

COVID-19 Crisis Exposes Alarming Anti-Christian Trends Threatening the Church

When I invited Dr. James Dobson, host of Family Talk Radio and founder of Focus on the Family, to be a guest on my *Strang Report* podcast I had no idea he would turn the tables and interview me on the two books I've written about what's happening in our culture and why we both believe Donald Trump must be reelected in November.

This week, *Charisma News* ran a very strong editorial by Dr. Dobson about the serious situation in our nation—the subject of our hour-long podcast, which we broke into two parts. The second one focused on anti-Christian trends. These are what concern me as a believer. We are seeing our constitutional right to freedom of religion challenged in many ways, which I wrote about in my newest book, *God, Trump and COVID-19*.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen how quick many left-leaning governors and mayors have been to call churches “nonessential” while deeming liquor stores and abortion clinics “essential.” *USA Today* reports that a recent Supreme Court ruling said Nevada has the right to impose harsher restrictions on churches than casinos, limiting churches to only 50 worshippers while bars, casinos, restaurants and indoor amusement parks are all allowed to operate at 50% of their capacity.

At the beginning of 2020 none of us expected this pandemic. And few expected that battling the outbreak would create governmental powers in which America would begin to look like a police state. As new restrictions on gatherings were lowered to 50 and then again to fewer than 10 people, it quickly became apparent that this pandemic would be a game changer.

Going to sporting events, movies, theatrical events, concerts and church meetings was suddenly forbidden.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio threatened to close churches and synagogues “permanently” if they refused to shut down during the pandemic. And Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam declared that church gatherings of 10 or more could result in a \$2,500 fine and up to a year in jail.

Northam’s approach is much like the tactic taken in France. My friend, Ken Timmerman, from Florida was stuck in France on Easter and gave me an eyewitness account of the total lockdown. He said French President Emmanuel Macron issued an order that if you attended church once, you would receive a \$150 fine. Twice, and the fine became \$1,500. The third time, you would go to jail for six months. Many started to point out how grocery stores and other businesses that were deemed “essential” sometimes had hundreds of people in the store at one time. So why were churches so quickly deemed “nonessential”? And why was the public so quick to accept this? It rapidly escalated to a hot debate in the Christian community.

Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne, a longtime friend of mine, was arrested and booked into a local jail on Monday, March 30 after holding Sunday worship services at The River at Tampa Bay, the church he leads. Howard-Browne was charged with unlawful assembly and violating the county’s stay-at-home order. He was later released on bail.

Originally coming to the United States as a missionary from South Africa, Pastor Rodney has been holding services where God’s presence has been moving in power for many years. His intention was to allow the Holy Spirit to move and heal the sick as they would come for prayer. After all, that is what the Bible says to do as believers.

The media loved this story—“crazy Pentecostal pastor endangers

the health of his church members by recklessly disregarding governmental edicts for no 'nonessential' gatherings over ten people." But the case brought up some interesting legal issues.

Whether churches are "essential" in the midst of this coronavirus crisis is a critical question that must take into consideration many factors. The related question, whether churches should open or close, must be considered in the context of each church and community.

Mat Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel, came to Howard-Browne's defense, and the results were amazing. The county dropped the case because Staver sued for violation of the church's constitutional rights to freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. On Charisma News we published an op-ed by Liberty Counsel stating its position in the case.

To navigate the media storm in wisdom and present the actual situation to the public after a heated debate had erupted, Liberty Counsel gave an articulate explanation, stating: "It is important to present the real facts surrounding the recent arrest of the pastor of The River at Tampa Bay. Many of the statements made by Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister are false. His statements have put both the pastor and the church in danger." You may read the statement in its entirety [here](#).

The issue is facing pastors across the country. In Kentucky, Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer issued a ban the week before Easter preventing churches from holding even drive-in services. He said with Louisville's urban population, "it's not really practical or safe to allow drive-up services." Fischer said such a move would result in "hundreds of thousands of people driving around" on Sundays instead of remaining home to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

On Fire Christian Center sued the mayor, and on the Saturday

before Easter, Federal District Judge Justin Walker issued a temporary injunction allowing the church to proceed with its drive-in services. The order was abundantly clear: "The court enjoins Louisville from enforcing; attempting to enforce; threatening to enforce; or otherwise requiring compliance with any prohibition on drive-in church services at On Fire."

