

Covid, An Appropriate Response

Part One

*An Understanding and Sympathetic High Priest
(Hebrews 4:15)*

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@branchofhope.org
www.branchofhope.org
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For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Introduction

Having shared the gospel publicly for the first time, I arrived home looking forward to a good night sleep. That was not going to happen. Three o'clock in the morning my phone rang, and I was informed that the closest person in my life had been killed in an automobile accident. I was twenty-three and I was devastated.

For weeks it was difficult to breathe. My heart rate, which was normally about sixty beats a minute, was a hundred. Every morning I would wake up and just for a moment rested in the thought that I had awakened from a bad dream. But it was real. My first public sharing of the gospel was shortly followed by my first funeral.

I wouldn't say I was a mature Christian at the time. But in the few years I had been in the faith I had learned that true growth generally involves some type of suffering. Jesus Himself was made "**perfect through suffering**" (Hebrews 2:10b). He "**learned obedience through what He suffered**" (Hebrews 5:8b). Clearly, growth through suffering applied to His followers as well. Speaking of children of God, it is written,

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

If suffering yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness¹, it stands to reason that there can be great benefit from extreme suffering (this should

¹ And by the *fruit of righteousness* he means the fear of the Lord and a godly and holy life, of which the cross is the teacher. He calls it *peaceable*, because in adversities we are alarmed and disquieted, being tempted by impatience, which is always noisy and restless; but being chastened, we acknowledge with a resigned mind how profitable did that become to us which before seemed bitter and grievous. Calvin.

never be unnecessarily self-inflicted). It dawned on me, even at that young age, that I didn't want to waste an opportunity. I didn't want to so inappropriately respond to God's seemingly painful providence that I would profane, twist and curse that which God had designed to be a source of benefit, the peaceful fruit of righteousness. This type of suffering might come only once in my life. So far that has been the case.

I am not here to advertise that I did well. I only wish to communicate what I was seeking: A proper response to great suffering-an opportunity to be trained in such a way as to enjoy the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

The Church's Opportunity

It would appear, at present, the political turmoil and Corona virus has presented the church with a great opportunity. By "the church" I am not merely speaking of our church, but churches in general. A couple of weeks ago I went for a walk/jog on the beach and happened upon a volleyball buddy who is also a youth pastor at a church whose pastor is a friend of mine. I asked him things were going. He shook his head and told me the elders in his church were split four to four on how their church should respond to the issues surrounding the Covid.

Days don't go by when I don't hear about a church splitting or people leaving their church en masse. Approaching thirty-one years in this church, plus another ten years in ministry before that, I can't think of a more laborious, challenging and exhausting season than the one in which we currently find ourselves. And my biggest concern revolves around our relationships with fellow believers. The people we love the most can easily be the source of our greatest suffering.

In our recent study in Hebrews we learned that the difficulties surrounding the church can affect the church family. It's for this reason that the epistle's last chapter opens with the words, "**Let brotherly love continue**" (Hebrews 13:1). Paul offers a similar sentiment in his letter to the Galatians.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

We have a great opportunity in our current season to grow individually and grow as a body; to obtain the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Yet there seems to be great difficulty. And in a very paternal sense, this concerns me. It concerns me the way I would be concerned if I began to see a wedge grow between my own children due to their differences of opinion on certain matters.

I would like to address our current opportunity/challenge this morning. I will begin by seeking to explain why this is such a difficult issue. This I will follow by issuing an exhortation to us all. I recently listened to a lecture by a very respected theologian on the issue of Covid. He mentioned that after the Spanish flu of one hundred years ago the church spoke little of what had happened. He said the reason was due to a general embarrassment of how they behaved toward one another. I trust that I am not hoping against hope that we will fare better. Either way, such would be my objective.

Why So Difficult?

Little Historic of Biblical Precedent

Why is this so difficult? First, due to limited historical or explicit biblical precedent. One sees very little in confessions or systematic theologies dedicated chapters to pandemics. There is no 'Of Pandemics' in the Westminster Confession nor was I taught on this issue while in seminary. We depend on this more than we realize.

