

FOREWORD BY JOHN MACARTHUR

NATHAN BUSENITZ | JAMES COATES

GOD

vs.

GOVERNMENT

TAKING A BIBLICAL STAND WHEN
CHRIST & COMPLIANCE COLLIDE

NATHAN BUSENITZ | JAMES COATES

GOD
VS.
GOVERNMENT




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God vs. Government

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To the dear members of our respective church families at

Grace Community Church, Los Angeles

and

GraceLife Church, Edmonton

CONTENTS

Foreword by John MacArthur	7
Why We Wrote This Book	11

PART 1: OUR STORY

Chapter 1: The Grace Community Story	15
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Chapter 2: What Can the Righteous Do?	25
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Chapter 3: The Statement	31
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Chapter 4: Lawsuits and Liberty	41
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Chapter 5: The GraceLife Edmonton Story	53
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 6: Closures and Convictions	63
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 7: The Battle Begins	75
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 8: A Minister in Chains	87
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 9: Trusting God from Behind Bars	99
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 10: The Underground Church of Canada	107
<i>James Coates</i>	

PART 2: OUR STAND

Chapter 11: Five Biblical Principles	121
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Chapter 12: Biblical Exceptions and Pastoral Implications . . .	137
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Chapter 13: The Time Has Come	153
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 14: Directing Government to Its Duty	167
<i>James Coates</i>	
Chapter 15: Christ, Courage, and Noncompliance	185
<i>Nathan Busenitz</i>	
Acknowledgments	201
Notes	203

FOREWORD

John MacArthur

In view of recent events, three basic biblical truths must be emphasized. First, the church is essential. Second, the church must gather regularly and corporately. Third, the church is duty-bound to obey Christ even when doing so violates governmental regulations and restrictions. Given the fundamental nature of these New Testament priorities, it's hard to believe they would prove controversial, especially among evangelicals. But here we are. There has been a great deal of both controversy and compromise, which is why the message of this book is so necessary.

A company of believers is not a “church” if they don't gather. The word for “church” in the original New Testament manuscripts is *ekklesia*. Even before the founding of the New Testament church, that word signified an assembly, a gathering of people. It is comprised of two Greek roots that literally mean “called out,” and more specifically, it refers to a body of people called out from their homes (or summoned out of a larger group) in order to muster together. Like the English word *congregation*, the concept of a group coming together is built right into the term.

The church specifically comes together *for worship*, but the vital benefits of the assembly include fellowship, instruction, mutual encouragement, and accountability. Believers are commanded not to forsake the assembly (Hebrews 10:25), and that command comes immediately before the New Testament's most somber warning about apostasy. Fellowship and corporate worship are therefore absolutely essential aspects of spiritual health for individual Christians, and they are also (obviously) vital for the very life of the church.

Believers may be forced by illness, imprisonment, warfare, natural disaster, necessary travel, or some other significant emergency to abstain from the corporate gathering *temporarily*. But there is no justification for the entire church to suspend congregational worship on a prolonged basis. Plagues, pandemics, and persecution have frequently (if not constantly) threatened the people of God since that first Pentecost. Never have faithful churches responded to such obstacles by simply shutting their doors for months at a time and declaring distance-learning technologies a sufficient substitute for corporate worship.

Christians in America and other Western democracies have been blessed and privileged to thrive for more than two centuries under governments that formally affirm and have seldom challenged the right of worshippers to assemble freely. But COVID is a wakeup call and a reminder to believers of how tenuous that liberty is. Pastors in supposedly free countries were literally jailed for weeks because they led worship services during the 2020 lockdowns. The example of James Coates, in that regard, serves as a compelling testimony of pastoral courage and unwavering conviction.

Despite court decisions favorable to churches, a strong current of public opinion favors giving governments more power to force churches to comply with restrictions inhibiting attendance, fellowship, and congregational singing. But the world's opposition to the church and her teaching should not catch believers off guard. "Do

not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). Jesus said, “Because you are not of the world...the world hates you” (John 15:19). We are citizens of heaven—mere sojourners and aliens here in this world (Philippians 3:20). And even the world sees the church that way when we are faithful to our calling.

