

6-1-2023

COVID. Crisis, Conflict, and the Cross: Making Disciples during a Pandemic

Omwocha Nyaribo

Andrews University, omwocha@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jayyam>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nyaribo, Omwocha (2023) "COVID. Crisis, Conflict, and the Cross: Making Disciples during a Pandemic," *Journal of Adventist Youth and Young Adult Ministries*: Vol. 1, Article 11.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jayyam/vol1/iss1/11/>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jayyam/vol1/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Adventist Youth and Young Adult Ministries* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

COVID, CRISIS, CONFLICT, AND THE CROSS

Making Disciples during a Pandemic

Omwocha Nyaribo, MDiv, PhD Student

ABSTRACT

Intimate desires characterize one's last moments with family, friends, or colleagues, often expressed verbally to the hearers. John 17 is one such moment. Jesus passionately, through prayers, shared the desire that His followers be united, for unity in Christ is the essence of soul-winning—the world believing in Jesus (Jn 17:21,23). The disciples of Jesus also contended among themselves concerning greatness. In the history of the Christian Church, unity among the brethren has been elusive. Within the Seventh-day Adventist church, we have witnessed strife among the brethren because of divergent views throughout our history. Such strife is not an emerging issue. One recent conflict was on the church's position regarding COVID-19 vaccines. This issue has caused some members to leave the church, while others have transferred to churches that accommodate their opinions. We have forgotten the impact of a conflicted church, especially on the spiritual growth among the youth and young adults. This paper aims to discuss the possibility of fostering unity among divergent views and personalities by developing the art of disagreeing while still respecting and being compassionate to one another. To achieve this, the presentation will first appeal to the Bible using sound biblical hermeneutics and, secondly, review the experiences of the Adventist pioneers in overcoming similar challenges.

INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 pandemic resulted in devastating and traumatic occurrences on personal and corporate levels. Many found their dreams, visions, and aspirations altered completely. Tears have been shed, hearts broken, jobs lost, hugs significantly decreased, and the saddest and most unfortunate of it all, we have seen a sharp increase in conflicts among God's children because of divergent views. However, amid such severe conflicts, the irony is that all have common goals, good health and longevity. The problem lies in how to achieve the goal.

Conspiracy theories abound, propagated by preachers behind the pulpit and members seated in the pews, from medical practitioners on the frontlines to patients lying in hospital beds, from politicians in the corridors of powers to ordinary citizens in the fortress of their homes. Everyone seems to be an expert with a better opinion. Unprecedented in recent history. During COVID-19 the members of the body of Christ have been caught up in the whirlpool of thinking and talking about COVID-19. Yes, we pray and act as if we trust God to resolve this problem, but our actions and attitudes seem to send a different message—a conflicted message to many in search of hope.

Questions we should ask ourselves include:

1. Who knew or thought that the COVID-19 crisis would result in sharp divisions in the church?
2. Is it possible to hold divergent views on specific issues but remain united in the mission of Christ?
3. Do we ever think about how conflicts affect discipleship?
4. Have we forgotten why Jesus died?

CRISIS AND CONFLICT

In the story of Jacob and Esau found in Genesis 25-33, one sees how a personal journey that started with crisis and conflict ended with a renewed personal relationship with God. Therefore, one's ultimate goal is to seek a personal relationship with Christ. While still in the womb (Gen 25:22), Rebekah knew there was a bigger problem because the pain caused by the pregnancy was unbearable (Reyburn and Fry 1997). Ellen G. White, in *The Story of Redemption*, stated,

God knows the end from the beginning. He knew, before the birth of Jacob and Esau, just what characters they would both develop. He knew that Esau would not have a heart to obey Him. He answered the troubled prayer of Rebekah and informed her that she would have two children, and the elder should serve the younger. He presented the future history of her two sons before her, that they would be two nations, the one greater than the other, and the elder should serve the younger. The first-born was entitled to peculiar advantages and special privileges, which belonged to no other members of the family (87).

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH BREAKS THE HEART OF GOD

It is no secret that church members have divergent views on the COVID-19 mandates pushed by various governments. When US President Joe Biden pushed for a national mask OSHA mandate, it received mixed reactions. The Supreme court halted the push. Those who opposed the mandate were hailed by some quarters, stating, "This kind of courage is all too rare among North American Adventism, and very much needed" (Wagoner 2022) On the other hand, some "wondered if church leadership would 'use that 'compliance' process to crack down on churches that ignore world church guidance on the importance of vaccines" or "root out anti-vaxxer preaching?" (Aamodt 2021)." The entire incident turned out to be too ugly for discipleship.

