

**Executive Committee, Assemblies of God, Northern California and Nevada District Council<sup>1</sup>**

Pastors and Churches that are thinking about violating a public health order need to study several key issues before making that decision:

1. The theology of faithful disobedience.
2. The constitutional issues arising from or affecting the decision.
3. The effect on the church's witness in the community.
4. The legal issues and liabilities that the church and its leaders may incur.

This advisory is to answer the third of these issues.

---

The purpose of this article is to address the third question above: the relationship between the church's response to public health order and its effect on the witness of the church. However, we have to acknowledge that the issue goes far beyond the public health order, it goes to the overall perspective and response of the church to the pandemic and the resulting circumstances, realizing that the church's witness during this pandemic is being widely broadcast and closely scrutinized by the public. Consequently, the church must pay attention to its testimony, regardless of whether it complies with the order or not. The intent of this paper is not to tell churches "what to do" but to present biblical principles to consider in making decisions and in general conduct.

The first thing we need to recognize is that the witness of the church is not represented by the slogan on the sign or the pastor's most recent message. It is not even found in the numerous repetitions of that message by members to others. The witness of the church is not the message that is "sent" it is the message that is "received or perceived." It we want to know

---

<sup>1</sup> This opinion is an advisory from the Executive Committee. It is not mandatory that AG ministers and churches agree with this opinion, the Assemblies of God does not dictate a stance on this subject. It is understood that self-governing churches are authorized to form their own opinion and make their own decisions on this subject. The Executive Presbytery also hopes that holding an opinion on this subject does not become a cause for division within the Assemblies of God.

“what is the prevailing witness of our church?” do not ask the church members ask the people in the community.

This reality raises two issues, that of Transmission and Reception. The message may start with the pastor, but it often gets altered in the transmission. Church members do not always repeat the message with accuracy. They omit a point, they add a point, they display different emotions, they add their own bias. The message is changed in transmission. It is very important that church leaders make their message clear and remove opportunity for distortion.

Reception is also an issue. All of us have endured a phone conversation with a weak cell signal, trying to make sense of a conversation where we only heard every third word. Church leaders need to acknowledge the fact that we are now living in post-Christian America, and the public are being inundated with anti-Christian messages. This is a social and mental filter by which our messages are being interpreted. Church leaders need to account for this. If we are frustrated that our message is being misunderstood, shouting louder won't help. Again, **church leaders need to make their message clear and remove opportunity for distortion.**

#### **Our Current Situation:**

In response to the COVID threat, the governor classified certain industries as “essential” and the remainder were, by default, “non-essential.” Churches were in the latter category and the governor severely restricted our worship and ministry practices. In some cases, these restrictions were more restrictive than other similar social activities. Sometimes the restrictions triggered moral sensibilities (liquor stores were open but churches were not.) Many church leaders and members were offended and outraged. We realized what we have suspected for years—that society views the church as being unimportant, insignificant, and marginalized. COVID, of course, did not cause this, but it exposed it and accelerated it.

In addition to COVID, numerous other cataclysmic events have taken place in 2020: Impeachment, Racial Injustice, Protests and Riots, Economic Collapse, Divisive Political Campaigns, Destructive Wildfires, and more. In times of turmoil, society often turns to spiritual leaders for counsel, perspective, and comfort. But, in 2020, the church finds itself marginalized and our comments un-welcome, ignored, disputed, or even prohibited.

The loss of relevance and freedoms has left many offended and confused. We suppose that every church leader has faced the temptation to shout louder and with more passion to make our message heard, objecting and arguing about the injustice we have received. We have scripted the responses and rehearsed the arguments and are ready to do so. **But is that what scripture tells us to do?**

*1Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. 17 For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?*

Peter provides us with important instructions about how the church should maintain its witness in circumstances where the church is being persecuted or marginalized.

1. **Attitude.**

Most of these verses relate to the attitude or disposition of the Believer. “Don’t be surprised. This is part of God’s plan. Rejoice and give glory to God. Remember that God gives a greater measure of the Spirit to those that suffer for Him.”