That is one of the main reasons why the people of God need to come together regularly for mutual encouragement and instruction. Times of crisis and hardship don’t make the church assembly expendable; that’s when it is most essential for believers to congregate. “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Faithful churches must assemble even if they have to go underground to do it. That’s how churches in the first three centuries survived and flourished despite intense opposition from Caesar. It’s how the church in Eastern Europe overcame communist persecution in the twentieth century. It’s how many churches in China and elsewhere meet today.

Scripture gives us several examples of godly people who resisted the ungodly tyranny of rulers who hated biblical truth. Under a despotic Pharaoh, the Hebrew midwives “feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them” (Exodus 1:17). Elijah opposed Ahab and was labeled “troubler of Israel” because of the stance he took (1 Kings 18:17). John the Baptist rebuked Herod to his face and ultimately was killed for it (Mark 6:18-29).

Western evangelicals now need to have that same resolve. We need to prepare ourselves for more pressure from the government and more persecution from the rest of society. When COVID has run its course (if it ever does), other crises are already lined up for government officials to exploit, claiming “emergency powers” to assert more and more regulatory authority over the church.

Now is not the time to forsake our own assembling together. The church must be the church—a pillar and buttress for the truth. We cannot cower in fear. We cannot hide our light under a bushel. We are not called to feed the fears of a world that is perishing. We have

been commissioned to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15), and we are soldiers in a spiritual war. “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

It is past time for the church of Jesus Christ to confront the prevailing falsehoods of a depraved society and show hopeless people the way to true hope and abundant life. That, again, is why the message of this book is so necessary. We are the Lord’s ambassadors, and we must stand confidently in that role, with joy and not fear, in bold unity—and all the more as we see the day of Christ drawing near (Hebrews 10:25).

—John MacArthur

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Christians and churches have become divisively polarized over the issue of compliance with government authority. Because civil powers have, in ways not seen before, acted aggressively and intrusively in usurping control over the kingdom of Christ, believers have had to face the collision of their duty to government authority and their submission to the lordship of Christ. Our purpose is to explain the clear truth of Scripture on this apparent conflict and, based on that, to show the biblical rationale for why our respective churches took a public stand against governmental intrusion. When civil authorities tried to close us down, both Grace Community Church and GraceLife Edmonton insisted on staying open. The question this book answers is *why?*

The focus of this book is not COVID itself. Studies have demonstrated the pandemic was not nearly as deadly as initially projected.¹ At the same time, as with any illness, we believe churches ought to respond to those who are sick with Christlike compassion and pastoral care (cf. James 5:13-14). That has been our attitude since the onset of the outbreak.

Instead, this book is about government overreach—how civil authorities exploited a public health issue to stir up fear and shut down freedom. Our concern centers on the restrictive measures employed by public officials and the effect those regulations had on local churches that wanted to gather in obedience to Christ (Hebrews 10:25). In a place like North America, including both the United States and Canada, religious freedom has historically been a cornerstone of our society. That liberty is now under attack in unprecedented ways.

The pages that follow recount both our stories and the reasons for our stand. Our thesis is simple: When Christ and compliance collide, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). As you read this book, our prayer is that you will be encouraged to do just that, standing with courage and conviction for the glory of the Lord.

PART 1

OUR STORY

CHAPTER 1

THE GRACE COMMUNITY STORY

Nathan Busenitz

If someone had told us, in the fall of 2019, that within six months nearly every church in North America would shut down, we would never have believed them. It would have been difficult to imagine a scenario in which government officials could openly bypass religious freedoms, suspend in-person worship services, and force churches to close their doors. But 2020 was a year filled with unexpected twists and turns. Topping that list was the global pandemic.