The judge began his opinion by acknowledging his shock that the injunction was even necessary.

On Holy Thursday, an American mayor criminalized the communal celebration of Easter. That sentence is one that this Court never expected to see outside the pages of a dystopian novel, or perhaps the pages of The Onion. But two days ago, citing the need for social distancing during the current pandemic, Louisville's Mayor Greg Fischer ordered Christians not to attend Sunday services, even if they remained in their cars to worship—and even though it's Easter.

The Mayor's decision is stunning.

And it is, "beyond all reason," unconstitutional.

The opinion gave a brief history of the Plymouth Colony, pointing out that the Pilgrims found in the New World "what they wanted most, what they needed most: the liberty to worship God according to their conscience."

The Pilgrims were heirs to a long line of persecuted Christians, including some punished with prison or worse for the crime of celebrating Easter—and an even longer line of persecuted peoples of more ancient faiths. And although their notions of tolerance left more than a little to be desired, the Pilgrims understood at least this much: No place, not even the unknown, is worse than any place whose state forbids the exercise of your sincerely held religious beliefs.

The judge said the Pilgrims' history of fleeing religious persecution "was just one of the many 'historical instances of

religious persecution and intolerance that gave concern to those who drafted the Free Exercise Clause' of our Constitution's First Amendment."

Judge Walker also cited comments from the Louisville mayor and Kentucky governor warning that police had been ordered to collect license plates of those participating in drive-in church services and that the health department would follow up with them to ensure they were quarantined for 14 days.

The authorities, he said, were applying a double standard that violated the Free Exercise Clause: "Louisville has targeted religious worship by prohibiting drive-in church services, while not prohibiting a multitude of other non-religious drive-ins and drive-throughs—including, for example, drive-through liquor stores. Moreover, Louisville has not prohibited parking in parking lots more broadly—including, again, the parking lots of liquor stores. When Louisville prohibits religious activity while permitting non-religious activities, its choice 'must undergo the most rigorous of scrutiny.'"

Mayor Fischer had been encouraging residents to participate in online services, but Judge Walker said that does not satisfy the burden of the Free Exercise Clause.

Louisville might suggest that On Fire members could participate in an online service and thus satisfy their longing for communal celebration. But some members may not have access to online resources. And even if they all did, the Free Exercise Clause protects their right to worship as their conscience commands them. It is not the role of a court to tell religious believers what is and isn't important to their religion, so long as their belief in the religious importance is sincere. The Free Exercise clause protects sincerely held religious beliefs that are at times not "acceptable, logical, consistent or comprehensible to others."

The court even noted that "the Greek word translated 'church'

in our English versions of the Christian Scriptures is the word *ekklesia*, which literally means 'assembly.'"

According to the court documents, the church committed to practicing the CDC's social distancing guidelines, saying "cars will park six feet apart and all congregants will remain in their cars with windows no more than half open for the entirety of the service." Only the pastor and a videographer would stand outside, and the pastor would preach over a loudspeaker.

Mayor Fischer later reversed his ban after On Fire congregants were met with nails at the entrances and exits to the church parking lot.

Although the church was represented by First Liberty Institute, WilmerHale, and Swansburg & Smith, Liberty Counsel had been monitoring the case. Mat Staver said:

The decision by Judge Justin Walker underscores the fact that the First Amendment does not evaporate even during a crisis. Many of the restrictions across the country on churches and houses of worship are unconstitutional because they prohibit religious gatherings while allowing a multitude of nonreligious gatherings. Mass gatherings are permitted in liquor stores, Home Depot, and a multitude of retail stores. When smaller and less frequent gatherings are prohibited in church parking lots or with social distancing inside the church while allowed in a myriad of secular commercial locations, the First Amendment demands rigorous scrutiny of the government's choices.