As stated earlier, the conflict between Esau and Jacob began in the womb. According to Genesis 25:22, "*But the children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is so, why then am I this way?' So she went to inquire of the LORD*" (emphasis supplied). Many English translations do not express the extent of the conflict in Rebekah's womb. It was a total war, not simply labor pains. It led Rebekah to inquire of God why she had suffered. Rebecca seemed to prefer barrenness to suffer to this extent at this point in her life. I expect this is how God feels when we engage in sustained conflict with each other. According to Isaiah 46:3b, "*You who have been borne by Me from birth and have been carried from the womb*" (emphasis supplied).

We all are members of the same family despite our cultural, social, and political diversity. As members of the same body—the body of Christ—if we continue in conflict with each other, then the experience of Rebekah is the experience of God. It grieves God's heart, such as the Israelites' rebellion in the wilderness. Yahweh said to Moses, "*Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them*" (Exod 32:10 emphasis supplied). God felt like starting all over again. Understanding the danger posed by conflicts in the body of Christ, Jesus gave a new command in John 13:34-35 to love one another.

Returning to the experience of Rebekah and Isaac, despite having a revelation from God that the younger would rule over the older, Isaac and Rebekah took sides by each favoring a different one of their twin sons (Gen 25:28). Taking sides has never been a solution to conflicts. Taking sides creates a more profound crisis. Isaac and Rebekah had the opportunity to raise their children to avert future disputes and fights.

DISCIPLESHIP IS NOT ABOUT HELPING GOD FULFILL HIS PROMISE

God calling us to be His disciples doesn't mean that He has called us to determine or control the will and future of other people, including our children. Yes, there is a part we need to play. If I were to define discipleship I would describe it through the words of Jesus at the resurrection of Lazarus: "Take away the stone" (John 11:39) or "Lose him, and let him go." Ellen White wrote,

"Take ye away the stone." Christ could have commanded the stone to remove, and it would have obeyed His voice. He could have bidden the angels who were close by His side to do this. At His bidding, invisible hands would have removed the stone. *But it was to be taken away by human hands. Thus Christ would*

show that humanity is to co-operate with divinity. What human power can do divine power is not summoned to do. God does not dispense with man's aid. He strengthens him, co-operating with him as he uses the powers and capabilities given him (emphasis supplied) (White 1940, 535).

White further stated, "Christ says to the astonished spectators, 'Loose him, and let him go.' Again they are shown that the human worker is to co-operate with God. Humanity is to work for humanity" (White 1940, 536). Discipleship is not calling Lazarus out of the tomb. That is the work of Jesus. As humans, we need to know the boundaries. Humans have a tendency to go past these boundaries and play tole of God, just as Rebekah and Isaac did. We interpret prophetic utterances to suit us. We want things to turn out precisely the way think.

Several Christians, including some Adventists, believe that getting vaccinated because of COVID-19 gives one the "mark of the beast" (Dwoskin 2021). Tiffany Firebaugh, a writer with *Religion and Politics*, reported that, "One particular fringe theory arose out of evangelical apocalypticism: that the COVID-19 vaccine is the "mark of the beast"—a sign of the end times and a symbol of alignment with the Antichrist." She further stated that "This fear has driven some Christians to request religious exemptions to vaccine mandates...Some in the political arena ... have suggested that the vaccine cards are the mark of the beast, while still others have pointed to masks as the true mark" (Firebaugh 2021). I believe there are more solid and better reasons against the vaccine, than fear-mongering with conspiracy theories that name it "the mark of the beast."

In the late 19th century in the United States, when the issue of Sunday blue laws brought to mind Sunday worship as the "mark of the beast" for Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen White wrote, "Receiving of the mark of the beast involves a serious transgression of God's law, not a mere refraining from ordinary labor on the first day of the week" (White 1901). I believe that the same principle still holds today. "Receiving of the mark of the beast involves a serious transgression of God's law." Therefore, as members of the family of God, let us not contract "Rebekah's syndrome" of playing God and try to fulfill the future, hoping that it will be a resolution to our conflicts.

IF NOT SANCTIONED BY GOD, THE BLESSINGS MAY BE CURSES

The fact that the story of Jacob's blessing is recorded in the Bible doesn't mean that the actions that led him to

deceive his father and receive the blessing were God's plan. That was Rebekah's plan. God's plans for us are bigger and better. Jacob cheated his way into getting the coveted blessing. Despite his failure to mimic his brother's voice, he received Isaac's blessing. It was not God's plan; it was Rebekah's treacherous plan. Discipleship is not about getting a blessing unjustly. Some might argue that the blessing was meant for Jacob based on God's message prior to the birth of these twin brothers. According to Genesis 25:23, the older (*rab*—abundant, many, mighty, elder) will serve the younger (*tsaowr*—little, few, young). It didn't say the younger would cheat his way into getting the older's blessings.

