



TEXAS' CHRISTIAN NATIONALISTS RESPOND TO COVID-19: MARCH THROUGH JULY 2020

David R. Brockman, Ph.D.
Nonresident Scholar, Religion and Public Policy

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented governments at all levels in the U.S. with perhaps their most severe public policy crisis other than wartime. January 2020 saw the first known U.S. case of COVID-19; the first known death from the disease occurred the following month.¹ By November 10, over 10 million Americans had contracted the disease and more than 237,000 had died—a death total far exceeding battle deaths from World War I, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined;² just over 18,000 of these COVID-19 fatalities were Texans.³ Across the nation, businesses closed, unemployment surged past 14%, and the gross domestic product plunged by an annual rate of nearly 33% in a single quarter.⁴

As if all this were not bad enough, the disease and the often-disorganized government response to it served to further roil an already polarized populace. Angry debates erupted over face coverings, business and worship center lockdowns, government financial aid, and even the dangers of COVID-19 itself. As Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs note, the pandemic “quickly ... became absorbed into partisan culture wars”; those on the left favored precautionary measures such as shutdowns and wearing masks, while many conservatives questioned the severity of the pandemic and attacked precautionary measures as government overreach and assaults on personal liberty.⁵

Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs also find that right-wing opposition to precautionary measures was undergirded by adherence to Christian nationalism.⁶ This ideology, also known as Christian Americanism,* consists of two related claims: that America’s founders intended that the nation be guided by Christian beliefs and that Christian teaching should again govern law and public policy today.⁷

This report examines how prominent Christian nationalists in Texas responded to this crisis in the critical first five months of the pandemic, March through July 2020, in which the state moved from lockdowns to reopening and then back to partial lockdowns after a spike in cases. The focus is on those lawmakers and activists profiled in my March 2020 Baker Institute report, *Christian Americanism and Texas Politics since 2008*. At the center of the story is Texas Governor Greg Abbott, the highest-ranking Christian nationalist in state government, who has, since March 31, led the state’s response to the pandemic. During the pandemic, Abbott has been both a champion of the Christian nationalist agenda and the target of attacks by his fellow Christian nationalists. On the one hand, Abbott used the pandemic as an opportunity to ban most abortions in the state, a longtime Christian nationalist goal, and to carve out religious exemptions that seem to have mainly benefited conservative Christian congregations. On the other hand, the governor’s attempts to control the spread of the virus ignited a revolt within the Christian nationalist movement in Texas, a revolt marked by the distrust of science that Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs find among Christian nationalists nationally.

*Although I prefer the term “Christian Americanism” as more evocative of the movement’s main goal, an explicitly Christian America, the equivalent term “Christian nationalism” is more common in the literature, and I adopt it here.

After a brief summary of the governmental actions to curb COVID-19 in Texas, this study examines three key aspects of the Christian nationalist response to the crisis: Abbott's abortion ban; conflicts over precautionary measures; and the Christian nationalist response to the mainstream science underpinning those measures. As of this writing (November 10, 2020), the crisis is still ongoing, debates over the proper response to it continue to rage in Texas, and the conclusions presented here are therefore subject to revision.

Brief Summary of the COVID-19 Crisis in Texas and Government Response

The Texas Department of State Health Services announced the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Texas on March 4, 2020; Abbott declared a state of disaster nine days later.⁸ He followed this on March 19 with an executive order prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 people, closing schools and gyms, and limiting bars and restaurants to pickup, delivery, or drive-thru.⁹ On March 22, to preserve hospital capacity and personal protective equipment for treatment of COVID-19 cases, he banned nonessential medical procedures.¹⁰

Several local officials urged Abbott to issue a statewide shelter-in-place order, but he at first refused, though "he welcomed local officials to take more restrictive action."¹¹ He would later reverse himself on this, as he did several more times in the period under study.

Officials in Texas' largest counties quickly issued their own lockdown orders. These generally prohibited social gatherings, closed all but those businesses classified as "essential," and directed residents to stay home except for carrying out essential activities (such as visiting a health care professional or the grocery store).¹²

These orders also banned in-person religious worship. On March 24, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo prohibited such services, allowing only video and telephone worship; violators were subject to a \$1,000 fine.¹³ Bexar, Dallas, and Tarrant counties similarly banned in-person worship.¹⁴ The rationale behind these prohibitions was compelling: early in the pandemic, outbreaks of COVID-19 had been traced to worship services and other religious gatherings.¹⁵ However, these bans soon drew fire from Christian nationalists in Texas as an assault on religious liberty.

