



Reformation Society of Western New York

Thursday, June 8, 2023

**COVID-19 AND THE CHURCH:
A RETROSPECTIVE CONVERSATION**

Matthew H. Fletcher

Webster Bible Church

675 Holt Road, Webster, NY

(585) 872-5150

www.websterbible.org

*COVID-19 AND THE CHURCH:
A RETROSPECTIVE CONVERSATION*

Introduction

The title of this paper conveys my goal for this gathering. The word *retrospective* means to be “contemplative of past situations, events, etc.” In this session, I want us to think carefully – not only individually but also collectively – about COVID-19 and its impact on the church. We want to have a *conversation*, an informal public exchange of ideas or opinions about this issue.

At least I hope we do! I confess that when Dave Theobald first approached me two years ago about speaking on this topic, I was reluctant to do so. I had already been sick *with* COVID as a virus and was already sick *of* COVID as a topic of conversation! Little did we know at the time that COVID was nowhere near over. It wasn’t until last September that President Biden declared, “The pandemic is over.” Even then he added, “we still have a problem with COVID.”

Yes, we do, and in more ways than one. That’s one of the challenges we face in having “a retrospective conversation.” It’s not entirely retrospective even now. We still see television ads by the NYS Department of Health urging people to get vaccinated. Mask-wearing is still required in many hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities. Furthermore, and most notably, as of last month (May 2, 2023), the stated number of COVID-19 cases worldwide had reached over 687 million, the number of deaths from COVID-19 was over 6.86 million, and the United States was still the country with the highest number of confirmed cases and deaths.¹

¹ John Elflein, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the U.S. – Statistics & Facts.” *Statista*, 3 May 2023. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.statista.com/topics/6084/coronavirus-covid-19-in-the-us/#topicOverview>.

As indicated by the idiom, “hindsight is 20/20,” situations and events are more easily analyzed when looking back on them as past rather than in the present moment. Though I wish there were more of a time gap between the end of the pandemic and this present moment, one benefit of discussing COVID now is that the key issues we faced are still fresh on our minds.

Some of the most pressing issues have also been the most polarizing. Christians who seemed to share similar convictions on most matters suddenly found themselves at odds with one another (in some cases at war with one another!) over certain issues. These issues included, but were not limited to, the proper relation between Church and State, the right exercise of Christian liberty, a holistic view of the believer’s health, and the responsible use of technology.

While more issues could be added to this list, these four concerns are broad enough to cover most of the practical matters with which the church had to wrestle during the pandemic. I have the unenviable role of venturing into these volatile topics on the front end of our conversation. My plan is to lay out the issues as objectively as I can, though at times my own thoughts on these matters will become evident to some degree. My aim is not to present my view as the “correct” one but to provoke meaningful conversation by providing some food for thought. Hopefully the result won’t be an all-out food fight! Rather, my prayer is that our retrospective conversation regarding COVID-19 and the Church would sharpen our thinking, strengthen our unity, and make us all better disciples and under-shepherds for Christ.

With these goals in mind, I would like to frame the conversation in the most helpful and least polarizing way. I believe the approach adopted by Christopher Watkin in his book, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, may provide the best framework for such a discussion (though in this paper I apply it loosely). In the

introduction, Watkin writes, “Given a choice between two camps or positions in our culture, the Bible frequently settles for neither and presents us with something richer than both, a subtler solution” that “cut[s] across the range of options presented to us,” thus leading us to discover that “those options were themselves distorted and dismembered versions of biblical ideas.”²

“This move of cutting across and rearranging false cultural dichotomies” is what Watkins calls *diagonalization*, which “usually comprises four elements”:³

1. It begins with a complex of *interrelated biblical truths*.
- 2a. It then shows how a *cultural dichotomy* splinters this rich biblical reality and offers it in fragmented form as a series of *mutually exclusive choices* ...
- 2b. ... or as an *unsatisfying compromise*.
3. Drawing on the complex truth of (1), diagonalization presents a biblical picture in which *the best aspirations of both options are fulfilled*, but not in a way that the proponents of those options would see coming.⁴

Theologian John Frame has observed that “God’s Word has a way of surprising us, of not fitting into our prearranged categories” and “understanding God’s will rarely means falling into lockstep with some popular ideology.”⁵ So, may the Spirit of God, through his word, grant us greater biblical clarity and sanctified wisdom as we converse about COVID with a humble heart, an open mind, and gracious interaction, in light of our own congregational and cultural context.

The Proper Relation Between Church and State

“The earth is the LORD’s and all that fills it, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1). Jesus declared, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18).

² Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17. Italics added.

⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 6-7. Cited by Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 18.

As Abraham Kuyper famously put it, “There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”⁶

God mediates his reign through his ordination of various institutions. Ralph Drollinger notes that “if the identifier of the existence of a God-ordained institution is the command to submit, then there are five ... institutions evidenced in Scripture”: marriage (1 Peter 3:1-5; Ephesians 5:22-33), family (Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20), the church (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-5), the state (Rom. 13:1-3; 1 Peter 2:13-14; Titus 3:1-2), and commerce (1 Peter 2:18-21; Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22).⁷

Peter writes, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him.... For such is the will of God” (1 Peter 2:13-14 NIV). “Submit” (Gr., *hupotasso*) means “to place oneself under” the institution of the state in this context. But Peter applies this principle more broadly by including the word “every,” meaning every other [God-ordained] institution.⁸ Drollinger further notes, “The Greek words behind the English word *institution* are *anthropine ktisei*, meaning in a literal sense . . . “for mankind what is created.”⁹ So, “the broad-meaning English word *institution* fails to convey all that the Greek word combination conveys, i.e., what has been created by God for mankind.

