

Despite COVID Restrictions, Bill Johnson Says Churches 'First Have a Responsibility to God'

As the senior leader of the charismatic megachurch, Bethel Church, in Redding, California, Bill Johnson was one of many ministry leaders in the state who were put into an awkward position by Governor Gavin Newsom during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 and 2021.

Johnson and other kingdom leaders worked diligently with local authorities to do what was lawfully responsible during the pandemic. But Johnson told me on a recent edition of the *Strang Report*, their biggest priority is to “maintain the values that we have as leaders of a church family.”

In other words, leaders could not ignore their duty to their congregations and their vow to God to continue to bring the gospel to the masses.

Ministry leaders like Johnson were forced to walk a fine line. In the end, however, God and His warriors won. When the COVID-19 restrictions were slightly relaxed, Johnson says the glory of the Lord came to his Bethel congregation “in ways we’ve not seen for a very long time.”

“As soon as they started to open up a bit, we were quick, of course, to meet together once again out in public,” Johnson said. “We put up a tent months ago because they didn’t restrict outside meetings. Night after night after night we had prayer meetings, and we were just crying out to God. Hundreds and hundreds of people would show up, and God has provided breakthrough for us. We are back in corporate gatherings—at about 50% capacity—and we’re inching our way

toward full capacity.”

On Tuesday, churches received vindication as a California district court laid down a full and final settlement this week, the first statewide permanent injunction in the country against COVID-19 restrictions and churches and places of worship. Under the agreed statewide injunction, all California churches may once again hold worship without discriminatory restrictions.

“We have a responsibility before God,” Johnson said. “If you love people and they are in the second story of a burning building, you’ve got to let them know. You can’t make up excuses. We need to do it with grace and kindness and love. It’s just a mandate that we have from the Lord, to represent Him well with what you do. If we’ve been called into the positions we’re in, we need to love people well and serve them well, and to give them instructions on how to do life.”

During the pandemic, churches had been considered “nonessential” in California and therefore weren’t able to meet, despite other congregations being allowed to do so in other states. Churches who ignored the mandate were harassed and fined.

Pastor Che Ahn, founder of Harvest Rock Church and Harvest International Ministry, received threatening letters from the Pasadena criminal prosecutor saying staff and anyone who attended church would face criminal charges, each up to one year in prison, and daily fines of \$1,000.

Those threats alone caused a great deal of anxiety for kingdom leaders in California.

“This past year has been like no other: that goes without saying,” Johnson says. “The lockdown, all of the restrictions in our country, but more specifically, I mean, who would have ever thought that the church would be called ‘nonessential’ and that the government would tried to levy fines on churches

for holding services?

“It really has been a crazy season—an unexpected season. We were really warned of the Lord to get into the system and not be afraid of politics and politicians. We have worked really hard with our local authorities to do what is responsible in this pandemic. We’ve walked in good standing with the city and had good counsel with the health leaders. We’ve tried to be responsible citizens, but also responsible for the Lord to love people and serve them well. It’s been our approach to honor city government because we have meaningful relationships there. But, most importantly, we must be honorable to serve the church well, and that’s what we’ve committed ourselves to do.”

Johnson said other churches in the Redding area continued to meet, but due to its high profile, Bethel continued to receive criticism from the media for any actions deemed inappropriate during the pandemic.

“They [other churches] are not the focal point of the news,” Johnson said. “They’re not the focal point of public criticism. We felt that our responsibility was to follow the policies the best way we knew how, but also to make our presence known and to train our people to have their meetings in their homes. And so, we ignored all policies that said people couldn’t meet in homes and that sort of thing. We actually worked hard to support or to fuel or empower the people to meet in homes, and we’ve had tremendous breakthrough as a result.”

And once churches return to full capacity, Johnson said he expects even stronger breakthrough not only in California, but around the country.

For more of my interview with Bill Johnson, listen to the entire episode of the *Strang Report* at this link. Be sure to subscribe to the *Strang Report* on Apple Podcasts or your

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