

THINKING ABOUT "THE BAN" (2) Motives, Justice, And The Danger Of Gradualism

In this series of articles, I am reflecting on the reasons Grace Fellowship chose to ignore the South African government's ban on worship services in January 2021—a ban that closed churches, but that allowed restaurants, movie theatres, gyms, and casinos to remain open. It is vital that we reflect on what we did and why we did it. As a congregation, we want to identify and embrace long-term principles that will inform our consciences, strengthen our faith, and guide us when we have to respond to similar situations in the future.

And make no mistake about it, there will be similar situations in the future. Because of the precedent established around the world during the last year, there can be little doubt that Christians will face further health-driven bans on church services in the years ahead. Not only is COVID still with us, new viruses will continue to emerge every few years stimulating similar governmental responses. The precedent has been set. Beyond that, in the decades ahead Christians are also sure to face government interventions and prohibitions completely unrelated to public health concerns. For example, a province in Australia recently passed legislation imposing a fine equal to R50,000 on any person attempting to convert someone from one religion to another. Evangelism just got expensive!

Making a decision to ignore government bans on church gatherings or on evangelism is a novel experience for Western Christians (myself included). That's one reason the recent situation in South Africa has caused so much turmoil and division in churches. While decisions of this nature are not new for believers in other parts of the world (such as in China, for example), they are new for us. We were off the edge of the map, so to speak. We should, then, expect a certain level of disagreement and confusion as we find our feet: we are learning a completely new facet of Christian wisdom on the fly.

In the first article in this series, I surveyed the relationship between specific commands and general commands of Scripture. In short, we opened services in January because we believed that, under the circumstances, a specific biblical command regarding worship (gather face to face) needed to be given priority over a general command only distantly connected to worship (obey the government).

THEN WHY NOT LAST YEAR?

That leads to a question: Why didn't we open church services last year when worship services were banned in March 2020?

To begin with, let's acknowledge that a decision whether or not to gather in order to publicly worship Jesus Christ is *not* a decision that Christians can long entrust to any government (if, indeed, we can ever do so). No government will ever give due weight to the importance of obeying God by assembling to sing, fellowship, encourage one another, and to hear the preaching of His Word.

But, if that is true, then why didn't we meet for several months last year?

As you recall, we chose to obey the government's lockdown order in March 2020 for three reasons. First, in the early months of the COVID outbreak, it was not clear how dangerous the outbreak might be; therefore, out of love for our neighbour and to give the health community time to assess the severity of the virus, we chose to submit to the government's complete lockdown order. Second, in a country where bad attitudes toward the government abound, we thought it valuable to exemplify a biblical desire to submit to the government. Third, the lockdown of March 2020 was society wide: it did not target churches in any selective fashion. While we refused to embrace the notion that Christian worship services are not "essential services," it was clear that churches were not being specifically discriminated against.

All three of those factors had changed by January 2021. First, the January ban was painfully selective. Second, there was no evidence that regulation-conscious churches were "hot spot" transmission points for COVID, nor had the COVID virus proven to be as deadly as the initial projections suggested it might be. Third, we had proven our willingness to submit to the government regulations where we could, even when they inconvenienced our worship. Ultimately, believing that spiritual health is *at least* as important as physical health, we chose to open worship services in spite of the government's ban. New circumstances required a new decision.

BUT THE GOVERNMENT'S MOTIVES WERE *GOOD*

While acknowledging that the January ban was selective, many Christians around our country have suggested that South African churches should have respected the ban on worship services in January 2021 *because the government's intentions were good*. And, indeed, it would be unjust to construe the January ban as a carefully schemed, thought-through conspiracy by South African government officials to destroy Christianity. It wasn't. However, it would also be naïve to imagine that the government's willingness to impose a ban of that nature revealed *nothing* about our government's view of the value and significance of Christian worship services. No scheme or conspiracy was exposed; however, a *worldview* was.

That aside, we can affirm that the government's intentions were good: a concern for public health. I would like to suggest that this is both true and *irrelevant* at the same time. Why do I say that?

Consider a parallel: our government's legislation against the spanking of children. One of the government's motivations for declaring spanking to be against the law was to stop child abuse. Few motivations could be better than that. However, in spite of the government's good intentions, most Christian parents quietly disobey the legislation against biblical discipline. Why? First, because the measured, loving, carefully restrained physical discipline of children commanded by God's Word is *not* child abuse. Second, when it comes to raising children, there are aspects of "good" that the government will never consider—for example, the fact that godly discipline imitates God's discipline of His own children and the fact that biblical discipline is God's plan for removing foolishness from a child's heart (Prov 3:11-12; 22:15).

In short, when it comes to obeying biblical commands, a secular government will never rightly or fully define the word *good*. For example, in regard to COVID lockdowns, physical health is not the only good to be considered when debating whether to close worship services. Without encouraging a reckless attitude toward disease, has there ever been a time when Christians needed the encouragement of face-to-face fellowship more than in the last year? Has there ever been a time when the world more urgently needed to hear that Jesus Christ is the only true solution to disease and death? Physical health and obeying the government are important; however, they are not the only pieces of the puzzle.

