Christianity and the Vaccine

We might as well tackle the issue of whether a Christian: should / must / is not required to / ought to consider / it doesn’t matter / it’s my body and therefore my personal business / get the COVID vaccine. To assist in our thinking please read the three articles below and relevant (longstanding) Florida law on the administration of vaccines to school aged children and recently enacted Florida law on requiring proof of vaccine.

The question for our discussion: **Do Christians have an obligation any different than anyone else with regard to the vaccine?**

**Article 1: the Viewpoint of Dr. Emily Smith, an Epidemiologist who is also a preacher’s wife (August 20, 2021)**

I wanted to give some practical guidance for churches as we navigate this fourth (and brutal) wave of the pandemic. I don’t have to tell you that this is the worst wave because of Delta. So, that changes the guidance I want to give with more urgency for you all. First though I want to ask three questions of you as you think through this guidance.

Regarding what precautions you are (or are not) taking in your church:

1. ***Is it truthful?*** By truthful, I mean are your precautions based on the truth of a deadly virus (based on the reality of the data and overwhelmed hospitals) or a congregational survey based on comfort (that is not truthful or reality)? The virus does not (and has not ever) care about how your congregants “feel” about the vaccine or masks. It’s just a novel virus (so, NOT the flu) that is highly contagious with severe outcomes (both hospitalizations/death and long COVID-19). Delta has changed the game - the other variants were not near as contagious. One person with Delta can infect 6-10 others (the previous variants were 1-3). Hence, it can spread quickly. So are you making precautions in your congregation based on the truth of the virus from reality or comfort surveys that can be skewed by cable news and politics? The latter will not protect against Delta. Please make your decisions for your church based on the truth of the reality we are seeing played out in our communities and hospitals right now.
2. ***Is it faithful?*** Given the transmissibility of Delta that is exploding in nearly every state, is it unfaithful to not wear a mask in your church? **I would say yes, it’s unfaithful.** Faithfulness according to the Cross is loving God and loving neighbor - of living out as ambassadors to His Kingdom (not a country) that calls us to align our comforts, allegiances, and freedoms according to the Cross. Faithfulness proves our allegiance according to that Cross - not according to how people feel about masking and vaccines. Would Jesus display his faithfulness with a mask and vaccine if He were physically walking the earth today? I think he most certainly would. This brings me to the third question.
3. ***Is it loving?*** Is it loving to your neighbors in your congregation, community, cities, towns, and friends to not mandate masking in your church? Is it loving to not encourage vaccination and combat the gross misinformation and disinformation about vaccines that seem to be invading churches, particularly evangelical churches. Loving our neighbors means taking the Cross-centered road of wearing a mask and getting a vaccine to protect the most vulnerable - those that you see in your congregation and those you see in the grocery store and those in the hospitals. Delta has made this even more evident.

Church leaders, I know you are tired and bombarded with LOTS of voices on all sides of this thing. I want to say - **this is not a debate though. There are no sides.** There’s only a deadly virus that has mutated detrimentally and is roaring through states and communities with low vaccination rates. I’m asking you to take the Cross-centered road and make precautions that are truthful, faithful, and loving in your churches. It might not be popular and may seem political to your congregants - especially in certain parts of the country. But time will tell that you made the right decisions. With that said, here’s my guidance.

1. If you’re in an area with positivity rates above 10% (which is a lot of your areas), masks should be mandated, not encouraged, for everyone inside. Regardless of vaccination status. At all times. This includes children. I can’t stress this enough. It’s one of the greatest weapons we have right now against the Delta variant. This new wave will end and come down at some point. But, all data indications show that it’s going to get worse before it gets better. Preemptive mandatory masking is a good idea before that happens. We have seen how quickly Delta can explode in communities with low vaccination rates. So, the more proactive we can be, the better.
2. If you have 2 services where 1 is mask-optional and the other is full-masking, I would stop doing the mask-optional one for a while. We can’t tell when the peak of infections is going to hit because the curve is so steep. So, for a time I would not do the mask optional service.
3. Singing - This is risky. You might consider limiting the number of songs again and number of people you have on stage.
4. If you have a high-risk congregation (based on age, poverty, un-insured, etc) with low vaccination rates, you might consider going to an online version again. At the very least, limit the number of congregants in your sanctuary again with masks mandatory for those that do attend. Open doors and windows if you can.
5. Food - Sorry, Baptists. No potlucks for a bit. If you are going to have a fellowship meal, order in individually boxed food or ask your congregants to bring their own. And, then eat outside!
6. Lastly, I’m going to encourage masking again - regardless if someone is vaccinated or not. Delta can still be spread if you’re vaccinated. So, we have to take it seriously - more than ever. I know making masks mandatory in the building at all times (not just walking in and out) is not popular in some of your churches. But, Delta changed the game. Please make masks mandatory for everyone at all times, including the sanctuary when people sit down.

