

THINKING & RESPONDING BIBLICALLY IN A TIME OF VIRUSES AND VACCINES

AT THE RED DOOR COMMUNITY CHURCH

WHAT WE BELIEVE

All instruction should be given carefully, thoroughly and in line with what the Bible actually teaches, exploring its context, explaining its meaning, expounding its doctrine in connection to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Applying the truth of the gospel to the spiritual needs of those who listen, exalting the glory of God. Because God's Word is supremely "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness", and because the Bible contains the gospel on every page, such instruction should be evangelistic in its proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ.

If one was to describe the current atmosphere of our society in terms of a weather report it would perhaps go something like this:

We are currently experiencing the effects of a high-pressure system that is causing a chaotic and disruptive weather pattern across the nation. The effects of this system have produced an oppressive cloud system of fear and uncertainty that have brought with them intense showers of outrage, anger, and division. So far, destructive gale force winds of opinion have caused significant damage to relational structures across the country, leaving some seemingly beyond repair.

The purpose of this document is help equip us to navigate this season well; to think and respond biblically in this moment where we see many different responses surfacing in people and communities. Some are just hunkering down and trying to ride out the storm. Others are being swept up and along with its damaging effects. Some are afraid. Some are confused. Some are angry. Some are even unintentionally joining with the destructive forces.

For the Christian, we have a responsibility to seek to respond well and be people who will pursue peace amid the chaos. There is a beautiful opportunity for the people of God to be a counter-cultural point of difference in our time if we would have eyes to see and ears to hear what God is saying and doing, as well as willing hearts to respond in obedience.

The following thoughts are shared with the intent to equip the body of Christ to navigate this crazy, hectic weather pattern well, and to bring encouragement not just to hunker down and ride it out, not to give in to fear, anger, and uncertainty, but to be equipped to be people of Godly peace and wisdom.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to help equip us all to think and respond biblically to what God is doing in our world right now, and to be faithful to Jesus in this hour. The purpose is NOT to convince you to take or to not take the vaccine. It is not about taking sides within the vaccine debate. It's about how to respond to the challenges and decisions this moment presents in a way that truly advances good in our society and honours God. Of course, these are two sides of the same coin, for whatever honours God will be what is good and best for all people.

What follows are some tools and truths to help guide us in this stormy, disruptive season.

Note, these are applicable to any season of disruption. Together, they reveal God's higher ways that will allow us to rise above the chaos of the storm to see clearly so that we can respond well. And please note what follows is not by any means an exhaustive list. There are many more points that could be included with the seven listed below.

TOOLS & TRUTHS

1. Allow the Bible to frame our foundational understanding of the world

When we are not intentional, we can easily allow our screens to inform us as to what is going on in the world. When we draw our understanding of the world from news and social media everything can seem out of control and we can be fooled into believing that the only hope for peace and solutions rests in the decisions made by politicians, and in the wisdom of men.

Sovereignty of God

When we look at the Bible however, we learn that far from being out of control, the world is very much in the hands of an all-powerful sovereign God who is at work in human history to bring about his plans and purposes. What are those purposes? Paul in his letter to the Ephesian Church puts it this way:

Ephesians 1:9-10

He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

God's purpose through human history is to reconcile all creation to a place of unity with the Godhead and with one another. All events in human history will ultimately serve this purpose, even COVID and vaccines.

Ruling Authorities & Governments

The testimony of Scripture is that God has created authority structures to govern people and he has done this for our good and for His ultimate glory and purposes:

Romans 13:1, 3–4

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

The testimony of Scripture is also that God is sovereign over all rulers, nations, kingdoms, empires, and governments. He puts rulers in place and removes them according to his purposes (Daniel 2:21). Scripture also reveals that no government or ruling authority holds the solution to the problems of society. As the core problem of all humanity is sin, the hope for the world does not rest in governments but in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the Church as his vehicle of redemption.

Spiritual Forces that Oppose the Plans and the People of God

The Bible clearly reveals the reality for the children of God is that there are rulers, authorities, powers, and spiritual forces of evil who have a clear agenda to destroy, divide and frustrate the people of God (Eph 6:12). These forces are always at work; therefore, the Christian should not be surprised that culture is not on their side and that life seems hard and discouraging at times. Until Jesus comes again, we are in a battle, not with flesh and blood, but with the kingdom of darkness.

2. Resolve to trust in the way of Jesus.

A good question to ask ourselves in a time of disruption and uncertainty is “does my response to this situation align with the way of Jesus?” To help answer this question it is helpful to clarify what the way of Jesus is. In a nutshell, it is the way of love, self-denial, sacrifice, servanthood, truth, compassion and mercy. *It is the way of the cross.*

To call Jesus ‘Lord’ means to pledge our allegiance and submission to his rule and his ways. It means that we are now his followers, his disciples, seeking to pattern our lives after his. Jesus makes this clear:

Matthew 16:24

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life. This means that his life was good in every way. We need to trust that even though the way of Jesus is extremely hard and narrow at times, it is the good way, and it is the only way that leads to life and flourishing for ourselves and for others.

