

THINKING ABOUT "THE BAN" (3) The Danger of Gradualism and Appeasement

This is the third and final article in which we are reflecting on our church's response in January 2021 when the South African government temporarily banned church services while continuing to allow restaurants, movie theatres, casinos, and gyms to remain open. As I pointed out in the second article, one of the reasons that we chose to hold services in spite of the government's prohibition was to avoid the trap of *gradualism*. Gradualism, as I've entitled it, is the danger of giving in bit by bit, the danger of failing to identify a decisive moment to take a stand, and as a result, often failing taking a stand at all.

GRADUALISM IN THE MORAL SPHERE

The Bible frequently warns believers of the danger of gradualism in the *moral sphere*. For example, according to the book of Proverbs, the sluggard gives in gradually—by millimetres, not kilometres: "a little sleep, a little slumber" is his self-justifying mantra (Prov 24:33). Jesus also pointed out the danger of gradualism in the Parable of the Sower: "As they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life ..." (Luke 8:14). The spiritual asphyxiation process described by our Lord is not instantaneous; it is gradual. In Revelation 2:4, Jesus chided the church of Ephesus for leaving their first love. No one imagines that the Ephesians did that all at once. In the same way, Hebrews 10:24-25 warns that inconsistent or infrequent church attendance is often simply a bad habit built up bit by bit, as individual decisions to skip church gradually congeal into a dangerous pattern.

In short, gradualism in the moral sphere is one of the primary threats to a Christian's spiritual progress.

Our concern, however, is with a different form of gradualism: the danger of gradually surrendering to government interventions, restrictions, and bans that prohibit or significantly impinge on biblical practices, such as gathering to worship. You might be surprised to learn that the NT says nothing about this danger. A moment's reflection will tell you why this is. In the NT era, government injustice toward the church was *not* gradual. In fact, it was immediate, direct, violent, and aggressive. Therefore, it is hardly astonishing that the authors of the NT didn't warn the church about a danger that, for them, was entirely theoretical.

AN OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLE

That doesn't mean that there are no biblical examples of this form of gradualism. Consider Daniel and his three friends. I think it is safe to say that if Daniel and his friends had not taken a stand against the requirement that they eat unclean foods in Daniel 1, it is exceedingly unlikely that they would have taken the stands they took in Daniel 3 and in Daniel 6. And it is no surprise that the other Jewish boys who had been transported to Babylon with them failed to take a stand later, even when government intervention escalated from regulations requiring them to eat pork to the requirement that they actively participate in idolatry. To adapt our Lord's saying: those who are unfaithful in little are rarely faithful in much (Luke 16:10).

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (as teenagers!) grasped the fact that a relatively small moment in Daniel 1 was actually a decisive moment to dig in their heels and to resist the unbiblical mandates of their Babylonian overlords. Their consciences compelled them to set a precedent, both for themselves and for their government overseers. I have no doubt that those four boys understood the saying, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." However, they were wise enough to see the trap of gradualism and to avoid it, even if it meant exposing themselves to the indignant scrutiny and enraged displeasure of government officials.

In other words, the book of Daniel illustrates the fact that, when it comes to unjust or unbiblical government regulations, sometimes small moments *are* big moments.

HISTORY: AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER?

No doubt you have heard the saying, "The only thing that we learn from history is that we don't learn from history." That's a trend that we need to break, because there is much to learn from the history in this matter.

But before we consider several historical examples, let me introduce another important term: *appeasement*. Gradualism is passive: it fails to take a stand because it is blithely (or wilfully) oblivious to the importance of the moment. Appeasement is not passive; it is active and is driven by fear. Appeasement hopes to avoid conflict by making small compromises in essential, foundational principles, naively reasoning, "I know it is wrong to concede this ground, but if I do so, surely my oppressor will be satisfied and he will make no further demands on me."

Gradualism is short sighted, failing or refusing to see that the status quo is changing. Appeasement, on the other hand, sees quite clearly that the status quo is changing, but rationalises that one or two "small" concessions of vital principles will end the conflict.

We chose to open services in January because we believed it was essential not to start on the path of either gradualism or appeasement. Why? Among other reasons, history is littered with examples of governments, churches—and even entire people groups—who failed to take a stand against government injustice early in the process with disastrous results, or who chose to compromise foundational moral or doctrinal principles in "small" ways in order to maintain an illusion of peace—also with disastrous results.

Let's begin with an example from church history—one relating to theology, rather than to government intervention.