In thinking through the three primary institutions – the family,¹⁰ the church, and the state – we would do well to keep in mind their respective functions.

⁶ Quote from Kuyper’s inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University. Found in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

⁷ Ralph Drollinger, “God’s Institutions and Their Roles on Earth,” *Capitol Ministries*, 13 February 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 02 May 2023 from <https://capmin.org/gods-institutions-and-their-roles-on-earth/>. Personally, I would combine the institutions of “marriage” and “family” into the one institution of “family,” since marriage constitutes the beginning of a new household (Gen. 2:24).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ By “family” I mean both marriage and parenthood.

- The *family* exists to portray through marriage the covenantal love relationship between Christ and his bride, the church, and to produce through procreation and parenthood “godly children for the growth of the church and Christ’s kingdom and its ensuing, resulting positive impact on culture.”¹¹
- The primary function of the *church* is to “make disciples” (Matt. 28:18-20).
- The basic function of the *state* is to punish evildoers and to commend those who do what is good (Rom. 13:1-3), that is, to actively encourage virtue and discourage vice.¹²

Jonathan Leeman spells out the implications of Kuyper’s quote (on page 4), asserting, “Jesus rules over every square inch, but he does not rule over every inch in the same way. He grants different authorities to different parties. To parents he gives the power of the rod. To governments he gives the power of the sword. To churches he gives the power of the keys.”¹³

Each of these institutional spheres are ordained by God for specific purposes, and they function best when each of them focuses on their divinely assigned function. Uri Brito offers some helpful distinctions on “the relationship of spheres”:¹⁴

- While these spheres overlap in many places and circumstances, the pastor is not the father, the father is not the pastor, and the pastor is not the politician. Roles may overlap, but they should be fundamentally distinct.
- The Church should speak into the civil sphere because she is the mouthpiece of the kingdom. But she communicates fundamentally through psalms, sermons, and sacraments. She is not a headquarters for political rallies but the true politics of the city speaking from heavenly authority granted and established by the work of Christ. She does not speak from a central space, but her voice is spread into many localized spaces.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George*, edited by Andrew T. Walker (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 103. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Jonathan Leeman, “The Relationship of Church and State,” *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition [online]. Retrieved on 02 May 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-relationship-of-church-and-state/>.

¹⁴ Uri Brito, “Ten Theses on the Relationship of Spheres,” *Kuyperian Commentary*, 09 November 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 02 May 2023 from <https://kuyperian.com/ten-theses-on-the-relationship-of-spheres/>.

¹⁵ This point can easily and understandably become a springboard for a related conversation about Christian nationalism, which Paul Miller (professor of the practice of international affairs at Georgetown University and a research fellow with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission), defines as “the belief

- The Church cannot impose ordinary habits and rituals upon families outside her formal gathering. She can offer wisdom and insight, but the father is free to lead his family as he pleases under the ordinary gifts of grace and the rule of God.
- The state promotes the good and establishes order so that the Church and family may succeed in every way. She cannot usurp authority over either institution, and she cannot assume the role of priesthood or patriarch.
- When the state violates the freedom of the Church and family, she is to be rebuked and exhorted to return to her spherical role given by God. The same application is to be made to Church and family, but the demands are more significant to the one who holds the sword.

Gubernatorial mandates and other state regulations in response to COVID-19 sparked tremendous controversy over the relation between church and state. In seeking to provide a framework for conversation on this point, I find it helpful to go back to Christopher Watkin's concept of *diagonalization* and how Scripture dismantles false dichotomies that fragment interrelated biblical truths and present them as mutually exclusive choices (see page 3).

At the risk of over-simplifying the two most polarizing positions, I would sum them up this way: At one end of the spectrum were church members who took a *combative* approach toward the state ("they can't tell us what to do!"), and at the other end were those who took a *compliant* approach toward the state ("we must do whatever they tell us, unless it directly contradicts Scripture"). The combative party strongly emphasized the distinctive spheres and jurisdictional boundaries of church and state but often minimized or rejected altogether the occasional overlap between these two spheres. The compliant party emphasized the importance of submission to governing authorities but downplayed or ignored altogether their jurisdictional boundaries.

that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. Popularly, Christian nationalists assert that America is and must remain a 'Christian nation'—not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for what America must continue to be in the future." For more questions and answers concerning this subject, see Paul D. Miller, "What Is Christian Nationalism?" *Christianity Today*, 03 February 2021 [online] at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html>.

