CURRENT ISSUES

FACING CLERGY

(VOL I)

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Every day now in Pandemic America, I get important and interesting questions from C4SO clergy and other leaders around the country. These are my thoughts on the most frequent leadership issues.

What Do I Do About the Increased Level of Politics Entering the Church?

Pastors are increasingly under the pressure of partisan politics wrapped in Bible proof texting. Politics now seems to supersede both science and religion. We, the teachers of God's story, cannot let the discussions and debates that emerge from the COVID crisis be framed by partisan politics—and the ugly civil discourse that carries it along. We have our own frame: a personal Triune God, his purposes in human history and its telos. Current political persons and ideas are real, and either helpful or harmful. But put against the proper backdrop of the redemption of the whole cosmos and all eternity, they are miniscule, time-bound and temporary. Why then should we let them dictate the rhetoric and imagination of the Church and potentially divide us?

Examples of political proof-texting we will see in the coming days:

Acts 5:29: Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"

Of course! No one would argue to the contrary. But the context here is that the apostles were being forbidden from "teaching in Jesus name" by religious authorities, not civil ones (though effectively there was some crossover in Jewish life). No current US governmental authority is demanding that of the Church. In fact, one could reasonably argue that over the last eight weeks, teaching in Jesus' name has been received by more people around the globe than at any other eight-week period of time in human history.

Hebrews 10:25: Do not give up meeting together…

Of course! We have not given up meeting. People are striving hard to keep meeting in creative and anointed ways online. And again, the context of Hebrews 10 does not align with our current context. Hebrews 10 is a pivot of sorts from detailing the superiority of the latter covenant, to how to live it out. The writer knew that some of his hearers were confused about faith and thus lagging in its practices, including regular, edifying fellowship. Some of his hearers may have also been confused about, or afraid of leaving, synagogue meetings and attending (or associating with) new "Christian" meetings. The writer of Hebrews was surely not picturing not modern church buildings and telling people to go there. He was saying that fellowship with other Christians in worship is crucial to discipleship and thus to living into the Superior Covenant of Christ. Every pastor I know is striving to provide fellowship and worship—just not in our familiar physical spaces.

I do note this: No one is proof-texting: Greet each other with a holy kiss… (2 Cor. 13:12).

We will also see appeals to the religious rights afforded to churches in the American Constitution—namely to *assembly* and *free speech*.

Again—of course! Who doubts this? Which agency is trying to take it away? Our most brilliant minds are trying to thread the needle between biological, economic and mental/social health issues.

Rights* vs. *responsibilities: The emphasis for followers of Jesus is not on what rights we can claim for ourselves. The focus is: In what ways do those rights give us the freedom to live into our responsibility to serve God, neighbor and enemy? In the kingdom of God, it works like this: We claim our responsibilities as the meaning for our life, and we use the rights afforded us in any given setting to joyfully carry out our duties.

This was the precise attitude of Jesus. It has formed the basis of spiritual transformation into Christlikeness and has sparked the worship of him for 2,000 years. Paul gives us a window into the motivation of Jesus:

Philippians 2: *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and*

compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death--even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul further spells out the proper use of freedom in **Galatians 5:** *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*

Yes, government should be held accountable to protect our rights. But our job is to live our Divinely-given responsibilities in whatever setting we find ourselves. Along with our neighbors, it seems to me that the poor, the marginalized and the elderly are the proper focus of our responsibilities right now. But how exactly? Social distancing helps with disease spread, but it is simultaneously putting many low-wage earners out of work. These same people groups are then exposed to huge fears and the mental and social destruction that comes with it. *This, it seems to me, is the complex question of the day for those trying to be the people of God for the sake of others.*

Maybe this question points us in the right direction: **What does it mean to be a blessing in your city?**

Gen 12:3 is the paradigmatic idea for the people of God: *blessed to be a blessing to others.* It is fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah, and continued in his people. Jesus was the model human, and the first fruits of those to come after him. We see this throughout the scriptures. For example:

Acts 3:23: And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'

Ephesians 2:10: For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

John 20: Even as the Father sent me, so I send you…

How Do I Deal With Emerging Conspiracy Theories?

Conspiracy theories are too often deeply cynical. A cynical worldview is not spiritually healthy. It completely misses the superintending of history by God. No real conspiracy can undermine the work of God. Sometimes they bring it about. Think about Judas. If there is a true charge of someone doing something wrong in the context of this pandemic, let it be made. Defend it with facts. Naming evil can be helpful—an act of service. But to merely engage in the sport of conspiracy theories out of desperate fear or confusion is counter-kingdom and destructive. A general attitude of cynicism does not facilitate the work of the Spirit. It cannot allow for rest, confidence and peace.