**The biggest temptation is to respond to the current situation in anger.** This is a natural temptation. We are all disturbed by circumstances in this world. Each day we see shocking and shameful things. Each day we are provoked to express indignation and outrage. But we must take care that our anger does not obscure the message of Jesus.

*The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. James 1:20*

Are the restrictions imposed on us discriminatory or unjust? Perhaps so. But that does not give us right to react badly.

*Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world. Philippians 2:14-15*

The verb “become” reminds us that growing in faith and maturity is a process, a process that often involves suffering, obstacles, or opposition. “Count it all joy my brethren, when you fall into various trials, knowing that the trial of your faith works patience.” (James 1:2) Those who denounce these troubles may be sending away God’s messengers and deny themselves the opportunity to grow!

It is a reality that there is evil in the world and that we have enemies. It is not easy to know how to speak. But we do know that we need to be both wise and innocent.

*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Matthew 10:16.*

Is there a conspiracy to marginalize or persecute the church? Perhaps there is. If not now, there will be one eventually. The scripture tells us how to respond.

*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. Luke 6:23*

Will evil prevail? No! While standing among the pagan temples of Caesarea Philippi Jesus made the irrevocable promise,

*“I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.” Mathew 16: 18*

## 2. **Behavior.**

Peter also focuses on conduct. In short, he says, “Honorable conduct in these times will validate your witness but illegal or dishonorable conduct will invalidate your witness. You are not responsible for the world, only for yourself. Be aware, God is purifying the church.”

When the church is marginalized and the world does not heed our words, we have to pivot and pay attention to our behavior. All of our behavior, from “murder to gossip,” should be scrutinized. This instruction restates Peter’s early words.

*Having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:12*

3. **Message.**

The inherent message of this passage is “glory.” Here, glory is used in two ways: first, it describes the duty of the believer to glorify God in the midst of tribulation, and second, it describes a future event when God’s glory is revealed and glory is conferred on the worthy believer. Peter’s words not only remind us of the essential “core” content of the message, but also remind us that our message needs to be **simple and relevant**—God’s work in the individual now, and God’s work in the future. It’s simple, relevant, and indisputable. Paul, gave similar advice,

*In all things show yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, and incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you. Titus 2:7*

COVID19 gave rise to many restrictions on our worship and ministry practices. The reaction to these restrictions has varied tremendously. Regardless of which way we lean on that subject, it is a near irresistible impulse to share these opinions publicly. We need to resist that impulse, doing so will obscure or distort the message of Jesus and it will not be effective.

**A. The church needs to take control of the message, making it clear and giving no room for distortion.** Remembering that the message is not just for the immediate audience or its own members, but for other people and churches as well.

This is especially important in the age of social media. The advent of social media, more than any other development in history, has diminished the ability of leaders to control their message. It made every person a publisher, a power that is without accountability or obligation to discourse. Consequently, public persons everywhere, from politicians and businessmen to celebrities and activists, are scrambling to take control of their message.

This is especially true for the church. The witness of the church may originate with the pastor’s sermons, but it is the representations (or misrepresentations) of the church members that has

the most influence on the community's perception of it. (We suspect that is why Peter included "busy bodies" in his list of witness-destroying behavior.) While the church leader can try to control the communication of the members, the leader must also ensure that they provide a clear and undistorted message to begin with.

**B. Keep our message Christ-centric.** Don't create a situation where a person might reject Jesus, because they rejected something you said on an incidental matter. It is imperative that we remember that our response to these circumstances is a testimony and witness to the world. As such, our comments need to be a "Christ-centric" and avoid any opinion that is peripheral to our testimony of Jesus.

We also need to remember that our message is more than our words, it is also how we conduct our relationships, Paul tells us to *"Walk worthy of the calling with which you are called..."* (we might expect him to follow this with words about holiness and prayer, but he does not.) *"...with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."* Ephesians 4:1-3.

Our message is critical. First, because people are in need. Society has been turned upside down, threat of disease is ever-present, people have lost jobs, people are worried about their life and about their death. People today need hope. They need to know that God loves them and has not abandoned them. They need to know that God will provide. They need the Gospel. We should not miss the opportunity to share our message of hope or obscure the message with incidental things.

