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To the family of faith at Fairview Baptist Church

COVID-19, Government Authority, and the Re-Gathering of the Church

A proposal for the gathering of our church in the current pandemic.

Pastor Tim Stephens
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This paper is intended for the members of Fairview Baptist Church in Calgary, Alberta. As your pastor I seek to provide leadership through this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This paper outlines my thoughts and reflections after much study, prayer, and counsel.

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INTRODUCTION

The church today faces difficult questions. After many weeks, months even, of lockdown to “flatten the curve” and keep hospitals from being overwhelmed with cases of COVID-19, talks of gathering again have begun. The government, in many different jurisdictions, are seeking to follow medical advice and to give guidelines (sometimes enforced by fines or imprisonment) to a variety of different businesses and groups, including churches.

In Calgary, churches have been restricted against meeting until Monday, June 1st when they will be permitted to meet in groups up to 50 (or 1/3 capacity, whichever is less) while following social distancing guidelines, sanitization, and restrictions on singing and communion (see full government guidelines for churches at <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-relaunch-guidance-places-of-worship.pdf>).

Does our government have the authority to instruct churches what can and cannot be done as they gather to worship? Is the church to submit to the governing authorities at this point?

As we move towards an answer, it has been repeatedly said, “We live in unprecedented times.” In some respects this is true, but we also have examples in the past where pandemics or plagues have struck. We also have many examples of how the church responded when there was a conflict of authority. The tension between church and government is not new and we should consider this before we jump to conclusions today.

I. GOD’S PEOPLE UNDER ANOTHER RULE

While there are many historical examples, the examples I’m interested in considering are the biblical ones where God’s people are under the rule of a government that does not worship God. There are three major periods in biblical history where such a scenario exists.

1. Hebrews in Egypt

When Joseph and his family came to Egypt it was God’s plan to keep them alive during a time of severe famine (**Genesis 50:20**). The Hebrew people settled in the land of Goshen and were under the authority of Pharaoh yet there was peace between them. Joseph was an honored figure. He was instrumental in preparing the Egyptian empire for the time of famine. Through Joseph’s planning the Pharaoh became wealthy and powerful.

Even though the Hebrews worshiped the true God and the Egyptians worshiped many different false gods, there is no account of “religious persecution” (even though, for instance, cattle were sacred to the Egyptians).

In later centuries, as Joseph was forgotten and the Hebrews became numerous, Pharaoh subjected them to build his monuments and even sought birth control measures lest these Hebrews join with an invading army. The Hebrew’s groaned under such oppressive treatment and God raised up Moses as a deliverer. As Moses confronted Pharaoh it was, in the narrative of Scripture, a battle between God and

the power of the Egyptian gods and the most powerful man in the world—Pharaoh. In the mind of Pharaoh, it was about his empire.

When Pharaoh refused to let the Hebrews go, he wasn't persecuting them because of their religious beliefs. His concern was for his empire and his labor force. He even sought to allow them to go into the wilderness to worship their God. He thought just the men could go or that they could come to some kind of compromise as to how they would worship so as to have a minimal impact on his empire.

Pharaoh had very practical (and we might even say reasonable) reasons for how the Hebrews ought to worship. Yet God, and Moses, would not compromise. The worship of God comes before the good of the empire. The end of the story we know.

2. Israel in Babylon

After a period of sovereignty for the Israelite nation, God sent judgment through Assyria and Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Judah were brought into captivity in Babylon. This captivity or time of exile lasted 70 years.

How were these people supposed to live under a foreign government that did not fear God? **Jeremiah 29:4–7** says, *“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

This is the same pattern we saw in Egypt. Israel is to labor for the good of the empire in which they dwell. God's people are to be good citizens and a benefit to the nation they are part of.