PANDEMIC

March–April 2020

When the novel coronavirus first appeared in the headlines, it seemed like a distant threat. But by March 2020, it had taken the world by storm. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the situation a global pandemic. The next day, California governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide directive, calling for any gathering of more than 250 people to suspend meeting until the end

of the month. At that time, little was known about the new virus. The headlines varied in their assessment of the danger, but many presented the situation in apocalyptic terms. News reports sounded like scenes from a science fiction novel or a Hollywood film. We all had a front-row seat to the unfolding drama.

As the situation escalated, society began to shut down. The same day Governor Newsom issued his directive, professional sports leagues like the National Hockey League, Major League Soccer, and Major League Baseball suspended their seasons, either in whole or in part. The days that followed witnessed a systematic closure of anything deemed nonessential. Activities where people gathered were especially taboo.

Despite the public panic, our pastoral leadership team at Grace Community Church was reluctant to stop meeting. The regular gathering of the saints is commanded in Scripture (Hebrews 10:25). The decision to cancel our weekly assembly, even temporarily, was not something our elders took lightly. The email correspondence with our elder team included this update sent on the morning of Thursday, March 12: “There are no plans to cancel church or other meetings. Early this morning, the CA health department *recommended* no meetings with more than 250 people but that is not mandatory. It is quite possible that we will be ordered to close the church. Unless, and until, that happens we will continue to meet. Obviously, those with health issues or who otherwise do not want to be at risk are free to stay home.” The email continued with this pastoral word of encouragement: “The overwhelming fear that has gripped this country is sad. But it is also an opportunity to encourage and strengthen the people of GCC. It is also an opening for the gospel in our community. For those who are afraid, [we] cannot imagine a better place to be than at church with God’s people reflecting on the providence and goodness of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Our desire was to meet, as we did every week. But the situation was developing rapidly, and by the time our elders met that

evening, the circumstances had changed. Out of an abundance of caution and in deference to the requests of government officials, we decided temporarily to suspend in-person services. On March 15, Grace Community Church opted for a livestream-only service. Pastor John MacArthur preached about the reality of mortality and the hope that comes only through Christ. His message, which focused on Matthew 6:25-34, was a clarion call not to grow anxious, but instead to trust the Lord. The truth of that passage stood in clear contrast to the anxiety of the culture around us. As our congregation watched from home, we were reminded to rest in the care of our heavenly Father as members of His family who have entrusted their futures to Him.

The following week, on March 19, a statewide shelter-in-place order went into effect, and life as we knew it came to a standstill. The situation in California reflected what was happening across the nation as society screeched to a halt. Almost everything closed, from Disneyland to Yosemite National Park. Schools went online; restaurants emptied their dining rooms; and families huddled in their homes to watch the daily health briefings from Washington, DC. Grocery store shelves thinned out as people stockpiled supplies to prepare for the worst. By the end of March, nations like India had gone into full lockdown, and the Tokyo Olympics had been postponed for a year. Here in the United States, a record-breaking number of Americans filed for unemployment benefits. In less than a month, any semblance of normal life disappeared.

When the shutdown began, our political leaders assured us it would be short-lived. But fifteen days to flatten the curve quickly became thirty days to stop the spread. Days dragged into weeks, and weeks into months. The relatively short break we were told to expect evolved into an indefinite delay. As a result, God's people began to suffer. The Christian life is not designed to be lived in isolation, but in community. Believers are members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). No part of the body can survive on

its own; it requires fellowship with the other members of the body to function, grow, and thrive. Knowing how essential church is to the spiritual health of the flock, our elders recognized the vital need to act. We could not continue, in good conscience, to suspend the weekly gathering of the church.

Of all the shutdowns and bans on in-person gatherings, the most detrimental targeted churches. Whatever danger the virus posed to the well-being of our citizens, the closure of the church in America posed a greater threat. The ramifications became evident within just a few months as civil unrest erupted with no spiritual influence to counter it.

