

A Serious Call for the Church to Lead Our Nation's Recovery

I'm flipping the pages of the May 4, 2020, *Time* magazine, which offers up the opinions of *Time's* selection of 100 thought leaders, all of whom were tasked to share their perspectives on how we are to find hope in this season of health concerns and economic devastation. Included in the roster of wise messengers are Angelina Jolie, Shawn Mendez, Misty Copeland and Lil Nas X.

Although I don't know any of the 100 notable contributors personally and have nothing against any of them, I was struck by the sheer hopelessness of the submissions purportedly offered to produce hope. Somehow a recommendation to watch the *Great British Bake Off* as a welcome distraction during these difficult times, seems unconvincing. Obviously, *Time Magazine* is a secular publication, but I looked in vain for the voice of hope available through Jesus' Church. His voice was absent. As are we, His disciples.

The voice of spiritual leadership across the country is strangely missing from the public dialog. Unfortunately, that's consistent with the observation my non-Christian friends make, that the church is invisible, irrelevant and impotent. Enough. It's time to change all that. How, you ask?

Here's my answer. *It's time, and past time, that we open the local churches.*

The Arguments

I know this is controversial. I expect pushback. I know the arguments against opening the churches. Some come from government. Some from cultural sources. But most of them we made up ourselves out of fear of man or fear of a bug, neither of which is biblical.

"It's hopeless. Mainstream and social media control the messages and are biased against Christianity."

Forget it. The early church did not have media. It was grievously opposed. The message of the gospel spread person to person. At the time of his death, Jesus had a few followers. 400 years later, approximately half the Roman Empire was Christian. That's 30 million Christians in 400 years. The Good News spreads faster than any virus ... assuming people are exposed.

"Turn the other cheek. Submit to rulers and authorities."

I'm sure that there are learned theologians who can make a case that Christians are to not make waves, not antagonize the government and should simply stay quietly in our prayer closets waiting on God to make all things new. I don't buy it. Passively ceding the power and authority given to us by Christ to the world is not the message of the Bible.

"It's not loving or Christian to willfully infect people with the virus."

That's a false construct and straw man. It's a trick question. Jesus got asked trick questions. When asked if it was right to pay taxes, He responded, ""Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21b). In the last few weeks, we gave what is God's to Caesar. Opening the doors of the churches for people to choose to enter, or not (the same as always), is not willfully infecting people with the virus. And who says that a virus is more powerful than the Spirit and presence of God? Certainly, not us. Let each person prayerfully take responsibility for their own life. Attend or don't attend. The doors should always be open for those who need us and want to come.

"If we open up against a governor's orders, we might get arrested. We might lose a tax-exemption or our church."

Those things might happen. They might not. But if they do, then let's stand on our state and federal constitutional rights of speech, press, religion, assembly, equal treatment under the law and due process. We must retake the ground we gave up. We will prevail. As we should. It might get uncomfortable for those of us in the battle, but it's a fight worth fighting. The reason that churches are closed right now is because we closed them. If they were open, people would come.

"The church is not a building."

This is another smokescreen and cop-out. There is enormous value in gathering together to worship and pray in person. Online TV church is not the same as real community, any more than video calls with my 90-year-old mom substitute for a real hug.

Bottom line: We've been duped, fooled and distracted.

The enemy's most insidious and effective arguments contain just enough elements of plausibility to twist the Word of God slightly and plant the seed of doubt: "Did God really say ...?"

Enough.

It's time to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. It's time to open the churches. It's time for the church to lead the recovery of our confidence, our courage, our culture and our economy. Someone must break the pervasive grip of fear. Someone must go first. That's us.

Benefits of Leading

There are at least four outcomes we can expect from the reopening of our churches.

1. Highlight the real battle. The battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in

the heavenly realms (see Eph. 6:12). Make no mistake, when the church moves to reopen, the battle will rage. So, we put on the full armor of God and go to war.

2. Preserve our rights. Our Founding Fathers established a biblically based Constitution and Bill of Rights that we have fought hard to preserve. We must not abdicate now. If we don't speak up and defend our rights, who will? None are better equipped to fight for freedom than the millions of Americans who remain Christ-followers. They just need our leadership.

3. Do what the church is called to do. For thousands of years, in times of plague or any other trial, the church stepped up to serve and care for the broken and hurting, frequently at great personal risk to the people ministering. But we stepped back. It's time to get in the ring.

4. Demonstrate our faith through action. People are watching. If our behavior is indistinguishable from nonbelievers', we forfeit our influence. We can model courage and faith, instead of fear. We say God has the power to protect us. Let's trust it. We say God has the power to heal—and has given it to us. So let's heal. We say our destiny is secure. Let's show it by bringing rationality to the COVID discussion. Chances are, we won't get the virus. If we do, it's probably not going to be a big deal. If it is serious, it's likely we'll recover like we have from other illness. There is, of course, a tiny chance we might die. But there's a 100% chance we are going to die anyway in God's timing. If we're saved, we know we get to be with God for eternity. What's to fear? But talk is cheap. Faith and confident assurance are revealed by our actions.

The Church Is Essential

The church has never been more essential. The people we are called to serve are hurting. They are lonely, anxious, depressed, abused and suicidal. They're worried, scared and downright terrified of the virus. They are living in deep fear

of losing their jobs, income and businesses. They are questioning their identities and the meaning of life. They are coming face to face with their own mortality and the question of "Then what?" The government can't fix this. The private sector can't fix this. Our country desperately needs what only the church can lovingly deliver: the message of the peace and hope of Jesus Christ, face to face. In person. The fields are ripe.

Let's reopen the churches and together do the work of the church. It's time. {eoa}

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