



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

Were Tandragee Baptists right to defy the anti-virus regulations and assemble together on the Sabbath Day past?

Much has been made by a few evangelicals of the issue of closing churches in an effort to avoid further spreading the covid virus. They would say that to do so is a contravention of God's command to worship Him.

Tandragee Baptists have featured in that protest by refusing to obey the directive and opened their premises for worship on the Lord's Day past.

I do not know if they have maintained that position throughout the earlier periods of lockdown that began back in March or whether this is a newly discovered 'conviction'!

However, I believe that they are wrong and this article sets forth my reasons.

I write this because I know there are Christians troubled about the matter and I am anxious to set forth what I believe is the Word of God.

I trust that all find the article helpful.



The pastor of the Baptist Church in Tandragee, Pastor David Patterson, was given space in the "Belfast Newsletter" of Monday, 7th December, to explain why he and his congregation defied the regulations brought in to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus by those charged with that duty. (**Newsletter article**)

In his explanation, the pastor defends his actions on a number of grounds. I do not think that his arguments are altogether the 'solid rock' of Biblical standards that he might think them to be.

1. Pastor David Patterson alleges that: 'The Executive in directing the citizens of Northern Ireland not to meet for the public worship of God, acted beyond their God given mandate, because the Executive's prohibition on the public worship of God is contrary to Scripture.'

Unless I missed something, I did not read of the Executive prohibiting the public worship of God! Christian assemblies were quite free to organise open-air gatherings, fellowshiping together around the Word of God via video links etc.

What was prohibited was people, in all branches of society, not just Christians, assembling together in a building whereby the spreading of the virus would be greatly facilitated.

Many chose to ignore this directive, attenders at pubs, rave parties and Tandragee Baptists!

Gathering together in a church building is no part of God's command to worship Him on the Christian Sabbath. If it were the case, then very many in the early Church contravened that command when they, out of necessity, oftentimes met together in one and another's homes. The opening words of Paul in his letter to Philemon indicate this fact. "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Here are not words of condemnation for not meeting in a public building! Necessity was laid upon them to gather as they did and the Lord was pleased with such an assembly as is evident from Paul's salutation.

The same truth is seen in Romans 16:3-5.



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"Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house."

It likewise might be noted that on many occasions the people of God forsook the meeting place where unscriptural worship was taking place and assembled instead in small gatherings, sometimes in the open-air. Indeed, I recall that I led the worship of the first gathering of the separated witness in Clogher Valley, out of which grew Clogher Valley Free Presbyterian Church, under a tree in a lay-by just opposite the present church building!

How many Baptist assemblies began in like fashion!

2. Again, Pastor David Patterson misrepresents the directive of the Executive when he suggests that such a directive is but another example of the persecuting spirit manifested by the Jewish leaders in Acts 5:29.

I think that people will readily understand that I am no friend of the Stormont Executive. I have opposed it in principle since its inception. However, I do not think that it is Christian to oppose it by alleging that it is guilty of that which it is not!

The Executive's directive may appear to some to bear some resemblance to the attitude and the actions of what happened in the events surrounding Acts 5:29, but it is not so. Heed what the Holy Spirit said of that event. "And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men," Acts 5:27-29.

Peter and the other apostles defied the leaders because they were forbidden to "teach in this name"! They were commanded not to preach the gospel. Such a command is to be forthrightly defied, as the apostles show us.

However, is it fair or honest to say that the Executive forbade the preaching of the gospel? I don't think it is.

From personal knowledge I know that during the lockdown, the preaching of God's Word via video links has actually increased the number of people listening to God's truth!

3. Pastor David Patterson states that obedience to the directive cannot be justified by the claim that forbearing to assemble together in a church building is out of concern for the possibility of spreading the virus to our neighbour. To do so is a negation of our duty to love God.

The Saviour states what God's Law says regarding our duty toward our neighbour. "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these," Mark 12:30-31.

We are commanded to love our neighbour as we would love and care for ourselves. In these days, sensible people, out of concern for their own wellbeing, frequently wash their hands, wear masks when out and about and above all seek to observe 'social distancing'! Is that not the very essence of 'loving oneself' in the present circumstances! Do we not condemn those we read of who gather in large groups at parties etc. Yes we do, and that very properly. Why? Because of the risk of infecting others, being infected ourselves and then spreading it to yet others. Such behaviour is 'anti-neighbourly' and anti-social. Families gather outside the windows of nursing homes and are unable to engage with loved ones as they dearly would love to - WHY? For fear of infecting them with the virus and thus possibly endangering their lives.

This is loving your neighbour!



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It is not the will of God that we endanger ourselves and our neighbour by gathering in a building to worship God. That principle was set forth in the law of God regarding the leper. He/she was forbidden to assemble with others, was put outside the camp of Israel, was required to wear a mouth covering and was forbidden to assemble in worship. "Then the priest shall look upon it: and, behold, if the rising of the sore be white reddish in his bald head, or in his bald forehead, as the leprosy appeareth in the skin of the flesh; he is a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall pronounce him utterly unclean; his plague is in his head. And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be, Leviticus 13:43-46.

Applying and obeying this law is our duty toward God in this day of pestilence!

4. What I find rather strange is the silence observed by the likes of Pastor David Patterson regarding the much more serious matters facing God's people, the devil's 'virus' of lies and deception.

I recall an incident which involved the Baptist Association back in 2002. Here is a report of a meeting in Ballynahinch Baptist Church as given in the "Down Recorder" of October 9th, 2002.

"Ballynahinch Baptist Church has held an induction service for its new senior pastor, Mr. Gordon McDade. Mr. McDade takes over from Dr. Hadden Wilson who retired in June. Mr. McDade and his wife, Pamela, were welcomed into the membership of the church by Mr. Michael Simms, church elder and induction promises were led by Mr. Robert Harpur, also a church elder. The service was chaired by another of the elders, Mr. Ed McBriar. In response, Mr. McDade, who had been the Associate Pastor at Strandtown Church for the past eight years, thanked the church for calling him to the pastorate and expressed his gratitude to God for His guidance and blessing upon his ministry. He expressed the desire to see Kingdom of God being extended through the efforts of the churches in the town working together. Mr. Billy Colville conveyed the greetings of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland and spoke of his admiration for Mr. McDade's zeal and the commitment to the work in Strandtown, which he had no doubt would continue in Ballynahinch. Greetings from the local churches were conveyed by Rev. Marisine Stanfield who expressed the hope that the unity and cooperation within the churches of Ballynahinch would continue. . . . Mr. Stephen Adams, chairman of Evangelical Alliance, closed the service in prayer."

Amongst those welcomed to that service was local Roman Catholic priest, 'Father' Gerry McGrory.

Such an event was not in keeping with the stand and witness of C H Spurgeon or of the late Pastors Willie Mullan and Hugh Orr.

Things have changed. Fighting the 'straw men' of self-perceived 'Goliaths' is much easier than tackling the true enemies of God in these evil times.

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