PROTESTS

May–June 2020

The death of George Floyd in May 2020 touched a nerve at the heart of American history and self-identity. The resulting outcry could be heard from coast to coast. After months of being empty, the streets of our cities became filled with crowds of demonstrators. They marched, knelt, and chanted together to show their united opposition to racial injustice.

At Grace Community, Pastor John met with a group of African-American church members and seminary students to hear from them. He was eager to know what was on their hearts and to gain their perspective. They met in his office for several hours and talked openly about what was happening. During that meeting, he asked how our church could best minister the gospel to the black community. Together, they agreed upon five ways we could help. The following Sunday was Father's Day, June 21. Pastor John opened his sermon by recounting those recommendations for our people.²

First, we need to make it clear that racism is a sin. It is a form of hate that is contrary to both the law of God and the gospel of Christ. Second, we ought to show compassion to those who have suffered.

Scripture calls us to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Third, we must be ready to listen. When engaging someone with the gospel, we ought to do so within the context of having heard their heart. Fourth, we should use these days as an opportunity to show the love of Christ. In contrast to the hatred tearing society apart, the church ought to be known for its Christlike care. Finally, the men asked our church to support them in their efforts to raise up the next generation of godly fathers. This fifth point set the stage for the rest of that Father's Day message. The exhortation to our whole congregation to raise up a generation of sons who will honor Christ and "act like men" rang out clearly from the text of 1 Corinthians 16:13.

Protests that started in May continued through the month of June. Many of the demonstrations turned violent and destructive. Americans watched in shock as city centers around the nation descended into chaos. The rioting and looting spanned from Washington, DC, to Washington State, with Seattle even losing control of a six-block portion of the city. On June 8, the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) gained control of Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, including the police department's East Precinct. Later dubbed the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), the occupation did not end until police cleared out the protestors in early July.

The anarchy in Seattle was representative of the chaos in other metropolitan areas. In New York, high-end retail stores were vandalized and emptied of merchandise. In Portland, the protests lasted for nearly 200 days in a row, often turning destructive after dark. In Minneapolis, the city council pledged to disband the police department altogether. Here in Los Angeles, as in many other cities, the National Guard was deployed to help keep the peace. Pastor John addressed the chaos and violence in a series of sermons, bringing the Word of God to bear on these disturbing developments. He condemned the vandalism and violence as dishonoring to God.

At a time when law enforcement agencies were under attack, with cries to "defund the police" dominating the headlines, our

church made a point to support the countless officers who work hard to serve and protect their communities. As a tangible expression of our gratitude, we invited members of law enforcement to come to the church for a free lunch. The In-N-Out burgers served that afternoon symbolized our appreciation. But that was not the only meal provided that day. Each officer was also given a complimentary copy of *The MacArthur Study Bible*.

From the pulpit, Pastor John emphasized that God has ordained vital structures in society to restrain evil and promote good. Those restraining influences include the conscience, the family, the church, and law enforcement. When the culture cancels the influence of those God-ordained structures, the result is devastating. In a June 14 sermon, he explained, “God has put restraints in the world: the law of God written in the heart in the conscience. This culture has completely destroyed that. The second restraint is the family and the authority of parents and the discipline that parents bring to restrain sin in children; and this culture has destroyed that. And the church has fallen on very hard times with its pragmatism and its desire to entertain sinners and make them feel comfortable, so it no longer comes with any force against sin. And we’re not at all surprised that the next restraint and the final one standing is the police; and they’re under assault.”³ Our church recognized the pivotal role law enforcement plays in maintaining order and keeping the peace (cf. Romans 13:4). To defund the police, as some were suggesting, reflected yet another step in American society’s downward spiral into lawlessness (Romans 1:18-32).

The chaos and destruction of the riots also demonstrated the desperate need for the church’s influence as a preserving and restraining element in the culture. The Lord Jesus told His followers:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled

under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

The church is to be both a preserving element (salt) and a beacon of hope (light) for the unbelieving world around us. But how could we fulfill that responsibility if our doors remained closed?