EXAMPLE 1: THE DOWN-GRADE CONTROVERSY

In the 1880s, Charles Spurgeon had the wisdom and insight to see that the Baptist Union in the UK included many men who were intentionally subverting key biblical doctrines, such as the inspiration of Scripture, substitutionary atonement, and the miracles and deity of Christ. When the Union's leadership refused to expel these men, Spurgeon withdrew, stating that

unity not based on foundational doctrines was not unity at all. As you recall, Spurgeon was publicly censured by the Baptist Union for his action (the vote was 2,000 to 7). However, do you know the names of *any* of the two thousand men who voted to censure Spurgeon? Probably not. The reason we respect and remember Charles Spurgeon nearly a century-and-a-half later is he had the clarity and insight to identify a key moment to take a stand *early* in the process of doctrinal drift. And, of course, Spurgeon's concerns were quickly substantiated as the Baptist Union in the UK rapidly drowned in a rising tide of theological liberalism: the good men who remained in that organisation never mustered the clarity and courage to take a stand, even when the doctrinal defection of many of its members became undeniable. At the time, Spurgeon wrote:

It is always wisest and best to exhibit clear decision upon fundamental points; we must draw the line distinctly, and then stand to it firmly.¹

Spurgeon's point? The men who didn't take a stand early in the Down-Grade Controversy, choosing instead the safe, passive path of avoiding confrontation, were setting a dangerous precedent. And in the end, it was no surprise to Spurgeon—or to any student of history and human nature—that, ultimately, those men were unable to muster the moral courage to stand against error at all.

EXAMPLE 2: THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT BEFORE WW II

Although not drawn from church history, this is a helpful example because it has to do with government injustice. By citing this example, I am ***NOT*** comparing our current South African government to the Nazis. That would be both absurd and unjust. The comparison is between *us* (Grace Fellowship) and *the British government*, which failed to stand up to the injustice of a foreign government early in the process, with ruinous results.

Everyone who has studied Hitler's actions in the 1930s acknowledges two things: the Nazis were masters of gradualism, and the failure of key European governments to identify and stand against Nazi injustice was catastrophic. The simple truth is, Hitler was not ready for war in 1936 and 1937, and the failure of the British and French to stand against his annexation of the Rhineland, Austria, and of a strategic portion of Czechoslovakia in the middle and late 1930s had disastrous consequences for millions of people. The judgement of history rightly frowns on Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister in the 1930s, for blinding himself to Hitler's well-documented ambitions, and for betraying basic moral principles and human rights in his pursuit of "peace in our time." As a result, Hitler came to believe no one ever would (or could) stand up to him, and tens of millions died in World War II as a result.

In most cases, a measured, cautious reaction to crisis is wise. The person who imagines that every situation requires a dramatic, line-in-the-sand response is a fool. However, there are times when delay, passivity, and appeasement cannot be countenanced, even though delaying conflict by making a "small" compromise of vital principles might seem attractive. But when doctrines or practices that are central to the Christian faith (such as corporate worship) are under threat, passivity and appeasement are not wise choices. In fact, they might simply create a habit of back-peddling in the face of government injustice. Moreover,

they embolden the government to more aggressive interventions in the future, confident that the church will meekly surrender to officious meddling or bullying coercion.

EXAMPLE 3: THE JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Ever since the Holocaust, distraught Jews have been asking, "How did six million of our people allow themselves to be led to the gas chambers *without resisting?*" As far as we know, only in one death camp (Treblinka) was there a significant, organised attempt to resist the guards. The reason the Jews did not resist (both before and after they were sent to concentration camps) is simple: the Nazis were masters of gradualism. They intentionally used that technique to keep their victims from taking a stand against their horrific injustices.

Below is a chilling summary of the tactics crafted by Adolf Eichmann, the SS colonel who designed and ran Hitler's "final solution" program to exterminate the Jews. As you read it, remember that the parallel is **NOT** between the Nazi government and our government. It is between *Christians* and *the Jews of the Holocaust* in regard to the danger of failing to identify the decisive moment to respond to government injustice with appropriate civil disobedience.

Operations [that Eichmann] had managed in Austria, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland had revealed to him the best methods to realize ... success The first stage of his plan focused on isolating the Jews. Orders would be issued to require the wearing of the Yellow Star, to prohibit travel and the use of phones and radios, and to ban Jews from the civil service and scores of other professions. He had more than a hundred such measures Bank accounts would be frozen. Factories and businesses owned by Jews would be expropriated Next came ghettoization, uprooting Jews from their homes, and concentrating them together until the final, fourth stage could be effected: deportation to the camps

[Eichmann met] face to face with Jewish leaders to reassure them that the measures restricting their community were only temporary necessities of war. As long as these leaders, organized in a council, saw to their implementation, he would promise that no harm would come to their community Even when the Jews were forced onto the trains, they were to be told that they were being relocated for their own safety.²

Blinded by the gradualism of the Nazis and driven by the instinct of self-preservation in the moment, the rational discernment of millions of Jews was paralysed, and they slowly gave away the ability to respond decisively to government injustice.

