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We should obey God, not humankind

Earlier this month, John MacArthur, Pastor of Grace Community Church in Los Angeles, won in Court against the government of the State of California in the USA.

The governor of California, had ordered the closure of all churches due to the coronavirus. Following several online weekly sermons delivered from the Grace Community Church, some members began to attend in person. Soon after, the church leaders opened the church for worship and a normal Sunday service.

John Corcoran reported about this on the *Conservative Woman* website on 19th August 2020.

Public statements had been published beforehand explaining why this decision had been made. The subject of the first sermon preached by Mr MacArthur to the assembled church was about obeying God and not man.

In the book of Acts in the New Testament of the Bible, we read about the events before the Jewish authorities at Chapter 5.

²⁹ Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

It would be quite correct to translate the koine Greek word 'we ought to' as meaning 'we must'. It was a duty and commission by God via an angel.

This is not the first time that we are told in the Bible that we must obey God and not blindly obey humankind where humankind is going against God. Our allegiance above everything else is to God. St Paul does put this into context of obeying the authorities but ultimately we must obey God. In Chapter 13 of St Paul's letter to the Romans in the New Testament we read:

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

The idea of obeying human authorities means that sometimes we are hurt by doing so but we accept that hurt.

Martin Luther King Jnr had many experiences in his life of being punished and beaten for



what he believed, for following God and not humankind when he knew that what mankind was doing was not what God wanted. It was Martin Luther King Jr who said:

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Confronting humankind when they are determined to go against God can risk the ultimate punishment of death, and yet

In 1555, Nicholas Ridley, former Bishop of London, was burned at the stake in Oxford because of his beliefs. On the night before Ridley's execution, his brother offered to remain with him in the prison cell to be of assistance and comfort. Nicholas Ridley declined the offer and replied that he meant to go to bed and sleep as quietly as ever he did in his life. Because he knew the peace of God, he could rest in the strength of the everlasting arms of Lord Jesus Christ to meet his need.

As Nicky Gumbel said:

Peace is a great blessing. 'Peace' is a word of huge significance in the Bible. The Hebrew word for peace, Shalom, means far more than the absence of war or hostility. It is not just an absence of certain circumstances but the presence of God and his reign. It means wholeness, soundness, well-being, oneness with God – every kind of blessing and good.

In order to bring peace to others, we first need to find and hold on to peace within ourselves.

So Nicholas Ridley was being executed for disobeying the law and yet showed peace to everyone around him.

Pastor John MacArthur's reasoning for going to the Californian State's own Court was that the government, Federal or State, had no grounds to interfere in religious matters as enshrined in the First Amendment of the American Constitution.

The Californian authorities went to court to stop the services, with Pastor MacArthur facing potential fines of \$1,000 daily and/or arrest. It was not just going to Court that cost him dearly, but also the risk of damage to him personally, and the huge fines that he could have faced. However after the church offered to ensure social distancing and the wearing of face masks, Los Angeles Superior Court allowed the services to continue pending a full hearing.

In the UK there are Church leaders who support secular society more than their own Churches. Only about two dozen church leaders in Britain, supported by the charity Christian Concern, have attempted to hold the government to account for its lockdown measures by requesting a Judicial Review. Only recently, churches have been allowed to open but still with stringent conditions. In the *Conservative Woman* article *John Corcoran* writes that there is a private appeal being made for a Judicial Review by Simon Dolan who states in his opinion the government have acted illegally and disproportionately with the imposed lockdown measures.

Even in St Paul's time there were Church leaders who had gone astray, so it is not new. In the first letter to Timothy St Paul writes:

1 Timothy 1 starting at verse 3:

³ As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer ⁴ or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. ⁵ The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. ⁷ They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

Yet this is also the same St Paul who wrote about being obedient to authorities even though ultimate obedience is to God.

So what Pastor John MacArthur has been forced to do is not unique to California at all.

John Piper, chancellor of Bethlehem College in Minneapolis said:

The difference between Christians and the larger culture, Piper wrote, is: "We weep over our sins. We don't celebrate them. We don't institutionalize them. We turn to Jesus for forgiveness and help. We cry out to Jesus Christ, 'who delivers us from the wrath to come'" (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

That warning is not just that Jesus Christ delivers us but that the wrath is going to come.

Even now the majority of Christians in the world, millions of them, have affirmed Gafcon's Jerusalem declaration confirming Christian beliefs and you can find the Jerusalem declaration on this website.

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