

# OpenTheo

## Principles Of Christian Wisdom In The Age Of Coronavirus (with Steven Wedgworth)

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Steven Wedgworth joins me to discuss some ways in which the Coronavirus crisis highlights our need for wisdom, and how the Christian and the Protestant tradition can speak to this need.

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### Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I am joined by my friend Steven Wedgworth to discuss some of the issues that we have seen arising from the coronavirus discussions, Christian reactions, and just the phenomenon as a whole. We've been watching ourselves react, we've been watching society react, and we've been watching the church react to a crisis that we did not anticipate.

A few weeks ago, we were completely unprepared for this, many of us. And so at this time, we're experiencing what I've seen as, first of all, a time of testing and also a time of humiliation. As a time of testing, it's something that reveals the strength or weakness of various parts of our society, our communities, our own processes of thinking.

And as a time of humiliation, it reminds us of our weakness, our humanity, our frailty, our dependence upon God, and hopefully should drive us to our knees to seek God in prayer

and to depend upon him all the more, recognizing our limitations and the limitations of all those great forces that seem to have our world in control. But when the world is hit with a crisis of this size, even our great governments and businesses and all these other forces around us cannot hold it in check. And so this is a time to draw near to God.

It's also a time to reflect upon how we have shown our own weaknesses, our own failures, and also some areas where we maybe have realized strength in some of our thinking, in some of our processes and reactions in our communities. And so to think about that, I invited Stephen on because he's someone who's thought a lot about these theological principles that underlie the processes of wisdom and judgment, which are processes that are of immense importance right now. So first of all, thank you very much for joining me, Stephen.

Yeah, thanks for having me, Alistair. And, you know, appreciate the invitation, all that you said about me and wanted to say how much I've appreciated your writing and voice over the years. I feel like we're kind of old friends from a very long distance apart.

Yeah, I think we've been in some form of correspondence for almost 15 years now. So it's been quite some time. Wow.

Yeah. Dates us in internet years. Anyway, I was wondering, as you've written about issues to do with judgment and wisdom, what are some of the principles that have really surfaced for you when you've been thinking about the responses that you've seen in the last few days? Yeah, I think with this coronavirus reaction, there are two or three particular sort of angles.

There's sort of the pastor's angle. He's always wanting to comfort people in times of uncertainty. We think about messages of divine sovereignty, you know, trusting on God, maybe even sort of the John Piper angle, don't waste your crisis, you know, use this time to really see what's important in life.

And what you panic about. And those, I think, are really good notes to sound. They're important, and I wouldn't want to skip over them.

But I guess I'm going to skip over them, because I feel like those are covered a lot. Typically, pastors, they go right to that. I imagine many of our sermons are going to go with those as well.

So I think that I don't want to skip them in the sense that I aim in everyone who's going to talk about those, but that's not probably the thing I want to talk about the most right now. Because I also, I think what you've seen is that there's this reaction to sort of everyday Christians saying, what can we do about this in response, right? Do we now learn a new reaction? Either that we should all move in this direction, rally, kind of to listening to the science and the data. That's been a very big one particular chorus.

Or the flip side, we don't trust any of the elite. This is all overblown. And we, the ordinary people, will figure this out and be just fine.

That dialectic is sort of what's captured my attention. What should a good sort of, a Christian who's got a general training in theology and philosophy, at least comfortable with that kind of conversation, how should they look at the situation we're dealing with right now? How can they maybe provide a voice of not merely reason, but kind of a calm and stable reflection on things so as to help people really understand how to think about the larger environment? That's probably what's been on my mind the most. And from there, what tools do we have in maybe the reformed, generally speaking, or magisterial Protestant tradition to start making sense of these questions? The fact that you bring up just the process of thinking, I think, that's something that's really arisen for me.

That's when we've been looking at the responses, what we're seeing is not just specific opinions that people are putting out. We're seeing something about the processes by which people arrive at opinions. And there, I think, things such as trust networks and the processes by which we arrive at information, these sorts of things are very important in a context like this, where there is no person who's a universal expert on all the issues at play.

No one can understand the economic dimensions of the problem, the medical dimensions, the very practical, immediate local concerns of running a particular hospital or whatever. What we need is the coordination of many different forms of expertise and to properly order ourselves relative to that, which requires something more than any single person can do by themselves. And it requires some sort of integration of our judgment faculties and processes with those of others around us.

And there, I think, there has been a definite revelation of failure and limitations, I think, with the approach that many Christians have taken in response. That I think have depended too much upon the idea that one person can or should be able to process all of these things themselves. And as a result, there's been distrust of authorities, there's been failure to comply with authorities, resistance, and a very selective approach to experts.

I think what we need to do is to reflect very carefully upon the processes by which we think with counsellors, among other things. The ways in which we relate to authorities, those who are placed over us, and the ways that the church's area of expertise relates to that of the state or the local authorities or that of medical authorities. And that sort of very down to earth process of networks of trust, networks of information, networks of authority.

At a time like this, that is absolutely essential to get right. And the failure on that is not just an intellectual matter right now. It's a matter, quite literally, for some people of life and death.

Yeah, it's interesting to me that when I was watching it sort of unfold online from a distance, because of course this thing was happening in China, and then it slowly made it obvious, okay, it's going to go everywhere. There were certain voices that were onto it pretty early. They were saying, hey, this is going to be a real problem.