Perhaps mindful of these complaints, on March 31, Abbott issued his own statewide stay-at-home order, explicitly superseding local orders.¹⁶ Abbott added religious services to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security list of essential services exempt from lockdown.¹⁷ However, he specified that congregations should hold in-person worship only if virtual or "drive-up" worship was not feasible.¹⁸ The March 31 order also closed businesses deemed nonessential, including gyms, massage establishments, and cosmetology salons, and restricted bars, restaurants, and food courts to pickup or delivery.¹⁹

As stay-at-home orders took effect in Texas and across the nation, the economy slowed dramatically, and some of Abbott's fellow Republicans began pushing for an end to the lockdowns. On March 22, President Donald Trump tweeted (in all capitals), "WE CANNOT

LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF,” the “cure” referring to the shutdowns implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19 (the “problem”).²⁰ Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick—one of the state’s most visible Christian nationalists on the national stage—echoed the president’s complaint the following night on Fox News. He suggested that senior citizens like himself would be willing to sacrifice themselves to COVID-19 rather than let the U.S. economic system falter.²¹ Meanwhile, many Texas Democrats argued that the state did not have adequate testing and contact tracing capacities to permit safe reopening.²²

Apparently bowing to pressure from business interests and members of his own party, Abbott announced in mid-April that Texas would begin reopening. He declared there were “glimmers that the worst of COVID-19 may soon be behind us,” and noted that the infection rate was stabilizing. “We have demonstrated that we can corral the coronavirus,” Abbott said.²³ That sunny reading of the situation contrasted sharply with the views of several epidemiologists and public health experts, who warned that Texas did not yet have sufficient testing and contract tracing in place and that a spike in COVID-19 cases was likely if restrictions were eased prematurely—warnings that would prove prescient.²⁴ Nonetheless, the governor did ease restrictions, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Between mid-April and mid-June, he issued a series of executive orders allowing various businesses and other activities to reopen.

As the reopening proceeded, many local officials, concerned about increased chances for community spread of the coronavirus, moved to require citizens to wear face masks in public spaces. In mid-April, Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins and Harris County Judge Hidalgo issued face covering orders, with penalties for violators.²⁵ These moves spurred protests by conservatives and libertarians, as well as legal action by Houston-area power broker Dr. Steve Hotze and his associate, attorney Jared Woodfill.

On April 27, in Executive Order GA-18, Abbott overruled local face mask orders. He encouraged Texans to wear face coverings, but declared that “no jurisdiction can impose a civil or criminal penalty for failure to wear” them.²⁶ This forced Hidalgo and Jenkins to remove enforcement provisions from their orders.²⁷ GA-18 also allowed limited reopening of additional categories of businesses.²⁸ In a press conference on the same day, the governor, flanked by Lieutenant Governor Patrick and Texas House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, declared that it was “time to set a new course ... that responsibly opens up business in Texas.” However, he held off on reopening barbershops, hair salons, bars, and gyms, saying that he hoped to allow them to resume operations “no later than mid-May.” When asked how GA-18 would be enforced, “Abbott said all his executive orders during the pandemic have carried a potential punishment of up to a \$1,000 fine or 180 days in jail.”²⁹

Soon thereafter, Abbott again changed course. Dallas hair salon owner Shelley Luther publicly defied the governor’s orders. At the behest of Dallas County officials, a state district judge ordered her to shutter her salon, and when she refused, sentenced her on May 5 to seven days in jail. Luther’s case became a cause célèbre in conservative circles. Although she had flouted Abbott’s own order, the governor quickly came to her defense.³⁰

And though Patrick had stood by the governor during the April 27 press conference in which the order and penalties for noncompliance were announced, he condemned the sentencing and offered to pay Luther's fine and serve her jail time.³¹ On May 5, Abbott issued another executive order allowing cosmetology, hair, and nail salons to reopen ahead of the schedule he had previously announced.³²

In the following weeks, Abbott continued the reopening. His June 3 order (GA-26) allowed most businesses to reopen to 50% capacity, with no occupancy limit on religious services, childcare providers, youth camps, and a few other categories; it further allowed some business establishments to move to 75% capacity.³³

