

# **THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA:**

## **TO SUBMIT OR TO DEFY HUMAN GOVERNMENT**

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**THE REPHIDIM Project**  
*Lifting up those who spread God's Word*

COVID-19 and government regulations to control the spread of the virus are provoking a divisive debate among evangelical Christians. Highly respected pastor and author John MacArthur Jr. challenges Christians to defy the government regulations and regather for worship, arguing that it is a test of our faithfulness to Christ.<sup>1</sup> Other respected evangelical leaders part ways with MacArthur. For example, Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman from 9Marks and Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, disagree.<sup>2</sup> They believe that Christians are free to submit to government regulations as a matter of Christian liberty and out of love for our communities.

Here we see the historic horns of a dilemma that the church has faced since the first century. When must we submit to human government, and when should we defy human government? The biblical precept is clear. Christians are to submit to all governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7). The biblical example is also clear. There are times when we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). These are the horns of our dilemma.

Prescriptive Scriptures form our theology, while descriptive Scriptures guide our practice. Generally, precepts take precedence over examples, but not always. Civil disobedience is the exception to the precept, but how should we apply the example? When do we disobey the laws of our earthly citizenship to obey the call of our heavenly citizenship? These are matters of application, not interpretation, and Christians have historically disagreed over the application of the civil disobedience examples in Scripture.

MacArthur has vacillated on the issue himself. Two months earlier, he had argued that churches should submit to the government regulations based on Romans 13.<sup>3</sup> Wavering on the horns of a dilemma, he changed his position to speak out against government overreach. He is exercising his right to free speech as a citizen of the United States in television interviews, sermons, and articles. In other words, he is using the rights of his earthly citizenship to protest government actions.

The Apostle Paul, too, used his rights as a Roman citizen to protest government actions three times in his ministry (Acts 16:35-40; 22:25-29; 25:6-12). Therefore, Paul's examples can help us as we wrestle with this question in our day. How and when should we exercise our rights as citizens to protest the restrictions the government places on our activities as Christians?

## THE BACK STORY REGARDING PAUL'S ROMAN CITIZENSHIP

Roman citizenship was a rare and highly prized right in the first century world. Over 90% of the population in the Roman Empire were non-citizens (*peregrini*) in the first century.<sup>4</sup> Paul held an important legal and social status by virtue of his citizenship, and his citizenship could open many doors for him in his ministry to the Gentiles. He could receive preferential treatment in the Roman legal system and could have sought protection while traveling Roman roads.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur Jr., "Christ, Not Caesar, is Head of the Church: A Biblical Case for the Church's Duty to Remain Open," *Grace to You*, 7/24/2020, [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Leeman, "A Time for Civil Disobedience? A Response to Grace Community Church's Elders," 9Marks, 7/25/2020, [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org); Mark Dever, "Episode 140: A Conversation About Grace Community Church's Statement on Civil Disobedience," 9Marks, 7/26/2020, [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org); Al Mohler, "Honoring Christ, Loving God, and Loving our Neighbor: The Christian Church in the Age of COVID-19," *The Briefing*, 8/3/2020, [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com).

<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, "Should Churches Reopen," in *A Modern Puritan*, 5/18/2020, <https://modernpuritan.com/2020/05/18/should-churches-reopen/>

<sup>4</sup> Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, 211.

However, Paul generally does not exercise his rights as a citizen except under specific circumstances. He is reluctant to use those citizenship rights for ministry even under serious persecution and personal suffering. Why? In general terms, Paul had a higher loyalty – a heavenly citizenship – that transcended allegiance to any earthly power (Phil. 3:20). He used his citizenship rights strategically to further the gospel, not to protest inconvenient government regulations.<sup>5</sup> Paul’s missional mindset controlled his rights of citizenship.

The Romans were known as the people of three names (*tria nomina*), which helped identify their citizenship origin.<sup>6</sup> They had a *praenomen*, a *nomen*, and a *cognomen*. In addition, one might have a *signum* or alias. The *cognomen* was the personal name. The *nomen* was the family or clan name, and the *praenomen* was a traditional name given to the boy nine days after birth. When we come to Paul, the Bible only gives us his *cognomen* (*Paullus*), and perhaps his *signum* (*Saullus*). This makes it difficult to determine how his family acquired their citizenship. Paul claims, “I was actually born a citizen” (Acts 22:28), which means that both his parents were Roman citizens.