One of the most famous of the exiles is Daniel. Daniel worked for the empire and rose to very high prominence. Babylon, after the capture of many different lands, was a very pluralistic city. Nations with many gods had little issue with the additional Babylonian gods. However, for Daniel and the Israelites who worshiped the one true God, this pluralism was a recipe for conflict. This conflict did not always exist. There is no indication of religious persecution in Babylon against the Israelites. It seems that even someone like Daniel had the freedom to worship his God and follow his laws (see **Daniel 1**).

When others grew jealous of Daniel and plotted to see him removed, they said, *“We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God”* (**Daniel 6:5**). That is, they knew that Daniel's allegiance was first and foremost for God and his law. Daniel was an exceptional and loyal citizen of the Babylonian empire, but his first and highest commitment was to God and his law.

This commitment, shared by Daniel, and other Israelites, led them to face the fiery furnace and the lion's den (see **Daniel 3 and 6**). Why didn't they just bow when the music played? Why didn't Daniel move his prayers to a more secluded place? Why pray in public as soon as the decree was signed to outlaw this

worship of God? Daniel was clear that his loyalties for God were higher than loyalties as a citizen in the nation he dwelt.

3. Jews/Christians in Rome

The next major ruler over the Israelite people were the Romans with Caesar and his governors. How did Jews, and later Christians, handle such a government that did not share their values and commitment to the worship of God?

We know it was much the same way as in Babylonian exile. In fact, God's people are called exiles in 1 Peter and so often in the New Testament, Rome is compared to Babylon (**1 Peter 5:13; Revelation**). God's people were called to the same pattern of living in submission and being good citizens under government rule while having their first commitment to God and his law.

This priority to God and his law led to the Jews, and later Christians, as being hated in the empire. They were seen as intolerant and arrogant as if they were better than everyone else. (Sound familiar? Pluralism hates exclusive truth.) When the Jews were given a measure of religious autonomy by the Romans (like in Jerusalem) there was freedom and peace.

When the empire encroached on the law of God then there were different reactions. The Sadducees, who controlled the Sanhedrin, were more liberal, not believing in the resurrection or angels, and were much more likely to compromise with the Romans. The Pharisees were more faithful to the written word. Then, there were groups like the Zealots who actually fought back against the Romans.

Where did Jesus land on these issues? Jesus was not part of any of these sects of Judaism. However, he did teach that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar while being devoted to God (**Mark 12:17**). Interestingly, while Jesus drew the hatred of the Sadducees and Pharisees, he did have a Zealot in his ranks (**Matthew 10:4**).

What we see repeated again was that in all these times of God's people under other leadership is that they strive to live quiet and peaceful lives (**1 Timothy 2:2**), be a benefit of the nation they are in, yet their first and foremost commitment is to God and his law and so defiance was sometimes necessary.

II. CHRISTIAN SUBMISSION TO GOVERNING AUTHORITIES

There are two important texts in the New Testament that deal directly with submission to governing authorities. Both are written in the context of Roman rule, a pluralistic society with many similarities with ours today.

Romans 13

Romans 13:1–7 says, *"¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do*

wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

What we learn here is that Christians, all people in fact, are to live in subjection to the governing authorities. It is not that this authority is higher or equal to God, but it has been instituted by God. The reason why God has instituted such authorities is to carry out justice. They are to punish the evildoer and approve of those who do good (**vv. 3–4**).

This text does not give governing authorities sweeping powers over every aspect of our lives. It does not give them the right to interpret or override God's law. Rather they are to keep justice and so should be honored and respected (this includes paying taxes [**vv. 6–7**]).

What is the good that the government should honor and the evil that they ought to punish? The ethic that flows from God's law of course. The next verses in Romans 13 speak about the law of God and how love is the fulfilling of the law. Later in the chapter, more details are given, "*So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*" (**Romans 13:12–14**).

This is the kind of submission, doing works of righteousness, that this chapter calls us to. Doing evil should bring punishment of the civil authorities and is an expression of God's wrath. Christians, although not under bondage to the Mosaic law, are not free from all law.

