

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

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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 response he or she makes to the crisis.**

The image is still vivid in my mind. My then four-year-old son’s face standing on the side of the pool, as I stood in the pool with my arms extended to catch him. The look was both excitement to jump—and uncertainty I would catch him. My early in fatherhood questions was, “do you trust me?”

Brother and Sisters, we all are about to ask this same question of congregations of 100’s or congregations of 1000’s—“do you trust us?” Over the past couple of weeks, **distrust** has been shouted amid the blazing fires of communities—those of others at a distance, or our own, close up. Distrust is the root of disunity... so hang on as I offer a few thoughts as I think of “everyone back in the building.”

For our purposes here, let’s agree to think of there being two types of trust: **self-trust** and **relational-trust**. We can best think of **self-trust** as the trustworthiness of the individual, while **relational-trust** is the trust that exists between two people.

Another image remains vivid in my mind, but for a reason that might feel uncomfortable to some, as we return to hugs and catching up. It was 1998 (hint of how this hit me then) when a man from another church in the city called. He had been incredibly involved in the ministries of his church—when his now

ex-wife chose an adulterous relationship over her marriage. She divorced him two years after the affair came into the light, and he had lived alone for the next nine years. What he said next is etched in my memory as long as God holds my mind all together. “For those first two years, no one from my church came alongside me to help me through the most horrendous and devastating experience of my life.”

So here is a very articulate, Christ-following servant, who in one day lost his wife and two children in an irreparable breach of family trust—living in solitude. My heart was crushed. He was part of a large church, and eventually went to an associate pastor to ask why no one in any leadership capacity had come alongside him, to ask how he was doing at his intersection of faith and life, nor tried to walk alongside him through that long, dark, night of his soul. This was a well-known man in his church.

The pastor’s response still makes me cringe, “You did not break your leg.”

What? Over time this associate pastor (friend of mine, by the way) was honest, he was transparent, and he went on to explain that if he had broken his leg, the church would know what to do because they knew how to send flowers and make hospital visits. They **did not** know what to do when someone like this former leader in the church, had divorced.

The response of this counselee to this associate pastor, brings us back to the construct of trust. His response was, *“Should you run into someone who is in a similar situation, **please let me know because I know what to do.**”* And this man still says, *“I have a scar, but no longer a wound.”*

I share this story with you because you need to know this worldview. You need to understand the presuppositions behind *soul care*. For those who have been wounded—and those who have since been healed, *their worldview matters*.

Let me be clear, no one knows how to disciple themselves, and if their church does not know how to care for them, they spend the next however many years, learning how to do soul-care—mainly on themselves by themselves. In the absence of a church including soul-care as part of their DNA, they will not know how to take a broken-down Christian and walk alongside that soul through the transformational steps to be whole, again.

Okay, I did not forget the construct of *trust*, this man’s church also was not able to provide transformational contexts for people like him to receive soul-care. After some forty years of attempting to offer soul-care I have found the greatest obstacle to those wounded has been the grace of rebuilding trust. Let me return to *self-trust* and *relational trust* in the context of building unity in the church.

*Self-trust* basically means nearly all of us want others to think of us as good, honest, and trustworthy people. I call this the act of *image-management*. Plato used a simple test, “imagine I give you a ring that, when you put it on, made you invisible to human sight. Would you wear it?” Today we think of this as a test of character—who you are when no one is looking.

As people return, you are going to find a broad continuum of choices to wear that ring! Some, like this man back in 1998 will ambush you in the hall, give you a hug and begin to pour out the weight of their heart. But others will politely elbow-bump, and say, “I’m fine, just hunky-dory!” A lot of patience WILL be required!

*Relational-trust* has two parts: confidence that the other is reliable; and this person cares about my personal welfare. The writer of Proverbs describes what it is like to rely on a person who doesn’t reward

your trust: *“Depending on nonreliable person in a crisis is like trying to chew with a loose tooth or walk with a crippled foot”* (Proverbs 25:19, GNT).

As pastors and church leaders, it is incumbent upon us to believe another has every intention of being there for us when we need them, as we choose to trust them, as we come alongside.

Relational-trust does not develop overnight—but it can be lost in a heartbeat! Rebuilding trust is a gradual process that takes time and grows in degrees, not instantly. Keep in mind, that those who return first will be a bit further down the road than those rejoining your second, or third, or however many Sundays pass before doing so. I refer to this as the *transformational gap*. Making disciples is not linear, nor is it uniform. It is, well, like being a shepherd to a herd of sheep.

Let me close this series of articles with this:

Seeking a glimpse of the functional heart motives 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.

The Apostle Paul’s modeling of Jesus’ had him closing his letters with simple, direct instructions for Christ-followers to remember and put into daily practice. His first letter to Thessalonica offers a context for our conversation, today:

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle (*disorderly, or undisciplined*) encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (ESV)

- There were some, among those Christians, who had stopped working and were depending on their brethren to support them.
- Maybe concerns over family, disappointment with people, financial pressure, illness, or crisis --- and it all seems to come at us at once.
- In every local church and in every audience/readership, there are people who are weak spiritually.
- The text takes us well into both understanding and motivation, about how we need to treat one another – to help one another get to heaven.

And if COVID 19 was not enough, the traumatic taking of George Floyd’s breath further destroys the social systems of care, protection, and meaning that support human faith and life. The healing process requires the reconstruction of these systems.

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”* Revelation 7:9-10

Building Unity in Your Church ... *“How big is your vision?”*