

And In Other News...

Pastors Arrested for COVID Violations: *What is the Christian's Duty?*

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Introduction

It is important to issue a disclaimer at the very outset: by reporting on and analysing these shocking events, we are not claiming that the churches and pastors involved are sound in the faith. All we know about them is what has been reported in the news, and what we have been able to learn about them online. In the case of the church pastored by James Coates, looking at its statement of faith we are in agreement with many aspects of it, but we have no further knowledge about the church or its members than this. As for the church pastored by Artur Pawlowski, if it has been correctly reported that this church celebrates the Jewish Passover, this is contrary to the New Testament and a denial of Christ's finished work. This article is therefore not meant to convey that we are in agreement with the doctrines and practices of these churches.

But these churches have been persecuted for the stand they have taken; and regardless of whether they are sound or not, the fact is that true Christians, pastors and churches are frequently lumped together with false ones, and both suffer in times of general persecution. This has happened countless times in history. For example, not all those who were branded by the Papists as "Anabaptists", "Donatists", "Albigenses", "Waldenses", "Baptists", etc., were true Christians or sound churches. The devil's agents lumped all dissenters and nonconformists together: true and false believers, true and false churches. The same thing continues to occur today. The persecutors – whether the Papal system, various governments, or any other agency – generally make no distinction between sound, biblically-based, sovereign grace Baptist churches, for example, and Charismatic churches whose members behave like lunatics, rolling on the floor and laughing hysterically or babbling in what they falsely call "tongues". In times of persecution biblical Evangelicals are lumped together with Jehovah's Witnesses, sovereign grace churches with free-will ones, sound Bible churches with wildly unsound Pentecostal ones.

What has happened to these churches, therefore, demonstrates the kind of persecution which is now increasing throughout the western, once-Protestant nations. What has happened to them is going to happen to others all over the western world.

Canadian Pastor Arrested and Church Building Closed by Police Over COVID Violations

In December 2020 the Alberta Health Services (AHS) of Canada issued an order requesting a local church, GraceLife Church, to comply with COVID-19 restrictions limiting attendance at church services to 15% capacity and requiring congregants to wear masks during the services. In January 2021 another order required the church to comply with the previous order. As this was not complied with, a closure order was issued in late January "until compliance with the restrictions was attained".

In February James Coates, a pastor of the church, turned himself in to the police for violating the government's restrictions – and was jailed for it. Let that sink in for a moment: a pastor of a church was jailed – not in Russia, not in China – *in Canada*. A leading western nation. And not for stealing, assault or murder – but for permitting the members of his church to assemble for worship, contrary to

Canadian government COVID-19 restrictions. In an affidavit he said – absolutely correctly – that the health orders “directly contravene the authority of the local church, and the supreme authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹

He explained his actions as follows: “I’m doing what I’m doing in obedience to Christ. I am quite content to let the Lord Jesus Christ Himself decide whether or not this is persecution. He promises that those who are persecuted for His Name’s sake will be blessed. He’s the one that blesses, and I’m content to leave that in His court.”²

The church also released a statement explaining its decision to re-open for services, saying that “the negative effects of the government lockdown measures on society far surpass the effects of COVID-19”, and that “the science being used to justify lockdown measures is both suspect and selective.” Right on both counts. It further stated that it re-opened services in June 2020 after the first public health emergency ended. “We did so recognizing COVID-19 was much less severe than the government had initially projected. This sentiment was reflected in the assessment of the premier of Alberta, who deliberately referred to COVID-19 as ‘influenza’ multiple times in a speech announcing the end of the first declared public health emergency.”

On 27 March the AHS sent a letter to Coates after he was released from prison, inviting him to meet with them virtually to discuss the “risks” of COVID-19. AHS stated: “GLC [GraceLife Church] has decided not to follow these mandatory restrictions, nor have they attempted to work with AHS to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.”

Coates continued to hold church services and was arrested a second time. He refused to agree to his bail conditions, which were that he was not to attend or conduct services at his church unless the church complied with government guidelines. A judge ruled that the pastor would have to remain behind bars until his trial in early May. His lawyers at the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms argued that the bail conditions and health orders “violate his Charter freedoms of conscience, religion, expression, association and peaceful assembly.” And: “A trial set eight weeks down the road was too long for an innocent pastor to be in jail. Pastor Coates is a peaceful Christian minister. He should never have been required to violate his conscience and effectively stop pastoring his church as a condition to be released.” “Charter freedoms do not disappear because the government declares regular church services to be outlawed while allowing hundreds of people to fill their local Walmarts.”³ Excellent points. There was clearly an agenda against churches, with the Canadian authorities viewing it as an opportunity to clamp down on religious freedom under the guise of “protecting the people from COVID.”