First Peter 2

1 Peter 2:13–17 says, "¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme,¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

We immediately see many similarities with this text and **Romans 13**. In the early days of Christianity the empire wasn't persecuting Christians. Rather there was local opposition and mobs (think the theatre in Ephesus in **Acts 19**). In these cases, Roman governors were an ally to the Christians in allowing them freedoms and sparing them from persecution from other citizens of the empire. The *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) was very important to the empire and so such squabbling between religious groups was quelled and discouraged.

This text calls us to be good citizens. We're also called to love the brotherhood (other Christians), and to fear God. Again, it conveys the role of civic authorities to uphold justice. We should be just people rather than bring the reproach of our authorities due to our wickedness.

What happens when the authorities rule against God's law? In other words, what happens when they are unjust? They Christians will suffer unjustly because they will continue to fear God and do what is right.

1 Peter 2:18–20 says, *“¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”*

Here we have the example of servants suffering under the hand of an unjust master. It is no credit if we suffer under our masters for doing evil. But if we suffer for doing good, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. This is a demonstration that God, and his law, his our greatest delight. If a government rules in matters of ethics or religion, we can expect a conflict between loyalties which will lead to unjust treatment and suffering.

III. CHRISTIAN DEFIANCE TO GOVERNING AUTHORITIES

Along with these texts in **Romans 13** and **1 Peter 2**, the New Testament is replete with examples of Christians defying governing authorities.

Stephen, in **Acts 7**, calls out the religious leaders and is stoned for it. Before him, John the Baptist lost his head because he spoke against the adultery of Herod. Peter and John are commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus but they famously replied, *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”* (**Acts 4:19–20**). The apostles were all arrested again and thrown into prison. During their interrogation they said, *“We must obey God rather than men”* (**Acts 5:29**). Later Paul was beaten many times, stoned, chased out of cities, and yet he continued to return and strengthen the believers before he was finally executed by orders from Caesar.

What was their ground of their “civil disobedience”? Was it due to the suppression of the gospel? Was it in response to religious persecution? Like Pharaoh in Egypt, or the king in Babylon, the Romans had no interest in religious debates or the religious views of its citizens. They had a desire for peace and for the welfare of the empire. If Christ was creating unrest, then Christ must go. (All Jews were expelled from Rome around 50 A.D. because of civil unrest over Jesus.) But for the most part, in the early decades Christians weren't persecuted across the empire but persecution was localized and sporadic.

Their ground of defiance to governing authorities was simple. When the governments rule or law conflicted with God's rule or law, they would obey God rather than men.

IV. OUR SITUATION

Our governing authorities have restricted church gatherings or given strict guidelines for what those gatherings look like. These are public health orders enforced as “law” with fines for violation

<https://www.alberta.ca/covid-19-orders-and-legislation.aspx>). Should the government close the churches or dictate how churches worship?

We must ask, what is God's law? God commands us to gather and not neglect to meet together (**Hebrews 10:25**). We are to be devoted *"to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"* (**Acts 2:42**).

We are called to publicly proclaim the gospel (**Acts 4–5**). As a pastor, I'm commanded to devote myself *"to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching"* (**1 Timothy 4:13**).

Together we are called to address *"one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart"* (**Ephesians 5:19**). And to *"let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God"* (**Colossians 3:16**). We're called to come together as a church and celebrate the Lord's Supper (**1 Corinthians 11:17–34**). God is very particular on how he desires to be worshiped, we don't have the liberty to change that. He has given us commands and we should obey them.