There is a great temptation in times of disruption to deny the way of Jesus by aligning with the ways of the world. We must be wise to this temptation. One such 'trend' prevalent in our cultural climate is that of the urgency of defending our rights. For the one who professes to follow Jesus, we are not to be those who are first concerned about our own rights. i.e., putting our needs first. But instead, as those called to be salt and light, and entrusted with the truth of the gospel, our first concern is to consider the needs of others (1 Corinthians 10:24). Just as Paul laid down his rights to serve the Corinthian church and not hinder the work of the gospel, so we too are called to do likewise (1 Corinthians 9).

3. Be wise to the ways and schemes of Satan and the weapons of the world

The call to the Christian in every season is to remain faithful to Jesus. This means we must be wise to the schemes and strategies of Satan so that we can effectively stand against them. His strategy is to fool us into using these same schemes and strategies ourselves, resulting in behaviours and attitudes that deny rather than glorify Jesus.

Romans 12:2 tells us that "we are not to conform to the patterns of this world." If we are not to conform to certain patterns, we need to know what these patterns are. These patterns and ways might seem obvious, but they can often have a seductive appeal to our flesh and in some way "feel" right. Anger can often seem like a justified response, but Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount teaches that to harbour anger towards another is akin to murder (Matthew 5:22). When we hold up the mirror of God's word, we often find that while we might feel right, we are behaving in a way that is far from right. Consider James' clear warning on anger in the following.

James 1:19-20

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

The ways and the weapons in our culture today are those of outrage, anger, fear, anxiety, intimidation, deception, division and coercion. These permeate the atmosphere in highly concentrated quantities, and they are also the tactics used by many to control or convince others of a particular view or opinion. This should not surprise us as Paul speaks to this in Galatians 5:16-24.

It's important the Christian is aware of these ways and schemes, so they are not influenced by them and are able to resist the temptation to engage in them. We must heed the following words of the Apostle Paul if we are to remain faithful to Jesus.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Timothy 2:23-25

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

In this hour the opportunity for division is heightened as we consider things like vaccination, vaccination passports, religious freedoms bills, our response to future anti-conversion therapy bills, how we gather as the church in light of these changing times, and how we understand end times theology and its implications.

The body is already divided through our myriad of denominational differences and approaches to worship, discipleship and evangelism. Is it possible that in this impending new season further division could be approaching?

It can be easy to focus our attention on what the enemy is doing in this time, but we must be discerning and attune to our hearts, minds and spirits to the bigger picture of what the LORD is doing. Through our differences Jesus desires to prove the authenticity of our unity in Him. We must remember Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 - LORD, make them one. We are not unified because of how we agree on vaccinations and the myriad of issues that push us away from one of another, we are simply one because of Jesus.

You may think that this is idealism or wishful thinking, but the unity that John 17 speaks of will be so radical, that it will cause an on-looking world to know that the Father has sent the Son. The way we love one another in the face of our differences, will reveal to people watching that we truly belong to Jesus.

May we value unity above being right.

4. Adopt a posture of humility

To respond well in this moment, it's important that we clothe ourselves in humility and be vigilant to identify and repent of pride. Pride will cause us to be defensive, critical, self-righteous, self-protective, and divisive. Adopting a posture of humility will enable us to be a force for peace, a non-anxious presence, in an environment super-charged with anxiety.

When ministering to a divided church Paul gives the church in Rome this following command.

Romans 12:3

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.

To consider ourselves with 'sober judgment' fosters a spirit of humility within us as we clearly see ourselves for the broken and flawed vessels that we are, while simultaneously realising we are wholly loved and accepted by our Heavenly Father.

Some suggestions as to how to be sober minded about ourselves include:

_Biases

We all carry around an inventory of different unconscious biases or blind spots. These are assumptions, beliefs, or attitudes that we aren't necessarily aware of and are nearly always contrary to the way of Jesus. Biases can cause us to respond to people or situations according to a preconceived belief or stereotype that we carry. Consider your attitude towards authority figures and structures. Are you someone who is naturally trusting or distrusting of those in power? It is helpful to consider why you hold to this belief. If you are sceptical and distrusting of the government and you find that you generally believe their decisions have an evil intent, is your belief grounded in truth or does it come from an unconscious assumption about people in positions of power?

Our biases can cause us to be incredibly ungracious to those who think differently to ourselves. In this current moment a generous and gracious response might be:

If You Are Un-vaccinated

Bear in mind that many who are vaccinated have done it with you in mind - they've acted out of concern for their community and their neighbours.

If You Are Vaccinated

Bear in mind many who are un-vaccinated are acting in good faith according to their conscience - it is troubled, and they are genuinely compelled by it.

