

# **WORSHIP AND WITNESS IN CRISIS**

**Has the Church Failed the Covid Test?**

**Edited by**

**Matthew A. Vogan and Matthew J. Hyde**



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# Introduction

The spring of 2020 initiated challenges for the church that have been acutely difficult. Navigating conflicts, official guidance and medical issues while trying to minister to a scattered flock has often seemed like an impossible task. Just as the life of wider society was disorganised by the effects of Covid-19, so the church has found itself in a disordered condition. Reviewing our response may seem like the last thing pandemic-weary pastors and congregations would want. There is an understandable desire to put it behind us and try to reassemble the life of the church as we once knew it. The past is the past, our instincts tell us—we cannot change it, so should we just move on?

This book shares that orientation towards the future. But the coronavirus crisis is such a seismic event that we cannot ignore its far-reaching impact. We cannot treat it as a mere interruption in the life of the church. It has been and will continue to prove to be a disruption. Political historian Peter Hennessy commented, ‘I would divide British post-war history into before corona and after corona.’<sup>1</sup> It would seem strange to find secular analysis outstripping faith-driven reflection.

The Covid-19 crisis found everyone unprepared, churches included. We responded as we thought best and had little time for working patiently through the principles involved. In seeking to provoke prayerful reflection on the church’s response, *Worship and Witness in Crisis* is neither complacent nor condemnatory. It does

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with BBC Radio 4: The World at One, on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. See <https://twitter.com/bbcworldatone/status/1239947862001278977?lang=en> [Accessed 27/04/2021].

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not list our woes, apportion blame, or excoriate any particular scapegoats. Yet reflection is called for. If we fail to reflect carefully, we will not only be unprepared for another crisis but we are likely to find that our impromptu solutions have had long-lasting unintended effects. We may also find ourselves drawn to a reflex response of pragmatism over principle to other issues which may arise in the future.

Instead, this book seeks to examine the response of churches within the United Kingdom in order to learn lessons for the future. The authors come from a variety of church groupings throughout Scotland, England and Ireland, providing some breadth of perspective and experience. Of course, the views stated in the individual chapters are those of the individual authors alone. Not all the authors hold the same position, and they belong to churches who may have made different decisions about the response to Covid-19.

Engaging in this kind of review is certainly biblical. God's call to Israel through the prophet Haggai was, 'Consider your ways' (Haggai 1:5). They had neglected to continue building the temple due to the command of the Persian king (Ezra 4:23-24). As a consequence, God had sent them many evidences of his displeasure in outward things (Haggai 1:9-11). Despite all these warnings they continued to put off their duty by saying it was not the right time to engage in it when they were surrounded by risk (Haggai 1:2). Yet they were happy to live comfortably (Haggai 1:4). They were like their complacent ancestors before the captivity who were at ease in Zion (Amos 6:1) and unconcerned about the afflictions of the people of God (Amos 6:6).

It was to such people that the Lord says, 'Consider your ways.' This very instruction implies that failure to engage in corporate



self-examination is perhaps the main reason we err from our duty and continue in disobedience. We need to ponder deeply and respond appropriately to God's dealings with us and our ways towards him. The events of 2020-2021 call loudly for us to do this. Indeed, perhaps they are the wake-up call that the Lord is using to make the church consider her ways. But while it is a tender rebuke, the message, 'consider your ways,' is also bright with hope and promise.

The exhortation to 'consider your ways' is repeated in Haggai 1:7-8 together with an instruction as to how to act in the future. The very fact that it is repeated shows how reluctant we are to bring matters to our consciences. Our natural response is to dig in and refuse to accept that we have got things wrong. After all, it will only create difficulty and loss of face. But the Lord adds rich promises of his gracious acceptance, delight and pleasure in his people and their service if they will listen to his call and obey. These promises are connected with his public worship, something that those whom Haggai addressed had neglected and undervalued.

Scripture and experience tell us that if we do not listen to God's voice to us, other heavier chastisements will be required. In the case of Haggai's message, there was a receptive audience. Their spirits were stirred up to work for the sake of restoring the public worship of God and the glory of his name. Much was accomplished in a short time (Haggai 1:14-15). They were so strengthened as to be able to resist the threat of opposition from civil authority (Ezra 5). All this came from a call to consider their ways. When they heeded that and considered what God required of them, they were found in a better condition.

## Worship and Witness in Crisis

*Worship and Witness in Crisis* opens with an overview by Iain Smith of how the church has responded to pandemics in the past. Douglas Somerset then sets the scene by identifying the principles which should guide us in negotiating disagreements within the church, as part of our Christian duty to maintain unity and love among the brethren.

The discussion then turns to ask serious questions about the nature and purpose of worship and of the church itself. Matthew Hyde explores whether the church should ever voluntarily choose to suspend public worship. Peter Wilkins then analyses the importance of gathering physically for worship.

During this crisis we have also faced critical questions about the role of church and state. For some time we have not been required to work out our understanding of such matters, and our analytical tools have become blunted and rusty through years of disuse. Allan MacColl refreshes our memories of how Scripture presents the respective roles of church and state and how the church has striven to implement these biblical principles down through the centuries. Matthew Vogan then homes in on how to understand the principle of 'rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'

In recent decades we have been used to reflecting on the preciousness of life in relation to issues such as abortion and assisted dying. Yet in other areas our views have perhaps been less coherently thought through and expressed. Suddenly Covid-19 faced us with immediate practical issues of preserving life and health. Paul Murray explores some dimensions of loving our neighbour that may have been neglected or under-emphasised. Jonathan Moore takes up the question of whether it is ever 'unloving' to go to church to worship God.

It is easy to think like the world and respond like the world when we are under pressure. Matthew Vogan and Catherine Hyde look at how far the church's response to this crisis has been shaped by the assumptions and pressures which prevail in our culture.

In the final chapter, the editors pull together a collection of pointers for how to move forward from this crisis.

Individually and corporately, whatever decisions and arguments we may have made since spring 2020, we have much to consider. 'Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord' (Lamentations 3:40).

We would like to express appreciation to Rev. David Campbell (Edinburgh) who originally floated the idea for a book on these lines and has provided assistance for the project along the way.

Matthew A. Vogan and Matthew J. Hyde  
Editors

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