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## **An Open Letter to the District Superintendents**

Regarding Ramifications of the CARES Act and Paycheck Protection Loans

April 2, 2020

Dear Teammates,

On a daily basis your team at the National Office is seeking to serve you with resources, guidance, encouragement, and support. Our staff consistently works hard, but I don't know of a season that has pulled more out of some of them than this moment as the opportunities provided by this crisis seem unlimited.

One form of guidance our office is seeking to give relates to the recent actions of the POTUS and Congress. I know that many of you have quickly moved to provide communication and guidance to your churches/pastors as well. Thank you for all of your efforts to assist your licensed workers and churches.

As my plate overflows with other opportunities and demands, I fully intended to stay out of this conversation. However, earlier this week, I woke up with a check in my spirit. Hence, this letter. This is the only communication I intend to give on this matter. The rapid progress of the issue (such a short period of time from the bill being passed to applications being received by banks) doesn't allow for long deliberation. I'm simply coming to you with this communication because I believe these words need to be said. What you do with them is your decision.

### **In Response to the CARES Act**

I sense that I'm taking a minority view. Yet, as I reflect on our churches, our relationship with the government, our reputation with the unbelieving community, and our understanding of how a church functions, I ask us to please consider this:

- If our churches cry out for a separation of church and state when the government wants to tell us how we are to use our facilities or who we must hire,
- if we rally lobbyist pressure when there is a threat of removing our tax-free status such as for ministerial housing allowance,
- if we complain loudly when the government imposes on churches something such as a parking tax,  
*. . . then who are we to now have our hand out for help when the government is giving aid assistance?*

In other words, who are we—who don't pay and don't want to pay taxes for our property or income or anything else—to get in line to receive government money at this moment?

At no time that I'm aware of in American history and, more importantly, in no place in the New Testament did the church look to the government for financial support.

I can hear the objection, "But we might miss out on some money that could be available to us!" True. But please consider with me the cost of that money.

If we choose to pursue government aid dollars for our local church,



- Are we not abdicating our responsibility as tithing, offering-giving people to support the church? Is not the church ours to support? As leaders, are we not robbing our people of ownership and engagement with their church?
- Are we not sending a double message to the world? We don't want to pay taxes, but now we want to receive from the taxes paid by others? Won't they see through this?
- Are we not weakening our position for future separation of church and state debates in the American public, courts, and Congress? Other challenges to religious liberty *will come in our lifetimes*. Are we not undermining our own arguments if we receive government funding?
- Does this not give the skeptic all the more reason to criticize the church? One of the top accusations lobbed by the world at pastors and religious leaders is that we are just money grabbers. We know that the accusation is largely unfair. However, if our churches take money from the government, are we not feeding this false narrative? Will the watching world not see the inconsistency of our actions?

### **A Call for the Long View**

I'm suggesting that the higher ground is to say, "Thank you for the offer, but we're not going to turn to the government to keep our bills paid." I believe that a "Thanks, but no thanks" response is in order.

It's not the purpose of this statement to assess the wisdom of our government's action or the economic impact of their decision. It's neither my place nor my expertise to do so.

But it is my place to speak into the life of the church, and I have a check in my spirit about our churches seeking government support. We're robbing ourselves of the full privilege and responsibility of supporting our church; we're weakening future arguments for keeping the proper church/state separation; and were giving the watching world more reason to question us.

Meanwhile, I have no qualms about a taxpayer applying for the aid being offered by the government. If a church staff member that's been laid off can receive extra unemployment benefits, I'd encourage them to do so. If a small business owner can keep their doors open after this crisis by receiving a loan, I would think it appropriate to do so.

From my chair, taxpayers—individuals and small businesses— should see if they can get some of their taxes back. However, for non-taxpayers (churches) I don't think it is for us to do. The price is too high. Our churches will be the poorer for it in the end.

Please take the long view.

Again, I know that this is a minority position. I'll shame no C&MA leader, pastor, church, or entity who applies for government funds. I'll respect each leader and church as they wrestle this through thoughtfully and prayerfully. *I'm just asking us to not rush too quickly to the world for help.*

It's an honor to be teamed with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Stumbo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "S".

John Stumbo, President