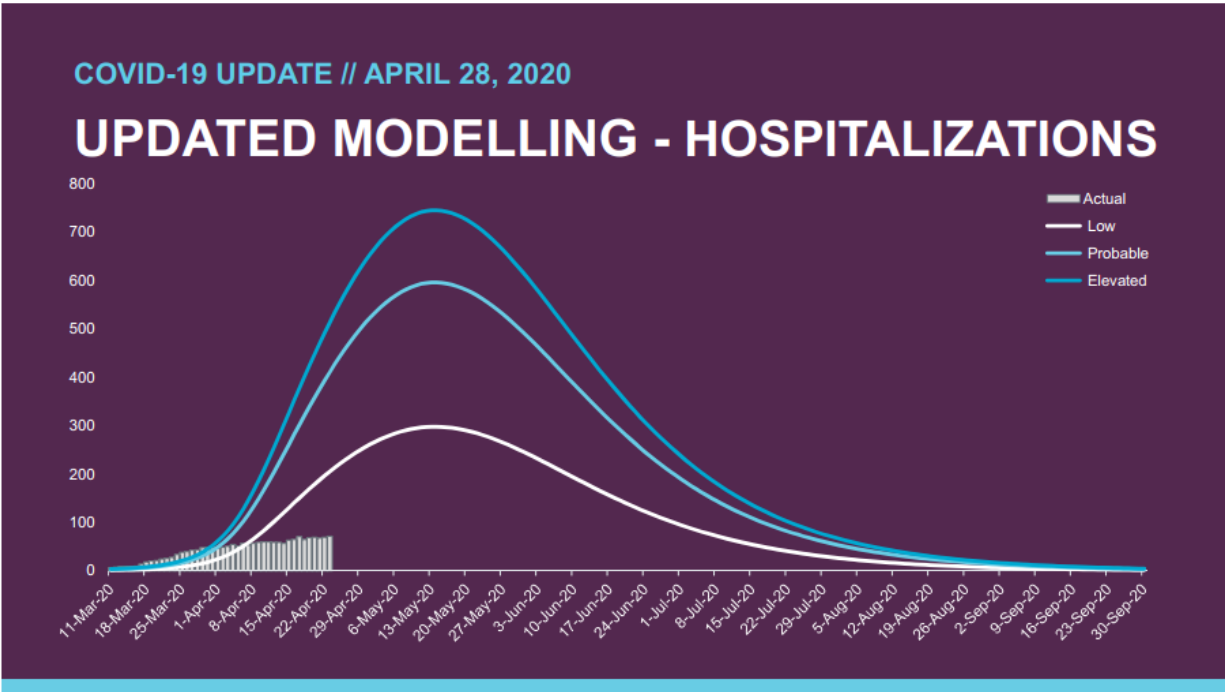
Our Health Crisis

But doesn't a health crisis make this more complicated? It certainly does.

Every church that I am aware of in Alberta has accommodated the government's guidelines and restrictions. COVID-19 was making headlines with much loss of life in places like China and Italy. Christians then, as now, were concerned for the safety of themselves and their neighbors.

On April 8th, the government of Alberta released modeling data to predict the infections and death toll this virus was likely to cause. Their decisions on restrictions were based on these models. This early model predicted the probable peak of the disease to happen in mid-May with 800,000 total infections, up to 900 in hospital, 244 in ICU, and up to 3,100 deaths. Their worst case predicted that total infections could reach 1,600,000 people with up to 32,000 deaths (see <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-case-modelling-projection.pdf>).

On April 28th the government updated their models. These models show different data than the first showing a probable outcome of 600 hospitalizations and 200 people in the ICU at the peak in mid-May (see <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-case-modelling-projection-april-28.pdf>).



Today (May 20th, 2020) there have been 6,716 infections in total, 61 currently in hospital, 8 in ICU, and 128 deaths. These actual numbers are many, many orders of magnitude lower than the data used to order churches and other places to close.

I think most everyone would agree that we should accommodate a health crisis, just as we would accommodate a war or natural disaster and suffer disruption to our regular worship of God. The question is, when does this accommodation turn from valid accommodation into sinning against God by forsaking the gathering of believers (**Hebrews 10:25**)?

My Growing Conviction

After last Sunday, our 9th Sunday of not holding a gathered worship service, I said goodbye to the camera—with you on the other side watching—and then wept. I wept because I'm convinced I'm in sin for not worshiping God as he calls me to worship him. I didn't always feel this strongly. What's changed? As seen above, this health crisis has not been as severe as predicted. My accommodation, in my mind, has turned into defiance to God's law. Just as mercy must have a limit, otherwise injustice prevails, so too accommodation has its limitations.