How did Paul’s Jewish parents obtain their Roman citizenship? We can only speculate, but the most plausible explanation is that Paul’s family received citizenship as a reward for helping the army. They were likely a well-established Tarsian family who may have been transplanted there by the Seleucid King, Antiochus IV (175-164 B.C.), as part of his master plan to strengthen his holdings in Asia Minor. The family acquired considerable wealth in Tarsus over the years as tentmakers. As such, they would have been especially useful to either Antony or Pompey in their military campaigns in Asia Minor. Paul’s father or grandfather might have been given a reward of citizenship because of his help in the military campaigns. We know that Pompey and Antony were known to offer citizenship to their allies, so this is the most plausible theory behind Paul’s citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

How did a judge verify the validity of a person’s claim to citizenship? It was no easy task to conclusively prove one’s Roman citizenship, especially when traveling.<sup>8</sup> Certain evidences could be presented to a judge to establish the truth of the claim, but often judges relied on the fact that a false claim of citizenship could be punishable by death.<sup>9</sup> Only a Roman could wear a *toga*, but it is unlikely that Paul carried a *toga* with him on his journeys. Some speculate that the cloak Paul left at Troas might be a *toga*, but we have no evidence to substantiate that interpretation.<sup>10</sup> The simplest way to claim citizenship was to use the full Roman name since that was one proof of citizenship. Another method was to use the Roman census and tax tables. A municipal census was taken every five years, and taxation tables were drawn up at irregular intervals.<sup>11</sup> However, this evidence would have been difficult for Paul to procure from Tarsus and so of little value in Philippi or Jerusalem.

The most likely possibility is that Paul carried a copy of his birth certificate with him, which could be produced as evidence of his citizenship. A scribe copied these birth certificates

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1998, 52-53, 69-73.

<sup>6</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963, 153-161.

<sup>7</sup> W.M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896, 31-32; F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977, 446; Witherington, *Paul Quest*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Black, “Paul and Roman Law in Acts,” *Restoration Quarterly*, 24 (Oct.-Dec., 1981): 213.

<sup>10</sup> Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 150.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

from the official register of births in the town. In the form of a convenient diptych (double clay or wood tablet), they could be carried from place to place. The diptych functioned like our passport. However, it was not conclusive evidence since it represented the profession of his parents and, if necessary, could only be corroborated by one of the seven original witnesses to the birth certificate.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, it was no easy matter to prove one's citizenship in those days. Ultimately, the issue was left in the hands of the magistrate, who must decide based on the evidence presented to him. However, it must be remembered that a claim of citizenship was usually treated as valid if any evidence at all could be presented (a diptych or the use of the Roman legal name) because of the severity of the punishment for false claims of citizenship. So, it is highly unlikely that Paul's claim was challenged, especially if the diptych could be produced.

Roman citizenship entitled Paul to all the rights and privileges of being a Roman wherever he went in the empire, rights that were not available to the average provincial during the first century. Citizenship gave Paul the right to hold political office, be involved in the process of Roman government, inherit Roman properties, contract a valid Roman marriage, the right to commercial enterprise protected by Roman laws, and the right to the protection of the state in his travels. More particularly for Paul, citizenship gave him the right of fair trial and exemption from execution without trial.<sup>13</sup>

#### PAUL'S GENERAL PRACTICE

Paul generally avoids using his rights as a citizen to protest government actions despite being beaten and even stoned. One wonders why Paul never invoked his citizenship rights to protest disturbances at Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. In each case, Paul did not protest the persecution but moved on to preach the gospel elsewhere (Acts 13:50-51; 14:1-7; 14:19-20). He later returned to all three cities but focused his attention on strengthening the believers and establishing the infrastructure of the churches in each place (Acts 14:21-23), and then left quietly. Later, in Thessalonica, Paul follows the same evasive pattern (Acts 17:1-9). Jason, apparently an established figure in the city, gives a pledge, pays a security fee, to the magistrates to release Paul. Then he and others send Paul away. Paul didn't fight these unjust treatments, nor did he exercise his legal rights as a citizen to protest against the persecution. Why?

The answers are instructive. First, the charges in these cities were not formal or official judicial proceedings. Although the local magistrates were involved, the charges were obscure and vague. For Paul to exercise his citizenship rights would be to create a formal, legal problem. Paul prefers to avoid provoking a formal charge from the government authorities, which would require him to participate in a drawn-out judicial process. Paul's practice is a good example for all of us in dealing with government regulations.