In early April 2021 the Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrived at GraceLife Church to physically close the church building after its repeated violations of the COVID-19 restrictions. Police shut the church down, fenced it off, and put a black tarpaulin over the entrance. When church members continued to show up for a service, the armed police increased their numbers and added more fencing. The AHS said in a statement: “Alberta Health Services physically closed GraceLife Church and has prevented access to the building until [the church] can demonstrate the ability to comply with Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer of Health’s restrictions.”⁴

Picture the scene! This was unfolding in *Canada!* A western country *supposedly* committed to upholding freedom of religion and conscience. This was the once-Protestant land which in the nineteenth century was the homeland of famed converted ex-priest Charles Chiniquy. When Chiniquy’s life was threatened by howling Roman Catholic mobs as he preached the Gospel in Canada, 1000 British soldiers with fixed bayonets formed two lines along the streets to enable him to safely reach a lecture hall where he was scheduled to preach.⁵ But in twenty-first century, Socialist, Woke, politically correct Canada, a pastor was arrested and jailed for simply permitting the members of his church to assemble for worship!

Christians in the West need to wake up! So many of them are living in dreamland, still thinking “it will never happen here”. It *is* happening, right now, and it is going to get worse. Coates is a brave

man, and he was right.

Another Canadian Pastor Harassed by COVID Police – Chases Them from His Premises

In early 2021 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, health inspectors and armed police showed up at the Cave of Adullam Church without a warrant. This church was celebrating Passover (*not* something any true Christian church would be doing, as all Old Testament festivals have been abrogated; but that is not the issue here). The pastor, Artur Pawlowski, was known for preaching against abortion, homosexual rights, Islamic shariah law and COVID-19 restrictions. He was born in Poland and lived under Soviet rule for part of his childhood, so he knew about Communism and its utter denial of freedom of religion.

The inspector and the police were there to give instructions regarding government demands over the COVID “pandemic”. But Pawlowski shouted at them, “I don’t want to hear a word. Out! Out! Out of this property immediately, until you come back with a warrant – out!”

He went on: “Out! Nazis are not welcome here! Do not come back you Nazi psychopaths. Unbelievable sick, evil people. Intimidating people in a church during the Passover! You Gestapo, Nazi, Communist Fascists! Don’t you dare come back here!” He added: “Can you imagine these psychopaths? Passover. The holiest Christian festival of the year and they’re coming to intimidate Christians during the holiest festival? Unbelievable. What is wrong with those sick psychopaths? It’s beyond me. How dare they.”⁶

The police and health inspectors eventually left, rather sheepishly apparently.

“Unbelievable, we’re living in a total takeover of the government with their thugs, goons, the brown shirts, the Gestapo wannabe dictators,” he said. “Coming to the church armed with guns and tasers and handcuffs to intimidate during Passover celebration? Well I guess that’s what it is, they want to enslave us all like the Egyptians did. They want to be the Pharaohs of today, that’s what they’re doing. Unbelievable. People, if you don’t stand up, wake up, I don’t know what will happen tomorrow.”

He was correct. Again, just to be 100% clear: Passover was a festival for the Israelites. It is not a Christian festival *at all*, let alone “the holiest Christian festival of the year.” It was ordained by God for the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant, but the reason for it ended with the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. We reject Pawlowski’s theology, which is seriously faulty, however much we may admire his bravery.

But was his behaviour justified? We will look at this in a moment.

Then, for the second time in a month Pawlowski chased away a government health inspector, who again arrived at the church’s premises with a troop of uniformed police flanking her, while a service was being held. She demanded to enter and “stand in the back” to observe, saying she had come to deliver an order and then talk about it.

“I do not co-operate with Gestapo,” said Pawlowski. “I do not talk to the Nazis. You came in your uniforms like thugs. That’s what you are. Brownshirts of Adolf Hitler. You are Nazi Gestapo, Communists, Fascists. I do not co-operate with Nazis. Talk to my lawyer. You are not allowed here, you are not welcome here, and I’m not going to co-operate with Gestapo like you.”⁷

When the health inspector insisted on explaining the order, Pawlowski replied, “This is what the Gestapo is doing. You’re coming to the place of worship, to intimidate, and to harass, so you can make an appointment.”

