

## COVID-19: A Theological Response

We are in a critical time in terms of our health and life in general because of the spread and threat of the Covid pandemic. We have been advised by the government and health officials to stay home, take care, and be kind. Individuals, families, community leaders and church leaders are responding in different ways. Some are strongly supporting this appeal and others are against it because of wrong information they gathered from the social media. Those who support the government and health officials' campaign are well versed with the logical information about the care for the lives of others. They comply willingly to the governments restriction rules and agree to have their Covid vaccination. In doing so, they are not only protecting their lives from the infection of the Delta virus and other viruses but also avoiding spreading in the community. In contrary, those who are having selfish decisions to go against the government's appeal and avoid the vaccination would potentially become the source of reproducing the virus as well as spreading in the community. This is irresponsible for the wellbeing and security of our community. In addition, they do in fact have no care for the life that God created and gifted with humanity for all creatures on earth to enjoy life.

Part of the argument by those who are against the government policy on vaccination is their human right to choose what they want, whether to vaccinate or not. It is their divine right. God has given them that right and nobody dare to take from them that right even the government. They used and interpreted scriptures to support their claim and their intention. In addition, they shared information on the social media to support their campaign even though it is false information. They called upon like-minded people to march in the public arena to demonstrate their personal belief and individual inclination. They have no hesitation in going against the government's restriction rules because they think their freedom has been jeopardised. It is their individual right to choose what is best for them. However, such a kind of perception is very narrow and shallow in a sense because it's only partly right. Yes, we have our individual rights but we need to be aware that our individual rights have set boundaries in order to prevent us from crossing over other boundaries that might interfere with the rights of others. I believe that's why the Parliament is responsible to make Laws in order to protect not only the right of individuals but the right of all people. It is the common good of all people that becomes the priority. This kind of conception is in line with what Charles E. Gutenson claims in his book when he states, "While Christians should perhaps be more aware or more empowered through God's Spirit to live as God intends, God's intentions are not different for the non-Christian community and the Christian community. The goals of our shared common life that conform to God's intentions are universal and not limited to the Christian community because God wills and desires the flourishing of all his creation."<sup>1</sup>

From a theological stand point, God gave us life and we are given a full responsibility to be good stewards of that very life. The two creation stories in the Book of Genesis convey clearly the priority of life that God has given us. The author of the Book of Genesis affirms that by stating, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7) From this text, the author explicates that life came from the very being of God, God's breath. God is the source of life according to the author of the book of Genesis. To deny or endanger life is to defy God's intention for humanity, which is to nurture and cherish life. This was the understanding that

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<sup>1</sup> Gutenson, Charles, E. *Christians and the Common Good*, 31.

Jesus had in his ministry. He knew the uniqueness of life and therefore, he had the compassion to save, restore, heal and nurture it. In his words, he declares this powerful statement, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10b) Even when Jesus died, life never concealed or overshadowed for Jesus defeated death and rose again to life. It is life, which is the very essence of God existence that finally prevailed and vindicated. Because of the vitality of life as God’s gift for us to nourish and cherish, I’m convinced that anyone, whether Christian or non-Christian who works to harm or to undermined life is not only against the will of God but also ignore the common good of all people.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism saw life as a priority in his ministry. Therefore, he developed a theology that would guide him to fulfil that purpose. James Stuart in his book, “*The John Wesley Code*”, claims that John Wesley’s theology was centred in the word “compassion” as a guiding principal that helped him to care for life as a core responsibility. Compassion motivated John Wesley to engage in a mission not only for moral revolution but also for social change. Stuart remarks, “For Wesley, compassion was a fundamental Christian way of relating to others. Faith necessarily required expression in compassion towards others where the suffering and struggle of others to be human invited one also to be human. This compassion love was the theological foundation of the Methodist movements”.<sup>2</sup> Out of his compassion for life, John Wesley established Health Clinics to provide remedies for the sick and infirmities but especially for the poor. He even produced books with explanations of remedies and their effectiveness to restore life. Stuart again states, “Wesley published in 1747 his “*Primitive Physick*” which contained over 900 remedies for the most illnesses afflicting the poor. His purpose of drafting this prescription booklet is to give instruction to the common people of his society not only how to cure their sickness but also how to nurture their lives to remain healthy. A. Wesley Hill makes a remark on John Wesley’s attitude toward life by stating, “Let John Wesley come beside your bed of sickness. Here is a man tidy of person, vibrant with health and energy in the leash of unruffled calm; here is one with eyes to see and sympathy to comprehend, with sense of mission and utter sincerity of purpose. This man, you feel, is a true representative of the divine Healer from whom all health and well-being flows. Let this man prescribe for you and let his medicine be ever so simple, it will, you know, do you good. This is a good physician.”<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, Methodist tradition emphasises on the value of life and the priority to enhance and cherish. I’m glad to know that the leaders of our church are aware of this tradition and stand firm on our claim that life is precious and it is a common treasure for us all to protect. If anyone or an organisation is working to hinder the value of life by their political or religious stance, especially the spread of Covid-19 viruses, is obviously counter to our Methodist tradition of compassion as well as the scriptural principle of sustaining life. We are accountable for the wellbeing of others as God has done to us through Christ (John 3:16).

Siosifa Pole (2021)

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart, James, *The John Wesley Code*, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, A. Wesley, *John Wesley Among the Physicians*, 20.