Yet by mid-June, as scientists and public health experts had warned, COVID-19 cases surged, at what Abbott himself termed "an unacceptable rate."³⁴ Although he had previously rejected face mask mandates, on June 17 the governor allowed local governments to require that businesses require customers and employees to wear masks.³⁵ County officials quickly issued orders following the governor's new guidance.³⁶

Still, COVID-19 cases continued to spike. The number of new daily cases more than doubled between June 10 and June 23, then nearly doubled again by July 15.³⁷ On June 23, Abbott granted local authorities the power to prohibit gatherings of more than 100 persons.³⁸ Three days later, he put the reopening process on hold, shutting down bars and rolling back restaurants from 75% to 50% capacity.³⁹ Finally, on July 2, he contradicted his own earlier stated position by issuing a statewide mask mandate, with a possible \$250 fine for violations; in a separate order, he once again prohibited gatherings of more than 10 people.⁴⁰

As of the end of July, Abbott's reopening process remained on hold as new cases hovered between 8,000 and 9,000 per day, and total fatalities topped 6,000.⁴¹ The political cost for the governor during this period was high. From late April to late July, approval of Abbott's handling of the pandemic slipped from 61% of Texas adults to 38%, only slightly higher than President Trump's dismal 32% approval rate among Texans.⁴²

Having reviewed how the crisis played out in Texas during the period under study, we can now move to three key aspects of the response to the pandemic by prominent Christian nationalists in Texas: the abortion ban; conflict over Abbott's handling of the crisis; and distrust of science.

Abortion Ban

Although opposition to abortion is by no means confined to Christian nationalists, banning the practice has long been a goal of theirs; they often point to the continued legality of abortion as emblematic of the nation's departure from its allegedly Christian roots. For instance, amateur historian David Barton claims not only that the Founders intended to ban abortion, but that the limited government established in the Constitution prohibits the practice.⁴³ Pastor Robert Jeffress complained that "non-Christians and atheists have perverted the U.S. Constitution by making it more inclusive to non-Christians"; one sign of

this secularization of American society is the legalization of abortion, he said.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Whitehead and Perry find that Christian nationalism strongly correlates with opposition to abortion.⁴⁵

Like his fellow Christian nationalists, Abbott is an outspoken opponent of abortion. For instance, at a 2016 anti-abortion gathering, "he vowed to make Texas 'the strongest pro-life state'" in the nation.⁴⁶ Thus it came as no surprise that Governor Abbott and his administration attempted to use his March 22 ban on nonessential medical procedures as an opportunity to bar most abortion services in Texas.⁴⁷

Texas abortion providers quickly challenged this move in federal court.⁴⁸ The ban was partly overruled by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, which first permitted women near the state's gestational limit to proceed with abortions and later allowed medication abortions as well.⁴⁹ Abbott's order expired on April 22, and was not renewed.

Despite its partial failure in court, the ban seems to have achieved the Christian nationalist goal of interfering with abortion services. It reportedly resulted in the cancellation of hundreds of abortions.⁵⁰ On the other hand, some Texas women found ways to get around the ban. One study found that the period when Abbott's ban was in place saw a significant increase in women requesting medication abortion by mail.⁵¹ Though Abbott only partly succeeded in stopping abortions in Texas, he did disrupt abortion care for many Texas women. He was also able to display his anti-abortion bona fides to his Christian nationalist and religious right supporters in the state.

Conflict between Abbott and other Christian Nationalists

Those bona fides, however, did not prevent some of Abbott's fellow Christian nationalist Texans from attacking other aspects of his approach to the pandemic. As one writer noted, although "Texas Republicans have long sparred with one another, with feisty internal disputes in recent years over gun rights, bathroom bills and other culture-war issues, ... since the spring, as the coronavirus began to take hold across the state, it has been an all-out battle of red versus red."⁵² In fact, Abbott faced an open revolt from several prominent Christian nationalists in Texas, who vigorously rejected his precautionary measures.

The critics of measures intended to control COVID-19 include the following Christian nationalist Texans profiled in *Christian Americanism and Texas Politics since 2008*: amateur historian David Barton; Houston-area doctor Steve Hotze; conservative oilman Tim Dunn; and state Senator Bob Hall (R-Edgewood).⁵³ Other Christian nationalist critics include: Hotze's associate, attorney Jared Woodfill; Barton's son and *WallBuilders Live!* podcast cohost Tim Barton; and another *WallBuilders Live!* cohost, self-styled "Constitution Coach" Rick Green.