I know that not everyone will share my convictions at this point. For some, we should continue to accommodate because of this disease. We must wrestle with the Scriptures, think critically, and have our consciences informed by God's word and commit these matters to prayer. I would encourage you to listen not only to our governing leaders, but to your spiritual leaders who watch over your soul as those who will give an account to God (**Hebrews 13:17**).

I'm convinced that it is time to obey God's commands and I'm ready to accept any earthly consequence out of obedience to our Lord.

V. OUR PLAN TO RE-GATHER

I propose that we resume our gatherings as soon as possible, including singing to the Lord songs of praise and worship and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I have listed the health precautions we will take and I mention where we will be in defiance to our government. I will assume all responsibility for any possible legal action taken against the church.

Health Precautions

In general, we will seek to accommodate health recommendations that do not conflict with our ability to gather and worship. We do not desire to be derelict in our responsibility to our own or another's health.

- The church will have signage, hand sanitizers, and the building will be cleaned in accordance with health authority recommendations.
- Any person who is unwell, has returned from traveling outside the province, or was in contact with a known case should stay home.
- Communion will be celebrated by having people come to the front of the auditorium to take the bread and cup. The elements will be arranged so there is no shared contact. Hand sanitizer will be available with the bread and cup. Once everyone has come forward and returned in an orderly fashion, we will eat and drink together.
- We'll ask people to register in advance so that we are not over-crowded and can plan accordingly.
- For those who wish to remain at home, we will continue to provide the sermon online.

Defiance of Health Orders

In general, we wish to accommodate health orders and submit to our governing authorities. We have carefully considered that where orders impede on God's commands, we must obey God. In this case, they are as follows:

- We will be singing even though health orders forbid this activity. Studies have suggested that singing send thousands of fine droplets into the air. These studies show that not just singing, but even speaking does this. But should singing (or speaking) be forbidden? The alberta.ca website says, "COVID-19 is not airborne, which means it doesn't stay in the air long and won't go very far. But if you are too close to someone with COVID-19 you can get sick by breathing in air that contains droplets with the virus.¹" How far? The BC center for disease control says, "These droplets typically spread only one to two metres and quickly fall to the ground."² We should keep this in mind but we can't ensure a zero-risk gathering. Going to the grocery store is a risk, just as singing. But we go to the grocery store because it is essential. We will sing because it is essential.
- We will not be capping the number of attendees. While we want to plan for the number of attendees, we want to be flexible given our particular context. The current government restriction is 15 and this will be increased to 50 for churches on June 1st. This limit does not take

¹ <https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>

² <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/about-covid-19/how-it-spreads>

into consideration the size of households. For example, a limit of 50 would allow 50 individuals from 50 households, or 6 or 7 families from 6 or 7 households. Obviously, the more households represented would increase the risk of a greater spread of any virus. Due to the makeup of our congregation, we'll have much fewer households represented given the number of people in attendance. We do not want to turn people away from their conviction to worship the Lord in the gathered assembly. We do not want a parent to stay home with their children so as to not "take up quota" that could be used for someone else. Note that we still plan to ask people to register so that we can plan accordingly.

- We will not send a list of congregants in attendance to the government. If it should occur that an infection is traced to our gathering, we will get in touch with those who attended and not give this information to the government as the guidelines state.

I understand that not everyone will be comfortable in attending under such circumstances. I hope that those who wish to come and gather may do so. Those who choose not to gather may continue to worship at home and watch the sermon online. Wherever we stand, we should have grace for one another and maintain the unity the Lord has created among us.

VI. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

This is not religious persecution so civil disobedience is not called for.