Meanwhile, a California pastor resigned from his position on the city council a day before he challenged state social distancing guidelines by holding an in-person Palm Sunday Communion service.

Rob McCoy, senior pastor of Godspeak Calvary Chapel in Newbury Park, had been on the Thousand Oaks City Council since 2015

and had previously served as mayor of the city for a year. Although his church had been livestreaming its services, he said he felt a deep conviction to offer in-person Communion to his congregation, which would be available after the online service from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. McCoy knew the move would put him in violation of the social distancing guidelines that prohibit gatherings of ten or more people, which is why he stepped down from his post. But he said it is a mistake to classify churches as nonessential.

“Palm Sunday and Resurrection Sunday are critical,” McCoy said in a video announcing the Palm Sunday Communion. “[We are being] paralyzed and considered nonessential, though we would have liquor stores considered essential, cannabis distribution considered essential. ... Across the country, abortions are considered essential. Is the church going to sit back and say, Well, we’ll be relegated to nonessential,’ though we feed people, and [physical food] is essential? We are essential—essential for the simple fact that God called us to this.”

The church mapped out strict social-distancing guidelines for the service. Only 10 people would be allowed in the building at a time, and the congregants were directed through the service with arrows positioned 6 feet apart. Church members were reminded to sit 6 feet apart when inside the building, and they were cautioned to keep a proper distance from other participants when outside.

“We want to honor Caesar,” McCoy said in the video. “We want to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. We want to respect social distancing. We want to respect everything that is expected of us. But we still want to have access to what is a sacrament in the Protestant church and the Catholic Church as well.”

The church urged those who were sick to stay home and those who were able to wear masks. Those who didn’t feel comfortable

leaving their cars could have someone deliver the Communion elements to them. The church even offered to deliver Communion to members at home.

“We find Communion; we find community—common unity—in this sacrament,” McCoy said. “It’s critical to the body of Christ. ... To not allow us to have access to Communion is not proper. To consider it nonessential is not acceptable.”

McCoy, of course, was attacked for his decision to hold the service. On the day of the Communion service, protestors lined up in their cars and honked their horns at participants, the *Los Angeles Times* reported. The newspaper added that Thousand Oaks police officers were to be on hand to ensure church members kept proper distance.

It may have felt like a strange turn of events for McCoy. He had been applauded for his leadership after the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar and Grill that left 12 dead and the Woolsey fire that destroyed nearly 100,000 acres and 1600 structures. Both tragedies took place in November 2018, and the following month McCoy became mayor of Thousand Oaks and remained in that position for a year. When his tenure ended, he was hailed as “the right mayor at the right time” and “the right mayor to heal” and unite his city.

In a statement responding to McCoy’s resignation, Thousand Oaks Mayor Al Adam commended McCoy’s leadership, calling him “a voice of strength and healing” as the city recovered from the Borderline and Woolsey tragedies. “I appreciate his contributions and wish him and his family well,” Adam said. “While these circumstances are unfortunate, the remaining members of the Council and I are very much focused on moving forward.”

Thankfully Christian law firms are defending freedom against these anti-God trends in the culture that manifested themselves during this time of crisis. The double standard has

been obvious.

As the country went into lockdown mode, America's pro-life leaders voiced alarm that churches were being forced to close down, while in most states abortion clinics were allowed to stay open.

"How dare they jail pastors and close the doors of the church while the abortion industry remains open to spread the virus and put our lives at risk?" said Janet Porter, president and founder of Faith2Action () and the author of the original pro-life Heartbeat Bill.

"While free speech and freedom of religion are being banned, Planned Parenthood continues to get away with murder," said Mark Harrington, president of Created Equal, a pro-life group. "The cure is now worse than the disease."

"In a pandemic, a double standard is deadly," Porter said. "Either there is a threat or there isn't. We must either close the doors of the abortion business or open the doors of the church."

"By definition, the surgeries abortion centers perform are elective—that's why they call it 'choice,'" said Harrington.