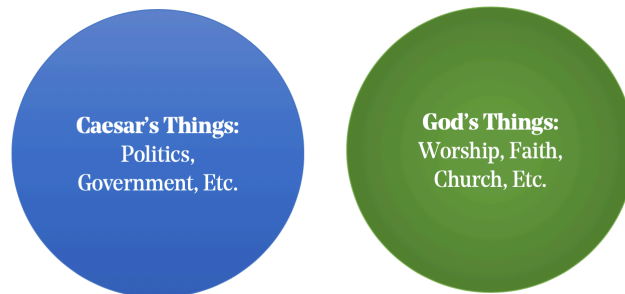
Instead of advocating a *combative* stance or *compliant* stance (as described above)

toward the state, Scripture promotes a *cooperative* approach. Jonathan Leeman writes,

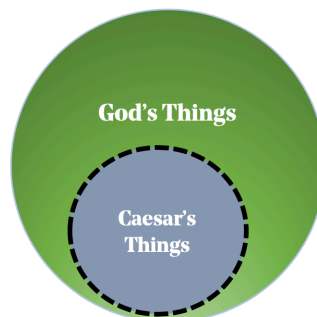
When we think about the separation of church from a biblical perspective, we discover something interesting: it rests upon an underlying foundation of cooperation, at least as God intends it. He means for them to do different things, and even to check one another when necessary, but all that presumes that both are working toward his ends. Both must work to enact his righteousness, each for their part. Governments should do so within the narrow lane of protection. Churches should so with a broader lane of perfection. Yet neither has permission from God to render their respective judgments according to some other god's version of right and wrong.¹⁶

Leeman goes on to warn against an unscriptural view among believers:

Too often, however, Christians interpret Jesus' words about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God's as if Caesar was somehow outside of God's jurisdiction. They envision two separate circles—one for Caesar's things and one for God's things.



Yet the context of these verses is worth noticing. Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. The people replied, "Caesar's." Yet every member of Jesus' largely Jewish audience would have known that Caesar himself was created in God's image. Really, what Jesus offered was a big circle with a smaller circle inside of it:¹⁷



¹⁶ Leeman, "The Relationship of Church and State."

¹⁷ Ibid.

Based on my own experience and observations during the COVID crisis, I would say that most churches and pastors erred in assuming too much authority on the part of the state. Whereas Christian parents diligently defend their jurisdictional boundaries from the illegitimate encroachment of the state with respect to the education of their children, pastors and churches have not been as vigilant when it comes to the corporate worship of their congregations. Throughout the COVID crisis, most pastors and churches seemed to let the state determine when and how they could worship corporately. Many pastors were quick to cite Romans 13 to defend their submission to state authorities but failed to emphasize and apply Hebrews 13 which speaks of submission to church leaders (verse 17). This failure to uphold the legitimate sphere of church authority seems to have revealed a flawed perspective of Jesus' words in Matthew 22:21, as noted by Leeman.

On the other hand, churches and individual believers who took a *combative* approach revealed their failure to cooperate with the governing authorities, often resisting them in a disrespectful and critical manner, thereby directly disobeying the biblical injunctions "to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people" (Titus 3:2). Many who took a combative stance also displayed a contemptuous attitude for the governing authorities. Such a disposition indicates more of a spirit of rebellion and self-autonomy rather than a commitment to do what is right for the glory of God and for the good of others.

In a fascinating section on "Trinity and Politics" in his book, *Biblical Critical Theory*, Christopher Watkin emphasizes the importance of "the few." The family, the church, and other nonstate groups comprise "the 'extended few,' ... those 'mediating organizations of civil society that act as a bulwark against the seesaw antagonism between the one" – the state – "and the

many” – the individuals within the state – “and that in some ways protect the individual from facing the state in atomized – and therefore vulnerable – isolation.”¹⁸ Watkin points out that “those who operate the levers of the state do not seek to eliminate privilege per se; they attempt to eliminate privileges that rival their own, the checks and balances on the state’s protected position.”¹⁹ The church and the family are God-ordained institutions that are meant to provide these checks and balances for the good of those in their care and for humanity as a whole. “The Trinity provides the blueprint and mandate for the mediation between the one and the many that is often lacking in modern political life.”²⁰

In a similar vein, Robert P. George contends, “Governments that trample on their citizens’ rights of conscience violate the humanity of their citizens and harm their societies politically, economically, morally, and socially.”²¹ Due to the separation of powers, “American citizens do not have to wait for their own government to act. Through active support and advocacy, ordinary citizens can and ought to defend religious freedom and pressure the government to take steps to protect religious freedom and home and abroad.”²²

This is what Grace Community Church (pastored by John MacArthur) did by defying the governor’s mandate, and what Capitol Hill Baptist Church (pastored by Mark Dever) did by suing the District of Columbia over worship service restrictions.²³ The attorneys for John MacArthur

¹⁸ Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. I realize that these quotes by Watkin on “Trinity and Politics” may raise more questions than answers, but that is even more reason to read his book. Limited space forces me to touch on this matter only briefly in this paper.

²¹ Robert P. George, “Job to Do,” 36. Cited in *Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George*, edited by Andrew T. Walker (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 27.

²² Ibid. For a broader reading on this subject, see also Glenn S. Sunshine, *Slaying Leviathan: Limited Government and Resistance in the Christian Tradition* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2020).

