

# Yes, Masks Are a Conscience Issue

ON DECEMBER 12, 2020 BY BRANDONADAMSIN REFORMED LIBERTARIAN

About a week ago a pastor named Erik Raymond wrote an article for The Gospel Coalition titled [Are Masks a Conscience Issue?](#) Regretfully, I think the article is a bit confusing (and perhaps confused).

## Argument A

When most people say that wearing or not wearing a mask in response to COVID-19 and various governors' Executive Orders (not laws) is a matter of conscience, what they mean is that it is not a black and white issue that Scripture speaks to directly. It is a "gray area" that requires additional information not found in Scripture over which people may disagree. Therefore Christians may disagree with one another as to whether or not God requires them to wear a mask. "[C]onscience is the application of what [one] knows both about God's law and about [oneself] to a particular case." This 4-min video is a helpful presentation of that point.

Let's call this **Conscience Argument A**: Whether or not God requires one to wear a mask is a matter best left to individuals to decide for themselves.

## Argument B

What is confusing about Raymond's piece is that he is **not** responding to that argument. He is arguing against some other appeal to conscience on the mask issue. He does not provide any references, so it is hard to tell if he has accurately understood whoever he is arguing against or if he has just misunderstood the appeal to conscience on this point. What he is responding to is an individual who says their conscience **forbids** them from wearing a mask. "While I've not met anyone who enjoys wearing a mask, I've come across many who do not. Some say they cannot as a result of their conscience." He refers to it as "the tenuous position that wearing a mask is a sin."

**Conscience Argument B:** I cannot wear a mask because it violates my conscience.

Against Argument B, Raymond says

*When a Christian says conscience forbids them from doing something, this means that for them to do it is a sin (1 Cor. 8:7ff; Rom. 14:20–23). But, generally speaking, wearing a mask is not a moral issue. A person is not sinning if they wear a mask. When a Christian says conscience forbids them from doing something, this means that for them to do it is a sin (1 Cor. 8:7ff; Rom. 14:20–23). But, generally speaking, wearing a mask is not a moral issue. A person is not sinning if they wear a mask... [T]he objection to masks is not fundamentally a conscience issue. It may be a health or a political objection, but it's not fundamentally a moral objection supported by a Christian understanding of conscience.*

I agree with Raymond's refutation of *Argument B*, but I don't think there are many people making that argument. His points #1 and #2 are irrelevant to *Argument A*. I encourage you to re-read Raymond's article.

His point #3 is aimed at *Argument B*, but some parts of it would also apply to *Argument A*, so let's take a closer look.

## Submission to Authorities

**Submission to the Authorities (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17)** *Christians are commanded to submit to and honor the governing authorities. This is in the Bible because it's not something we'd naturally want to do. Imperfect people run governments. The authorities at the time of Paul and Peter were notoriously evil. Nevertheless, such submission is the will of God for his people (1 Pet. 2:15). Failing to do so is a sin against God. Disobedience to the government is reserved for when the Christian is commanded to do something God forbids or forbids something God commands. It's hard to argue that masks fall into this category reasonably.*

REPORT THIS AD

This is a common argument that some pastors make, but I don't think it's what those passages of Scripture teach. I do not believe it is true that "Disobedience to the government is reserved for when the Christian is commanded to do something God forbids or forbids something God commands." Most theologians recognize that any divine requirement to obey civil rulers is limited to when that ruler is functioning within his proper, limited jurisdiction – a question best left to the individual conscience to determine.

Additionally, I think there is good reason to believe that Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 command us to *be subject to* the powers that be, rather than simply to *obey* the powers that be. Note Louis W. Hensler III's point in his excellent essay "[Flexible Interpretations of 'The Powers that Be' from Constantine to Mandela and Beyond](#)" (Regent University Law Review).

*Paul begins the passage by declaring to his readers a broad obligation to submit: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers"; the Greek word translated in the King James Bible as "be subject unto" is hypotassomai, "a hierarchical term."<sup>51</sup> It is important to note that the word is not synonymous with "obey." "The Greek language has good words to denote obedience, in the sense of completely bending one's will and one's actions to the desires of another. What Paul calls for, however, is subordination."<sup>52</sup> The word chosen by Paul generally does not mean "obedience"...*

*The conscientious objector who refuses to do what his government asks him to do, but still remains under the sovereignty of that government and accepts the penalties which it imposes, or the Christian who refuses to worship Caesar but still permits Caesar to put him to death, is being subordinate even though he is not obeying.*

Samuel Waldron makes the same point.

