and ordinarily belong to the Elders of the church.

### ***The Second Ground: Care for our Community***

The second ground for gathering as a church is *care for our community*.

When the virus was first spreading, the physical threat was real and acute – and the physical danger of gathering was greater than the spiritual danger of not gathering. But somewhere along the way this danger shifted. And now we find ourselves in a situation where the effects of the Governor’s PAUSE initiative have become catastrophic.

Even the governor has acknowledged the devastation that has been leveled on society by being separate. There has been a marked increase in alcoholism, drug abuse, anxiety, depression, assault, and domestic violence. Our society is suffering under the weight of the PAUSE initiative – and the church is being silenced in its effort to help. The church that was thriving is now struggling with spiritual disciplines and with sin, loneliness, and depression.

We are not created to be autonomous. We are physical creatures that are made for touch and for community. Indeed, one could argue that God Himself – in His Triune nature – is an example of the community that we as His image bearers are to maintain. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are three-in-one: one God, with community! We as God’s image bearers, created by Him, are created to also live with community. We are not meant to be autonomous.

It is our responsibility to care for the weak, to minister to the widows and the orphans, to serve the poor and the needy. What we do for the least of these is a direct expression of what we do for Jesus.

The gathered church of God is uniquely equipped to minister physical, spiritual, and emotional help to those in need. We have the ability to offer faith, love, and hope through the rivers of living water that flow from us.

It has long been the practice in the United States for the government to call upon the church – in times of crisis – to pray, serve, and lead. But our Governor has refused to acknowledge the church. He continues to deny the power and existence of God, and he ignores the voice of the church.

We have the responsibility to care for our community – and yet pastors are forbid from praying in hospitals and visiting the nursing homes. The devastating effects of these decisions are immeasurable.

### ***The Third Ground: Constitutional Rights***

Finally, our third ground for gathering as a church is *our constitutional rights*.

In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln reminded us that “government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” And the Declaration of Independence starts with the words “We the People,” reminding us that “we” are the government.

It is our civic duty to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America. Indeed, it is our duty to stand up against those who would seek to deny the foundational rights that are guarded by the Constitution. When our forefathers established this nation, they recognized that there are certain inalienable rights that are granted to us by God. They sought to guard those rights with the writing and amending of our Constitution. Indeed, both the United States Constitution and the New York Constitution guarantee our right of religious expression and the freedom to assemble.

On December 15, 1791, Congress ratified the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution, known as the “Bill of Rights.” It is worth noting that there was a great debate as to whether or not there should be a bill of rights – because the thought was since inalienable rights are obvious, any bill of rights would restrict rights to the ones it specifically mentions. But others argued that without a bill of rights, there would be no end to what the government would deny the people. It

seems as though wisdom may have won the day, and the “Bill of Rights” was ratified.

The very first right listed says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble.” This is often brought up when speech is on the line or when the press is denied access. But let us not forget – the very first thing mentioned is the freedom of religion and the freedom to exercise it. That is not a mistake!

Furthermore, Article Three of the New York State Bill of Rights protects the freedom of worship, and Article Nine protects the right to assemble. The New York State Bill of Rights says: “§3. The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed in this state to all humankind.”

Our Governor has seized executive authority and is trampling on the inalienable rights that are guarded by the laws of the land. In the name of safety – something that our Governor cannot guarantee – he has suspended our laws and our rights to gather.

To obey his demand is in fact to disobey the Constitution and join him in violation of the law. In order to obey the Constitution that I have sworn to uphold, I have to disobey the seized authority of the Governor of New York. This is *my civil obedience*.

Perhaps you think I am overstepping here. Perhaps you think that the church has not been singled out, so there is no foul. But let me put these things in perspective.

We are not allowed to gather for worship or for prayer. But we are allowed to gather for commerce and buy stuff at Walmart, Home Depot, and Lowes. Their parking lots are packed and their stores are crowded with people assembling together.

We are not allowed to gather for the reading of the Scriptures and the preaching of the Word. But the press is allowed to gather daily for the Governor’s briefing.

They gather inside with assemblies of 25-plus people. We have daily watched the Governor exercise his right to assemble with larger numbers at his press briefing than he is permitting in his executive orders.

If it is safe for the Governor to meet inside with more than ten members of the press and his staff, without masks, then surely it is safe for the church of God to gather for worship. By affording freedom of the press while prohibiting freedom of religion, the Governor is parsing the first amendment and has violated both the spirit and letter of the law.

During the past several weeks we refrained from meeting for the physical health of our congregation. But we must now resume meeting for the spiritual health of our congregation.

**CONCLUSION: HERE I STAND!**

Our governing officials will one day have to give an account to God for how they governed.

But, I want to remind you, as I have before, that here in the United States – “We the People” are the government. Therefore, we must give an answer for how we have handled this great land that God has given us.

Now, it is not my intent to stir up anger, panic, and fear. I am confident that God is at work. I am confident that God has not abandoned us. All of the events of today, of this week, of this year – have been ordained by God, by His providential hand, which is sovereign over every action. I am reminded of the 11<sup>th</sup> question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What are God’s works of providence?” The answer: “God’s works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.”

As Jesus noted:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. (Matthew 10:29-30)

There is nothing that is outside of the hand and plan of God.

In Acts 4, the disciples were warned not to preach in the name of Jesus. Today, we are being warned not to gather in the name of Jesus. So I am left with a decision: *Do I obey man or do I obey God?* For it is clear that I can no longer obey both.

Here is my answer: *I will not wait for the permission of a man to worship the living God!*

When the great church reformer, Martin Luther, stood before the Diet of Worms in 1521 – he was instructed to recant of his beliefs. He responded with all the courage he could muster; and he responded in a voice that was barely audible because of the weight of what he was saying: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason (I do not accept the authority of popes and councils because they have contradicted each other), my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”

My convictions from Scripture and my conscience will not allow me to obey the Governor’s mandate. My convictions and conscience are held captive by the Word of God. And I cannot go against my conscience, it is neither safe nor right. So whether it is right in the sight of God for me to gather the church of God to worship, you must decide. But I cannot help but call the church for worship.

Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.