²³ For more information, read Aila Slisco, “Church That Defied Gavin Newsom’s COVID Rules to Get \$800k in Legal Settlement,” *Newsweek*, 31 August 2021 at <https://www.newsweek.com/church-that-defied-gavin-newsoms-covid-rules-get-800k-legal-settlement-1624801> and Kate Shellnut, “DC Settles

and Grace Community Church told *Newsweek*, "We are very pleased to see Pastor MacArthur and Grace Community Church's First Amendment protections fully vindicated in this case," adding, "It has been a hard-fought battle to preserve religious liberty and we hope that this result will encourage Californians, and all Americans, to continue to stand firm that *church is essential*."²⁴

Indeed, it is, as the remaining issues discussed in this paper will show. Even as we seek to foster a spirit of cooperation between the church and state, we must ever be aware of the jurisdictional boundaries between these two institutions. As Patrick Schreiner stated in a recent article, "We must remember that we have *ordered* allegiances."²⁵ The church is to be "a community that is loyal to King Jesus and make[s] all other political allegiances pale in comparison. ... And this will have a leavening effect upon society."

The Right Exercise of Christian Love and Liberty

One of the most divisive issues that plagued society during COVID was the issue of mask-wearing. This highly politicized point of contention made its way into the church. Yes, it is tragic but true. The body of Christ became deeply divided over a piece of cloth. One side called for loving your neighbor by wearing a mask because it protects their health and preserves our gospel witness, whereas the "anti-maskers" contended that "love delights in the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6) and showed that many healthcare professionals advise *against* mask-wearing.

Both sides talk about love but in many cases, but many of those holding these polarized positions did not often *show* love for one another. David wrote in Psalm 133, "How good and

\$220K Capitol Hill Baptist Lawsuit," *Christianity Today*, 11 July 2021 at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/september/mark-dever-capital-hill-baptist-church-dc-lawsuit-covid-gat.html>.

²⁴ Ibid. Italics added.

²⁵ Patrick Schreiner, "Political Life Begins in the Church," *9Marks*, 10 April 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.9marks.org/article/political-life-begins-in-the-church/>.

pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (NIV). But how awful and miserable life is when they don't! In his book, *Great Church Fights*, Leslie Flynn quipped, "Two chickens tied at the legs and thrown over a clothesline may be united, but they do not have unity."²⁶ Sometimes chickens peck one another to death, and so do Christians, killing their unity.

Romans 14 was written to help us avoid this outcome. In the two preceding chapters, Paul describes in practical terms the quality of Christian love. He writes in chapter 12, verse 9, "Let love be genuine." Paul then goes on to explain how such love expresses itself in relation to fellow believers and to non-Christians, including the governing authorities God has placed over us. In the last section of Romans 13, Paul shows us how loving our neighbor fulfills God's law and why we must not delay in showing such love – because the Lord could return at any time! As Paul begins chapter 14, he addresses a practical concern that every Christian faces: *How do we get along with people who don't agree with us?* How do we avoid dividing over our differences?

In this section of his letter, Paul addresses those who are "weak in faith" and those who are "strong in faith." Both groups were criticizing and condemning each other, thereby crippling their unity in Christ. In the original context, those who were "strong in faith" – the meat eaters – looked down on those who were more scrupulous about their diets and days. Instead of feeling compassion for them, they treated them with contempt and criticized them for being legalistic and narrow-minded. On the other hand, the "weak in faith" – believers whose consciences compelled them to observe certain dietary restrictions and holy days – judged those who didn't adhere to the same convictions. Paul urged both sides, "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." We could substitute the word "food" with masks. The same principle applies.

²⁶ Cited by Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p. 599.

While there are certainly biblical precepts and principles that inform our understanding about mask-wearing and all things COVID, the issues themselves are not explicitly set forth in Scripture. As Kevin DeYoung pointed out in a recent article, “the effectiveness of masking turned out to be far from clear.... Might the Bible actually be clearer about, say, abortion and gay ‘marriage’ than about the effectiveness of masks?”²⁷

Yet some church leaders made mask-wearing mandatory for their worship gatherings. Such a requirement, in my opinion, overstepped the jurisdictional boundaries of the state toward the church and/or the elders’ spiritual authority over their congregations.²⁸

Ultimately, the problem isn’t a difference in our perspectives, opinions, or convictions. The problem is the lack of peace among God’s people. Paul is more concerned about believers *doing* right than *being* right (in terms of their stance on disputable issues). So, throughout this passage, Paul raises key biblical principles that should compel us to pursue Christian unity:

1. God welcomes all believers (v. 3).
2. The Lord upholds every believer (v. 4).
3. The Lord is sovereign over every believer (vv. 5-9).
4. The Lord alone will judge every believer (vv. 10-12).

When it comes to disputable matters, those “gray areas” that are not explicitly spelled out in Scripture, we are to *accept* everyone even though we will not *agree* about everything.²⁹

²⁷ Kevin DeYoung, “A Dust-up among the Historians,” *WORLD Opinions*, 8 December 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://wng.org/opinions/a-dust-up-among-the-historians-1670504711>.