Some object to defiance unless the church specifically is persecuted or singled out with unfair treatment. I have no reason to believe our governing authorities intend to persecute Christians. I believe they are acting in good faith in the interest of the citizens of our city, province, and country. I also know that their wisdom is not God's wisdom as they do not submit to God's word or law. I also know that while they are not persecuting Christians, they are forbidding us from doing what God has commanded. Like Pharaoh who wanted the best of his empire and so sought to instruct how the Hebrews ought to worship, our leaders are seeking to define how we gather and worship for the good of this "empire."

The question is not a matter of whether this is persecution or not. The question is, is our government forbidding what God commands? To that, the answer is clearly yes. And so, we must obey God rather than men.

This is a matter of conscience.

For some, this issue of gathering or not is a matter of conscience (see **Romans 14**). Can we continue *not* gathering for the sake of those whose conscience is not settled about re-gathering?

I agree that we should respect each others' conscience. Currently, those who think it best not to gather can follow their conscience. Those who believe it is sin not to gather, sing, and celebrate the Supper, are currently unable to obey their conscience. Every Sunday goes by with the guilt of sinning against the Lord.

If we gather *and* keep online options available, everyone would have the option to follow their convictions. Those who gather also have to remember to respect one another and their level of comfort for physical distancing and such.

This will be a poor testimony.

For some, our defiance of health restrictions will be seen as a poor testimony to our community. This, of course, is a great concern. Greater, however, is our testimony before God. Our obedience to him will be unpopular. This is increasingly the case as our society continues to pass legislation to promote perversity and outlaw God's ethic for mankind. The word "martyr" actually means witness or testimony. It is a noble testimony when we stand for God's truth and suffer for it.

I thought we were refusing to gather out of love for our neighbor, not for the government.

Kindness and love toward our neighbor has been associated with staying home. Staying home will help prevent the spread and thus be a benefit to our neighbor.

We must remember that staying home isn't the only way to love our neighbor. As church history tells us, there are many ways to love in a time of plague. Christians are typically the ones who accept greater risk to themselves to obey God and benefit others rather than isolating themselves from others. It is possible to show love for neighbor and to gather together in worship to our Lord. We must exercise caution in appealing to loving our neighbor when it is used to disobey God's commands.

Christians are to be known as peacemakers, not protesters.

Some contend that defiance will be a blight upon Christians as we ought to strive to make peace. Some are against all forms of protest. But remember that we are called Protestants for a reason! Our heritage is also traced through the Puritan Separatists who preached and gathered as outlaws (e.g., John Bunyan)! Yes, we are called to make peace, but peace will not come if we forsake what God has commanded. We must be bold and uncompromising in the proclamation of God's word and our obedience to it.

The Bible leads us to adopt isolation measures for serious, spreadable diseases.

In reference to leprosy, **Leviticus 13:46** says, "*He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.*" Aren't similar isolation measures called for today?

This verse outlines exactly how we want to handle this as a church. If someone is sick or has been in close contact with someone who is, they should remain home until they are "clean." Israel did not stop the worship at the tabernacle or temple when there was a leprous infection. They quarantined the sick and the healthy continued in worship.

We should work with other churches and not do this alone.

Ben and I joined a Zoom meeting this week with pastors from all over Alberta. Some churches are choosing not to gather because the restrictions in Stage 1 are still too onerous. However, most pastors who spoke were in agreement with my sentiments expressed here. One pastor, a man who came two years ago as a Syrian refugee and pastors an Arabic speaking church, said that we in the West are too integrated with the “system.” He was surprised at how much accommodation we tolerate for the government’s sake. An interesting observation from an outsider and one who has pastored in the Middle East where it isn’t easy to live for the Lord.

Since that meeting, I’ve learned that some of the churches in that call are meeting this Sunday to worship and sing. This is not borne out of a desire to be radical or defiant, but out of obedience to the Lord. May God protect them and be pleased with their courage.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let us pray for these things. Let us be committed to unity and love for one another. It’s great when we agree, but when we do not, love and patience are called for, especially between brothers and sisters who love the Lord and his word.