Ultimately, no secular government will give adequate regard to the intrinsic good of obeying God. Therefore, the government's motives for prohibiting Christians from engaging in biblically commanded practices (such as public worship) cannot be the determining factor in deciding whether we should submit to such prohibitions. After all, has any government ever described its injunctions or prohibitions as *bad*? Of course not. However, at times, Christians will have to acknowledge that God's good is better—more well-rounded, more fully defined—than the government's "good," and on that basis enact God's good in the face of governmental prohibitions.

GRADUALISM AND INJUSTICE

Besides the danger of embracing a limited, unbiblical definition of the word "good," a second thing that the January ban exposed is something I call *the danger of gradualism*. Gradualism happens when Christians fail to identify a decisive moment to take a stand against government persecution or injustice, with ruinous results—results that, in many cases, eventually include failing to take a stand at all.

INJUSTICE AND THE CHURCH

To understand this danger, let's start with the matter of injustice. When the Bible speaks of justice, it is referring to *equal standing before the law* (e.g., Ex 23:3-6). Justice refers to the reality that laws should be consistently applied to all: rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable, and so on. This, for example, is why the OT says so much about defending widows and orphans: their weakness and low standing in society left them particularly vulnerable to being treated unfairly in court.

THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT ... NOTHING?

Churches are, in many respects, the weakest and most vulnerable member or organ of society. Plainly stated, we make no money. Once you get past a general cultural sense that organized religion is important—a sense that is fast evaporating today—there is very little left to protect the church. Although our nation's constitution speaks of freedom of religion, it is exceedingly vague about what that means, thus providing no clearly defined protection for churches. In short, humanly speaking, the church's "pull" and protections are miniscule compared to other entities in our society: more like widows and orphans than nobles and landowners.

Without denying the reality that God will protect His people either from or through persecution, we must realise that, since the world is hard-wired to hate the church (John 15:18-20), Christians must stand quickly and courageously against government injustice directed toward the church. All injustice is wrong, but as an entity, the church is especially vulnerable. That doesn't mean that Christians should turn into marchers and chanters—not at all. But government injustice toward the church must always be identified and decisively stood against early in the process.

When we are compelled by Scripture and conscience to disobey the government, we will quietly take the consequences of our actions, as Daniel and his friends did in the book of Daniel, and as the apostles did in Acts 5. However, we cannot simply lie down and passively surrender *at the beginning of the process* when we are told by government authorities to disobey God.

AN ANALOGY

It has been suggested that the South African government implemented the recent ban on church services because some churches were flagrantly ignoring the COVID regulations. Even if this was the government's rationale, closing *all* churches as a result was an unjust response. Let me explain by analogy. How would you evaluate the following rationale and resulting law? "Some people who own BMWs drive too fast on the freeway. Therefore, no one who owns a BMW can drive on the freeway."

Because it punishes both the innocent and the guilty, and because it focuses on only one brand of car, such a law would cause a furore and would quickly be overturned as unconstitutional. However, we would not counsel civil disobedience in such a case, even though such a law is obviously unjust. Why? No biblical command is affected. And the fact of the matter is, BMW has plenty of pull, and they would make sure that any such legislation was quickly overturned.

That was not the situation we faced in January. A biblical command was affected. Moreover, most other "cars" were allowed to drive on the freeway (i.e., other public venues like restaurants, movie theatres, and casinos, remained open). Furthermore, unlike a wealthy multi-national company, the church is highly vulnerable to government injustice, persistent inattentiveness, and—potentially—to bullying. Court battles are not what we're about as a church; therefore, we simply chose to gather quietly in the face of a selective and unjust government prohibition, freely allowing those whose consciences spoke differently to stay home.

In other words, we chose to open services to combat the danger of *gradualism*.

The battle was on two fronts. First, it was vital that *we*, Grace Fellowship, not establish a precedent of knuckling under to unjust government regulations that prohibit fundamental biblical practices. Such a habit, once formed, is rarely broken. Second, it was important that *government officials* not be allowed to imagine that they can impose selective, unjust restrictions on churches, confident that churches won't have the fortitude to resist anyway.

A QUESTION

Rarely will government pressure against the church of Jesus Christ start with something so earth-shatteringly obvious as the outright ban on gospel preaching that the apostles faced in Acts 4-5. Satan is too clever for that. In light of that, Western Christians today need to ask a question: Are there times when a church must take a stand against government interventions, even if the situation is *not* as clear cut as it was in Acts 4-5?

History will help us navigate our way to an answer. In preparation for our third article in this series, let me leave you with a quotation from a pastor who served the Lord in Germany during the Nazi era:

[What] we learned in the first year under Hitler was, how unprepared we were for such a time, how helplessly we stood before the question of what really was to be done.¹

We are not the first Christians to face this situation! In the 1930s, German believers were totally unprepared for the interventions and prohibitions imposed on the church by the Nazi government. In other words, the danger of gradualism is not a new one. And in our final article I would like to explore some historical examples that will help us understand the importance of taking a stand *early* when facing government pressure or injustice.

¹ *Christ or Hitler?*, Wilhelm Busch, trans. Christian Puritz (EP Books, 2013), 209.