²⁸ Based on the information we had at the time, Webster Bible Church discontinued our public worship gatherings for a few months in 2020. When we resumed corporate worship in July of 2020, the elders sent a letter to the congregation which included various guidelines and the following statement: “Our strong recommendation is for all to wear masks in and out of the sanctuary and while singing.” We used the language of strongly recommend rather than require because we didn’t want to overstep our authority as elders on a disputable matter.

²⁹ Daniel M. Doriani, *Romans*. Reformed Expository Commentary, eds. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021), p. 488.

As Paul emphasizes repeatedly in Romans 14, *motives matter*. The one who observes the day observes it *for the Lord*. The one who eats, eats *for the Lord*. The one who abstains, abstains *for the Lord*. If we live, we live *to the Lord*. If we die, we die *to the Lord*. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are *the Lord's*.

Despite their differing convictions, the believers in Rome were motivated by a desire to please God. Paul never says that their respective views don't matter. Rather, he says, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:6). Search the Scriptures, pray for wisdom, seek godly counsel, and then follow your conscience, doing what you believe is right before the Lord. In his comments on Romans 14, John MacArthur offers some practical counsel:

In matters that are not specifically commanded or forbidden in Scripture, it is always wrong to go against conscience, because our conscience represents what we actually believe to be right. To go against our conscience, therefore, is to do that which we believe is wrong. And although an act or practice in itself may not be sinful, it is treated as sinful for those who are convinced in their own minds that it is wrong, and produces guilt.

It is also sinful, however, to try to impose our own personal convictions on others, because, in doing so, we are tempting them to go against their own consciences. Paul is therefore giving a two-fold command: Do not compromise your own conscience in order to conform to the conscience of another believer and do not attempt to lead another believer to compromise his conscience to conform to yours.³⁰

Recently, Jonathan Leeman shared some counsel for pastors to help their congregations navigate Gay Pride Month. These principles could also be applied to COVID-related issues. The last principle was: "Do not pass judgment on one another" (Rom. 14:13). Leeman wrote,

We don't want to wrongly condemn our brothers and sisters when our consciences draw different conclusions amidst some of these tough situational dilemmas. So often, the path to apostasy is not denial of the faith per se, but a fracturing of church unity under pressure that slowly erodes faith.³¹

³⁰ John MacArthur, Jr., *Romans 9-16*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 282.

³¹ Jonathan Leeman, "Pastor: Help Your Congregation Navigate Gay Pride Month," *9Marks*, 02 June 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.9marks.org/article/pastor-help-your-congregation-navigate-gay-pride-month/>.

As pastors we face the daunting task of helping the sheep whom God has entrusted to our care to navigate their differences over disputable matters. We say with Paul, “And who is adequate for such a task as this? ... It is not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor. 2:16 NLT; 3:5-6 CSB).

A Holistic View of the Believer’s Health

“Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). As a result of our Creator’s wondrous design and handiwork, we humans are both material and immaterial at the same time. As the apostle Paul notes in 2 Corinthians 4:16, we have both an “outer self” (body) and an “inner self” (soul/spirit). Biblical counselor and pastor Matt Mitchell correctly states, “You and I are embodied souls. From conception to eternity (with the curious exception of the hiatus between our deaths and the resurrection), we are heart and flesh united, distinguishable yet inseparable.”

God cares deeply about the health of the whole person, as indicated by Paul’s prayer in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” If God is so committed to the health of our whole person, then we should be also. The first Q&A in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) teaches that our “only comfort in life and in death” is “that I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; Rom. 14:7-9). Under the heading, “Biblical Counseling Must be Comprehensive in Understanding,” the *Biblical Counseling Coalition* affirms in their Confessional Statement

the complexity of the relationship between the body and soul (Genesis 2:7). Because of this, we seek to remain sensitive to physical factors and organic issues that affect people's lives. In our desire to help people comprehensively, we seek to apply God's Word to people's lives amid bodily strengths and weaknesses.³²

During his earthly ministry, our Savior had compassion for those with physical needs and ailments and healed them (e.g., Matt. 14:14; 20:34). Likewise, we are to care for the physical needs of others. Showing such care is an outworking of our faith (see James 2:14-17). The hope of the resurrection speaks to God's care and concern for the whole person, both body and soul.

However, if we're not careful, we can become preoccupied with our physical health to the neglect of our spiritual health. At times this imbalance is most noticeable on the church prayer list. Petitions pertaining to physical needs tend to greatly outnumber prayer requests for our spiritual needs, unlike the prayers of Paul in the New Testament for believers (e.g., Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14). Paul reminded Timothy that while "bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). Paul is not disparaging physical health but is merely contrasting its temporal benefits with the eternal worth of godliness. Yet since the start of the COVID pandemic, health anxiety has been on the rise. Biblical counselor Lucy Ann Moll notes,

Chronic and paralyzing worry is at the heart of health anxiety. The health anxiety sufferer is sick with worry. "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad" (Prov. 12:25).

He or she might rationalize that "I'm just trying to be careful." But destructive anxiety is a sinful anticipation of a future threat that has not occurred; it fixates on endless "what if's" and on reassurance.³³

³² "BCC Confessional Statement," *Biblical Counseling Coalition* [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/>.