Second, because we represent Jesus: we have an obligation to present Jesus accurately and we do not have permission to put our own opinion into the mouth of Jesus. If people reject Jesus because we have misrepresented Jesus, then we cause someone to stumble and we have incurred guilt upon ourselves. We say we speak for God, what a weighty responsibility! We cannot proclaim our own opinion and call it God's.

Many of the public statements that are being made in response to the COVID crisis are about politics or government restrictions. And, frankly, this is a very divisive subject and is not essential to our gospel message.

**C. Remember the example of Jesus.** The Gospels are very clear that Jesus lived in a politically charged environment. Judas Iscariot<sup>2</sup> may have been involved in rebel militia prior to his discipleship. There are references to revolts and pressure put on Jesus to launch a revolt. There are incidents where an opponent tried to trick Jesus into aligning himself on a political matter. Some even wanted to forcibly make him King. But Jesus visibly resisted all of these efforts. When Pilate asked him, “*Are you a king?*” Jesus answered, “*My kingdom is not of this world.*”

The point is that Jesus resisted making a political statement, and he certainly refused to offer a political solution. We do not want to join the crowd of those that pressured Jesus to take a political position.

We admit that faith in Christ should shape our morals and values, that our morals and values will shape our political views. There is nothing wrong with having a political opinion. But our message needs to be Christ-centric.

Ministry during this chaotic season has been difficult. Our society is experiencing a convergence of storms—a global pandemic, deeply divided and angry political environment, deeply divided and angry social environment, catastrophic economic upheaval, and manifold natural disasters (fires, hurricanes, floods.) It can be difficult to know how to respond correctly to the circumstances of the day.

*Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.* Colossians 4:5

**D. Practical Considerations.**

The question of witness has another, more practical angle to consider. Our witness to the world is often a function of our public worship meetings—people come, they sense the Spirit, they hear the Word, and they respond. How can we continue this witness with the limitations on our public gatherings?

---

<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the name “Iscariot” is uncertain, but it may be a corruption of the Aramaic word “dagger,” a reference to a rebel Jewish militia.

This is a serious question. In-person gatherings will always be a part of the Christian experience. And we anticipate that we will be able to gather on the Lord's Day as we have done before. Nevertheless, we think that we would miss a tremendous opportunity if we do not consider new and different ways to worship and meet.

Recently, we were reminded that the word "synagogue" appears sixty-nine times in the New Testament, but zero times in the Old Testament. Scholars believe that the loss of the Temple (or restricted access to the Temple) compelled the Jews to find alternative ways to worship. By the time of Jesus, synagogues were scattered across Palestine, Northern Africa, Southern Asia, and lower South Eastern Europe! The synagogue had become the default venue for worship and instruction, a reality that exists to this very day. **The Jews were faced with a limitation and they found an alternative.** But they would not have found this alternative if they had insisted on "temple worship only."

We need to develop alternative ways to worship and share our message. Many of our churches have launched online worship during this season. But we need to look beyond "online." We've heard some observe, "We've said for years that the church needs to get out of the four walls of the church building, now we are doing it." But, with respect, going online doesn't do that. In fact it isolates the church even further--now we are isolated in our homes!

We need to think carefully about our mission and strategize how we will achieve that in the uncertain future. We imagine that it will include more online meetings. But we also imagine that it will include more decentralization: leadership development and curriculum development to support small group meetings, "home-school-Sunday-school," and more neighborhood engagement efforts.

#### **E. Prophetic Considerations.**

1 Peter 2 calls attention to the final future work of God to glorify himself and the worthy believer. When we consider the calamities of 2020, we cannot help but wonder if these events are prophetically connected and if they all have a common spiritual cause. We wonder, "are we experiencing 2 Thessalonians 2:7?"



*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.*

Are these events the consequences of a widespread rejection of God?

If that is true, then our answer is found in 2 Chronicles 7:14

*If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven, I will forgive their sin, and I will heal their land.*

The remedy to COVID/division/economy/disaster is not found in a vaccine, or the ballot box, or the Treasury—the remedy to all of these things is found in widespread repentance and return to the Lord.