Should Getting Back to Normal Be the Driving Goal Right Now?

I've already said that fellowship/worship is crucial to discipleship. We are doing that the best we can given local, state and federal guidelines.

I wonder if our best testimony, now and upon the reflection of history, is fast from *normal* church and discover the spiritual truth that *fasting* is *feasting*. Giving up

something (food, or in this case normal church) gains us a richer feast: an increased manifest presence and voice of God. Paul helps us cultivate an attitude that is not stoic or fatalistic, but grounded in Christ:

1 Timothy 6:6: Godliness with contentment is great gain.

Philippians 4:11,12: I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

We have a lot of spiritual riches that can sustain us for a time of crisis, even if it lasts 12 -18 months:

Romans 5:1 (NLT)**:** Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

2 Peter 1:3 (CEV) We have everything we need to live a life that pleases God. It was all given to us by God's own power, when we learned that he had invited us to share in his wonderful goodness.

How Can I Deal With Growing Levels of Division?

A possible great division of the American church is a profound concern. In the last week or two, I have interacted with pastors on almost a daily basis about the political pressure they feel from the *red* and *blue* camps in their church—or all-red or all-blue—which presents a different leadership challenge. It seems increasingly clear to me that the Church is facing its greatest threat to unity in my lifetime and maybe beyond.

Here I would like to distinguish among **difference, division and divisiveness:** It is one thing to differ with one another about our best thoughts on a matter. It is another thing to allow our differing minds to become an excuse for division within Christian families, within churches, between churches or between denominations and pastors. The spirit, lifestyle or worldview animated by divisiveness is worst of all. It is completely contrary to the spirit of Christ, the letters of Paul and the entire revelation of scripture. In context of feuding among Israelites over territorial, political, tribal, and personal concerns, the Psalmist (133:1) said: How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! *See also: 1 Corinthians 1:10; John 17:23; 1 Peter 3:8; Ephesians 4:3; Galatians 3:26-28; Colossians 3:11.*

The sources of divisiveness that I see are:

- **Arrogance:** A lack of humility about the imperfections in our knowledge of something as complex as this pandemic and the public policy that must help humanity through it.
- **Fear:** When we live in fear, we tend to cultivate a pseudo-certainty. We don't want anyone messing with that certainty, so we must demonize or dehumanize others to such a degree that it forms a rationale for dividing from them.
- **Political commitments that trump everything else:** As I mentioned above, I am disturbed by the degree to which increasing numbers of Christians think first in terms of contemporary partisan politics, driven by social media, talk radio and cable television. This is not a new phenomenon. Jesus knew that many, if not most, of his audiences had previously existing social/religious/political commitments that they had no intention of submitting to his teaching—his *kingdom worldview*. Examples of these are the Herodians, the Zealots, and the Qumran sect. The first was committed to politics, the second to holy war and the third to separatism. And they readily divided the people of God over it. The key for us is to always frame or re-frame, as the case requires, a particular issue in ways that take Jesus seriously: his teaching, deeds of power and manner of being, all which explicated the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

How Do I Think About the Complex Problems Associated with COVID-19?

The virus vs. the economy vs. mental and social health. Thinking comprehensively is a high and important calling in our era. Sometimes we are just too tired and unfocused to do this—I get it! But I do think we want to consciously steer clear of the kind of selective thinking that fits the explanatory schemes of partisan politics but falls far short of the Divine Narrative.

It makes me want to say: Solomon, where are you? Who of us would like to make the big decisions needed here? Who has the breadth of knowledge and wisdom? Some humility and goodwill is called for now. I empathize with the vast economic harm being done and the very human desire to work. But this moment in time seems to be an outlier of historic proportion. That means some big instincts must be examined carefully. And, just to be practical, it seems to me that if we don't solve the biology/virus, the economy won't really recover and the mental health of millions will not be healed. The law of unintended consequences could mean that churches who try to meet too soon could inadvertently make things worse.

I saw an article that describes the risks of disease being transmitted in churches:

Ignoring the terrible outbreaks in nursing homes, we find that the biggest outbreaks are in prisons, religious ceremonies, and workplaces, such as meat packing facilities and call centers. Any environment that is enclosed, with poor air circulation and high density of people, spells trouble. For instance,the church choir in Washington State. Even though people were aware of the virus and took steps to minimize transfer; e.g. they avoided the usual handshakes and hugs hello, people also brought their own music to avoid sharing, and socially distanced themselves during practice. A single asymptomatic carrier infected most of the people in attendance. The choir sang for 2 1/2 hours, inside an enclosed church which was roughly the size of a volleyball court. The main sources for infection are home, workplace, public transport, social gatherings, and restaurants. This accounts for 90% of all transmission events. Social distancing rules are really to protect you with brief exposures or outdoor exposures. In these situations there is not enough time to achieve the infectious viral load when you are standing 6 feet apart or where wind and the infinite outdoor space for viral dilution reduces viral load.