³³ Lucy Ann Moll, "Overcoming Health Anxiety, Part One," *Biblical Counseling Coalition*, 23 March 2022. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2022/03/23/overcoming-health-anxiety-part-one/>.

“Wash your hands and say your prayers, because Jesus and germs are everywhere.”

Notwithstanding its tongue-in-cheek humor, I’ve never cared for this quip, because germs are not omnipresent in the same way that Jesus in his divine nature is! Yet, hand sanitizers, masks, and social distancing became so closely associated with public worship,³⁴ that it became difficult to focus on Jesus instead of germs. Could it be that, despite our good intentions, these preventive measures contributed to “the spirit of fear” (2 Tim. 1:7) that paralyzed so many of our church members? Yet joy, not fear, should dominate the fellowship of believers. “One mark of a faithful church is that they are ‘rejoicing in hope’ (Romans 12:12), not cowering in fear.”³⁵

Based on my own observations and growing concerns, I have come to agree with the following statement by John MacArthur and the pastoral staff of Grace Community Church:

In today’s troubled world, perpetual fear has been made to seem normal, even noble. Life itself has become all about avoiding risk. But to cultivate that kind of fear, especially at the government’s behest, poses a grave danger to the long-term spiritual health and ministry of the church. If young people are taught that the preservation of their own lives is more important than corporate worship and evangelism, who will go to the mission field? Christianity does not flourish, and our collective testimony loses all credibility, when the church cowers in fear. Christians should enjoy liberty from the fear of death, hope in the midst of tribulation, and joy and gladness in all circumstances.

The dark cloud of melancholy and anxiety that COVID has brought over the world signifies an extraordinary opportunity for the church—but only if congregations can resist adopting the frame of mind that currently dominates our culture.

In what he referred to as a “lightbulb moment” for him, the Surgeon General of the United States realized that “social disconnection was far more common than [he] realized. ...

³⁴ In many churches, additional measures were taken, such as the discontinuation of the “passing of the plates” for the Lord’s Supper and congregational giving.

³⁵ “Facing COVID-19 Without Fear,” *A Statement from John MacArthur and the Pastoral Staff of Grace Community Church*. Published 21 September 2021, Modified 30 January 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.gracechurch.org/news/posts/2254>.

And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation.”³⁶ Have we not seen the emotional and spiritual fallout of disconnection and isolation among members of our own congregations?

In a TGC article, Brett McCracken lamented, “It’s telling that our society has decided we cannot live without ‘essentials’ like liquor stores, marijuana dispensaries, and golf courses, but we can live without physical church gatherings.”³⁷ The Scriptures indicate otherwise. Believers are to be gathering more, not less, to encourage and build up one another (1 Thess. 5:11) and to motivate one another to love and good works as we await the Day of our Lord’s return (Heb. 10:24-25). “Society at large suffers when local churches aren’t fully functioning.”³⁸

A holistic view of the believer’s health requires that we not only be concerned about spiritual, emotional, mental, and relational health in addition to physical health, but also that we commit ourselves to building and strengthening relationships, especially within the context of the local church. *Church is essential*. It is how believers “rebuild in the ruins what society and sin have torn apart” and “actually [become] a part of a community building community.”³⁹

The Responsible Use of Technology

During the COVID-19 lockdown, many churches upped their game in technology, particularly when it came to livestreaming, and they continued to offer this service after their

³⁶ “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

³⁷ Brett McCracken, “Why We Don’t See Church as ‘Essential,’” *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition, 22 May 2020 [online]. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-essential/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Albert Mohler, *The Briefing*, 03 May 2023. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://albertmohler.com/2023/05/03/briefing-5-3-23>.

doors reopened. An unprecedented number of churches have even established what they call “online church” or an “online campus.”⁴⁰ Last year *The Christian Post* reported,

As online Christian engagement continues to expand rapidly through the use of digital technologies, it has coincided with a staggering disruption in physical church membership, which some technology experts say will continue to displace physical churches that refuse to adapt to the digital revolution. And the ongoing displacement is becoming more apparent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹

According to Pew Research, 22 percent of Christians said they watch online services more often than before the pandemic.⁴² Yet “embodied presence cannot be replaced or replicated by online communication.”⁴³ Scripture maintains that gathering is essential for the life of the church.⁴⁴

In his book, *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church*, Dustin Benge notes that Charles Spurgeon called the local church “the dearest place on earth.”⁴⁵ To call someone a “dear friend” is to communicate how special that person is in your life. By using this expression in relation to the church, Spurgeon was emphasizing that “nothing in the world is dearer to God’s heart than his church; therefore, being his let us also belong to it, that by our prayers, our gifts, and our labours, we may support and strengthen it.”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ For some “churches” (quotation marks intentional), online engagement has become the *only* option. Consider, for instance, VR Church, “a spiritual community that exists entirely in the metaverse” and “believe[s] the church can be anywhere at any time with anyone.” <https://www.vrchurch.org>.

⁴¹ Leonardo Blair, “How the digital revolution is disrupting the Church and forcing it out of buildings,” *The Christian Post*, 09 June 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.christianpost.com/news/how-the-digital-revolution-is-disrupting-the-church.html>.

⁴² All the survey data, put together, presents a complicated picture. For more information, visit <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/>.