Second, Paul is exploiting the fact no inter-city authorities were regulating itinerant people in these provinces. Local provinces functioned under a hodgepodge of competing regulations that mainly focused on property-owning citizens.<sup>14</sup> Paul's missional mindset recognized that the political realities in the provinces gave the gospel witness great freedom despite the local persecutions. It was far better to move on and keep the focus on gospel

<sup>12</sup> Fritz Schultz, "Roman Registers of Birth and Birth Certificates," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 32 (1942), 78-91; Fritz Schultz, (Roman Registers of Birth and Birth Certificates, Part 2," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 33 (1943), 55-64.

<sup>13</sup> Black, "Paul and Roman Law, 214, Bruce, *Paul*, 38-39; Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion of the legal details see Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 95-97.

preaching – the mission – rather than to get bogged down in legal protests that would consume time and resources. Paul prioritizes the gospel and decides what actions to take for missional reasons. It is often more effective to work within the government restrictions to preach the gospel to more people because local laws vary from place to place. The mission takes precedence over our rights as citizens of local governments.

### PAUL'S FIRST PROTEST ACTS 16:14-40

The first place that Paul uses his citizenship rights to protest a government action is at Philippi, a Roman colony. There are two charges which business owners brought against Paul and Silas, (who may have also been a Roman citizen) at Philippi (Acts 16:20-21). The owners of the slave girl charge that Paul and Silas are (1) instigators of riots, and (2) they are proselytizing Roman citizens. The latter charge is the most potent threat to the gospel. In the early days of the Roman Republic, Rome considered citizenship in any other state to be incompatible with Roman citizenship. Specific laws were written to protect Roman citizens from being proselytized.<sup>15</sup> However, by Paul's time, such laws no longer existed. Therefore, the charge against Paul is archaic, but probably not unusual in Roman towns in the provinces.<sup>16</sup> More significantly for Christians, the charge against proselytizing directly denied the freedom to preach the gospel and was now officially on record in a Roman court.

The magistrates hear the charges in a judicial proceeding and render their verdict. Assuming that Paul and Silas are Jews (non-Romans, *peregrini*), they order the lictors to beat them with rods and throw them into prison (Acts 16:22-23). The next morning the chief magistrates ordered the jailor to release Paul and Silas without a trial (Acts 16:35-36). Once again, they were treating them as non-citizens and considered the beating to be sufficient to end the proselytizing of Roman citizens. It is at this point that Paul objects based on his Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37).

There is considerable debate over exactly how much authority civil magistrates in a Roman colony had over Roman citizens.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, Paul had the right to a Roman trial, but whether the magistrates had the power to beat and imprison a Roman citizen is more problematic. Theoretically, Paul had certain rights of exemption from such practices, as would be indicated by the fearful reaction of the magistrates (Acts 16:38-39). However, Paul must have been aware of the abuses which were common in the empire and of the gradual expansion of the powers of Roman colonial magistrates during this era. Paul wished to make an official response to the charge before leaving the city to establish the infant church in Philippi on a solid foundation in the eyes of the authorities.

Paul's decision to protest the actions of the government in Philippi is consistent with his choice not to protest in other situations. Whether to protest or not, Paul does not decide for personal or political reasons. Even though the government actions may be inconvenient or painful, Paul does not factor those considerations into his choice. He bases his decision to protest or not on his mission to preach the gospel. The charge in an official Roman court prohibited him, and, by extension, other Christians from preaching the gospel to Romans. Paul uses his rights as a Roman citizen to protest that government action because the freedom to preach the gospel is at

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 81-82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-76.

stake. When the freedom to preach the gospel is at stake, we must obey God rather than men. Our heavenly citizenship takes precedence over our earthly citizenship.

### PAUL'S SECOND PROTEST ACTS 22:22-30

Why did Paul invoke his Roman citizenship before the scourging of the tribune at Jerusalem (Acts 22:25)? At first glance, it might seem like Paul protested to protect himself from harm in this case, and it seems out of character with his previous pattern. There are several significant differences between this protest and his first protest. First, Jerusalem was not a Roman colony, and no official charge had been lodged against Paul. Second, the tribune did not have the same powers over civilians as the magistrates of a Roman colony. Third, the scourging was an example of coercive examination (*coercitio*), not punishment. At Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten with the official lictor's rods of the magistrates as punishment for breaking the law. Here, the tribune orders scourging to force Paul to admit guilt (Acts 22:24). Torture was a form of examination used in the empire to produce confessions. As a Roman citizen, Paul had certain rights of exemption from such an investigation, particularly since no charge had even been established against him. He is on firm legal ground in this case in Jerusalem.