The Honeymoon Phase

Early on in the COVID-19 crisis, many prominent Christian nationalists in Texas appeared willing to cooperate with state and local preventive measures, including bans on in-person worship. In a March 26 email message, state Senator Hall encouraged constituents to “follow the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidance to safeguard the health and safety of our fellow Texans. Our priority is to ensure we stop this virus so we can resume our normal lives.”⁵⁴

What we might call the “Barton Circle”—David Barton, Tim Barton, and Rick Green—also displayed a spirit of cooperativeness early on. In an April podcast episode, David Barton answered a listener question about church lockdowns: “This is not the government shutting down churches. This is just the government shutting down everything. ... I don’t look at this as a problem as much as an opportunity” for churches.⁵⁵ Green agreed: “Let’s follow these guidelines so we don’t put those people we love most at our church at risk.”⁵⁶ The cooperative spirit extended even to face mask mandates, which had already become a bone of controversy, especially among conservatives.⁵⁷ Addressing a listener question about whether it is constitutional for an employer to require staff to wear masks, David Barton replied, “It’s not a constitutional issue, but more of a courtesy issue. ... I want to protect somebody else’s inalienable right to life. And I don’t want to be a carrier and contaminate them.”⁵⁸

Barton, however, voiced some wariness about government-ordered quarantines. They must be “limited and temporary and universal,” he said. He cited a Texas town (which he did not name) which had allowed daycares to open but not churches: “No, no, no. If daycares can meet, churches can meet.” He also cited lockdowns in Virginia, Illinois, and New York City that he believed unfairly and unconstitutionally targeted churches.⁵⁹ (By the time this episode aired, Governor Abbott had classified worship services as essential in Texas.)

Hotze and Woodfill Lawsuits

Other prominent proponents of Christian nationalism, however, were far less sanguine about precautionary measures. In late March, Woodfill and Hotze filed the first in what would become a series of lawsuits challenging pandemic restrictions. On behalf of Hotze and three Houston-area pastors, Woodfill sued Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo over the county’s March 24 ban on in-person worship.⁶⁰

Soon after that suit was filed, Abbott, who had until then left the COVID-19 response largely to county and city officials, stepped in. In his March 31 statewide stay-at-home order, the governor overruled local in-person worship bans and declared worship services essential.⁶¹ Texas became one of only 15 states that allowed religious gatherings without limiting their size.⁶²

Abbott’s action by no means satisfied some of his fellow Christian nationalists in Texas.⁶³ On April 16, state Senator Hall sent the governor an open letter which claimed that “dire predictions” about the “Chinese Corona virus” [*sic*] had not come to pass; he urged Abbott

to roll back COVID-19 restrictions and to “prohibit, with penalties, any local government entity from placing any restriction on religious activities” or from implementing “policies that violate individual privacy rights.”⁶⁴

On his Patriot Academy website, Barton associate Rick Green charged that Abbott had “put the Constitution in quarantine” in his March 31 order. Though Green acknowledged that he had previously defended the governor’s orders, he said he was now “shocked at how far [Abbott] has gone with this draconian new order.”⁶⁵ “‘Disappointed’ does not come close to describing what I felt when I read the Governor’s executive order,” Green wrote. “Righteous Anger. That’s a little more accurate.”⁶⁶

Tim Dunn, a major donor to conservative and Christian nationalist causes, voiced similar criticisms—though without explicitly targeting Abbott—in an April open letter to President Trump. Workplaces have been “upended” by lockdowns, “and must be restored,” declared Dunn and his coauthors. They charged that “many state and local governments ... are using wrong and confusing data to strip Americans of basic liberties, and to advance tyranny at an alarming rate.” The letter advocated instead a libertarian approach to the pandemic: “Let Americans manage their own risks.”⁶⁷

In mid-April, Abbott himself became the target of Hotze and Woodfill’s legal actions. Joining with several pastors, they sued the governor in Travis County state district court, claiming that his March 31 order “infringe[d] on their constitutional rights.”⁶⁸ “The Texas Constitution guarantees our God-given unalienable rights to worship, to peaceably assemble, and to move about freely without unconstitutional restrictions on one’s ingress and egress. None of these rights is contingent upon our health status or subject to the limitations Governor Abbott is attempting to impose on these rights,” the lawsuit alleged.⁶⁹ (As of the time of writing—November 10, 2020—the case is still listed as pending.⁷⁰)