Let me say it again: there is no Nazi-like, secret conspiracy in the South African government to exterminate Christians. Of course not. The point of comparison is between *our church* and *the Jews*. Unalert to the dangers of gradualism, as they gave in bit by bit, most European Jews soon reached a point where they were no longer able to identify and react to injustice. And here's a vital point: *gradualism doesn't have to be an organised and intentional government tactic to have that effect on people.*

EXAMPLE 4: CHRISTIANS IN NAZI GERMANY

In the second article, I quoted Wilhelm Busch, a man who served as a pastor in Germany during the Nazi era. Reflecting on the years from 1933-1945, Busch notes that gradualism and appeasement were the primary dangers faced by Christians under Nazi rule—dangers that were completely novel to their Christian experience.

*[What] we learned in the first year under Hitler was, how unprepared we were for such a time, how helplessly we stood before the question of what really was to be done.*³

Sound familiar?

*In the first year [of Hitler's rule] the state police had not been fully developed. At that time the Nazis didn't know exactly how far they could go in infringing people's rights and how far the people would tolerate the government operating "a little outside the law."*⁴

Once the Nazis realised that neither society generally nor churches specifically had the moral fortitude to stand up to their unjust and tyrannical actions, all pretence at restraint was quickly jettisoned. However, it is important to realise that the strictures and regulations imposed on churches were subtle at first, not dramatic. For example, soon after Hitler came to power, government decrees made it mandatory for all children to attend Hitler Youth meetings in order to indoctrinate them in Nazi beliefs. By "coincidence," Hitler Youth chapters soon began scheduling their meetings on Sunday mornings. Children were not forbidden to go to church; however, mandatory government meetings just happened to be scheduled at the same time as church services.

In other words, German Christians had a completely unexpected choice forced upon them: Should they obey the government, appeasing the government and avoiding conflict by sacrificing an essential principle of the Christian faith (i.e., corporate worship), or should they trust Christ and take a stand? In his memoirs, Busch records that some of the boys in his high school ministry took a stand, telling their Hitler Youth leaders, "We're going to church." When they were informed that obedience to the government *must* come first, Busch writes,

*That produced the first big conflict, the question of the conscience But they stood firm It really struck me at the time how my young lads already grasped the principle that one must be obedient to God from the beginning*⁵

"From the beginning ..." That is the primary lesson that Busch urged Christians to learn from the persecution that he and his fellow Christians experienced under the Nazis.

Unfortunately, many German Christians, all too aware that the nail that sticks up gets hammered down, followed the path of appeasement and capitulation. Gradually, as governments always do, the Nazis grasped more and more authority and imposed more and

more regulations and restrictions. Sadly, having missed the decisive moment, most German churches never took a stand.

CONCLUSION

The historical examples I've mentioned do not have the same authority as Scripture. However, they are informative—perhaps even compelling. History has one voice on this matter: those who fail to take a stand early in the process, rarely recover. Back-peddling becomes a habit, and making ever-increasing concessions of foundational principles becomes a way of life.

As a church, we need to keep this in mind as we look to the future. We want to have wise and informed consciences as we are faced with choices in an increasingly aggressive anti-Christian world.

In my estimation, when the government tells Christians that they can go to a movie with their friends and gather at a restaurant afterwards to discuss that movie and to enjoy secular fellowship, but that they *cannot* gather at church to study Scripture, worship Christ, and have Christian fellowship, then it is time to quietly ignore the government. At that point, the delusional reasoning, "If we give in just once more, the problem will go away," must be replaced by quiet Christian courage.

Submitting to the government is a very important way that we maintain our Christian testimony: but it isn't the *only* way. At times, as we move into a new season of history in Western Christianity, we will have to identify government injustice, pray for the clarity and courage to respond rightly, and join believers like Daniel and his friends in quietly taking a stand for Christ.

¹ *An All Around Ministry*, Charles Spurgeon (Banner of Truth Trust, 1900, 1960, 2000), 291.

² *Hunting Eichmann*, Neal Bascomb (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 3.

³ *Christ or Hitler?*, Wilhelm Busch, trans. Christian Puritz (EP Books, 2013), 209.

⁴ 207.

⁵ 209, 208.