A church in Canada, holding worship services in March, with a birthday celebration in the fellowship hall after church, reported that 41 of 42 people in attendance were infected, and two died.

The pastor reflected: "We don't want another organization or faith community to go through what we've been through. It's really, really hard. There seems to be this huge divide between those who've experienced [COVID-19] and the majority who haven't. If you haven't experienced it, you are so lucky. You have no idea how fortunate you are."

Increasingly, I hear people trying to work their way through this in a *libertarian* way. Such thinking goes something like this: We are all adults, including parents with young children and the elderly. Open everything up and let people decide what they want to do based on their calculations of whatever kind.

First, not every calculus is scientifically, ethically and spiritually equal. Second, there likely are not presently enough people willing to go back to work and shop, etc., to make a solely libertarian view really work. But, as a practical matter, no matter what doctors or politicians say, I'll bet something like that is what occurs over the next three to six months. Why? Americans are not used to being told what to do by anyone or in this case, *anything*—the virus. America has a certain form of liberty that is hugely powerful—for good and ill.

What Should I Be Thinking About in the Coming Months?

This fall will require intense leadership. No one knows for sure how the next few months will play out. It is not even certain what will happen in June: 2,000 deaths per day? 3,000? But most of the best thinkers are greatly concerned about the fall—and that is only to do with the pandemic. I have more on my mind:

Another Lockdown: How will Americans deal with another lockdown? Civil unrest directed at governments? Violence toward those who disagree with them? How will the Church react? At best, another lockdown will be a challenge unlike any faced in American history. How can we be *creators* of peace?

Health Care Systems Overwhelmed: If we don't have widespread testing, if there is not a vaccine, and if there is a new outbreak of COVID in the fall—combined with the normal flu season and the pneumonia that often comes with it—fear will reign. Our health care systems could be pushed beyond their capacity. We can help by keeping our eyes open for vulnerable people in our sphere of influence.

The Election: The rhetoric of "the whole thing is rigged" is going to increase. There will be dueling accusations of cheating. Some may want to delay the election which will cause the other side to cry "foul." Here again, there is a great possibility for civil unrest not seen in our country since the 1960s. Can the Church be a people of peace? Can we model patience, long-suffering, hope, respect and love of others?

Spending, the Deficit and Debt: No matter where one falls on the dispute over the economy vs. risking increased illness and deaths, it seems to me that everyone ought to agree that the national debt and deficit are alarmingly high. Long term, this is likely to weaken the value of a dollar and/or cause inflation. Once this is clear, people will react to this too. Can we point to sources of strength and courage, and embody them ourselves?

A Wave of Bankruptcies: The economic disaster has been in the news for a few weeks now, so it is on most people's radar screens. But this fall is likely to bring a wave of bankruptcies that will devastate families and some communities. At a minimum, it will be severely depressing. We may be called upon to do intakes with people with issues of depression or suicide. We may want to brush up on pastoral in-take skills.

Distrust and Heated Rhetoric: The issues between politicians and the medical community are rapidly increasing. This is unfortunate because we are all crying for people to trust, to do their best for altruistic reasons, to guide us though this crisis. But as these two entities demonize each other, truth and trust will, sadly, be the main victims. Again, we are called upon to receive, cultivate and radiate the peace of God in Christ.

Redemptive Suffering: Modern Americans are not used to suffering, or being controlled by anything. In this case, the proximate control is seen to be government. But taking government out of the picture allows for a complete laissez faire / libertarian point of view, and we are still left with a virus that has us under its invisible thumb. Theodicy, even if technical terms are not used, is moving from textbooks to casual conversation. Does the American Church have an imagination for suffering as an aspect of discipleship? How might we preach or teach in that direction?

If you find yourself stuck in these complicated issues, you have a couple of elegant, simple places to run:

- The Great Command to love God and others
- The Golden Rule to positively love and serve others as you would want for yourself

This is a fantastic time to be alive—to be a Christian leader! Everyone who has always wanted to make a difference now has context to do so. God, please give us the gifts and fruit of your Spirit to animate, energize and guide our work. Show us what to do and say. Give us a willing and glad heart to follow you for the sake of the vulnerable of every kind: the sick, the economically devastated and those experiencing psychological torment.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.