Nonetheless, Abbott effectively sided with Hotze and Woodfill—at least initially—on face mask mandates. When on April 22 Hidalgo mandated that Harris County residents wear face coverings and practice social distancing, several prominent Christian nationalists denounced the action. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick called it the “ultimate government overreach.”⁷¹ Hotze and Woodfill again took legal action against Hidalgo. In a suit filed in Harris County state district court on April 23, they asked for an injunction on Hidalgo’s order, on the grounds that it violated the Texas Constitution and was more restrictive than Abbott’s executive orders—one of which, ironically, they were then challenging in court (the March 31 order). (Their request for an injunction against Hidalgo’s order was later denied.)⁷² On April 26, Hotze and Woodfill also filed a petition for a writ of mandamus (a court order directing a government official to correct an abuse) against Hidalgo.⁷³ (The Texas Supreme Court subsequently denied this petition.⁷⁴)

As he had done on March 31 regarding in-person worship, Abbott once again took the side of Hidalgo’s critics. In his Executive Order GA-18, he explicitly superseded local face mask orders and nullified any penalties for failure to wear face coverings.⁷⁵ What influence the Hotze-Woodfill lawsuit against Hidalgo had on Abbott remains unclear. Yet as in the earlier

case of local bans on in-person worship, Hotze and Woodfill seem to have gotten their way even without a court ruling in their favor.

Rifts Continue during Reopening

Even as Abbott began the process of reopening Texas in mid-April, he continued to face attacks from prominent Christian nationalist Texans, who argued that he was moving too slowly in lifting restrictions.

In an April 23 email to constituents, state Senator Hall wrote that Texas Republicans “need to lead by opening Texas back up, and letting Texans get back to work.”⁷⁶ In a June email, Hall wrote that it was initially appropriate for government officials to “push the pause button,” but that Texas and other states had “hit the kill button instead,” resulting in economic “destruction” and “government intimidation through messages calculated to create fear and distrust in one’s neighbors.”⁷⁷

Similar complaints surfaced from the Barton Circle, though not mentioning Abbott explicitly. On the June 3 *WallBuilders Live!* episode, David Barton noted that legal action over pandemic restrictions had moved beyond churches pushing to resume in-person worship to businesses pushing to reopen: “There is an inalienable right to make a living for myself and my family and [governments lockdowns are] impeding me from doing that.”⁷⁸

Meanwhile, Hotze, Woodfill, and their allies continued their legal assault against the governor.⁷⁹ On May 29, Hotze and a coalition of business owners and pastors asked the Texas Supreme Court to strike down as unconstitutional Abbott’s executive orders relating to COVID-19.⁸⁰ (On July 17, 2020, the Texas Supreme Court dismissed the lawsuit for lack of jurisdiction.⁸¹) In June, Woodfill filed a similar complaint against Abbott, this time in federal district court. The June 15 complaint, filed on behalf of Hotze, Rick Green, and over 1,300 other plaintiffs, alleged that it was unconstitutional for Abbott to allow some businesses to open fully while others remained shuttered or operating at limited capacity; the suit also sought an injunction against contact tracing.⁸² (The case was dismissed on July 22, 2020.)

In a May 2020 newsletter entitled “The Coronavirus Fraud: Power, Control and Money,” Hotze took aim at both the governor and Hotze’s former business associate Dan Patrick: “Although they are now ‘allowing’ [businesses and churches] to open slowly, Abbott and Patrick have cost nearly 2 million lost jobs in Texas—and many will never return. Hundreds of thousands of businesses are on the verge of bankruptcy or have already gone bankrupt.”⁸³ On his Conservative Republicans of Texas News website, Hotze contended that Texans’ “God-given, unalienable Constitutional rights and liberties have been trampled upon by Governor Abbott’s executive orders closing businesses and church services, as well as by his decision to implement surveillance and contact tracing of all Texans.”⁸⁴

Flak over Pausing the Reopening

In June, as COVID-19 cases surged again, Abbott allowed local governments to mandate that businesses require customers and employees to wear masks. The governor's move drew an angry response from state Senator Hall. In a June 19 email, Hall wrote that "the Governor has managed to turn the rule of law, the role of government, individual liberty, and the free market on its head ... Now it appears that as long as we allow the Governor's actions under the Disaster Management Act, we are expected to live as if we have a monarchy."⁸⁵

Abbott's subsequent moves to pause the reopening and close bars also drew legal fire from Hotze and Woodfill. Two days after the bar shutdown, Woodfill, on behalf of a group of Texas bar owners (this time without Hotze), sued Abbott in state district court, alleging the bar shutdown "is unconstitutional and unfairly discriminates against bar people and bar spaces."⁸⁶ Then, on July 2, one day before Abbott's statewide mask mandate took effect, Woodfill and Hotze, along with Rick Green and others, filed suit against the governor in an attempt to block the order, again claiming that the order and the law authorizing it are unconstitutional.⁸⁷ (As of the time of writing—November 10, 2020—both suits are still pending in Travis County state district court.)