⁴³ Trevin Wax, “Talking Technology with Tim Challies,” *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/talking-technology-with-tim-challies/>.

⁴⁴ See Matthew 18:17-20; 1 Corinthians 11:33; Hebrews 10:25.

⁴⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Best Donation” (exposition, April 5, 1891), in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Containing Sermons Preached and Revised*, vol. 37 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1975), 633. Cited by Dustin Benge, *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 13.

⁴⁶ Spurgeon, “The Best Donation,” 633, 635. Cited by Dustin Benge, *The Loveliest Place*, 14.

One of the best ways to so strengthen the church is by assembling each Lord's Day to worship God corporately and to encourage one another as believers in Christ. At the height of the pandemic, when church gatherings were suspended for nearly four months, our staff and ministry leaders at Webster Bible Church utilized more technology to make the best of a bad situation. Our worship music and sermons were recorded in advance and then made available to the congregation. Soon thereafter we began livestreaming our services, and this ministry continued even after we had resumed our corporate gatherings.

But last fall our elders decided to discontinue the public livestreaming of our worship services. Why? Perhaps an analogy will help to explain the reason for our decision. If a person is unable to walk, then using a wheelchair is a great help. But if one *is* able to walk but still chooses to use a wheelchair, then at that point the wheelchair is no longer a help but a hindrance. Our elders became concerned that livestream was enabling laziness among some of our members.

The book of Hebrews warns against the dangers of spiritual lethargy. Instead of gathering with the church less, we are to do so more as the Day of the Lord's appearing draws near. We want to meet face-to-face to encourage one another, to motivate each other to love and good works. We don't want our church members to miss out on the relational dynamics of corporate worship and fellowship. We don't want to create the illusion that there is any such thing as "online church." The church, by definition, is an assembly. And it's not just any assembly. It is the place where the Lord himself and his people are present with us. That makes church is "the dearest place on earth." If we really believe that, then we will make public worship a priority.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ We have continued *private* livestreaming for our shut-in members, those who are physically unable to come to church. We have an official shut-in list and seek to supplement our livestreaming service with home visits, phone calls, notes of encouragement, etc., to maintain that personal connection and care.

Now, it would be both wrong and polarizing to say something as black-and-white as “churches shouldn’t use livestream” and other similar forms of technology. As I stated in the introduction of this paper, we must consider our own congregational and cultural context. One Lutheran pastor testified, “I’ve discovered the technology many feared would disconnect people from authentic Christian community can actually become a catalyst for people to experience that very community. That includes, for our church, *an increase of in-person attendance*.”⁴⁸

The caution being issued here is to think before we leap, while we’re in the air, and even after we land! Tim Challies has rightly observed that “every new technology brings unintended consequences – secondary consequences that can have a profound impact on our lives. We tend to be myopic – we see only what’s right in front of us. What we need to train ourselves to do is to look farther, to try to see the greater impact of any new piece of technology.”⁴⁹ We should think theology before pragmatics. Our theology (derived from the truth of Scripture) should shape our philosophy of ministry, which in turn should drive our strategies and methods.

Conclusion

I’m almost embarrassed by how many footnotes I have in this paper. Part of the reason I referred to so many resources is that my own lone voice seems woefully inadequate to speak on such a massive subject that is still fraught with unpleasant memories, unanswered questions, unresolved differences, and disconcerting outcomes. I wanted other voices from the evangelical

⁴⁸ Matt Peeples, “Why Our Church Will Keep the Livestream,” *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition, 27 May 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/keep-livestream/>.

⁴⁹ Trevin Wax, “Talking Technology with Tim Challies.” Tim points out that this principle applies even to switching from the use of a hymnbook to Powerpoint. He is not arguing for the rightness or wrongness of such a decision but is simply trying to get us to see that “there are always implications and we’d do well to think those through.”

world to weigh in on this topic in the hopes that we might benefit from their insights, even as we converse among ourselves. My associate pastor, Mike Smith, encouraged me by repeating what a seminary professor told him: A key purposes of a research paper is to bring the best voices to the table. I don't know if I brought the best voices, but I tried to bring a breadth of respectable voices.

As I was in the final days of preparing this paper for our Reformation Society meeting, *Christianity Today* published a timely article by Paul Miller titled, "It's Time to Forgive Each Other Our Pandemic Sins."⁵⁰ His might be the best voice on which to end, given his sympathetic appeal for a "pandemic amnesty," a term coined by Emily Oster in *The Atlantic* last fall, who suggested that we "start assuming each other's good faith and 'forgiving the hard calls that people had no choice but to make with imperfect knowledge.'⁵¹ After all, "none of us had lived through a once-a-century global pandemic before, and Lord willing, none of us will again...."⁵²

Furthermore, "we should recognize that different churches in different places had reason to approach COVID-19 differently. Indeed, that spirit of grace would have made the past three years more bearable. During the pandemic, churches split and pastors quit."⁵³ This is a hard and sad reality. But together we can move beyond it. Of all people, Christians – and especially pastors – should be able to extend to one another a spirit of grace, for we have come to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who "took up our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matt. 8:17).

