

Are Masks a Conscience Issue?

ERIK RAYMOND DECEMBER 3, 2020

Churches today are faced with many challenges when considering their response to COVID-19. It can sometimes feel like we are walking on a dimly lit sidewalk on a winter night. We trust ourselves walking as usual, but then we step on a bit of black ice. How many times have pastors and church members picked themselves up, took a deep breath, and then said, “I didn’t see that coming!”

Navigating the mask conversation can seem like walking on ice (thin ice, with roller skates, and perhaps blindfolded). Part of the issue relates to the fact that public officials have sent mixed messages about masks. There was a time when some health officials questioned the effectiveness of face coverings, but now most support their usefulness. And many states have mask mandates for public worship gatherings. I’m not qualified to offer a defining medical word on masks, but I want to offer some thoughts on the implications for Christians who refuse to wear a mask because they say it violates their conscience.

What Is the Conscience?

Andy Naselli and J. D. Crowley wrote [a helpful book](#) on the conscience. I found a number of their categories useful for framing up these considerations.

They define the conscience as “your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.” The consciousness here refers to your awareness or sense of the right and wrong. God blessed every human with a conscience. There is an internal moral awareness.

But our conscience is precisely that, *our conscience*. It’s personal based upon individual moral standards. This is why no two people will have identical conscience convictions on every issue at every time. One may have a standard for the types of entertainment they consume that is more restrictive than another. Three years later, based on knowledge and experience, the gap may widen or decrease. Paul presents some of this with his discussion of the conscience in [1 Corinthians 8–9](#) and [Romans 14–15](#). The terms weaker brother and those strong in faith communicate a scale of growth and maturity as believers.

What the Conscience Is Not

It’s important to keep conscience in its proper place. The conscience must never trump Scripture. Christians believe in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture ([2 Tim. 3:16–17](#)). The Bible is over everyone—even our individual consciences. Therefore, if someone believes that their conscience supports them disobeying the clear teaching of the Bible, then the conscience is out of line and must be brought in subordination to the Word of God. Our conscience is not more authoritative than the Scriptures.

Some Implications for the Conscience

Conscience has relativized importance. One's personal conscience is to be highly regarded; we should listen to our conscience lest we sear it. However, we should never allow our conscience to outflank the Word of God. The Bible is authoritative over our consciences. If God says something is a sin, we are not able to say our conscience permits it.

Our conscience is for us. We must be careful not to impose our personal convictions of conscience upon others. By nature, conscience is something personal. It may be something not directly addressed in Scripture or even something contrary to Scripture. Therefore, we must be careful not to bind other people's consciences. For example, the Bible permits eating meat, but if someone believes it would be sin for them to eat meat, then they should abstain ([Rom. 14](#)) not force others to the same position.

Our convictions should not lead to judging others. Christians must show love and not judge those who may have differing views of conscience ([Rom. 14](#)).

Conscience as an Objection

Let's reset our current cultural context. Many Christians live in places where there are legal requirements for them to wear a face-covering when going outside, into a public place, or to church. The basis for the mask requirements is because of the spread of COVID-19. 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.

It is curious why some claim to have such a sensitive conscience to something like masks, which are not explicitly addressed in Scripture, while at the same time being comparatively insensitive to things that are clearly outlined in the Bible.

Most of the resistance to wearing masks falls into these three categories:

- *A scientific objection:* masks are ineffective
- *A political objection:* masks represent unjustified government restrictions
- *A moral objection:* masks represent a false narrative (i.e., the seriousness of COVID is overblown and to wear a mask is tantamount to lying)

Is it accurate to say that wearing a mask is a conscience issue? By now, you realize the importance of the answer. If "yes," then churches requiring church members to violate their conscience is a serious concern. If the answer is "no," then Christians should stop using conscience as a reason for refusing to wear a mask.

Is Wearing a Mask a Matter of Conscience?

In this current situation, I believe wearing a mask is not a conscience issue. I base this on three reasons.

1. Masks are not fundamentally a moral issue.

When a Christian says conscience forbids them from doing something, this means that for them to do it is a sin ([1 Cor. 8:7 ff](#); [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. It's not a sin to be a dental hygienist, welder, or scuba diver. If a Christian is fortunate enough to get drafted by an NFL team to play football, his crisis of conscience would not likely be about wearing a facemask or a helmet but rather playing on Sundays.

If the mask itself is not moral, then the so-called moral objection is actually an implication of one's reading of the scientific data or understanding the government's jurisdiction. In other words, the 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.

If someone maintains, based on conscience, that they won't wear a mask to come to church, but then they wear a mask to buy groceries, they would be inconsistent.

2. This is not how the conscience works.

In my context, masks are required by the executive order of the governor. If you want to walk outside, go to the supermarket, get a haircut, go to the library, or go to church, you need to put on a mask. If someone maintains, based on conscience, that they won't wear a mask to come to church, but then they wear a mask to buy groceries, they would be inconsistent. But the conscience is not so easily set aside. Think about the biblical examples. If it's a sin for you to eat meat (it violates your conscience), then you can't just set this aside if you get hungry. This is not how the conscience works. If it's a sin to wear a mask, then it's a sin whether you are at church or the deli. We can't turn off our conscience when we're hungry.

3. It causes disobedience to the clear teaching of Scripture.

If one maintains the tenuous position that wearing a mask is a sin, they will disobey other clear teachings of Scripture. There are at least five areas of concern. (Again, my context is assumed here: masks are legally required for the church's public gathering.)

Gathering for Worship ([Heb. 10:25](#)) The church gathering together is not only a privilege; it's a command. Therefore, a believer should make every effort to prioritize the Lord's Day gathering. No biblical understanding of conscience would support forsaking this assembly.

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.

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.

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.

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.

It is curious why some claim to have such a sensitive conscience to something like masks, which are not explicitly addressed in Scripture, while at the same time being comparatively insensitive to things that are clearly outlined in the Bible. Ironically, masks, which are not a fundamentally moral issue, can actually become one, because it's how one chooses to disobey God's Word.

Save the Conscience

I have compassion for the many pastors and church members trying to navigate this season. It's a tricky time. Thankfully, God has not left us without his Word and a promise to supply wisdom when we ask ([Jam. 1:3](#)).

I do not believe that conscience is a valid reason for refusing to wear a mask to church. Christians should save the conscience for conscience issues. Instead, call this what it is: civil disobedience.