When she and her police escort turned to leave, Pawlowski explained: “They could come any day of the week. No, they want to do it during the church service because they have a purpose, they have an agenda. If you’re not seeing it then you’re plain either stupid, blind, and deaf. Either you’re going to keep pushing as hard as you can or you’ll be swallowed by those people. They’re going to keep coming, keep taking your rights, one after another. Destroying you by thousands of cuts. One cut at a time.” Again, he was absolutely right about this. It was an obvious and blatant example of intimidation on the part of the authorities.

Finally in May, Artur Pawlowski and his brother David were arrested for holding an “illegal” in-person gathering as per COVID limits set by a new court order. The police statement declared that its officers “lawfully enforced” the court order by arresting the two men after a service. They did this by massive overkill – sending at least five police vehicles to make the arrests. The brothers knelt on the road and refused to walk on their own during the arrest, so they were dragged away. They were then “charged with organizing an illegal in-person gathering, including requesting, inciting or inviting others to attend an illegal public gathering, promoting and attending an illegal public gathering.”⁸

Pawlowski was jailed briefly. After his release he said in an interview, “I just woke up in Hong Kong a few days ago. I mean, I thought I emigrated to our beloved Canada, but I am in Hong Kong, full force.” He added, “It’s insanity – arresting pastor[s], shutting down churches. Crazy.”⁹

“I have become, with my brother, a political prisoner,” he said. “We were taken to custody, thrown on the police van like a piece of meat, and we were denied access to the lawyer for 24 hours. It’s horrible. It’s a repetition of history. I grew up behind the Iron Curtain. I’ve seen the police abuse of power, people being arrested – you could be arrested at five in the morning, the doors could be broken for no reason.... I escaped Communism. I escaped Poland because I wanted to come to a country that is free. And here we are again, repeating the same mistakes, the same history. And I have to stand up and fight for my rights – not for doing evil, for just opening [the] church for the people that freely want to come and worship their God.”

The Proper Response of the Individual Christian and the Local Church

So: how should Christians respond to tyrannical abuse of power by those in authority? How should the child of God live in such times? And what should local churches do? The Bible answers these questions fully.

It was shocking to see how many professing Christians responded to the Coronavirus “pandemic” precisely as the people of the world responded to it – with fear, panic, and sheep-like acceptance of what their governments, the UN, and the WHO said about it, instead of searching for the truth themselves and rejecting the spoon-fed lies which were doled out to them by the liberal/Socialist world media. COVID-19 is *not* a plague; the vast majority of the world’s population is *not* in danger; enforced lockdowns are unnecessary and stupid but very useful to the one-worlders devoted to people-control; and all this has been a giant leap forward for the internationalists. Global slavery has arrived.

That we are to obey the authorities is the clear teaching of Scripture (e.g. Rom. 13:1-7). Christians are to be law-abiding citizens – even when a particular law is silly or unnecessary. We do not have to like a particular law, nor agree with it. We are simply to obey it. Christians are not to be rebels, engaging in civil disobedience. The teaching heard in some circles – that it is the Christian’s duty to physically resist State tyranny – is completely false. Paul wrote Romans 13 at a time when the tyrant Caesar ruled the world!

But – although we are to obey the authorities, there is one exception. When they command us to do something contrary to the will of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, we are *required* to disobey. When forbidden by the authorities to preach the Gospel the apostles answered, “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). Earlier they had said to those same authorities, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20). When it comes to serving God, we *must* disobey if the authorities forbid us from doing so!

Biblically, God has not given the State authority over the Church (Matt. 22:15-22). True Christian churches do not take their orders from the State on how to conduct their services, etc. Biblically, the State’s authority extends only to the maintenance of law and order, protecting the physical lives and the properties of the citizens from criminals, invasion by foreign enemies, etc. (Rom. 13:1-7). It has no jurisdiction over men’s souls, their consciences, and how they worship. It may *claim* such jurisdiction, of course, but God has not created it to control how any church conducts its affairs. Therefore a pastor

may certainly refuse to be dictated to by the State when it comes to the internal affairs of his church. In such matters the believer is bound to disobey the State (Acts 5:29).

And believers are commanded to assemble to worship the Lord. Heb. 10:25 says, “Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together”. The State does not have the right to forbid Christians from assembling for worship, and no Christian is bound to obey such a law.