⁵⁰ Paul D. Miller, "It's Time to Forgive Each Other Our Pandemic Sins," *Christianity Today*, 01 June 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 01 June 2023 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/may-web-only/covid-19-pandemic-amnesty-masks-vaccine-lockdown-church.html>.

⁵¹ Emily Oster, "Let's Declare a Pandemic Amnesty," *The Atlantic*, 31 October 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/covid-response-forgiveness/671879/>. Cited by Miller.

⁵² Miller, "It's Time to Forgive...."

⁵³ Ibid. Citing research by *Barna* on pastoral burn-out, Miller notes, "Last spring, over forty percent of pastors said they had seriously considered leaving the ministry due to loneliness, isolation, political divisiveness and stress."

WORKS CITED

Books

Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader, ed. James D. Bratt. Eerdmans, 1998.

Benge, Dustin. *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2022.

Doriani, Daniel M. *Romans*. Reformed Expository Commentary, eds. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021.

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008.

MacArthur, John Jr., Romans 9-16, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1994).

Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George, edited by Andrew T. Walker. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023.

Sunshine, Glenn S. *Slaying Leviathan: Limited Government and Resistance in the Christian Tradition*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2020.

Swindoll, Charles R. *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998.

Watkin, Christopher. *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022.

Articles and Other Resources

"BCC Confessional Statement." *Biblical Counseling Coalition* [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/>.

Blair, Leonardo. "How the digital revolution is disrupting the Church and forcing it out of buildings." *The Christian Post*, 09 June 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.christianpost.com/news/how-the-digital-revolution-is-disrupting-the-church.html>.

Brito, Urieso. "Ten Theses on the Relationship of Spheres." *Kuyperian Commentary*, 09 November 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 02 May 2023 from <https://kuyperian.com/ten-theses-on-the-relationship-of-spheres/>.

DeYoung, Kevin. "A Dust-up among the Historians," *WORLD Opinions*, 8 December 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://wng.org/opinions/a-dust-up-among-the-historians-1670504711>.

Drollinger, Ralph. "God's Institutions and Their Roles on Earth." *Capitol Ministries*, 13 February 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 02 May 2023 from <https://capmin.org/gods-institutions-and-their-roles-on-earth/>.

Elflein, John. "Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the U.S. – Statistics & Facts." *Statista*, 3 May 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.statista.com/topics/6084/coronavirus-covid-19-in-the-us/#topicOverview>.

"Facing COVID-19 Without Fear." *A Statement from John MacArthur and the Pastoral Staff of Grace Community Church*. Published 21 September 2021, Modified 30 January 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.gracechurch.org/news/posts/2254>.

Leeman, Jonathan. "Pastor: Help Your Congregation Navigate Gay Pride Month." *9Marks*, 02 June 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.9marks.org/article/pastor-help-your-congregation-navigate-gay-pride-month/>.

Leeman, Jonathan. "The Relationship of Church and State." *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition [online]. Retrieved on 02 May 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-relationship-of-church-and-state/>.

McCracken, Brett. "Why We Don't See Church as 'Essential.'" *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition, 22 May 2020 [online]. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-essential/>.

Miller, Paul D. "It's Time to Forgive Each Other Our Pandemic Sins." *Christianity Today*, 01 June 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 01 June 2023 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/may-web-only/covid-19-pandemic-amnesty-masks-vaccine-lockdown-church.html>.

Miller, Paul D. "What Is Christian Nationalism?" *Christianity Today*, 03 February 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html>.

Mohler, Albert. *The Briefing*, 03 May 2023. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://albertmohler.com/2023/05/03/briefing-5-3-23>.

Moll, Lucy Ann. "Overcoming Health Anxiety, Part One," *Biblical Counseling Coalition*, 23 March 2022. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2022/03/23/overcoming-health-anxiety-part-one/>.

Nortey, Justin, and Michael Rotolo. "How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services." Pew Research Center, 28 March 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/>.

Oster, Emily. "Let's Declare a Pandemic Amnesty." *The Atlantic*, 31 October 2022 [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/covid-response-forgiveness/671879/>.

"Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community." Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023. Retrieved on 05 June 2023 from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

Peeples, Matt. "Why Our Church Will Keep the Livestream." *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition, 27 May 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/keep-livestream/>.

Shellnut, Kate. "DC Settles \$220K Capitol Hill Baptist Lawsuit." *Christianity Today*, 11 July 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2022 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/september/mark-dever-capital-hill-baptist-church-dc-lawsuit-covid-gat.html>.

Schreiner, Patrick. "Political Life Begins in the Church." *9Marks*, 10 April 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.9marks.org/article/political-life-begins-in-the-church/>.

Slisco, Aila. "Church That Defied Gavin Newsom's COVID Rules to Get \$800k in Legal Settlement." *Newsweek*, 31 August 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.newsweek.com/church-that-defied-gavin-newsoms-covid-rules-get-800k-legal-settlement-1624801>.

"VR Church in the Metaverse" [online]. Retrieved on 03 June 2023 from <https://www.vrchurch.org>.

Wax, Trevin. "Talking Technology with Tim Challies." *The Gospel Coalition*, U.S. Edition [online]. Retrieved on 06 June 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/talking-technology-with-tim-challies/>.