Pastors and leaders, bless you, bless you, bless you. It’s been a long road for you all and some of you have been doing the right thing from the beginning - at great cost. I want to encourage you to stay the course during this wave. It’s just brutal and seems to be affecting our children and hospitals more than the other waves. Let’s do this for our congregations, children, and neighbors. As a ministry family, I deeply understand how hard some of these decisions are for you and your families. I’m praying for you today to be encouraged with all of our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faiths. I’m also praying for your sweet families if you have a spouse/partner and children.

Bless you, bless you, bless you.

**Article 2: Pope Francis Calls Getting Vaccinated an Act of Love (New York Times, August 18, 2020)**

Getting vaccinated against Covid-19 is “an act of love,” Pope Francis says in a public service ad started circulating online and on television on Wednesday.

The ad shows the pope, speaking in Spanish with English subtitles, with church officials from Brazil, Mexico, the United States and other countries describing vaccination as a moral responsibility.

 “Thanks to God’s grace and to the work of many, we now have vaccines to protect us from Covid-19,” the pope says in the ad, which was produced with the Ad Council, an American nonprofit.

In centers of faith, efforts to counter vaccine hesitancy have often been fraught.

Many religious Americans who are hesitant have told researchers that faith-based arguments could persuade them to get the shot.

Pastors in Black communities, where congregants skeptical of the Covid-19 vaccines cite a history of medical mistreatment, have publicly rolled up their sleeves to get inoculated. Orthodox Jewish rabbis have taken to YouTube and Zoom to endorse vaccination. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, Muslim groups issued statements emphasizing that the shots were halal, or permissible to use.

Still, the message from some religious leaders has struggled to counter vaccine misinformation. On WhatsApp, recordings of rabbis making unproven claims about the vaccines’ effects on fertility have circulated among Orthodox Jewish communities. And on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, some churches and Christian influencers have spread conspiracy theories linking vaccines to microchips or blaming those who get a shot for not trusting God’s will.

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**Vatican News: August 18, 2021**

The Pope has joined his voice to those of Bishops across North and South America to urge people to get jabbed against Covid-19.

In a video message produced in conjunction with the Ad Council, Pope Francis praised the work of researchers and scientists in producing safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines.

“Thanks to God’s grace and to the work of many, we now have vaccines to protect us from Covid-19,” he said in the video released on Wednesday.

He added that vaccines “bring hope to end the pandemic, but only if they are available to all and if we collaborate with one another.”

1. Vaccination is an act of love

Pope Francis went on to say that getting a Covid jab that is “authorized by the respective authorities” is an “act of love.”

Helping other do the same, he said, is also an act of love. “Love for oneself, love for our families and friends, and love for all peoples. Love is also social and political.”

The Pope noted that social and political love is built up through “small, individual gestures capable of transforming and improving societies.”

“Getting vaccinated is a simple yet profound way to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable,” he said.

Pope Francis then prayed to God that “each one of us can make his or her own small gesture of love.”

“No matter how small, love is always grand,” he said. “Small gestures for a better future.”

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1. ‘Strength of faith’

The Pope was joined in the video by several Cardinals and Archbishops from across the Americas.

Archbishop Jose Gomez, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Archbishop of Los Angeles, lamented the suffering and death the pandemic has wrought across the globe.

He prayed that God might “grant us the grace to face it with the strength of faith, ensuring that vaccines are available for all, so that we can all get immunized.”