And what was fascinating to me is that they were a very eclectic group of people. You had your epidemiologists, the people that pay attention to disease and viruses, right? That's a very small group of people, but they were on it. And then you had your sort of Silicon Valley technology gurus who were really dialed in.

And then you had maybe your fringy, far right wing conspiracy theory people. Originally, they were saying this was going to be a big problem. And it was kind of the moderates of all flavors who were reluctant to go there.

But as then it manifested itself as, okay, this is a big problem, there was a very interesting reshuffling of those opinions, at least in the United States or North America. Suddenly it's took on more of a familiar sort of conservative-liberal split. And all of a sudden now the liberals are going to be on board with taking this seriously.

They believe in science and whatnot. And the conservatives are suddenly reacting to all the things that they typically don't trust, experts, and is this going to create government overreach? Maybe this is really just a plot, one more plot to discredit the current administration in Washington, D.C. That became the more comfortable conversation pretty quickly. And it wasn't until I think you saw President Trump himself change his tone, which I think happened on Monday, that everyone sort of had permission to, okay, we can start thinking about this in different categories now.

But I don't know if everybody has those new categories. I think that a lot of us are scratching our heads trying to figure out where do we go now? It's been interesting seeing some of the narratives that people have been bringing to the crisis and how ridiculous the narratives that would dominate the news in the past, things about identity politics and social justice and inclusion, all these sorts of things, how completely ridiculous they seem at this moment in time. But yet how many people, that's all they have.

They don't really have any framework within which to speak of a crisis of this scale, something that has the sort of existential force for society as a whole. And that has been a revelation apart from anything else. Yes.

Yeah. And in some ways it's an opportunity to really reflect on what questions about government and politics, what they really should be about. So many people, politics has been largely about cultural preferences, things that we enjoy better amongst a network of friends or lifestyle habits or also religious commitments.

But there has been relatively little interest in just what I would think of as the meat and potatoes of keeping a concrete group of humans living together, things such as infrastructure, the way you get your food, the way you have your medicine and healthcare. I mean some people will talk about health insurance, of course, but I'm talking about just the basics of it all. Usually we don't care about that stuff.

That stuff's not that interesting. And now we see that's really probably the most important things for politicians and certainly local communities to really have smart responses to. And the processes of response again are important there.

You mentioned just the diversity of the group of people that were onto this fairly early. And I noticed the same thing. I think I'm probably, I know a number of people who are buying masks back in January.

I bought some back then. And we realized that there was something on the horizon that might become an issue in a few months time. And it wasn't certain, but we had a bit more reaction time.

And I think that it has been very telling seeing the way that people who dismissed things as just pointless fear a few months ago are now realizing those were rational fears. But since they didn't pay attention to rational fears, now they have panic and they don't have any response time. They're just left with reactions, which has made me wonder how can we become better as people who are buying ourselves or getting ourselves the space in which to respond to issues before they blow up to the point where we have no response time and have to panic.

That I think requires very structural questions. It requires questions about the sort of people that we get together. Because if you just have an echo chamber, people who hold the same sorts of values and opinions and viewpoints, maybe you won't experience the sorts of challenge that you have where you do have a more disparate group of people who can see things from different perspectives.

Yeah, well, in one respect, it's sort of the worst time, at least, again, I'm speaking with North American factors first in my brain. It's kind of the worst time for our people to have to face a real sort of existential human life crisis, because no one listens to anyone. They don't trust anyone.

Everything is suspect. In fact, we are accustomed to everything being fake and knowing that it's all fake, right? Like we know that it's fake before we have the conversation. And so now that we're starting to realize, oh, this is real, none of the ordinary people you would expect are stable voices.

Which news channel can you say, okay, these guys will just give me the basic information, right? They're not going to give me a slant. I don't know the answer to that.

Which medical figure is thought of as a neutral referee who's just really trying to apply the right rules? I don't think anyone knows who that is here.

And so it's a bad time for that to happen. I think the one, as you say, the sort of group that we're thinking about these things are often those who fall outside the blue and the red tribe, as it were. It's more the gray tribe area and people who are on the fringes, people who don't fit neatly into any side.

That's right. You actually find in the sort of ferment of their conversations, a lot of things emerge that you just don't see in the mainstream. But what I found interesting here is you mentioned the issue of trust and society runs on trust.

We don't usually see it. We don't usually realize just how important it is. But where trust has broken down, and trust has pretty devastatingly broken down in many of our Western societies, we get on because we have very positive social and material conditions.

And at a point like this, we suddenly realize we don't have the most valuable thing of all, which is trustworthy leaders, trust in leaders and the meeting of those two things. And where that is lacking, it's very hard to have coordinated action in response to a crisis. You won't recognize authority on the one hand.

And on the other hand, there's just not a responsible exercise of authority for the people. And that is a fundamental existential crisis now that we have to address. Yes, absolutely.

Now, I maybe throw it back a little bit the other direction. I've also noticed certain authorities not having the same opinions. And this has been very interesting to me.

Let's just take the medical world. Many people who I have connections with who are maybe ordinary level doctors, you know, they worked in a hospital or they were family doctors or nurses, many of them were quite skeptical of the COVID outbreak, because they just said, hey, what you people don't understand is these sorts of things happen all the time. If you really were aware of the number of people that get the flu and get sick and die, then you would have these sorts of possibilities and numbers in your mind more often.

