

Pastors John MacArthur and Andy Stanley Disagree, but I Agree With Both of Them

Two of the best-known pastors in America have offered very different (and very public) responses to governmental prohibitions to church gatherings.

Pastor John MacArthur has said no to government overreach and encouraged other pastors to do the same. Pastor Andy Stanley has said yes to government guidelines and feels this is the best example to set. For my part, I agree with both of them.

But first, lest anyone think I'm trying to play both sides against the middle, nothing could be further from the truth.

My public disagreements with Pastor MacArthur are well known, to the point that I wrote a full-length book, *Authentic Fire*, in response to his full-length book, *Strange Fire*. (And I did so with the utmost respect for my elder colleague.)

My public disagreements with Pastor Stanley, whom I also hold in esteem, are also well-known, to the point that I told him half-jokingly I would need to write a full-length response to his latest book, *Irresistible*. (My proposed title was, *Why Andy Stanley's Irresistible Must Be Resisted*. For our helpful discussion on radio, see [here](#).)

So I have no problem differing with these prominent leaders.

In this case, I feel they are responding to different circumstances, and I believe that each of them has valid points.

Pastor MacArthur believes the California government has exceeded its rightful reach by forbidding church gatherings, also contending that COVID-19 poses little to no danger.

In his words, "I would say to pastors, 'have church, open up, have church.' You don't have to fear someone's going to die. You don't have to fear you're going to get sick, because they're not going to be able to trace this back. I haven't seen anything like that anywhere."

He continued, "Health mandates and governors' orders are not law. I don't think you have to fear that. You need to open the church because this, of all times, when people fear is where they need to come. I don't think you have to give a clinical explanation; I think you have to welcome them and not make them follow protocol that you know is pointless."

On the one hand, I do not fully share Pastor MacArthur's dismissal of health concerns, since I have colleagues who restarted their church services only to shut down because of a serious outbreak of the virus. I have read of other pastors (whom I do not know personally) who flaunted health and safety guidelines and are now dead.

On the other hand, I too have urged pastors to defy government hypocrisy and overreach. This would certainly apply to states like California, where mass, public Black Lives Matter protests were welcomed but Christian gatherings were placed under severe restrictions (including "Thou shalt not sing!") and even home Bible studies were banned.

As for Pastor Stanley, his position is that the government is doing its best to solve a difficult problem, that churches are no more being singled out than professional sports leagues and that this is how we love our neighbors. Plus, we have plenty of other ways to gather together. (Pastor MacArthur has emphasized the importance of our public gatherings during such a stressful and difficult time.) That's why Pastor Stanley's church has cancelled full public services for the balance of the year.

In his words, "This was just our way of loving our neighbors

and loving our neighborhoods, trying to keep our neighborhoods safe as we get closer to school reopening.

“The schools are having a difficult enough time opening and staying open. Even the university systems, as you know. So it just seemed like the wisest thing to do as it related to the community and as we wait this thing out and figure out what’s going to happen.”

He added, “I can’t imagine a scenario in the United States of America where the only group being picked on is the church unless it’s a specific local church.”

On the one hand, churches *are* being singled out for unfair treatment, as in Nevada, where casinos can meet at half-capacity but a congregation with a building that seats 2,000 is limited to 50 people in attendance. That’s why even the Department of Justice has weighed in on discrimination against churches.

On the other hand, Pastor Stanley shares some of the same reasoning I put forth in my COVID-19 book, *When the World Stops: Words of Hope, Faith and Wisdom in the Midst of Crisis*. As much as possible, we should submit to government authority, and as much as possible, we should demonstrate love for our neighbor.

That’s why I have urged pastors to pray, take counsel and come to decisions on their own. On the one hand, we cannot respond to a spirit of fear, paralyzing us from taking action. On the other hand, we cannot cultivate a spirit of rebellion that thrives on defiance to the law.

In this case, living in different states and making decisions for different reasons, I commend both Pastor MacArthur and Pastor Stanley for acting on their convictions out of love for God and their communities. May the name of Jesus be exalted; may the cause of the gospel be advanced; and may a hurting world be touched. {eo}