To classify abortion as "essential medical care" during the novel coronavirus crisis is "preposterous," said Mark Crutcher, founder and president of Life Dynamics, a Texas-based pro-life organization. "Abortion providers don't care that there's a pandemic. All they care about is killing babies. There can be no sacred cows in a pandemic. It is indefensible."

In late March, when states were developing their coronavirus responses, the governors of Ohio, Texas and Mississippi vowed to halt abortions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ohio was the first to stop abortion clinics from performing

“nonessential and elective surgical abortions.” On March 21, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost sent a letter to clinics ordering them to stop abortions in order to preserve personal protective equipment such as face masks, reported NBC4 in Columbus.

Then Texas Republican governor Greg Abbott issued an executive order to halt elective procedures so as to expand hospital bed capacity. That included any abortions not deemed medically necessary. “No one is exempt from the governor’s executive order on medically unnecessary surgeries and procedures, including abortion providers,” Attorney General Ken Paxton said. “Those who violate the governor’s order will be met with the full force of the law.”

Republican Mississippi governor Tate Reeves followed suit, saying he would take action against abortion clinics if they continued offering abortions during the COVID-19 outbreak, The Hill reported. He too said abortions should count as elective procedures.

In a statement issued March 26, Dr. Dobson praised the governors of Texas and Ohio for their bold decisions and said other governors across the nation should follow their example:

Our nation and our world are in the midst of a pandemic that is claiming thousands of lives, and the U.S. is taking drastic measures to protect people during this unprecedented time.

So why are abortionists seeking to operate business as usual?

Abortion is neither health care nor essential. It is the ultimate selfish act, the taking of lives in the name of “choice.” Abortion is not life-protecting—it ends the life of an unborn child, and irreversibly changes the lives of so many others.

Thankfully, some governors are taking action and issuing executive orders to halt “elective surgeries”—this should most

certainly include abortion procedures. Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Ohio Governor Mike DeWine are two who have acted decisively and boldly. They have my deepest thanks!

But where are the other 48? As my friend Janet Porter, president of Faith2Action, says, "There can be no 'sacred cows' in a pandemic." Let's remind every governor of this reality, and demand that they order Planned Parenthood and its ilk to put up the "closed" sign. During this unparalleled health crisis, we need to be about saving lives and not carrying out this blatant evil of abortion that kills them.

In the weeks after Dobson issued that statement, Republican governors and attorneys general in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Alabama also prohibited abortion, deeming it an elective medical procedure during the novel COVID-19 outbreak. But judges blocked most of those orders from being enforced. On April 20, Texas won an appeal of a lower court order, allowing it to keep its ban on abortion as health care workers grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic. Other states, however, have forged compromises, prohibiting surgical abortions while allowing medication-induced abortion.

"The abortion industry continues to defy state orders and national health directives, putting us all at risk of the deadly COVID-19 virus," Porter said in March. "Until the abortion centers are closed, none of us are safe."

Porter joined with more than 100 prominent pro-life leaders "in calling on President Trump to shut the door to the coronavirus by shutting the doors of the abortion industry before the virus spreads even farther across state lines and across the country." Other supporters included Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, and Tom DeLay, former majority leader of the US House of Representatives. They were joined by 30,000 medical professionals at .

This chapter has been excerpted with permission from Chapter 6

of my most recent book, *God, Trump and COVID-19*, published by FrontLine. [Click here](#) to receive a free sample.

If you share Dr. Dobson's and my deep concern for America's future, I urge you, as he did, to take time to register and then vote on Election Day this fall. As you pray and prepare, I also encourage you to check out any of my other three books on the spiritual elements of Donald Trump's election and presidency: *God and Donald Trump*, *Trump Aftershock* and *God, Trump and the 2020 Election*.

If you enjoy Charisma's spiritual presentation of people and events in the news, I urge you to subscribe to our flagship magazine, *Charisma*, and receive a free copy of *God, Trump and COVID-19*. Be sure to listen to part 2 of my podcast with Dr. James Dobson and share this article and the podcast with friends, family and anyone you know who would benefit from the wisdom of this man of faith and family. {eo}