Therefore, under the restrictive lockdown regulations forbidding churches from holding their services, it is perfectly right for churches not to comply. Fear of the authorities should never hinder the Lord’s people. Christians, including pastors, who criticised the two Canadian pastors and their churches need to take a good, hard, honest look at themselves and ask themselves why they have been so cowardly, and so disobedient to the Lord during the entire Coronavirus madness. We should not mistake an online “virtual service” for a church service. Listening to a recorded sermon, or even an entire recorded service, may be a blessing as far as it goes, but it is not a church service and it cannot be a replacement for one.

However, although no government has the right to forbid believers from assembling for worship, it may have the *sheer power* to do so, by arresting Christians. And as the Waldenses and so many other Christians experienced through the centuries, when the State comes down hard there is nothing professing Christians can do to resist it. They are lambs in the midst of wolves. They are not to take up arms and fight against the authorities, and the authorities have the manpower, the muscle, to arrest the pastors and close the church premises if they so wish. This, after all, was what happened in Canada. Those churches resisted, their pastors resisted, but humanly speaking the end result was inevitable: they were arrested and their church premises physically closed.

What then is the solution, biblically?

The problem with having special buildings for church services in this day and age, accessible to the general public, is precisely that they *are* public. For western Christians the time has come to radically rethink this. In countries where persecution is occurring, the only solution in most cases is for churches to *assemble in secret*, or at the very least in private. Countless times through the long centuries of Christian history churches have been forced to meet and worship behind closed and bolted doors (Acts 12:12-17), or in forests, caves, and other secluded places. Anywhere that is away from the prying public eye. When they met for secret worship contrary to the law they did right, for “We ought to obey God rather than men” is always applicable in such cases (Acts 4:18-20; 5:29). Such laws are always a clear case of the State overstepping its authority, and Christians who disobey it in this matter so as to worship the Lord are acting according to His will.

In such circumstances, *house churches* (i.e. when local churches meet in private houses) are far safer than meeting for worship in public buildings, and the New Testament has many examples of such churches (see Acts 1:13; Acts 12:12; Acts 20:8,9; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2).

Unfortunately, the mindset of western Christians is set on the concept of the local church having its own visible edifice in which to meet, with doors opening onto the street inviting all and sundry to come in and the church’s name prominently displayed on a signboard outside. Christians in the West have been so safe from persecution for so long that they cannot conceive of holding their services in any other location. But as their brethren in those parts of the world where persecution has been ongoing for a long time would be able to tell them, they need to rethink this concept – and return to a more biblical pattern. A time of persecution has now engulfed the West. It is no longer “business as usual” for local churches. They should do as the early Christians did and as so many others after them have done throughout Church history, assembling for worship in more secluded locations.

But of course, in today’s surveillance states it is impossible for many to even *reach* their place of worship during a police lockdown, even if their services are being held in seclusion or in secret. For if the police and military are in the streets in large numbers, making all civilian movement impossible (as occurred during the lockdowns in 2020 all over the world), and if the citizens are being spied on by high-tech surveillance equipment so that they cannot leave their homes without being detected, there is

nothing they can do. It is no different from an innocent Christian man being sent to prison: with all his heart he may wish to meet with his brethren in Christ, but physically it is simply impossible, for he is incarcerated.

During the lockdown of 2020 Christians all over the world were *physically unable* to hold church services. They were effectively in a gigantic prison, with no way to assemble for corporate worship. They were as effectively imprisoned as Peter or Paul when they were incarcerated (Acts 12:1-5; Acts 16:23,24). In such circumstances Christians are still able to pray privately, to sing praises to God privately, even to witness at times (Acts 16:23-25); but assembling for worship with other believers is physically impossible.

Whenever this is the case for the Lord's saints it is a great trial. They must cast themselves on the Lord. They must serve Him where they are and await His pleasure, observing how things will fall out and what will change, being ready to go through any doors the Lord may open. He works out His sovereign purposes in all these things, though we may not always be able to see it clearly at first.

Of course, they should *try* to find ways to hold their services. They should not simply throw up their hands, as so many local churches did during the lockdowns, and say, "Oh well, the government has forbidden it, so that's that." What a capitulation! How disgraceful that the Lord's people took such an easy way out in so many cases! Wherever possible, plans should have been made for the members of the local churches to assemble in private houses or in other secluded places; and *only if* there was absolutely no physical way for them to do so should the services have been cancelled. Never should any have been cancelled just because the State interfered in Church matters and forbade services!