They were almost, because of their expertise, they were not panicking. However, there were others that were more particularly specialized in the virus growth and maybe the impact it's had on social level, not just thinking about an individual patient, but thinking about what this can and has done to large polities. And they were quite alarmed.

And so for the individual Christian who says, okay, I'm going to trust an expert who knows more than myself, you probably don't know very many people who are in that second category. You know mostly people who work in smaller, more personal environments, but you certainly don't know how to tell the difference between their

points of view or why one would be better than the other. And that's definitely a huge issue.

I think there is an issue here that we're facing that requires response of a dramatic scale to something that seems very small in relative terms. When you think of the number of people who die of the flu every year, it's more than the number of people who have died so far of COVID-19. So it doesn't seem that big to make such a response.

And to actually make a response on that scale requires considerable trust in the authorities that are telling you this. Because why should we close everything down? Why should we close our schools, our businesses, lose our jobs, depend far more upon government handouts, all these sorts of things are extremely radical actions to take. And that I think requires a lot of coordination of authorities, because as you say the more local authorities are often just not seeing this as quite such a big issue as others who are more specialized in some of these areas might be.

There, maybe we should return to the principle that we see in Proverbs of the multitude of counselors and the importance of seeing counselors as a group of people who are interacting together. And then we make judgments as a result of seeing their interactions and the sharpening effect that that has. Yes.

And another thought that goes along with that, we want multitude of counselors, but to what extent do some of our communities of discourse on this sort of topic, and now I'm going to think about a different direction, to what extent do many of them have sort of a hierarchy of which counselors are more important? And so you get your couple of doctors in the room. You get your economist in the room. You get just people representing everyday families in the room, and they have the conversation.

I think for most of our larger political scale evaluations, the doctors are going to be at the top. Maybe if you're a libertarian, you flip that and you make the economist always at the top. And everyone else is sort of expected to just sort of follow at that point.

And I wonder, especially as a pastor who's got to make decisions about what to do with his congregation, do we meet on Sunday for service or not? How do you integrate all of those concerns? You hear what the epidemiologist is saying. You hear what the World Health Organization or the Center for Disease Control is saying. Then you hear what your local people are saying.

You hear what the economists are saying. And you've got to make a decision. You've got to take - all of those could, in a world that is working well, everyone's being honest and doing what's right, they could all be legitimate expert opinions who then you have to synthesize and make some application in real life.

And that is extremely challenging because I think many of us have trained ourselves to

have one particular trump card that answers everything. And yes, I think when we think about the way that we regulate our lives according to wisdom, if we're depending purely upon what we can synthesize within ourselves, that's going to be very limited. A process of wisdom that integrates the insights of many different parties who have more specialized insight can act far more wisely.

But that process of integration is part of the structure of wisdom. And we need to think more carefully about how that goes about. I think for many it's taken the form of a more reactive framework and a more absolute framework.

So you either trust or distrust. There's less regulation of trust. I mean, how much weight do you put upon an opinion? Putting weight on opinion doesn't mean that you take it as absolute truth, nor does it mean that you dismiss it.

It can be something in between. You can give it a certain amount of weight relative to others. And there can be a sense of how strong this opinion is, this particular viewpoint.

And some of the countervailing considerations, these sorts of things. Again, if you have motivated reasoning driving you, it can be very difficult to hear something that maybe threatens your livelihood. If you realize you're going to lose your job, if the government takes a particular course of action, you're strongly motivated not to believe the evidence that would push them in the direction of that policy.

And to actually make responsible and rational and actionable responses to this virus crisis, we're going to have to find some way to exercise trust responsibly and in a way that is not just throwing ourselves into the arms of one particular party or one particular tribe that we're believing everything that they throw at us. That's often how we've tried to regulate trust within a partisan society. And it doesn't work at this sort of time.

We're realizing that we actually need the multitude of counselors. We need a less partisan framework. We need to test these different opinions.

And how do we arrive at that when we've been formed for so long just to listen to one particular set of experts who often are not really experts? We're looking for a one-stop shop. And for many in churches, that has been the pastor. The church has presented biblical reasoning as a sort of universal answer to all the world's problems.

And so if you're just biblical enough, you'll be able to be the expert on whatever subject is thrown at you. In a crisis like this, you won't be. And it will become very obvious that you can actually put people's lives at risk.

And so to take the concerns of the experts, to integrate those with theological concerns, because what you're doing is not taking the concerns of the medical experts over the theological concerns, but you're bringing those things together. And you're weighing them up and you're determining action accordingly. It's not a matter of preferring one



over the other.

It's recognizing theological concerns themselves should drive us towards this. Christ said he desires mercy, not sacrifice. And so if we're going to be people who are prepared to sacrifice the well-being of our neighbor for the sake of our worship, that is an abomination to God.

And so for the sake of our theological convictions, we do care about what medical experts say. But that process of harmonization is a challenging one in a polarized society. And also, trust networks, information networks, and processes of healthy belief and responsible belief, we don't usually think about belief as something that has to be responsible.

But at times like this, I think we see that it really does have to be. Those become absolutely imperative. Yeah, things like you say theological, biblical, even sometimes Christian.