The context, however, demonstrates that Paul remains consistent with his previous pattern of using his rights for the gospel. Some Asian Jews saw Paul worshiping in the temple and incited the crowd to attack him. They dragged him out of the temple and were getting ready to kill him when the soldiers intervened. The mob was so violent that the soldiers had to carry Paul up the stairs to the barracks (Acts 21:27-36). Paul spoke to the tribune, who asked about Paul's background supposing him to be an Egyptian revolutionary. Paul replied by stating that he was a Jew who was a citizen of Tarsus. He avoided any mention of his Roman citizenship. Paul is following his usual pattern of avoiding the use of his rights as a Roman citizen.

The tribune permitted Paul to speak to the crowd. Paul had surprised the tribune by talking to him in Greek, but now he speaks to the crowd in Hebrew (Acts 22:2). Paul is practicing his missionary philosophy of doing whatever he needs to do for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:23). To the Jew, he will be a Jew. To the Greek, he will be a Greek. His priority is always the gospel. So, Paul preaches the gospel in Hebrew to the Jews from the steps of the Roman Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem. Paul shares his testimony of faith in Jesus Christ and God's call on his life (Acts 22:3-21). The mob became incensed once again, and the tribune ordered that Paul be scourged to find out what he was really doing. Only then, did Paul exercise his citizenship rights in protest (Acts 22:25-29).

The next day, the tribune took Paul under protective custody to speak to the Sanhedrin, where Paul created chaos by speaking of his belief in the resurrection (Acts 23:6). Luke records for us:

*But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, you must witness at Rome also." (Acts 23:11)*

Just as he did in his first protest, Paul used his rights as a citizen to ensure a platform for the gospel. He witnessed to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and he will witness in Rome also.

Christ's promise to him that night becomes the foundation for his third protest against government authority.

### PAUL'S THIRD PROTEST ACTS 25:6-12

Chapters 22-26 of Acts tell the story of Paul's trial at Caesarea and his subsequent appeal to Caesar.<sup>18</sup> Scholars debate the distinctions between *provocatio* and *appelatio* in Roman law. *Provocatio* is the right of appeal prior to the trial, while *appelatio* is the right of appeal after the trial. Initially, the appeal was made to the people (*ad populum*), but in 30 B.C., the emperor took the place of the people, so it became an appeal to Caesar.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars argue that *provocatio* was the early system of appeal still in existence in Paul's day, and *appelatio* was a later system.<sup>20</sup> Others argue that the two terms were used interchangeably in Roman law with no significant distinction.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the underlying legal doctrine, Paul states, "I appeal to Caesar" (Acts 25:11), making his protest a legitimate part of the appeals process.<sup>22</sup>

The question that Paul's protest raised concerned the power of the provincial governor (Felix or Festus). Did he have the power to reject the appeal and try the case himself? The charge that Paul faced in Caesarea was probably a charge *extra ordinem*. There was an established list of crimes known as the *ordo* for which punishment was fixed by statutory law. For these crimes, the governor would usually over-ride the appeal because the penalties were clear-cut. However, Paul's case was not on the list of crimes (*ordo*). His case was a sensitive and complicated case that Governor Festus agreed should be sent to Caesar. Festus conferred with his advisors (Acts 25:12) on the charge *extra ordinem*, not on the right to appeal itself.<sup>23</sup>

Why did Paul appeal to Caesar? Paul's reasoning revolved around the gospel witness and Christ's call to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He wanted to gain a hearing for Christianity at the very highest levels of the government.<sup>24</sup> At the outset of his imprisonment, Christ had spoken to him in a personal revelation and promised Paul that he would be Christ's gospel witness in Rome (Acts 23:11). Paul had declined to exercise his right to appeal during the two years of his custody because Felix seemed inclined favorably toward his position, and he had ample opportunity to preach the gospel (Acts 24:22-27). However, the situation changed when Festus came to power. He was inclined favorably toward the Jews (Acts 25:9). No doubt, under pressure from the Jewish leaders, Festus suggested that Paul stand trial in Jerusalem. This was a

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<sup>18</sup> For a complete discussion see Henry Cadbury, "Roman Law and the Trial of Paul," in *Additional Notes*, Vol. 5 in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, edited by F.J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, London: MacMillan and Co., 1933, 297-338.