Now to all the above some might say: But what about the fact that when the apostles were forbidden to preach the Gospel and continued to do so, this was done openly, not secretly; and they were arrested for it (Acts 4:18-20,33; Acts 5:12-29,40-42)? Should we not do the same? Should believers not be out in the open, doing what they have always done, even if arrested for it?

Well, we have these examples; but we also have very clear examples of the early Christians being extremely cautious during times of persecution (e.g. Acts 9:10-18,26); apostles escaping from persecutors secretly, fleeing dangerous places so as to avoid being captured (Acts 9:23-25,29-30; Acts 14:5-7; Acts 17:5-14), which was in accordance with the Lord's own teaching (Matt. 10:23); an apostle being delivered from prison miraculously, and then remaining in hiding (Acts 12:1-11,17); and again, as we have already seen, believers meeting in private houses. All of these Scriptures teach us that in times of persecution it is wise to take precautions. We are *not* to stop holding services, nor are we to stop preaching the Gospel to the lost, but even so we may do so with caution and wisdom.

It is true that the apostles, in the early days after Pentecost, were very public in their ministry among the Jews, and continued to be after their arrest and release. But there were literally thousands of other Christians at that time, in the same city, who would have been witnessing, and some of the men even preaching, to many people, and yet they were not arrested. They must have been ministering more quietly and privately. And later, as the book of Acts shows, even the apostles took more precautions than before.

There may be a few exceptions to the general rule in a time of persecution, when certain men, called by God, believe they must continue openly as before even though they know how it will likely end for them. But as a general rule, whenever possible during times of persecution certain activities should be held privately or even secretly.

If something cannot be done without compromising your faith, then there is no choice – you must continue to do it, regardless of the consequences. A local church's services may be held privately or secretly, for safety's sake; a Gospel minister may go over a city wall secretly to escape arrest; but at no time may a believer deny that he is a Christian if asked, or sin in order to save his skin.

Conclusion

We admire the courage of the two Canadian churches, and especially their pastors, for standing up for their freedom to worship and for the fact that no government has authority over the internal affairs of a

church. They were arrested, and the hearts of all the Lord's true saints should go out to them, for their arrests were a shocking abuse of power on the part of the authorities. It is disgraceful that so many professing Christian churches capitulated from the outset of the Coronavirus lie, hastily and fearfully closing their church buildings and suspending services merely because the government said so, and then forcing their congregations to wear masks and practice "social distancing" once the government permitted church buildings to re-open (imagine it – a government *permitting* a church to hold services, and the church meekly obeying!). The Lord's people should pray for the persecution unfolding in Canada, and for the men involved, because the outcome of these events will effect churches everywhere. The persecution they are presently enduring will soon come to a church near you...and perhaps even your own.

However, as much as we admire their courage and agree with them, the New Testament shows that as a general rule it is better, during a time of persecution, to hold the local church's services privately. May these events encourage all true churches, worldwide, to change their approach in these times of increasing persecution, and to conform more closely to the New Testament pattern, where there were no special buildings in public places for the local churches to meet in, but they made use of private and secluded venues, just as their persecuted brethren have done through the centuries in many parts of the world.

This is the reality of the world we live in now. Brethren, get used to it, and adjust accordingly, without compromise.

June 2021

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ENDNOTES:

1. *The Christian Post*, March 8, 2021. “Court orders pastor to remain in jail until May trial for violating COVID-19 restrictions.” www.christianpost.com.
2. *WND*, February 22, 2021. “‘I’m doing what I’m doing in obedience to Christ’: Pastor arrested for holding church service.” www.wnd.com.
3. *The Christian Post*, March 8, 2021.
4. *WND*, April 7, 2021. “Authorities ‘physically close’ church after COVID violations, erect fencing.”
5. See the great Christian classic, *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome*, by Charles Chiniquy, pg. 590. London: The Protestant Literature Depository, 1886.
6. *WND*, April 4, 2021. “‘Unbelievable sick, evil people!’ Pastor goes nuclear on ‘Nazi’ cops.”
7. *WND*, April 27, 2021. “‘You’ll be swallowed by those people’: Pastor chases out ‘Gestapo’ COVID cops – again!”
8. *The Christian Post*, May 11, 2021. “Canadian pastor who escaped communist tyranny arrested for holding church service.”
9. *The Christian Post*, May 14, 2021. “‘It’s insanity’: Canadian pastor jailed for holding church service compares gov’t actions to communist China.”