And I think for many of us, we've already loaded the definition of those words. And we've made them largely always kind of come back to the same kind of answers. So if you're more of a pietistic person, then you're going to look at this crisis, just like you look at any other crisis and say, how can this bring us to introspection, repentance, reliance on God? And that's a biblical theological reflection.

And if you're more of a church's counter, you know, polis sort of philosophy, you say, how can this crisis teach us how to come up with a social sort of action strategy? Maybe it's a new economic approach or a new community lifestyle. That's what you mean by a theological reflection. But it's perfectly possible for a theological reflection on all of this to include what we believe our religion and doctrine teach us about natural revelation.

What we think it teaches us about vocation, lay people in general, and even what we maybe see in biblical narratives about how the people of God sometimes work with, maybe in an uneasy alliance, but work with otherwise rival powers for something of a similar goal. You think of David when he's actually with the Philistines, contrary to, you know, fighting against perhaps Saul and leadership of Israel, or maybe Paul finding allies in the Romans, the Roman political structure. What ways can that also teach us about interacting with something like this? And one thing that really just came clear to me in the last week or so is how relatively little I as a pastor have to say about the specifics of the disease.

Is this something we should fear as a health concern? Is this something we should quote unquote take seriously? Should we make big dramatic reactions? As a pastor, just thinking of all my sort of pastor tips and tools, I don't have anything special to offer to that question. Other Christians who are biblically literate, have reflected on the teachings of great theologians over the years, but who are working in other fields, they

have as much or more to offer to that kind of question as I do. And so it would be most appropriate, most theological, most biblical for me to, as a pastor, defer to those other voices at a time like this.

None of this is particularly new. I mean, the reformers were talking about this in terms of two kingdoms and other things like that. And that doctrine has often been one that's been disputed and opposed.

But I think we can see its importance in a situation like this. And what have been some of the ways you found the doctrine of the two kingdoms helpful in thinking about such a specific problem? Yeah, so it's interesting. The last two weeks or so, I was actually working with a group of people who are going to be republishing Luther's three treatises.

The letter to the German nobility, Babylonian captivity of the church, and freedom of the Christian. They're already out there in English, but they're sort of public domain and people reprint them in various ways. And so some of my friends who work with Canon Press, they're going to repackage that and put it out there in a new popular format.

And so they asked me for some help with that, collaborating and giving some editorial thoughts. And so I was rereading Luther on these points. And the first of those treatises is the letter to the German nobility or to the German princes.

It's all about his understanding of the two kingdoms. But what's so fascinating about that essay is that it's asking the magistrate, the civil magistrate, to help save the church from clergy who have hurt the church. And as an American, that is a very strange or unnatural way to approach the two kingdoms.

For many of us, we've been kind of taught to think, even if we didn't have the name two kingdoms in our brain, that the two basic groups are church and state. Those are your categories. Church over here, that means the visible church, the ministers and the membership of the church, the discipline and polity of the church.

And then the state, that's the federal government, state government, kings, queens, whatever mechanism you have there. And those are your two groups. But that doesn't work with Luther because Luther sees the hierarchy and the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church as part of the problem that needs to be solved.

And when he's writing that essay, he doesn't have any other church in mind. There's not a Lutheran church. There's not a Church of England.

There's not these other groups. He's writing as a member of this singular church, and he's speaking to civil magistrates as if they are also part of this church. He says the temporal power is baptized like us, and therefore it has certain duties and responsibilities.

Now that was a Christendom model. It's not the same even in Europe anymore, certainly not the same in the US. But when you realize the categories are different, then it clues you into what the two kingdoms really were all about.

And so for Luther, both church and state and the family and civic arena, they can be both. They can be understood as in either kingdom. So that's the difference.

Insofar as they're doing earthly activities, things due to the body, things having to do with social relationships and interactions, what we call the common good, things about general revelation and general creation, those are all temporal kingdom activities. The church can do those as much as anyone else. Easy example, modern day, you have a church building, and it has to be up to code.

You have to have enough fire escapes. You have to have the right kind of insulation or not have used lead paint or whatever the case may be. And you have to actually have people come and check on that, make sure it fits.

Similarly, if you're going to run some sort of charity program, a soup kitchen, a camp, you've got to work and submit to all the various earthly regulations that would come with that. But insofar as it's promoting spiritual matters properly, the things of the soul, doctrine of salvation, and teaching the word and the worship itself, the activity of the liturgy, then it's the spiritual kingdom. And the family is the same way.

You could have a spiritual kingdom activity in your kitchen or your dining room when we gather the family together and we do family worship or devotionals. That's spiritual kingdom activity. But then when you go out and do your life and your work, then it's temporal kingdom.

And for Luther and Calvin and other Reformation characters, both of those kingdoms could meaningfully be Christian, though that meant different things for each kingdom. And they had different areas of expertise. They had different goals.

And different people might have different levels of authority in each kingdom in ways that might be surprising. An example of the latter, and this again is different to modern philosophy, modern egalitarian assumptions, but it would not be impossible in a different world for a slave to hold office in the church. Now that sort of sounds strange, but the point in bringing that out is in the temporal realm, he could be holding a very low position, very low office, having relatively little authority.