In summary, the COVID-19 crisis revealed fissures in Texas' Christian nationalist community. As Abbott worked to stem the spread of the virus, many of his fellow Christian nationalists railed against his actions as tyrannical overreach. These divisions underscored a point raised in *Christian Americanism and Texas Politics since 2008*: Christian nationalism is not a cohesive political movement, but instead "functions as an ideological tendency within the broader Christian right."⁸⁸ Apart from the shared—though vaguely defined—goal of privileging conservative Christianity in law and public policy, Christian nationalists are a fractious lot, as likely to do battle with one another as against progressives, secularists, and proponents of church-state separation.

Distrust of Science

Rancorous though the fight over Abbott's COVID-19 response undoubtedly was, it tended to conceal a substantial point of commonality between the governor, his Christian nationalist critics, and Christian nationalism generally: namely, a profound distrust of scientific authority. In a recent study, Baker, Perry, and Whitehead find Christian nationalism to be "a key cultural mechanism connecting religion, politics, and opposition to scientific authority among the American public" and a consistently "strong predictor of opposing scientific authority on controversial issues of science and religion, outpacing the effects other religious and political characteristics."⁸⁹ This opposition is less about science per se than "status politics," an attempt to assert the dominance of conservative Christianity, rather than science, as "*the* moral authority in the public sphere."⁹⁰ The distrust of science among prominent Christian nationalists in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic has tended to manifest neither in an outright rejection of science itself, nor in advancing religious over scientific claims, but instead in a dismissal of the

epidemiological predictions and models on which government leaders, including Abbott, based public policy responses to the pandemic.

While the governor has shown some willingness to rely on that science, he has at times appeared to disregard it, or to rely on it only selectively. For instance, after the reopening was under way, virologist Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, argued that Texas was reopening too rapidly, without sufficient testing and contact tracing in place, and that by relying too heavily on the new case rate, Abbott was neglecting more significant measures such as hospital and intensive care unit admissions.⁹¹ It should be noted, however, that in late August, the governor responded to those criticizing his orders by insisting on the importance of scientific and public health experts.⁹²

One of those critics, state Senator Hall, claimed in his April open letter that though the governor's "initial actions were reasonable and prudent," they "unfortunately were based on faulty models," some "more than 2,000% wrong."⁹³ Similarly, on a May *WallBuilders Live!* episode, David Barton declared that "all the models were wrong": "In Texas, we were told 495,000 [COVID-19 deaths], we're still less than 1,500."⁹⁴ On an episode the following week, his son Tim claimed that the original scientific information about COVID-19 on which lockdowns were based was "incredibly flawed."⁹⁵

In fairness, Hall and the Bartons made these comments before the mid-June surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Texas and nationwide. It was after that surge was in full swing, however, that Lieutenant Governor Patrick weighed in. On a July 1 Fox News appearance, he took issue with National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci's suggestion that states like Texas had reopened too quickly. Fauci has "been wrong every time on every issue," Patrick declared. He also said that he and other Texas leaders would be guided by "a lot of science" and "a lot of doctors," but not by Dr. Fauci.⁹⁶ Thus, instead of dismissing science altogether, Patrick's comments strongly implied that Texans should trust the state's conservative Christian leaders rather than scientists who disagree with them.