*The word Paul uses (the Greek verb, hupotasso) is precisely the one we would expect if Paul is intent on inculcating the opposite of revolution and rebellion. Subordination (the translation I favor for bringing out the meaning of the verb, hupotasso) is the virtue which has for its contrasting vice, rebellion... Ordinarily, of course, subordination includes obedience. These two things, however, cannot be simply equated... Is the conscientious disobedience mandated by the Scriptures an exception to the requirement of subordination found in Rom. 13:1? To put the question more clearly, Is such conscientious disobedience insubordination, rebellion, or incipient revolution? The answer clearly must be negative! Conscientious disobedience to certain of the demands of ordained human authorities [powers] is clearly consistent with the strictest subordination to their general authority [power].*

**"POLITICAL REVOLUTION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION: AN HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL CRITIQUE" UNPUBLISHED**

I do not believe that Scripture warrants a pastor telling his congregation that they are sinning if they do not wear a mask when a Governor has issued an Executive Order under the Emergency Powers.

This 2 minute clip from Sam Waldron is helpful. In addition, see his 3 part series [The Christian's Relationship to Civil Authority](#).

## Love for Neighbor

**Love for Neighbor (Matt. 22:39)** *In our churches, there are various levels of concern about COVID-19. Some have lost friends and family members to the virus. For many wearing a mask is one reasonable way to love other people and protect them. It would be unloving to minimize or ignore their concerns, especially in light of the evolving data and heightened case numbers. Christian love requires a willingness to follow Jesus and set ourselves aside. Christians should be eager to do this.*

Here Raymond simply betrays his own opinion of the science and politics. He cannot bind others with his opinion on those points. Yes, we should love our neighbors and should not unnecessarily cause them harm. But whether or not wearing a mask is a way to protect others from harm is a disputed point. Furthermore, love for neighbor and setting ourselves aside is a two-way street. It would be unloving to minimize or ignore the concerns of those who choose not to wear a mask just as it would be unloving to minimize or ignore the concerns of those who do wear a mask. As with much of life, there is no obvious, one-size-fits-all answer to how these different people may live and assemble together, but “Christians should be eager to do this.” A proper understanding of *Argument A* would help Raymond better understand this point.

## Wisdom Toward Outsiders

**Wisdom Toward Outsiders (Col. 4:5)** *It’s saddening to read of some churches who disregard safety standards and then become super-spreaders for the virus. This harms the testimony of the church in the community. Christians should be concerned with reasonable efforts to preserve and promote the gospel. At this moment, failing to wear a mask doesn’t seem wise.*

Once again, Raymond betrays his own opinion of the science and politics of COVID – opinions that he cannot bind other Christians with. Following Col 4:5, Raymond even says it’s a matter of wisdom. How then can he possibly place this point under the heading that not wearing a mask “causes disobedience to the clear teaching of Scripture”? Once again, a proper understanding of *Argument A* would really help Raymond better understand and apply Col. 4:5, which says “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.” After all, an argument could be made that dissenting from the COVID narrative is quite wise.

## Submission to the Elders

**Submission to the Elders (Heb. 13:17)** *God requires church members to submit to their elders. Failing to do so is a sin against God. There’s obviously a bevy of caveats here, but in this conversation, if the elders believe it’s right to submit to the government by wearing a mask, then there’s not a provision for the conscience to disregard them. There may certainly be principled disagreement,*

*but there is no conscience clause that allows a perpetual lack of submission. The solution would be to either submit to the leadership of the church or find a church where they could worship according to their convictions and joyfully submit to the elders of that church.*

Heb. 13:17 says “Obey your leaders and submit to them...” I do think this is a more valid point by Raymond. Our elders do possess spiritual authority that we must obey. But note carefully the rest of the verse “...for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Wearing or not wearing a mask is not itself a danger to one’s soul, so hopefully elders will be careful about wielding the hammer of their spiritual authority on the question of masks. (Of course, if those elders misinterpret Romans 13 and believe it is sinful to disobey a governor, then they would see the matter as a spiritual one. In that instance, I would encourage them to reconsider their interpretation of the passage.)

## **Conclusion**

In my opinion, Raymond’s article confuses the issue. Wearing masks is a gray issue that is best left up to individual Christians to determine whether or not the law of God requires it.