To be sure, there have been pandemics that Christians have had to contend with in the past. But there is no monolithic, agreed upon response. There are all sorts of reasons for this, not the least of which is the varying levels of pandemics and the medical advancements which dramatically change the landscape. Many things that were once deadly don't even make it into today's emergency rooms.

Immediate Impact

Second is the immediate impact upon everyone. As many of you may know, our church over the years has made significant theological transitions. Beginning as a church plant in the Foursquare denomination

(which leans charismatic) we are not in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Time does not allow me to embark upon the significant distinctions we now have with who we once were (all within Christianity).

But there was one change we made that was more difficult than all the rest: we started keeping children in during the church service. This was not a theological hot topic (like infant baptism or a millennial commitment). But it was the most difficult because all of the sudden the church service was full of pandemonium. My own children at the time were two, four and six. My wife went years without being able to give her full attention to the sermon.

Keeping the children in during the entire church service was not some lofty, esoteric transition that members theologically scrupled. It was a decision the elders made that immediately changed our routines and made life difficult for a lot of people. Such is the case with Covid. Nobody is sidelined. Everyone has been immediately and significantly affected.

The Vastness of the Spectrum

A third reason this is difficult is the vastness of the spectrum within orthodoxy. There are certainly things which should not be tolerated. Perhaps you think your church's response to the pandemic is not merely unwise, but explicitly and incontrovertibly sinful.

If such is the case, you have the vehicle of approaching the Presbytery of Southern California or the General Assembly of our denomination. Perhaps you go to a church where no such vehicle is available. That is something to consider. But I'm guessing for most of us, though we may not be entirely like-minded on the proper response, we're not ready to pursue church discipline.

Herein lies a great opportunity to begin to understand others. To work hard at listening and seeking to grasp the factors driving the convictions of others. And we should do this without assigning dark motives. It is God and God alone who can search and know the heart of man (Jeremiah 17:10; 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9).

There have been times when it was just a matter of minutes between being told I have a pastor's heart and being told just the opposite. I have a difficult enough time understanding my own heart, let alone the heart of another. Unless someone shares their motives, we should avoid assuming

motives. And even when someone uses ambiguous or questionable language when explaining their convictions, we should listen as charitably as possible.

It does seem that we have too easily assign fear, selfishness, rebellion, sheepishness, idolatry, faithlessness, etc. In my conversations with people I have found that there is generally a more thought reason for their convictions.

When I speak of the vastness of the spectrum, I am addressing the spectrum of the response to the mandates given by the civil magistrate along with the response driven by health concerns for others and ourselves. On one end of the spectrum are those who remain in almost full isolation and will wear masks even in their own homes or, at least, if they go in their yard. On the other end of the spectrum are those whose lives have changed very little, other than the shutdown of the society and the protocol requirements to enter certain establishments.

I am at a place on the spectrum. But I am not trying to convince you to adopt my place. I may actually seek to dissuade you from residing in my place on the spectrum. Why? Because you're not me. You're not my age. Your health may be better or worse than my own. You may be more or less at risk. We have members of our church in the eighties or nineties who have opted to live-stream the church service and I wholeheartedly agree with that decision.

For most people, their immediate primary concern is their own health and the health of others. Our own health and the vulnerability of others must assume a pinnacle in our response and place on the spectrum. As the catechism teaches,

Q. 68. *What is required in the sixth commandment?*

A. The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.

The message here seems easy enough, but the application has become quite broad. Some read this and believe the wisest and most loving response is to tight adherence to the advised protocols. Others think the current level of the pandemic warrants a cautious, but looser, response. Some believe the consequences of the protocols have created their own

unhealthy issues, economically, socially, psychologically, and even physically.

My point at this juncture is that a person's age or health, as well as the age or health of those with whom they come into contact with, will be factors in their response to Covid. Another factor is the level one believes the protocols to be effective, along with the side-effects of the protocols. I don't doubt that many will hear this, and their minds are drawn to information they have been given which has served to form their opinion. I must avoid going too far into the weeds here. I am not trying to get you to from or change your opinion.