PASTORAL CARE

Summer 2020

The violent unrest that dominated the summer headlines evidenced two important realities. First, it exposed the double standard of government officials, who forbade religious gatherings but openly encouraged protesters to march shoulder to shoulder through the streets. The politics of the pandemic had never been more apparent. In an election year, public health was being used to stir up strife and advance a political agenda. Though our elders were not insensitive to potential health concerns, which is why we continued to offer livestream options for our Sunday services, we were not willing to keep the church closed for the sake of politics.

Second, the negative effects of the lockdown underscored the essential need for the church. The destructive nature of the riots demonstrated this on a broad scale. But there was also the devastating impact of social isolation on the daily lives of individual people. Cases of severe loneliness, depression, and suicide skyrocketed. Other social problems also intensified, from harmful addictions to marital and family strife. Our elders witnessed these ill effects on the society around us and became concerned for the protection of

our church family. Our people had been deprived of the safety and vitality that comes from the regular fellowship of the saints. For the sake of their spiritual care, we felt compelled to open the doors of the church and allow them to gather.

Throughout the month of June, some of our members started coming to the church campus on Sundays and sitting in the worship center during the livestream broadcast. Members of law enforcement also came, not to enforce restrictions but simply to hear the preaching of God's Word. They were drawn to our church because of the support and care they received. At that time, Grace Community was not officially open. But our people began to show up anyway, motivated by their love for Christ and for one another. Their persistent eagerness made it clear to our leadership team that we needed to reopen officially and publicly.

When we finally resumed in-person services, some wondered why we had ever suspended them in the first place. To answer that question, our elders published the following response. It serves as a fitting conclusion to this part of our story:

“The elders of Grace Church considered and independently consented to the original government order, not because we believed the state has a right to tell churches when, whether, or how to worship. To be clear, we believe that the original orders were just as much an illegitimate intrusion of state authority into ecclesiastical matters as we believe it is now. However, because we could not possibly have known the true severity of the virus, and because we care about people as our Lord did, we believe guarding public health against serious contagions is a rightful function of Christians as well as civil government. Therefore, we voluntarily followed the initial recommendations of our government. It is, of course, legitimate for Christians to abstain from the assembly of the saints *temporarily* in the face of illness or an imminent threat to public health.

“When the devastating lockdown began, it was supposed to be a short-term stopgap measure, with the goal to ‘flatten the

curve’—meaning they wanted to slow the rate of infection to ensure that hospitals weren’t overwhelmed. And there were horrific projections of death. In light of those factors, our pastors supported the measures by observing the guidelines that were issued for churches.

“But we did not yield our spiritual authority to the secular government. We said from the very start that our voluntary compliance was subject to change if the restrictions dragged on beyond the stated goal, or politicians unduly intruded into church affairs, or if health officials added restrictions that would attempt to undermine the church’s mission. We made every decision with our own burden of responsibility in mind. We simply took the early opportunity to support the concerns of health officials and accommodate the same concerns among our church members, out of a desire to act in an abundance of care and reasonableness (Philippians 4:5).

“But we are now more than twenty weeks into the unrelieved restrictions. It is apparent that those original projections of death were wrong and the virus is nowhere near as dangerous as originally feared.⁴ Still, roughly forty percent of the year has passed with our church essentially unable to gather in a normal way. Pastors’ ability to shepherd their flocks has been severely curtailed. The unity and influence of the church has been threatened. Opportunities for believers to serve and minister to one another have been missed. And the suffering of Christians who are troubled, fearful, distressed, infirm, or otherwise in urgent need of fellowship and encouragement has been magnified beyond anything that could reasonably be considered just or necessary. Major public events that were planned for 2021 are already being canceled, signaling that officials are preparing to keep restrictions in place into next year and beyond. That forces churches to choose between the clear command of our Lord and the government officials. Therefore, following the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, we gladly choose to obey Him.”⁵