_Fears

Rather than denying our fears or trying to hide them, we need to be honest and confess any fear that is operating in us. In Psalm 139 King David prays, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." Why did he pray this? Because he knew that

the power of anxious thoughts, once they take hold, lead us away from God's path. Any fear or sin that remains unconfessed and unrepented of will end up having great influence over us. When fear has control, it cripples us from being able to respond in ways that are faithful to Jesus.

In our current climate many are afraid but are perhaps too ashamed to admit their fears. Afraid of death, afraid of COVID, afraid of vaccines, afraid of what others will think about their choices. Fear doesn't lose its power when we try to hide it. It loses its power when we humble ourselves and confess it.

_Do The Plank

In times like these judgment and criticism can permeate the atmosphere in overwhelming quantities. The temptation to join in with judgment and criticism of those in positions of power and those who think differently can be incredibly strong. One of our greatest tools when tempted to stand in judgment and to adopt a critical spirit is to heed Jesus' words.

Matthew 7:1-5

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

When tempted to share words of judgment and condemnation about others, and yes, even those in government, first stop and look at your own life. For example, I don't like it when people have critical opinions and judgments about the decisions I make when they don't know what it's like to walk in my shoes. It would therefore be hypocritical of me to be abusive of the government over decisions they're making in this moment that I don't like or agree with when I don't know what it's like to walk in their shoes.

This doesn't mean we have to agree with every decision, but it does mean an attitude of judgment and condemnation is not an option for the follower of Jesus. We must heed Jesus' warning that when we judge others, we will be judged with the same measure we are using. As Jesus said to those gathered around the woman caught in adultery, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

5. A Matter of Conscience

Because taking the vaccine is not a sin, and because it's not a sin to refuse the vaccine, the decision to be vaccinated or not is then a matter of conscience. Our conscience is our consciousness of what we believe is right and wrong. The Bible is clear about how we are to relate to one another on matters of conscience (see Romans 14). We are not to condemn one another or allow division, and we are to honour one another's conscience.

We also need to be careful of the temptation to exalt our conscience. Although often reliable, it is also fallible. Consider the example of the Apostle Peter from Acts 10. Peter's conscience told him that Gentiles were unclean and there were certain animals that were unclean for him to eat. God gives Peter a vision of animals that the Old Testament declared unclean and then he commands Peter to "kill and eat". Peter's conscience is deeply offended by this. His conscience needed recalibrating. If the Apostle Peter's conscience needed recalibrating at times, we can be assured that ours will also. Therefore, we must always strive to remain teachable and correctable in this area.

6. Know God's voice

To be truly discerning in our time where there is so much noise, we must learn to hear the voice of God and be able to discern God's voice from the voice of our own conscience, the voice of fear and the voice of popular opinion. God's voice is that still and small voice. It is not loud, 'shouty' and intimidating like many of the voices in our culture. The pattern of the world is that it's the loudest voice who wins and that has the most authority, but that's not the way of God. Jesus didn't shout or rant or rave. He spoke the truth with authority.

To know God's voice requires spending time in the Bible. It requires the cultivation of a deep and rich devotional life. It requires a rigorous pursuit of the uprooting of sin in our life. It requires a dedication to a life of holiness. And it takes time. Discernment is the ability to think biblically about all areas of life. It is indispensable to an uncompromising life and without it Christians are at risk of being "tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:11-14).

Many Christians today profess to be hearing from God and share what they've heard prefaced with phrases such as "I believe God is saying...". As many of the "God is saying" thoughts being shared contradict one another either God is very confused or not everyone is actually hearing God's voice clearly. I suspect the latter is the case. When someone is sharing what they believe God is saying to them, a helpful guide as to discerning whether their wisdom is from God or not can be found from the book of James.

James 3:17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

We must discern our voice from the voice of God. When it's our voice and not God's we can find ourselves promoting our position by being loud, obnoxious and pushy. The reason humans do this is that they want and need to find safety and security in the position we hold. The problem for the Christian is we were never meant to find security in a position about the times in which we live, but in Christ. And so real revelation comes with a meekness because I don't need you to accept my position to feel better about myself.

7. Pray

This final point should perhaps be the first. To respond well in this time, we must get on our knees and pray. If we try to do any of what is shared above in our own strength we will stumble. We must pray for ourselves, for our neighbours, for our enemies and for our government and leaders.

Lord, we know that you are at work in our time. You are at work through viruses and vaccines to bring about your good purposes for us and for your world. We ask for your great wisdom, discernment, and courage to enable us to respond well to the situations and challenges that are impacting us. We desire deeply to be faithful to you in the testing of this season. May you be glorified in and through our lives as we seek to surrender our whole lives to your will and your good ways. In Jesus name. Amen!

Need to talk

As always if you would like to discuss any of the above, please make a time with one of our pastoral staff by emailing us at enter@thereddoor.cc

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