<sup>19</sup> A.H.M. Jones, *Studies in Roman Government and Law*, New York: Basil Blackwell & Mott, 1960, 97

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Studies in Roman Government*, 51-65; Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 48-70.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Garnsey, "The *Lex Iulia* and Appeal Under the Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 56 (1966), 167-189.

Garnsey argues that Paul's appeal is not a case of *provocation* at all, but rather a case of *relectio iudicii*, the rejection of a biased court. While Garnsey raises some excellent points, it is still an overly subtle distinction.

<sup>22</sup> Black, "Paul and Roman Law," 215.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Studies*, 51-65; Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 48-70; Black, "Paul and Roman Law," 216-217; Bruce, *Paul*, 364. Likewise, the trial of Jesus in the Gospels was a trial *extra ordinem*. However, a charge *extra ordinem* against a non-citizen (*peregrine*) like Jesus was left in the hands of the Governor. He decided whether the charge was valid or not. So, Pilate was legally within his bounds in deciding the case against Jesus (Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 24-47.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce, *Paul*, 366.

dangerous new situation. At Jerusalem, there was little hope of acquittal and a subsequent trip to Rome. Furthermore, his opportunities to preach the gospel would be stifled by the Jewish authorities. Therefore, Paul made his decision to go to Rome, even if it was as a prisoner.<sup>25</sup>

This raises an interesting question concerning the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. Some argue that Paul could not have been tried as a Roman citizen by the Sanhedrin, but Governor Festus could have used the Sanhedrin as his council.<sup>26</sup> However, Gentiles were not allowed into the sacred inner courts of the temple, which is certainly part of the charge which the Jewish leaders brought against Paul (Acts 21:28). F.F. Bruce writes:

*This was the one type of offence for which the Romans allowed the Jewish authorities to retain capital jurisdiction; they authorized the death penalty in this regard even when the offender was a Roman citizen, so careful were they to conciliate Jewish religious susceptibilities. Had there been any foundation for the charge against Paul, his Roman citizenship would not have saved him from the consequences.*<sup>27</sup>

Once again, Paul used his citizenship rights strategically. After two years in the prison of Caesarea, and under threat that his gospel witness would be extinguished in Jerusalem, Paul chose to appeal to Caesar. His appeal was a protest against the court process that he had been subjected to for two years without resolution. He did not want to waste more time waiting for the government to change its unjust procedures. He had been patient long enough. His gospel witness was at stake. Paul would take the power of the gospel to the highest levels of the empire. He would preach in Rome itself, even if it had to be as a prisoner.

### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

State governors have imposed a kaleidoscope of regulations to limit the spread of COVID-19 across the country. The specific regulations vary from state to state, with some states more rigorous (and onerous) than others. Churches face a variety of restrictions about attendance, social distancing, masks, and singing that have limited worship services. Pastors have responded with live streaming services, outdoor worship, and limited indoor gatherings. Generally, the restrictions appear to be consistent with other similar gatherings in the secular marketplace. However, there are times when the regulations appear to be unfairly applied to churches by some governors when compared to casinos, retail stores, bars, and restaurants, which have led some pastors to call for protest.

How should we apply Paul's examples of protest to our current situation? I think there are four implications we can draw from his examples in Acts to help us in our current dilemma.

1) Our default response should be to submit to the government regulations.

Paul's prescriptive teaching is to submit to human government even under onerous and unfair conditions (Rom. 13:1-7). He usually followed that prescription himself even when he faced real persecution, physical harm, and personal danger. Paul's default example was to shake

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<sup>25</sup> Garnsey, "The *Lex Iulia*," 184.

<sup>26</sup> Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *Paul*, 349.



the dust off his feet and move on to preach the gospel in new places and fresh ways. As long as the magistrates did not prohibit him from preaching the gospel, he did not protest even when mistreated. Paul regularly sacrificed his rights to preach the gospel following the model of his Savior, who had sacrificed all on the cross.

2) Avoid provoking government authorities in ways that will make our gospel witness to our communities more difficult.

Thessalonica is a good example of Paul's practice. Jason, along with other businessmen, had paid his bail – security pledge – to release Paul from the court (Acts 17:9). Paul did not protest this unfair treatment but went on his way to avoid making it harder for the Christians to witness in the city. Do no harm is a good place to start. Live in peace with all so far as it is personally possible (Rom. 12:18). Our public protests can generate harder line responses from the government, as many believers have found in the underground churches around our world. Avoiding the confrontation often opens more doors to witness than fighting the government. My friends in the underground church told me that the government knew they were gathering for worship but left them alone until some western preacher came into the country and provoked the government. Then they cracked down on all Christians as a result.