Mexican Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes linked Covid-19 jabs to a better future for all.

“From North to South America, we support vaccinations for all,” said the Cardinal.

1. Safe, effective vaccines

Honduran Cardinal Rodriguez Maradiaga said the world has much to learn from the coronavirus.

“But one thing is certain: the authorized vaccines are effective, and are here to save lives,” he said. “They are the key to a path of personal and universal healing.”

Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes praised the “heroic efforts” of health professionals in developing “safe and effective” jabs.

He also repeated the Pope’s affirmation that “getting vaccinated is an act of love”.

Salvadorian Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez said vaccination helps protect the most vulnerable.

“Our choice to get vaccinated affects others,” he said, adding that it is a moral responsibility.

1. Unity across the Americas

Peruvian Archbishop Miguel Cabrejos rounded out the testimonies contained in the video with an appeal to unity.

“We are united—North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean—to promote and support vaccination for all,” he said, encouraging everyone to “act responsibly, as members of the great human family, seeking and protecting our integral health and universal vaccination.”

**Article 3: Florida and federal law allows an exemption from getting a vaccine for religious reasons**

In the case of vaccines required for children to attend school, Florida law exempts a child from being vaccinated based on a religious belief. Florida Statute 1003.22(5) states, “The provisions of this section shall not apply if (a) The parent of the child objects in writing that the administration of immunizing agents conflicts with his or her religious tenets or practices.” .

“The issue which we are called upon to decide implicates two very important social policies-the desire to protect the public health and welfare and the desire to protect a parent's fundamental right to raise his or her child according to the religious tenets that he or she chooses.   After considerable reflection, we conclude that the legislature intended that when, as here, the two policies collide, greater protection be afforded to the latter by prohibiting any inquiry by the Department into the bona fides of the parent's or guardian's objection.”

“It is true that the intent we have attributed to the legislature will permit parents and guardians to obtain exemptions based upon untruthful representations that immunization would conflict with their religious beliefs.   However, the legislature might well have considered that a relatively minor concern compared to the danger that giving to the Department the authority to determine the bona fides of such objections would pose to the free exercise of religion guaranteed by both the federal and state constitutions.”

*Florida Department of Health v. Curry*, 722 So. 2d 874 (Fla. App. 1st DCA 1998)

In 2021 the Florida Legislature passed the law below regarding requiring proof of vaccination.

381.00316 COVID-19 vaccine documentation.

 (1) A business entity, as defined in s. 768.38 to include

 any business operating in this state, may not require patrons or

 customers to provide any documentation certifying COVID-19

 vaccination or post-infection recovery to gain access to, entry

 upon, or service from the business operations in this state.

 This subsection does not otherwise restrict businesses from

 instituting screening protocols consistent with authoritative or

 controlling government-issued guidance to protect public health.

 (2) A governmental entity as defined in s. 768.38 may not

 require persons to provide any documentation certifying COVID-19

 vaccination or post-infection recovery to gain access to, entry

 upon, or service from the governmental entity’s operations in

 this state. This subsection does not otherwise restrict

 governmental entities from instituting screening protocols

 consistent with authoritative or controlling government-issued

 guidance to protect public health.

 (3) An educational institution as defined in s. 768.38 may

 not require students or residents to provide any documentation

 certifying COVID-19 vaccination or post-infection recovery for

 attendance or enrollment, or to gain access to, entry upon, or

 service from such educational institution in this state. This

 subsection does not otherwise restrict educational institutions

 from instituting screening protocols consistent with

 authoritative or controlling government-issued guidance to

 protect public health.

Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires religious beliefs be accommodated, including an accommodation of allowing a person not to be vaccinated because of a sincerely held religious belief. As an example of how to apply this, the Department of Defense is considering how it will handle requests to opt out of the mandatory vaccine requirement being implemented in September. According to the Department of Defense, "There is a religious exemption possibility for any mandatory vaccine, and there's a process that we go through to counsel the individual both from a medical and from a command perspective about using a religious exemption."

<https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2726774/services-will-make-call-on-religious-exemptions-to-covid-19-vaccines/>