

Getting our arms around the trauma of COVID 19 in terms of churches coming back together in faith and life: *Expectations*

Glenn Gritzon Congregation Family Services
CongregationFamilyServices@gmail.com

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Crisis=Circumstances; that is, a crisis is a circumstance to which a person needs to respond and in which he or she believes the response may have life-shaking consequences. Notice that there are **three** elements pastors and church leaders must consider in the COVID 19 crisis:

- The crisis (real or imagined).
- The individual in crisis; and
- The response he or she makes to the crisis.

Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding, but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools. Proverbs 14:33 (ESV)

This series of articles is offered to provide pastors and church leaders insights to bring God’s wisdom into the ongoing task of renewing unity in the church through this current crisis—and those we know are yet to come.

All three require careful consideration in relationship to the obligations to and the promise of God. Pastoral “First Aid” on the spot must focus first to stabilize the individual to buy time to get them more aid. The qualitative damage or deforming due to the experience will vary across the constructs of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy.

The individual in crisis

I wrote earlier (see *Mindfulness*) about the five perceptions of the crisis (real or imagined) and how acknowledgement, as each was expressed, was the wisdom to hold disunity in check. Those perceptions were:

1. “Nothing happened...”
2. “Something happened, but ...”
3. “Something happened, and I’m angry about it!”
4. “Something happened, and it cost me a lot.”
5. “Something happened, and I have overcome (healed from) it”.

Seeking a glimpse of the functional heart motives of the individual requires probing for *the thing behind the thing, the truth behind the truth, and the mystery behind the mystery*. Unity in the church—even in stable times—always comes back to the functional heart motives. This includes both ours, as pastors and church leaders, as well as those who congregate forming our local churches.

From the moment you and your significant other started to realize marriage could be a reality, expectations started to materialize and shape your thoughts should those expectations go met, or unmet. For married couples, the first step in addressing the after-the-honeymoon distress surrounding expectations is to determine if you need to lower the expectations you have, in your own mind, placed on your spouse.

As a pastor or church leader, you have spent far more time than you want to admit, dealing with perceptions of met or unmet expectations around nearly all your church's systems and structures! Bringing what we have already learned about coming alongside couples likely applies as we begin to regather Christ's bride.

Perception of threat = the Perception of risk to return

The **threat** (*the possibility of trouble, danger, or ruin*) of something possibly happening, tends to be far more overwhelming than the actual crisis itself. From first hearing the word "novel coronavirus" individuals were applying whatever form of threat management skills they had to 1) identify and 2) assess the hazards.

In our churches, most of our church adults live in a community of two: them and their spouse. Yet, as you will see later, there are other dynamics from which people are returning, too. What is true for most is that most no longer live in supportive communities with our birth families or childhood friends, in the neighborhood (much less same state). We **worked** long hours, **commuted** farther, and farther distances, and as such **had** fewer and fewer opportunities to develop close relationship. Even before the pandemic, it was a lot to ask of your spouse to meet all of your emotional and relational needs—much less be a part of a dynamic body of believers that reflects the love and unity of Christ.

Even **before** COVID 19, followers of Christ were struggling to remember God calls us into relationship not just with our spouse but also with members of his church. As Christ followers, we are to gather with others, in faith and life. The Apostle Paul's favorite metaphor for this was the human body, which is especially fitting in this pandemic. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (I Corinthians 12:27, ESV). Paul's image implies a vital relationship of interconnectedness between those who make up Christ's body. Being held together "by every supporting ligament" and that, when we take the time to care for and nurture each other, the whole body will grow in love as "each does its work" (Ephesians 4:16).

Disunity is **not** God's desire yet sustaining the interconnectedness through the pandemic has disconnected many, leaving them alone in their disappointment or joy, depending on their experience. We know the appropriate response is, "If one part suffers every part suffers with it" (I Corinthians 12:26), yet our five distinct experiences through the pandemic, so far **do not** reflect one functional heart motive.

Jo and I know our marriage has been greatly deepened by being involved in both church and a couple's Bible study with a couple of other families, where we celebrate life together and help each other through life's struggles. Because this body of believers help meet my personal and spiritual needs, I do not place unrealistic expectations on Jo to constantly attend to me. Being part of this community also gives us a common goal: to be agents of grace to other couples or families God has brought across our path.

But, in the absence of the body, the expectations of God's most basic crisis formation risks running amuck! And there lies the mystery.