And then in the life of the church, because of gifts he's been given and because of the calling of God, he might actually be a deacon or something like that. And that would really make you think. How is it that he can have spiritual gifts and abilities that are not the same as in the temporal world? I think logically the Christian theology promotes liberating, freeing slaves, but that's always a political question of how do you do that?

Obviously, I'm getting this thought from the example of the New Testament.

Paul has a slave master in his church and a slave runs away and Paul is returning him, Onesimus being the slave. And Paul certainly seems to indicate that Onesimus has got special spiritual talents, very useful to the church and all of that. And yet he recognizes Philemon's relative authority in the matter, even though I think he's encouraging him to free the slave.

But you can see that interplay between the two sort of jurisdictions there. And it makes an informed Christian have to look at each one very carefully. If it's a temporal kingdom activity, then it will be measured in certain ways.

Certain people will have the authority and jurisdiction. And if it is a spiritual kingdom activity, then it will be measured in different ways and will have a different way to answer that question. That was a long answer.

But in our current crisis, it seems very relevant to the question of what if the state says, your local authorities, perhaps, that you should have no meeting of over 10 people for the sake of this outbreak. And should the church obey that when it feels it is called by Christ to meet? And if the church wants to go ahead, does the state have the right to insist? It seems to be a very practical example of how that sort of theology hits the ground. Absolutely, absolutely.

And if the, again, if the representatives of the civil government are being honest and truthful with information, they're actually doing what they think is the proper decision, then they do have that authority. Some of the old distinctions were that the civil magistrate does not have the authority in sacra, in sacred things, but has authority circa sacra, around sacred things. And for establishing the physical conditions of safety at an unusual time, even though that is going to have direct implications on the business, the sacred activity of the church, the conditions around it are entirely given to the civil magistrate.

And from a Protestant Reformation perspective, we have a tradition in history that acknowledges that, even more so than the Roman Catholic tradition. One, maybe it's sinister, maybe it's smart, but one narrative from the Reformation was in Stroudsburg. Martin Bootser is the famous pastor there.

And of course, John Calvin was exiled there, which he was very happy to be exiled there, enjoyed his time. During the Reformation of Stroudsburg, Bootser encouraged the civil magistrates to require all of the clergy to become citizens. They had to actually become citizens of Stroudsburg and agree to fall under certain legal judicial oversight, understood in terms of a largely Christian commonwealth still.

And what they discovered is when they passed those measures, most all of the Catholic

clergy chose to leave the city rather than comply, which Bootser knew would happen. So that meant the only clergy left were Reformed Protestants. Bootser was – he was more than happy with that.

So maybe that was sinister. Maybe that was smart as could be. But Bootser knew that within the Protestant framework, this would work.

This would be consistent. There was nothing that said clergy shouldn't be citizens or are immune from civil criminal liability. And so it was a dividing line there.

And you can see how modern Protestants have really forgotten that because their first instinct is to say no. We are totally the sole authority in this conversation about whether to have a meeting and of what size. And any input from the magistrate is seen as sort of persecution.

This is almost a sort of occasion for martyrdom. And that's very different. That's not what the Reformers meant when they defended the Christian liberty, the rights of conscience, different jurisdictions.

That's not what they meant. They were perfectly in favor of temporal authorities making temporal decisions. Now, in ordinary circumstances when you don't have the corona situation going on, you have many, many more categories as well.

You could say, well, hold on. Let's don't give people too much authority here or there. Even if they could have authority, maybe they shouldn't use it at this time.

That's all appropriate as well. We don't want to use this template to then just say, okay, we give the state maximum authority overall. There are always competing interests.

And to what extent should they use authority they have? Or are they saying smart and wise things? Those are always still important questions. I think as an example of this, you could think of Joseph's running of the state of Egypt. The state becomes this huge monster of a state in order to protect people from the famine.

But that's not an ideal to seek. It's not what we want our state to be. But in a crisis, the state may need to take those sorts of measures as emergency exceptional measures.

But we really do not want that to become the norm or something that provides a precedent for just regular times of peace. The ideal is that each person is under their own vine and fig tree. There's independence from authorities as much as possible.

I mentioned the response of no to authorities. There's also the response of why. And that is a bit more complicated in part.

Because there are times when authorities lay obligations upon us. And at times like this, very heavy obligations whose full rationale we do not yet understand. And the rationale,

even in that case, may be somewhat uncertain.

It's dealing with dimensions of risk, risks that they cannot fully process that may materialize to be significantly less than they feared. But how do we respond to authorities in that sort of situation? Where ideally a good authority is one that over time it will... Authority is something that gives us reasons for action in the absence of our own reasons. And in that sense, it can be liberating because it can order us towards wisdom and positive, healthy behavior.

Even when we do not yet fully process why. But the idea with parents is over time you learn from your parents why they tell you certain things. And that becomes internalized.

No longer a force outside of you imposing upon you. But something that has informed you and liberated you to act according to a wisdom that is within. Now, with state and civil authorities, that can be a bit harder.

We don't always understand the expertise that factors into a decision to have a quarantine, for instance. How do we respond to that why question that arises within us? Yeah, well, I think you made the point really well that the best way that this works is that we actually recognize the authority as having something good and helpful to say. And so we want to get it.

Think about, you know, when you enter a field that you're brand new to, you really know nothing and you know how little you know. Then you're asking questions to people who you think have the right answer. And you almost you're almost motivated.