What I am seeking to do is help all of us understand is the vastness of the spectrum. Why people might have conflicting responses to the current pandemic. We should avoid thinking that those who are adhering strictly or governed by fear or sheepishness and that those in a looser category are governed by impatience or selfishness. I am not saying those aren't factors to consider in our own hearts. We should examine our own motives. But not the motives of others.

The Civil Magistrate

A fourth variable pertains to people's convictions regarding the civil magistrate. To what extent to governing officials outside of the church have authority over the church or individuals in general? Most seem to recognize civil authority to be ordained by God.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God (Romans 13:1).

We are, therefore, to properly respond to God ordained authorities. Our general disposition should be one of submission to legitimate authority (parents, elders, employers, etc.). But there is disagreement regarding the spheres of jurisdiction among authorities. The elders of our church, for example, don't have the authority to tell you what to have for dinner. That is not within our jurisdiction.

Certainly, any authority which seeks to convince us to behave in a way as to disobey God's word should be disregarded (Acts 5:29). There

seems to be unanimous agreement on this. But there is a broad spectrum among Christians regarding the jurisdiction of authority figures.

Again, I am not, at least here, trying to get anyone to change their view on this. My objective is for us to realize that our brothers and sisters are seeking to behave consistently with their convictions. Is it possible that we are being easily and fearfully manipulated by dark political overlords? Maybe. Is it possible that we are just rebellious and disregarding legitimate authority established by God? Maybe. You can evaluate that in your own heart. But unless I know different, I should seek to respect that you have a well thought out conviction to which you're seek to hold.

The Church

Another variable adding to the difficulty are the varying opinions of the uniqueness of the church as an institution. What constitutes church and at what level do we have a commitment to hold services and attend it? Again, this is very broad.

Everyone would agree that there is a possible scenario where church should be cancelled. If there was a gas leak or a bomb threat and the fire department or police department said we have to empty out, no one (at least that I've talked to) would question that. But if they found the bomb and arrested the perpetrator but told us to remain closed for a year because 'You never know,' we might have some disagreement.

If someone is sick, even during normal times, it is perfectly understandable for them to stay home from church for their own health and the health of others. But at some level of your own health, or the health of others, you should probably go back. At what level are you too sick to go to church? Are we ready to answer that for others? This is all why it is so difficult!

Optics

Finally (and as you can see, this can go on forever) there are the optics. Some say that the willingness of churches to close their in-person services so easily gives the appearance of a lack of conviction. How essential can church be if they are willing to close their doors so easily?

Others say that the church's willingness to remain open demonstrates a lack of love and concern to a watching world.

Those both seem to be valid observations. Of course, the opinions of a watching world are not a top priority. There were many things Jesus taught which were not accepted by the watching world. Nonetheless, it is a factor. But similar to the other points of difficulty it all depends on the level.

I've spoken to no one who thinks we should shut the doors at the first sign of trouble so the world will admire us, nor have I spoken to anyone who thinks we should not be concerned at all with how the world might respond. It's just that the optics are very difficult to manage. The higher priority is to do that which is right.

The Current Options

In light of these varying degrees within the spectrum of orthodoxy our church has, at least currently, offered five church service options-from very loose to very tight. Because of these varying convictions we don't all see each other as often as we normally would. The absence and the distance make relationships and loving discussions difficult. We develop a surface-level understanding and begin critiquing the convictions of others and how well they are holding to their convictions.

An Initial Response

Next week I will offer an exhortation. What I am seeking to establish here is a willingness, similar to our Savior, to endure suffering toward a holy end. I am also praying we will, like our Savior, seek to understand. We have a High Priest who, though God, became man. And in doing so was able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). Let us ever look to Him to **"obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).**

Questions for Study

1. Can you recall going through great suffering? How did you respond? What can we look forward to in our suffering (pages 2, 3)?
2. What opportunity is Covid providing for the church (pages 3, 4)?
3. List some of the reasons Covid is providing such a difficult issue for the church (pages 4-8).
4. How can you personally respond better to those with whom you disagree (pages 4-8)?