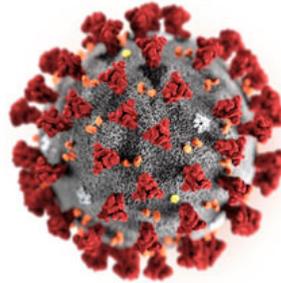


## COVID-19 - Laboratory of Liberty

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Now in our 13<sup>th</sup> week of emergency health orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, what has emerged is a referendum on liberty itself. Once it was determined that COVID-19 had made its way to the American shores, state after state enacted health emergencies with a cadre of health orders. These draconian laws enacted by state and local governments forced the suspension of civil liberties that had not been seen in this country for generations.

As health officials created an atmosphere of fear over the Chinese coronavirus that may have been created in a Chinese bioresearch lab in Wuhan, governmental officials began to issue emergency health orders that resulted in restrictions on commerce, movement, and public gatherings. One area alarming to many in the faith community was the suspension of in-person religious services, as state and local officials deemed religious assemblies “non-essential.”

There was no uniform code or reason to the types of restrictions ordered by government officials. In some instances, it appeared as if it was at the whim of the governor, mayor, or policing authority in charge. Numerous disturbing reports surfaced across the country.

In Orlando, Florida, a pastor was arrested on a Monday after his Sunday services for what the local county sheriff stated were violations of the health orders. County officials had previously given the church the go-ahead, as they had enacted a number of precautions and social distancing guidelines. Nevertheless, the pastor was arrested and booked at the county jail on the Monday following his Sunday services. A lawsuit was filed on behalf of the pastor and the church. Florida Governor DeSantis, hearing of the arrest, stated that was not what he had intended. The local sheriff had acted on his own accord in relation to the church and pastor with enforcement the state had not intended in its health order.

In Kentucky, Governor Beshear ordered that churches were not permitted to conduct a drive-in-style service at their churches, even though they would practice social distancing by staying in their cars. He threatened that if anyone attended the service, they would have their license plate number recorded by the highway

patrol, and that they would receive an order forcing them into a 14-day quarantine. Again, a lawsuit was filed to defend the church members' right to assemble and worship.

In Greenville, Mississippi, the mayor had local law enforcement issue \$500 tickets to anyone who showed up to a drive-in-style church service. In Richmond Virginia, the pastor of Lighthouse Fellowship in Chincoteague Island received a summons served by police for holding a church service for 16 people spaced far apart in a sanctuary that seats 293. The charge for violating Governor Northam's Covid-19 order carries a penalty up to a year in jail and/or a \$2,500 fine.

Dozens of disturbing examples emerged across the country. Some pastors and churches that have been threatened have chosen not to go public for fear of public reprisal. And even though U.S. Attorney General William Barr spoke against such discriminatory treatment of churches, the oppression of religious liberty continues under the guise of health emergencies. The prejudice and bigotry against people of faith has been on display during this COVID-19 shutdown.

In Chicago, Mayor Lori Lightfoot ordered a no-parking zone in a 9-block area targeting a Romanian Catholic church that had announced they would hold in-person services. Not only were the congregants affected as an army of tow trucks emerged, but local residents also had their vehicles towed. Because some churches were undeterred by the intimidation of city officials, some city officials took additional steps. A threatening letter was sent from Commissioner Allison Arwady that stated, "I am authorized to see to enjoin such nuisance or to cause the same to be summarily abated in such manner as I may direct...." What this order means is that the property could be forcibly closed, boarded up, or deemed a "nuisance property", like a drug house that can be razed by city government. So, not only did the virus come from China, it sent along its religious oppression to be practiced in its wake.

What is apparent in all of this is just how fragile our right to assemble and practice freedom of religion has become in the United States during the COVID-19 shutdown. The health emergency has clearly exposed limitations to our liberty that we could never have imagined. John Adams, one of our great founding patriots, left us with a warning, "A Constitution of Government once changed from Freedom, can never be restored. Liberty, once lost, is lost forever."

Whether or not a vaccine or antidote will ever be developed to combat COVID-19 is unknown. The real question is, what antidote or vaccine will be available to protect civil liberties and religious freedom against tyranny for America's future? Only time will tell.



Chris Long is the President of the Christian Alliance of America, a public policy, voter education grassroots organization representing Christian interests before the U.S. Congress and state legislatures. The Christian Alliance of America advocates for pro-life, pro-family, religious liberty, First Amendment issues and produces nonpartisan educational voter guides which can be distributed in churches. [www.CAAmerica.org](http://www.CAAmerica.org)