You're very hopeful that their answer is correct. You're ready to take it. Take it.

Apply it. Let's do it. You're not immediately checking everything they give you.

And that's a good way for authority to work. Similar - well, a similar thought, but in evangelical Christian circles, we talk about headship, submission, and gender marriage relations. Well, if it's only - if you never submit when there's a disagreement, if you're only going to submit after everyone comes in.

If everyone comes to agreement through totally and fully proving their case, then that's not really submission. You've made it so everyone gets to do what they wanted to do already. However, if submission is you hate it, it's a burden, it's terrible, and maybe even occasioned by fear and a history of abuse, well, that's not good.

That's not the ideal. That's a big problem as well. What you want is an authority relationship where, yes, there's an admission of, okay, I will listen to the authority because that's correct.

It's right to listen to the authority, but in a world, a context, and an environment where

you think that authority is good and that it knows - it has good insight. It wants what's best for you, and I think on that micro scale, one way that that trust is built is when the authority does demonstrate that it's hearing the other person. It knows what concerns they have.

It's being reflective on its own potential to make mistakes. On a micro scale, that's essential to maintain that reality. When we get to a larger social level, that's when it's hard because we have a history, or at least we think we have a history, of being ignored, not being listened to, or the authority has got its total own plans and agendas, and they're just going to do it no matter what.

The trust has been eroded, and so the only time we submit is very begrudgingly or maybe after being coerced into submitting, and so we don't want to do that. We don't like that. We naturally don't like that.

And in these times of crisis, there are sort of exceptional situations, and so either we're so scared we've totally been convicted. Okay, we don't know anything. We need help.

Or there's such a huge coercive punishment there. If you don't comply, these things will happen. That's people - they all get together.

But that's not - it doesn't satisfy on an individual level, and it won't last. So I think it reveals that we need experts who we believe are experts. We actually think they do know what they're talking about.

But then those leaders and experts have also demonstrated that they understand what's going on with the people that are supposed to listen and what concerns they have, and they have to be accountable. I think that's a huge problem as well is we've had so many experts make tons of incorrect decisions, be wrong, and nothing happens. They carry on as usual.

At most, they lose their one position, their one job, but then they get hired at some other job that's pretty good too. Again, think about American history. In my lifetime, some of the defining moments of authority really messing up the Iraq war.

We were told that we're going into this war because of the presence of weapons of mass destruction, which could be an existential threat. And nobody believes that anymore. Maybe there's one person out there who would make that case.

But overwhelmingly, people say that turned out to be wrong. And then after that, you have the housing crisis and the Great Recession kind of setting in, and you say, who had to answer for that? Who was accountable and was on the hook for that? I don't think anyone has answers for that. I don't know anyone of profile who had to deal with that.

And so in this situation, that's a natural haunting feeling. I think a third aspect of that is

we distrust authorities that we do not feel have our best interests at heart, or we do not feel they associate with us or care about us or have our common good in mind, a common good that we are invested in. And there, I think there's been a great deal of trust squandered by so many different authorities.

People who have, for instance, handling of abuse crises. If you do not handle an abuse crisis while in your church, you are squandering the trust, which are the rails upon which truth will move. And so if you do not have that trust, if you've mishandled abuse, if you're going to defend someone who is part of the in crowd, perhaps, just in order that the institution not be attacked, but you'll allow some people to be collateral damage.

You'll find when you need to communicate truth as a matter of urgency, you'll be met with death ears. And there I wonder whether just the way that the authorities in many of our countries have behaved towards the more general population is a cause of the current crisis that we're facing now, where there just is not enough trust in order to facilitate effective action in response to immediate crisis to coordinate people in a way that would be effective. So, for instance, one of the ways we could respond to this is by restricting everyone's movements for a few weeks and surveilling people, ensuring that we know exactly who is infected, where they are, where they moved, who they've come in contact with, testing people again and again and again.

And then you could start to identify green areas where things could start to return to normal. But if you don't have trust, you need a strong collective society or you need a very coercive government or you need a high, very high trust society for that to work. And we don't have any of those things, which is why it will be a real struggle to work out this issue in Western countries compared to other countries, for instance, in the Far East, where they have one or more of those conditions.

Yeah, but when you say that, I have to be honest. I find it initially terrifying. I don't know that I want all of those things you just said.

And so it makes me wonder, again, how can we achieve similar results in ways that don't have the accompanying abuse? And yeah, the idea of more surveillance, right? That is exactly the sort of the East Asian model. When people say, you know, these countries like even China got it under control or Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, they got it under control because they can do things that we would never, ever want our governments to do. Some of those countries seem to have used more collective high trust instincts like Japan.

Yes. And there's also the thought - now we're in the surveillance containment, trying to figure out problems. But very early on, there was also the prevention option that was nixed because it was viewed as maybe too reactive to perhaps racist or xenophobic.

And that was something like what I saw Nassim Taleb, when he was first noticing this, he



just said, all right, shut everything down going in and out of China. Draw a circle, build a wall, quote unquote. Keep it there.

Now, I don't have all of the expertise and knowledge to know what the impacts of that would be. I don't know how much was dependent on free flow in and out at a certain time. But that makes a lot of sense to me.