Perhaps most strident among Texas' Christian nationalists in dismissing mainstream science on COVID-19 is Steven Hotze. In the April and May 2020 issues of his newsletter, Hotze complained about the "mass hysteria" created by "government health care bureaucrats, fake news media, conventional doctors, and politicians" and called the pandemic "a manufactured health crisis" and "the greatest fraud ever perpetrated upon the American people."⁹⁷ In May, Hotze tweeted: "There is NO pandemic. There is a virus no worse than the flu, fake prediction models, ridiculously inflated death counts, and media-induced hysteria."⁹⁸

Drawing on data from the CDC, Hotze claimed that COVID-19 is less deadly than the seasonal flu.⁹⁹ He also contended, "Contrary to reports by government health bureaucrats ... [it] is not highly contagious."¹⁰⁰ Government-ordered lockdowns merely "preven[t] the development of natural herd immunity among the population."¹⁰¹ "Herd

immunity could be developed if the lockdown were ended now and people returned to their normal lives,” Hotze concluded.¹⁰² Instead of the preventive measures advocated by mainline epidemiologists and public health experts, he recommended that readers take refuge in Christian faith. “Trust God,” Hotze wrote. “We should demonstrate the courage of our Christian, Biblical convictions. ... ‘No evil will befall me, nor any plague enter my tent.’ —Psalm 91:10.”¹⁰³

The skepticism voiced by Christian nationalists is somewhat understandable. U.S. government scientists did initially project that 2.2 million Americans could die of COVID-19—too large by nearly a factor of ten. This estimate was, however, based on a worst-case scenario with no precautionary measures; most states, including Texas, did implement such measures.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, accurately predicting COVID-19 spread and lethality has been difficult; one model favored by the White House in March predicted 82,000 deaths by early August, whereas the actual death count turned out to be nearly double that.¹⁰⁵ Yet Christian nationalist critiques of mainstream science on the pandemic have been far from credible. Patrick’s claim that Fauci had been “wrong every time” simply does not hold up to scrutiny. In March 2020, Fauci estimated that 100,000 to 200,000 Americans could die from COVID-19;¹⁰⁶ as of November 10, 2020, the CDC had reported that nearly 238,000 Americans had died of COVID-19—indicating that Fauci’s earlier estimate was almost certainly too conservative.¹⁰⁷ As for the herd immunity promoted by Hotze, epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins contend that such immunity is not likely in 2020 and would come only at the cost of “a public health catastrophe,” including the deaths of over half a million Americans.¹⁰⁸

Throughout the March–July timeframe, Abbott’s critics displayed a deep distrust of precautionary measures and mainline scientific thinking, closely matching the findings of Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs in their nationwide study of Christian nationalists. Though Abbott was responsible for enacting such measures, and was roundly criticized by his fellow Christian nationalists for doing so, he himself demonstrated a similar aversion to precautionary measures—most prominently in overruling arguably prudent local prohibitions on in-person worship, nullifying local mask mandates, and moving to reopen the state without sufficient testing and contact tracing in place. Later, of course, he reversed course on masks and reopening bars. Yet overall, Abbott seems to have more in common with his Christian nationalist critics than their vociferous attacks on him might suggest.

Concluding Thoughts

There are two key takeaways from the response of prominent Christian nationalists in Texas to the pandemic during its initial five months. First, Abbott's abortion ban and his ruling that religious worship is an essential service not subject to lockdown offer insights into the Christian nationalist approach to governance. Second, the open rebellion of prominent Christian nationalists against the highest-ranking Christian nationalist in statewide office concealed a broader shared distrust of precautionary measures and science.

Turning first to the governance issue: As of March 31, the governor had taken actions amenable to his fellow Christian nationalists. He overturned local bans on in-person worship, which Christian nationalists had vigorously criticized. He also attempted to achieve, at least temporarily, the long-sought Christian nationalist goal of banning most abortions in the state. Yet in both cases he did so without recourse to Christian nationalist claims or rhetoric. Abbott's approach fits a broader pattern of Christian nationalist policymaking in Texas. As discussed in *Christian Americanism and Texas Politics since 2008*, though Christian nationalism asserts that (conservative) Christian teaching should govern law and public policy, Christian nationalist lawmakers in Texas filed few measures explicitly privileging Christianity over the past decade. Instead, they offered legislation that, though not explicitly pro-Christian, would serve to advance the Christian nationalist agenda, such as mandating school prayer in public schools and carving out "religious liberty" exemptions. However, this legislation was typically couched in terms of protecting religion generally, rather than Christianity in particular.¹⁰⁹