Earlier I mentioned returning to look **beyond** the household of two. An unforced error as pastors and church leaders would be to assume all households brought with them the same resources to navigate the perception of threat = the perception of risk to return to your building.

Let us face it, the household we first identified and assessed the possible hazards was also the household (and its resources) we lived through COVID 19 with.

The *Oikos* (household) was **the** base unit for the organization of social, political, and economic life in the Ancient Greek world. The *oikos* was composed of a nuclear family as well as extended family members such as grandparents or unmarried female relatives.

The *Oikos* took on new forms as schools closed, universities shut down their dormitories, jobs were lost, and care for family changed, without being invited. Here is a short-list of households to consider, as we continue:

- A. **Nuclear family households**—two married parents and their child(ren) for whom you built your children and youth ministry programs.
- B. **Couple households**—married couples who do not have children or anyone else living with them
- C. **Single parent households**—unmarried parent and their child(ren) of any age. (may be a multi-generational household)
- D. **Stepfamily households**—remarried parent(s) and their child(ren)
- E. **Single adult households**—adults who live with no one else in their residence
- F. **Grown up nuclear household**—includes two parents who live with their adult child(ren)
- G. **Multi-generational household**—comprised of at least three generations in the home or a grandparent raising a grandchild(ren) or non-family relatives (niece, nephew, cousins, etc.)
- H. **Roommate households**—made up of unmarried adults who share a home with a roommate or boarder
- I. **Other households**—those which do not fit into another segment.

As toilet paper, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, wifi, and face coverings became the tools to manage the emerging threat—were you aware that each type of household wrestled with a unique package of expectations?

Enter **hidden expectations**. Romantic comedies plant the idea that our soul mate ought to anticipate our deepest needs without having to voice them. In other words, our spouse ought to intuitively know in certain situations what is important to us, and what is not. We should not have to spell it out—if they really loved us, they'd know! Talk about a disaster script being written.

As I look back at my counseling during the peak of the pandemic, **the one thing** that consistently bought time to search for the thing behind the thing, the truth behind the truth, and the mystery behind the mystery gaining **a first agreement** to lower expectations. This was especially important when one worked from home while the other ventured out to work—a new dynamic of expectations stirred new emotions.

Mindfulness of the individuals within the dynamics of **ALL** the households from which individuals will be trickling back into your in-building ministries comes with lots of tripwires, unless **lowering expectations** occur. Lowering includes the quantity, quality, and quickness of response to one's expectations. And as pastors and church leaders, you appear to have prepared yourself to welcome people back following whatever wardrobe, multi-tasking, and decorum online worship at home habits were formed.

But are you aware of the expectations those returning will bring with them of you, your church and the meeting of their new current, unmet needs? This is going to be the tricky part of regathering the congregation—bringing their subtle, hidden expectations.

As an individual

No matter the size of the household someone spent the COVID 19 journey, they all will bring their individual intersection of faith and life surrounding their perception of *the possibility of trouble, danger, or ruin*. In some of my earlier work surrounding trauma healing I found **one consistent unifying question** people were wrestling with, “Who am I now?”

An exercise you may want to invest a little time in follows:

Whether we want to admit it or not, the 2020 pandemic changed our plans, activities, priorities, values, hopes, dreams, ambition, social interaction... the list goes on. No one can consistently behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the way he or she sees themselves. You cannot hold one opinion about yourself and try to live according to a different one. While you may succeed for a while, the energy needed to keep up that front is huge. Your self-identity ball started rolling downhill.

There are eight dynamics of self-perception shown below—the positive side and the negative side. Place an “X” somewhere along the line that indicates how you currently see yourself.

- Regarded-----Disregarded
- Important----- Unimportant
- Forgiven ----- Unforgiven
- Valued -----Devalued
- Accepted----- Rejected
- Powerful----- Powerless
- Lovable----- Unlovable
- Connected----- Separated

The farther to the right your “X’s” appear, the more vulnerable position you find yourself in—because you have been given false intelligence that for the Christ follower, has no valid verification. In other words, Satan’s lies.

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44, ESV).

Who we are, in Christ, is clear: regarded, important, forgiven, valued, accepted, powerful, lovable, and connected?

During the pandemic, what lies did you find yourself wrestling with?

As a Couple

It is one thing to wage war within one's own mind—a totally different one when two minds waging war meet. Marriage is tough enough in good times! Early in marriage everyone discovers you do not have to be awake to offend... it just happens. When offense happens, hurt is the felt emotion.