THE ESSENCE OF THE CROSS: SUBMISSION TO CHRIST

One can avoid pain, suffering, and a lot of wasted years by ordering one's life well. If we prioritize our relationship with God, we will save ourselves from many conflicts. In another vein, we often let good things such as church, family, and job, have priority over our relationship with God. When God is not first and last in one's life, the results will be fear and retreat. This can be seen by how COVID-19 became a major, dividing issue in the church. Because our relationship with Christ wasn't primary, this secondary issue became primary.

Adventist pioneers faced a different type of crisis. There was a major conflict between two early Adventist leaders—James White, the President of the church, and Uriah Smith, the editor of the *Adventist Review*. The argument was about the interpretation of Daniel 11. James White was so charged that he confronted Uriah Smith publicly, which created a division. Ellen White was shown in a vision that her husband erred in confronting Smith publicly. The unity of the church was more important than a private interpretation of a controversial prophecy. She later wrote about it in a letter addressed to J. Waggoner, in the wake of another conflict, White counseled, "Even if you are fully convinced that your ideas of doctrines are sound, you do not show wisdom that that difference should be made apparent" White 1990, 19). With regards to the incidence between her husband and Uriah Smith, she said;

My husband had some ideas on some points differing from the views taken by his brethren. I was shown that however true his views were, God did not call for him to put them in front before his brethren and create differences of ideas. While he might hold these views subordinate himself, once they are made public, minds would seize [upon them], and just because others

believed differently would make these differences the whole burden of the message, and get up contention and variance (White 1990, 21).

White identified the source of the conflict in the church. She wrote, “I know that Satan’s work will be to set brethren at variance. Were it not that I know [that] the Captain of our salvation stands at the helm to guide the gospel ship into the harbor, I should say, Let me rest in the grave” (White 1990, 21). Making reference of Christ on how he dealt with conflicts, she continued, “Christ did not reveal many things that were truth, because it would create a difference of opinion and get up disputations, but young men who have not passed through this experience we have had, would as soon have a brush as not. Nothing would suit them better than a sharp discussion.” A reminder that silence is eloquence even when we do not agree on some opinions that have been made public. She stated,

There is to be closed every door that will lead to points of difference and debate among brethren. If the old man was purged from every heart, then there would be

greater safety in discussion, but now the people need something of a different character. There is altogether too little of the love of Christ in the hearts of those who claim to believe the truth. While all their hopes are centered in Jesus Christ, while His Spirit pervades the soul, then there will be unity, although every idea may not be exactly the same on all points (White 1990, 28).

The essence of the Cross is, as the body of Christ, to remain united for the sake of the Gospel commission. It can only be achieved if we submit our will and self to God. Discipleship is submitting ourselves to the Cross. It is realizing that we cannot do it alone. It is knowing that God does not take delight in sacrifices and offerings, but he takes delight in a contrite and broken heart. When Jesus commissioned us to go and change the world, He had one thing in mind (John 17:21) “That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. Unity is requisite for fulfilling the Gospel commission.

REFERENCES

- Aamodt, Alex. “Adventist Church Releases New Vaccine Statement.” *Spectrum Magazine*, October 29, 2021. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/2021/adventist-church-releases-new-vaccine-statement>.
- Dwoskin, Elizabeth. “On Social Media, Vaccine Misinformation Mixes with Extreme Faith.” *Washington Post*, February 16, 2021. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/02/16/covid-vaccine-misinformation-evangelical-mark-beast/>.
- Firebaugh, Tiffany. “COVID-19 Vaccines: Why Some Christians Decry Them as the ‘Mark of the Beast.’” *Religion & Politics*. October 11, 2021. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://religionandpolitics.org/2021/10/11/covid-19-vaccines-why-some-christians-decry-them-as-the-mark-of-the-beast/>.
- Reyburn, William David, and Euan McGregor Fry. 1997. *A Handbook on Genesis* (p. 580). United Bible Societies.
- Wagoner, Gerry. “Several SDA Conferences Support the OSHA Mandate, Then the Supreme Court Halts It.” *Fulcrum 7*, January 13, 2022. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://www.fulcrum7.com/news/2022/1/13/several-sda-conferences-support-the-osha-mandate-then-the-supreme-court-halts-it>.
- White, Ellen. July 16, 1901. “A Present Help in Every Time of Trouble.” *The Review and Herald*. July 16, 1901. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/821.20621>.
- . 1940. *The Desire of Ages*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- . 1990. *Manuscript Releases Volume Fifteen* [Nos. 1136-1185]. Accessed March 7, 2023. https://media4.egwwritings.org/pdf/en_15MR.pdf.