Much the same holds true of Abbott's order on in-person worship and his abortion ban. Official guidance on the March 31 order for houses of worship, jointly issued by Abbott and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, lacked any explicit reference to Christian nationalist claims; it instead grounded the order in federal and state constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion generally (rather than Christianity in particular).¹¹⁰ Still, since many congregations in Texas elected to continue without in-person worship, the main beneficiaries of Abbott's order appeared to be a relatively small number of conservative evangelical Christian churches in the state.¹¹¹ Abbott's abortion ban similarly did not mention Christianity or even religion; the sole justification given was to preserve hospital capacity and supplies for use in dealing with the pandemic. However, critics mindful of Abbott's and Paxton's earlier public comments on abortion recognized the move as an attempt to privilege conservative Christian beliefs over those of other religious and non-religious citizens.¹¹² For instance, Austin, Texas, pastor Amelia Fulbright called the ban a "move to force [a religious right] faith perspective onto the rest of society," part of an overall "tendency ... for Christian supremacy."¹¹³

These two instances of Christian nationalist governance during the pandemic support one hypothesis proposed in *Christian Americanism and Texas Politics since 2008*: namely, that the paucity of legislation explicitly privileging Christianity suggests Christian nationalists are "taking an incremental approach to breaking down church-state separation and privileging conservative Christianity." Even without explicitly pro-Christian elements, Christian

nationalist legislation and public policy measures “set legal precedents that could pave the way for more explicitly Christian-preferential legislation in the future, while at the same time furthering the broader Christian Americanist agenda—especially weakening church-state separation.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, the effect of Abbott’s March 31 order was to privilege religion over public health concerns, primarily benefiting conservative Christians, and to prevent women from accessing abortion services permissible under federal law but condemned by conservative Christians.

As for the second key takeaway, the intensity of the revolt Abbott faced from his fellow Christian nationalists may conceal a significant point of uniformity in Christian nationalist attitudes and behaviors, a uniformity that roughly aligns with a key finding by Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs in their national study: namely, a radical rejection of precautionary measures and a distrust of science.

As discussed above, the governor’s reluctance to act early on in the pandemic, his initial rejection of mask mandates, and his consistent refusal to ban in-person worship suggest that he was driven by the same disdain for precautionary measures and distrust of science as his Christian nationalist critics, though to a lesser degree. Similarly, in his reopening process, Abbott appeared to reject warnings from noted public health experts—warnings which were later vindicated—and to heed conservative voices pushing for reopening (though, to his credit, he was more cautious than they).

If Abbott was indeed motivated by a distrust of mainstream science similar to that of his Christian nationalist critics, how do we account for the fact that in several respects he refused to bend to their admonitions? One possible reason is that his allegiance to the ideology is more tenuous than that of, say, Barton, Hotze, or Patrick. As discussed in *Christian Americanism and Texas Politics since 2008*, “though Abbott occasionally deploys Christian Americanist talking points, he tends to be less forthright [than other leading Christian nationalists] ... in advocating for a Christian nation.”¹¹⁵ This may signal a less dogmatic approach to Christian nationalism, an approach that during the pandemic permitted Abbott to govern in a more pragmatic, less ideologically purist manner than his critics advocated. Another possible reason is that unlike his critics, Abbott was responsible for governing during the crisis. The Texas Legislature was not in session. With the exception of Hall, the governor’s chief critics were activists rather than elected officials. Moreover, 2020 is an election year. Though Abbott himself is not on the ballot, it stands to reason that he would be, on one hand, mindful of the need to keep his base on side as far as possible, yet, on the other hand, aware of declining poll numbers for President Trump, largely related to his handling of the pandemic, as well as the fact that Democrats appeared competitive in many state races. Perhaps Abbott calculated that a hard-line libertarian approach to the crisis—of the sort advocated by Hall and Hotze, and actually implemented by South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem¹¹⁶—could ultimately harm GOP chances in the fall election.

Whatever Abbott’s motivations, he continued to face opposition from his fellow Christian nationalists after the period under study here. In an August 5 email, Hall accused Abbott of violating the state constitution in acting by executive order; he called on the governor to

fully reopen the state's economy and convene a special session of the legislature to address the pandemic.¹¹⁷ More criticism came from newly elected state Republican Party chair Allen West, who in early August attacked Abbott's approach to the pandemic: "Orders, dictates, mandates, decrees, and things of that nature ... that's not what we're about in Texas. That's not what we're about in America."¹¹⁸

It remains to be seen whether Abbott and his fellow Christian nationalists will remain at odds over the state's response to the pandemic and how the politics surrounding the presidential election will factor into that response. Regardless, the Christian nationalist movement in Texas bears further watching as the state continues to wrestle with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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