The current government restrictions are for medical reasons – to stop the spread of a virus. There is little evidence that governors are persecuting Christians by their regulations. That day may come, but this is not it! When all the businesses in our communities are struggling to comply with government restrictions, why should churches be able to avoid them? We force the hand of government when we insist on gathering in our churches in violation of government regulations. If the government cracks down on churches, it is not persecution but enforcement of rules that apply to others as well. We send a message to our communities that we don't care about them if we are exempt from the regulations that apply to them, especially if the result is a broader transmission of the virus.

3) Recognize that the application of civil disobedience is a matter of Christian liberty.

Don't make civil disobedience a test of faithfulness to Christ. Paul sometimes protested government actions, but more often did not, even though the actions made his ministry much more difficult. We all agree that Christ, not Caesar, is the head of the church, but we can disagree about how to apply that truth to our individual churches in these times. John MacArthur and Grace Community Church have chosen to meet indoors with thousands of other believers in a traditional church building, but biblically this is not the only form that Christ's church can take in worship. The early church worshiped in small house churches as do many around the world today. We should not claim that churches who follow the restrictions have allowed earthly governors to "supplant Christ as head of the church" or that pastors have "ceded their Christ-delegated authority in the church to a civil ruler."<sup>28</sup>

Christ may lead other churches to respond differently. Our church has chosen to meet outdoors in our parking lot for now. J.D. Greear and the 12,000-member Summit Church he leads have decided not to meet the remainder of this year, but rather to focus on dividing into house churches while live-streaming the worship. Capitol Hill Baptist Church, led by Mark

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<sup>28</sup> MacArthur, "Christ, Not Caesar, is Head of the Church" *Grace to You*, 7/24/2020, [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org).

Dever, is planning to divide and plant new smaller churches should the restrictions remain. Jonathan Leeman writes, “I’m not saying Christians need to embrace this as the new normal and that we should give up on having larger gathering spaces and larger churches. I am saying that, at least in this moment, a church could decide to do something besides all gathering together without selling out to Caesar.”<sup>29</sup>

4) Make sure that the protest is about the gospel and not peripheral matters.

Every time that Paul protested a government action in the book of Acts, he did so for the sake of the gospel. If the authorities were stifling the gospel, then Paul would stand up to the authorities. His decisions to use his rights as a Roman citizen were strategic and missional. The prohibition against proselytizing Roman citizens (Acts 16:21), though based on an archaic Roman law, directly squelched his freedom to preach the gospel. So, Paul exercised his rights to make sure that the authorities would think twice about applying that law to the church in the future.

We should make our decisions from a missional mindset. Every decision about complying or defying government authority should be gospel-centric. My concern with defying the government over COVID-19 regulations is that they are not gospel-centric issues. The regulations are public health regulations. Pastors are not being prohibited from preaching the gospel. COVID-19 regulations are more like fire codes and zoning restrictions than they are about gospel prohibition. We follow the government regulations in many areas of community life, and, while we sometimes chafe under those rules, we don’t usually consider them to be persecution of the church.

## CONCLUSION

The English Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter (1615-1691), was asked, “May we omit church-assemblies on the Lord’s day if the magistrate forbid them?” His answer summarizes our current situation well.

*It is one thing to forbid them for a time, upon some special cause, (as infection by pestilence, fire, war, etc.) and another to forbid them stately or profanely. ... If the magistrate for a greater good, (as the common safety,) forbid church-assemblies in a time of pestilence, assault of enemies, or fire, or the like necessity, it is a duty to obey him. ... If princes profanely forbid holy assemblies and public worship, either stately, or as a renunciation of Christ and our religion; it is not lawful formally to obey them. But it is lawful prudently to do that secretly for the present necessity, which we cannot do publicly, and to do that with smaller numbers, which we cannot do with greater assemblies, yea, and to omit some assemblies for a time, that we may thereby have opportunity for more: which is not formal but only material obedience.*<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Leeman, “A Time for Civil Disobedience?” 9Marks, 7/25/2020, [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org)

<sup>30</sup> Richard Baxter cited by Joel Beeke, “Joel Beeke Doctrine for Life,” 3/28/2020, <http://www.joelbeeke.org/2020/03/wise-and-interesting-advice-from-richard-baxter/>

A day may come when we will be tested regarding the gospel, and we will have to defy the government. When that day comes, we must be ready to face real persecution. Until then, let's exercise wisdom and follow Christ faithfully.