When offended we tend to feel disgruntled, disappointed, deceived, or defensive in marriage (and the Christian life). The underlying ideas we have in our minds (expectations) usually take on the form below:

The Feeling Being Generated	The Underlying Idea (thinking)
I feel disgruntled (angry)	I've been mistreated (abused)
I feel disappointed (hurt)	I've been betrayed (let down)
I feel deceived (lied to)	I've been manipulated (used)
I feel defensive	I've been threatened (accused)

Ever have a splinter in your finger? Not exactly life-threatening. But unless you're willing to do the work and dig it out, exposing it and the infection to the open air, that little thing will become an excessively big thing in your life, requiring **all** your attention.

*Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long (Psalm 32:2-3, ESV).*

In marriage, you are only as sick as your secrets.

I can already hear the voices stirring, I will NEVER lower my expectations of my spouse—I need them to meet my needs. Unspoken expectations (hidden secrets) have been the #1 counseling issue people have presented with during the pandemic.

How this played out depended greatly on the type of household this drama was unfolding—that is, who else was there. How the offense-hurt-anger cycle was formed is less important to you now, than your need to be *mindful* to identify and assess just how much this has played into those returning to your church gatherings.

For you, which, if any of the feelings were generated?

Underlying values you wrestled with?

As a Parent

Understanding the functional heart motives of returning parents, with their children, is best sorted out playing the story, in reverse. That is, there is no value in over-thinking their parenting, in what now seems an eternity ago, but in the present. And your ability to identify and assess this will rely upon how well you and your ministries asked, “how are you holding up?”

A dear pastor of 50+ years who invested in my early ministry had a key phrase: Life isn't fair—so don't compare. As parents regather, in whatever the new form of “bleacher butt” looks like, there will be a lot of comparison—and **perceived failure**. Oh sure, we all know (and their social media post confirm) they nailed it! So, for the next few moments—ignore those thoughts!

With crisis comes the “failure-factor”. Understanding the failure orientation starts by seeing it as a self-perception found in **some** people that limits not only their self-confidence, but even their ability to trust God as all sufficient Lord. Let me try to unwrap this by offering two failure orientations:

- How we think we appear to others.
 - Perceived failure orientation makes us morbidly sensitive to any negative response we're getting from others (spouse, co-parent, children).
 - Tremendous difficulty distinguishing between negative feedback directed at them personally (who they are) and negative feedback simply directed at their behavior (what they do/did).
 - As Christ followers, we may fail, but we are not failures. Through Christ we can walk ourselves back into fellowship, as we seek to be conformed to his image.
- How we view ourselves.
 - Frequently, people with a failure orientation have an artificially high unrealistic, or even perfectionistic set of **expectations** for themselves.
 - Even before the pandemic, they held an “either-or” mentality when viewing their own accomplishments. They saw their output as fully acceptable or totally worthless—more often the latter. Such a sense of failure often paralyzes following through on even the best of intentions.

Overcoming failure orientation in **non-trauma** settings involves rethinking one's own failure prone thinking to locate each unbiblical idea we can identify in our thoughts. Now before our pastor-readers start churning sermon ideas—stop! Unless this message comes from someone from their “*Something happened, and I have overcome (healed from) it*” pandemic experience—you will only add guilt. This is best suited for a one-to-one discipleship format... one your church may or not have previously equipped yourself for prior to the pandemic.

Still, there are four truths you can weave into your messages:

- To fail is human (God is fully aware of our limitations)
- To fail is not to be a failure (in truth, most successful people fail often)
- No one is ever a failure until he or she stops trying to change
- Failure is never final as long as we get up one more time than we fall down

Fear in parenting is far more damaging than failure. Focus on what God is stirring you to do, to glorify him through your parenting, not your failures.

As we pause from our focus on households in crisis, I want to remind you that under pressure, one of two things happens: 1) we find ourselves (and our faith) strengthened and fortified like a diamond; or 2) we crack (like an egg). As you mull over where your church might consider intentionally conveying a lowering of expectations, please include the following top contenders for causing pressure:

1. Self-identity
2. Goal-orientation
3. Fear
4. Time
5. Health
6. Family
7. Finances

As I write, my concern is that the defaults of “go back” (I just want my old life back) or “go under” (I can’t do this any longer) will be the functional heart motives of returning to church fellowship. Our message both in public and personal ministry to people in crisis remains:

- Face our pressure, reevaluate our priorities and reduce our agenda; and
- Get a fresh start... get out of the rut and tackle something.

Doing a few things well rather than a lot of things done poorly requires focusing on what God has really called us to do.