Instead of making every community on earth quarantine itself, you quarantine the one area really quickly, really well. But at that point, no one was persuaded that it had come to this. They didn't think we really had to take that kind of action, and that kind of action struck them as morally or otherwise philosophically repugnant.

They just didn't want to do that. My impression was it wasn't even weighed in terms of prudence. It was largely resisted for more complete morally repugnant or just something that was reactionary.

It wasn't seen as a serious option to consider in response to a crisis. Right, yeah. Did not actually process any of the deliberative concerns that would have given rise to such a proposal.

I think that's also the problem in that situation. If you do not respond quickly and decisively to these sorts of things and have a very fast cycle of response. That's another important thing.

You will end up constantly reacting to something that's moving faster than you. And there I think we've really been caught on the hop. The other thing that you notice is politics is the art of the possible.

And there are countries that have a great many different, more things that are possible to them politically and in terms of their society than the US or the UK have. The other thing is you have more possibilities if you respond well and quickly. You open up possibilities down the line.

And that I think is something that we've really lost as a result of responding so slowly to this. We're ending up just being stuck in the realm of reactions. And we're losing, having lost the more benign possibilities of approach, we're having to have more draconian ones.

And that is a concern to me because I think we're going to see if this does not, if this blows up even further, the draconian approach will be the one that we may most likely have to go towards because the ones that are possible to us are very limited because we have a low trust society. Yeah, I think that may be part of the conversation is having a trust that allows leadership to make decisions which strike us as maybe extreme or too much early on. But with the knowledge that if successful, they will be short lived and over and you can return to a more normal arrangement versus slow but then enduring.

And on that side, there's the responsibility, it highlights that if you're going to govern well, you have to prove yourself to be trustworthy. Because if you don't prove yourself to be trustworthy, if you don't win the trust of your people, you cannot govern in a crisis. And that applies to churches as well as governments in states.

And that's where I think it's been very fascinating. The idea of a sense of political decorum, you know, keeping up appearances, doing sorts of things that had ceremonial value. That stuff all kind of was out of fashion the past few years, you know, get out of here.

That's so sentimental. We're doing hard nose politics. It's all war.

But in these moments, you really do want a leader who can give a sense of calm. They have their hand at the wheel. They're going to be looking into things and doing the kinds of things that you would want them to do so that you don't always have to double check and get right back on them and cajole them to doing it.

You really want that feeling. And our societies have moved in such a way that those that seems less and less possible to have those kind of characters. And I don't know that in the US, we've had one in quite a while.

So it's not just, you know, I'm not just making a criticism of Trump. I don't think that Obama would have been necessarily better, at least for half of the country's point of view. So in terms of a very practical question that some Christians may be facing right now.

What if your pastor is telling you that you must meet and it's very important that we continue with the gathered worship of God. And yet your local authorities are very strongly telling you do not meet. How do you determine between those conflicting authorities in that sort of situation.

Yeah, so a couple of basic things. If a Christian pastor simply is saying you must come, you have to come. And he's unwilling to give you legitimate categories of, you know, reasons of necessity or acts of mercy and charity.

Then I would argue he is himself violating the majority at least Protestant Christian position, you know, whenever I teach on the obligation of the Fourth Commandment. I always say that exceptions of mercy and necessity are built in. If your ox is in the ditch.

That's the old, old saying, but it comes from Jesus, right, who will not go and get it. And he applies that to cases where he was healing people. He was he was contributing to their physical well being obviously had the goal of directing them to himself for spiritual good, but the the obligation of necessity was there.

And I'm pretty confident in all of the major traditions. We have that category. And so if a

pastor is just totally foreclosing that in a situation like a virus outbreak, then I would argue he's not even being faithful or he's not being consistent with his own best tradition.

Now, what I think is likely to happen is the pastors will be put in a position like I am and my I'm an associate pastor with a group of other elders and one other pastor, we've got to make the decision. Should we even open worship at all? You know, should we, we will certainly allow people to choose to stay home, but should we even offer worship, right? And that's different. We tell everyone if we're going to offer the worship, you don't have to come.

We understand the circumstances here. And so really the question is, how should the individual Christian decide whether or not they should come? That's a little different when they're getting conflicting advice, you know, from the other authorities. In that situation, I would say a few things.

Does your church leadership seem to be aware of the severity of the situation? Do they have best information about the conditions which make an environment more or less safe? I think that's a very important grid to run through. And are they giving you enough information to know about that and make that sort of decision? So, for instance, what we have been doing, and we have not at our church totally made the final decision for this Sunday, we've got a few ideas. We are going to offer a streaming virtual option, but we're also saying, can we have some in-person opportunities? We read a number of material on the internet.

Andy Crouch had a very good article about the general philosophy. I think it was called Love in the Time of Coronavirus. And then there was a link over to a man, I think his name is Lyman Stone.

Do you know who I'm talking about? He's in Hong Kong. He had written a pretty helpful protocol, you know, the things that they did in order to continue to have service. And it had features like limiting the size, who can come, and making sure everyone that does come is healthy, things like that.

And seating them at certain distances from one another and eliminating physical contact, food, that sort of thing. We passed that around. We've been talking about that.

