

Voices: Let us consider: Hebrews 10:24-25 during a pandemic

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We face a challenge in the church across the world that none of us has faced before in our lifetimes.

The threat of a global pandemic had been mere speculation, sensationalized in action movies in which a frantic search for “patient zero” led to the inevitable vaccine to be administered in the nick of time to the protagonist.

As it turns out, pandemics are a lot less flashy, vaccines aren’t developed overnight, and economics and social isolation play a much greater role than Hollywood anticipated.

Everything we’ve been told points to a difficult time ahead before a “new normal” is established.

As Christians, we want to honor God in this time. We want to hear his voice and conduct ourselves as children of light in a dark world. We want to confront the fear of uncertainty with the certainty supplied by faith in a faithful God.

In uncertain times, conspiracy theories thrive. In one version, Christians should view this as an attack on the church, as secular governments attempting to quash the gospel by preventing congregations from gathering together. After all, the Bible clearly warns us against “neglecting to meet together” (Hebrews 10:25).

Isn't this exactly what the governing authorities are instructing us to do? Shouldn't we defy the orders of secular governments when they countermand divine imperatives? Isn't that what Peter and John did when instructed to keep silent about Jesus (Acts 4:19)?

Faithfully approaching Scripture

As a pastor, I think often and deeply about how I interpret the meaning of Scripture. I am convinced the Bible is the word of God, and it stands alone as our guide for faith and practice. But I also am aware even Satan quotes the Bible. It can be misused.

Through the years, I have given special attention to how Jesus himself interpreted Scripture. Surely, he did it right. What arises from a study of the Gospels is a clear confrontation between Jesus' way of understanding Scripture and the various approaches of other religious leaders—most famously the Pharisees.

Where the Pharisees stuck tenaciously to the letter of the law, Jesus insisted we must dig deeper to arrive at the spirit of the law, the "why" of the law. Thus, a Pharisee would be content with refraining from murder, but Jesus would trace murder back to the first moment you despise another human being in your heart, the moment you call him an idiot (Matthew 5:21-22).

The spirit of instruction

How would Jesus interpret the meaning of Hebrews 10:24-25?

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (ESV).

If we focus on the letter of the instruction, the simplest reading would mean we have to gather together. We might add “physically” automatically—even though that is not spelled out—because we would assume “physically” from context.

But what is the spirit of this instruction? Grammatically, “not neglecting” is a participle that further fleshes out the main verb from verse 24: “let us consider.” We are being called to give thoughtful consideration to *how to stir up one another to love and good works*.

We must be intentional about using our minds to devise new ways to light a fire under one another, to stimulate in one another a greater love made tangible in concrete actions.

“Let us consider” is the main verb, and we “stir up one another to love and good works” by ensuring we are “not neglecting to meet together.” In this light, gathering together is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The instruction about “not neglecting to meet together” is followed up by a contrast that clarifies the author of Hebrews’ intent: *not neglecting ... but encouraging one another*.

The author’s fear is that Christians will be slothful in their connectedness to the family of faith, that they will allow distance to cool love, that they will fail in their task to be an encouragement to others as we eagerly await the Day of the Lord.

If we put it all together, these verses instruct us to challenge and encourage one another in love and good works, and to do this by remaining connected.

Applying this instruction now

How do we apply this to our current situation? Is it love to insist on gathering physically when we know we could be putting the lives of others at risk? Is this one of the “good works” the author of Hebrews had in mind? Is belligerent defiance of safety precautions the best way to convey the love of Christ to the world around us?

Perhaps we’ve focused on the wrong thing. The question we need to ask ourselves at this time is: Have we allowed ourselves to become disconnected from our family of faith?

Through the technologies we have available—texts, phone and video calls, video conferencing—we still are fully capable of keeping the instruction we’ve been given.

The apostle Paul used what crude technologies he had available—papyrus and quill—to remain connected to others and to stimulate them to love and good works, to encourage them.

We still can do discipleship, pray, open up the Bible and share and challenge one another if we avail ourselves of the opportunities.

A Pharisee might be content to sit in a group gathering, but Jesus expects more.

If we would honor Christ in this time, we must ask: Are we neglecting the opportunities we have to connect with others, to encourage them, to challenge them to love and good works?

People are isolated, frightened, grieving, struggling financially. What are we doing about it?

Get to work. Don’t watch TV. Get on your phone or computer, and join that

church Zoom Bible study. Call up that person in need. Drop off groceries. Organize a drive-by expression of love. Use your ingenuity, and *let us consider* this together.

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