

Elders guidance and leadership to BCC re. vaccine mandates

The last two years with the global COVID pandemic have been highly unusual, and something that most of us, and possibly all of us, have no similar prior experience of. It seems ages since we were at church camp together 2 years ago when we heard the first whispers of a new disease, and from there language over lockdowns, restrictions, vaccines, mandates, masks, social distancing etc etc have become part of everyday language. And I think we all yearn for a time when such things are consigned to history books and academic study.

However, we are where we are, and into this heady mix of health issues, economics, philosophies, and politics we are required as individuals and as a church to make choices around how we engage with and operate in the world in which we find ourselves.

You will note that in all this discussion I will not mention anything medical. This is of course deliberate. As elders, we note that we have some knowledge and learning on theological and church matters, but we are not doctors or medical experts, and we defer to them in their area of expertise and knowledge. We do not believe it is our place as church leaders to opine on medical matters; it is however, our duty to God and to you to faithfully guide the church in whatever circumstances we are facing in our society and world.

Specifically then, what I want to share with you today, is what we as an eldership team have decided is the most appropriate position for us to take and what that means for how BCC will continue to function and operate as the body of Christ in our community given the current pandemic settings devised by the NZ Government.

How are we to thoughtfully, considerately, lovingly and graciously approach a topic so divisive in our community and families, a topic that creates such acrimony and fallout amongst friends and colleagues?

It's worth stating that this season will pass. This pandemic, as with all other pandemics and periods of national pain and suffering will pass. And when it's passed, we want to know that relationships, and friendships and families have not been harmed and damaged such that those problems linger and cause suffering long after the pandemic is yesterday's news and our politicians and media have moved onto the next news story.

It was with those thoughts in mind that I penned the words for the sermon in December on 'Love & Fear', where I concluded:

The gospel we preach does not divide, it does not discriminate, it does not shut out, it does not reject, and it does not fear. No, our gospel is one of love, because God first loved us; he laid down his life for us and he compels us to follow his example as we love one another.

A foundational truth of the gospel is that Jesus came to offer all people the invitation to be part of his body, the church. In fact, the gospels continually point out the tension and anger that arose precisely because Jesus refused to reject anyone. His criticism of those who sought to create barriers was withering; may we be ever alert to that danger. The poor, the marginalised, the outcast... Jesus walked and talked and lived a life which demonstrated a gospel that was offered without fear or favour to anyone. (maybe look at Lk14-18 if you want to reflect on this)

He commanded his disciples to do likewise, and so we read in the NT of how the church continued his mission, empowered by his Spirit to do the work of God in proclaiming the message of repentance, forgiveness and salvation, and in so doing announcing that in Christ all those who received this message became children of God, and became united as one body, just as God himself is one (see Acts 10, Gal3, Col3).

And because it is God who has built his church to be a united whole, it means that we have no authority, we have no right to exclude or discriminate against those who have received from God an invitation to be part of his body.

Therefore, as a matter of theological primacy it would be in direct contradiction of our gospel message to operate BCC with vaccine mandates. How could we preach a message of universal acceptance and welcome and then simultaneously say, 'but you can only join us if you've had a vaccine'? It'd make us hypocrites in that our words would be saying one thing, but our actions another.

In the same way, nor can we open up the Rawene centre and then sort people as they arrive into different places or spaces based on vaccine ideology – again, this would be living out an action which is fundamentally contradicting our gospel; we'd effectively be creating two 'classes' of Christian, with divisions based on vaccination status. Or put another way, we'd be doing church in a way that opposes the unity and very purpose of what the church is meant to be – one united body; Christ's body.

But we also know that so far as is possible within the bounds of our faith we are subject to the governing authorities (eg Rom 13:1, 1Peter 2:13). And we also know that at this time our Government in NZ has made the decision that without vaccine mandates people cannot (generally) gather in numbers greater than 25.

Never say that it is the unvaccinated that are preventing us from meeting – it is nothing of the sort; there is only one source of authority that is preventing us from meeting in larger numbers and that is the Government. Whether you agree/disagree, like/dislike is another matter; but let us be honest in attributing the decision where it lies. Never should we allow some people to be scapegoated or blamed; all sorts of terrible things have happened when a marginalised group in society has been permitted by those in power to be the focus of blame and anger. Do not be a party to such talk.

Our response to this is therefore quite simple really – we meet in groups of up to 25. As leaders of the church, we will do our very best to create content and material which as best as possible enables us to remain connected and united in this environment. Through online services which we share together in multiple groups, through encouraging people to meet outside of Sunday morning services, to better build on the fellowship, support, and pastoral work that we can do within our smaller groups.

We are reminded in Hebrews (10:25) ‘do not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another’. There is nothing especially magical about meeting in a group of 150 as opposed to 10, or 25, or 500. We may have preferences, but theologically and biblically when we meet in each other homes and pray for one another, share each other’s burdens, encourage, and support we are being the body of Christ and we are fulfilling the command of Heb 10.

As elders, we know we have much more work to do in helping to make these smaller home meetings better. We can be better organised, we can be better in ensuring people aren’t left out, we need to think about our infants, our kids and our youth. Many of our mid-week activities and groups can continue to meet, but possibly in slightly different ways – all of this is still very much ‘church’, and BCC still has its commission from our Lord and Saviour to preach the gospel and build up disciples in this place. None of that changes – we just need to do things slightly differently for a season.

We know that some people will want to be careful about how they socialise at this moment in time, so we need to ensure that there are ways and means for each and every person at BCC (and in our community) to have a space and an opportunity to gather in ways that work for them at this time. So if you need to meet with a group where you know that each person there has been vaccinated – let Dan or Jo know, and they can guide you to the right place for you.

And our prayer, is that as soon as possible, we will be able to meet in larger numbers again, and enjoy the fellowship that comes from such gatherings. But we re-iterate, that when we open the doors of the Rawene Centre to meet as God’s people, we will only do so on the basis that none are excluded from that welcome; to do otherwise would mean operating the church practically in a way that directly opposes the message of the gospel we’re proclaiming. And that is something that as the elders of BCC we cannot possibly do.

We know this is hard; so let me finish with some encouraging words Paul wrote to a church 2,000 years ago. Interestingly, the church at Colossae to which the words were originally addressed, was being warned by Paul about teachings that were aligned with the world but which undermined Christ. You see – things don’t change; the world is continually putting things to us which can lead us away from the gospel...

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)