So as a parishioner making a decision, I would say, has your pastoral leadership shown you that they're aware of this information? Have they given it to you with a reasonable amount of time to make a decision? And do you think that it's likely to be implemented? I think those would be decent questions to ask. What about the situation where the practice of your church is in direct contravention, not just of the advice, but the instruction of the local authorities? Yeah, so I think if the authorities had issued a hard mandate, do not do it. We are saying no gatherings.

Then I think the church, at least for a short term, should simply comply. We're going to obey. We're not going to meet right now.

We're going to have some way to do it by distance or have people at home, but they should just comply. I think that that's a basic application of other principles, such as, again, what we said. The civil magistrate does have authority in matters of temporal good, even having to do with the circumstances and occasions around religious entities.

And the religious entities themselves have that category of exceptions for cases of necessity. So I think in that situation, the church leadership really should just submit. And if they're unwilling, if the church leadership, for whatever reason, just will not do it, then I think the individual Christian is entirely justified to make that decision.

OK, the leadership of the church isn't listening. And so we should listen to the proper authority in this matter. Even though their church authority are authorities, when it comes to the temporal well-being, those church authorities are lesser authorities in that jurisdiction.

In terms of the relationship between the church's authority and that of local authorities particularly, how can church leaders model a proper relationship with those authorities to their congregants? So it's not just two distinct authorities, but two authorities in real conversation with each other. Yes. So as we said earlier, in the best setting, it's going to be a two-way street.

I can't speak for the civil magistrates, but they do need to make an effort to demonstrate that they understand the burden they're putting on people. We need to make sure that that gets mentioned here. And they should only be putting these really strict burdens if it really is called for.

So they are going to need to make an effort on their part to show that they are paying attention and that they're being conscientious to us. And then again, as I said, the church authority needs to be showing their work. They need to show their people, this is the information we're getting.

This is where it's coming from. This is why we are making the decisions we're making. And they need to, I think, give the appropriate options to their people.

You can come if you feel it's safe and appropriate. If you don't believe you can come, then know that we're not placing judgment on you. Speaking in those terms, I think, is very helpful.

And for the pastor or the elder who's making these decisions, you, I think, can understand what we're doing today is not normal. This is not the plan for the whole year. This is not what we want to do all the time.

And that gives you a measure of freedom. In cases of maximum uncertainty, it makes sense to be very conservative. That demonstrates a care for the people.

I think one of the things I found really helpful at this time is considering just how many categories, particularly Protestants, have to hand to think about the processes of prudence and deliberation between authorities, weighing different concerns. And the many ways in which we don't actually have some of the absolutes in our ecclesiologies that some others do. There's a lot more of a sense of the prudential character of our ecclesiological forms, which frees us to, on occasions due to necessity, to limit those forms temporarily.

And to recognize that there is still Christ's presence to be found in those situations. And when the time comes, we will restore the well-being of the church. But the church may have to fall away from its well-being for a while, while still enjoying its being.

Exactly. Yeah, that distinction between being and well-being, so helpful. I find that many Christians of all stripes, they have right and wrong.

Those categories are there. And they might even have essential first-order issues and then things that don't really matter. They have that category, things that don't really matter.

But there's actually a category in between those two, which is what you've mentioned. Well-being. Things you ordinarily want to do, you prioritize, they definitely do matter.

But they're not, specifically and properly speaking, essential. Not for the gathering. Go ahead.

And for the question of worship, that really hits at it, right? The essential part of a Christian's worship is prayer, word, knowing that they're with others and loving others. And a willingness and a readiness to gather regularly when that's offered, when that's a possibility. But there's nothing that says when, for serious reasons that is suspended, that you are somehow excommunicated or cut off from God's presence and grace.

That is a very good note, I think, to conclude on. Thank you so much for joining me, Stephen. This has really been helpful.

And I hope that those who listen will have found their thinking challenged by it, that maybe they'll want to look deeper into these issues. If they did, what resources would you recommend to them? Oh, boy. So many things to say.

I think that I work with a group called the Davenant Institute, and they have lots of this material that I've been referencing. We have written books on the two kingdoms. Brad Littlejohn has got an intro called Two Kingdoms, A Guide for the Perplexed.

On the webpage, we just reprinted Martin Luther's thoughts on how Christians respond to a time of plague. And so that gives a good application of this. And so those would be starting points.

And I'll leave it with that. There's a lot of other angles. And as I say all this, I just think about so many other things we could have talked about.

We just don't have the time. And so for the Christian to be able to put these categories into place, you know, what is the theological doctrine of the church versus my necessary spiritual well-being at all times, trusting in God's providence when things are out of my control. And then those specialized topics of economics and health and statecraft, which are not what most of us typically have on hand.

I think as we develop healthier trust networks, one of the things that does relieve us from is the pressure to know everything. While still being able to be guided by wisdom and informed by wisdom over time as we follow good authorities. And so this is a very practical, I think, approach to living lives informed by wisdom and growing in that wisdom as we come under that guidance.

But it requires not just an education of ourselves as individuals. It requires healthy political ecclesial and social structures which really come into their own or fail to come into their own in times like this. Absolutely.

Thank you very much for joining me, Stephen. All right. Thanks so much, Alistair.

Lord willing, we'll have other conversations like this again in the future. Absolutely. Take care.

If you've listened to this and found it helpful, you can follow Stephen on Twitter and you can read some of his work. I think he's got various articles on the Davenant website and on Calvinist International. God bless.