

Retreat, rebuke, recite: outliers in church responses to the current COVID-19 pandemic

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Retreat, Rebuke, Recite: Outliers in church responses to pandemic

1.0 Introduction

'We reserve the right to worship God. We take all the necessary precautions...so these are our religious convictions and this is why we continue to operate as a church' Tony Spell, 24 March 2020 (Spell 2020, 0m:10s).

'[Covid-19] is finished. It is over. And the United States of America is healed and well again.' Kenneth Copeland, 29, March 2020. (Copeland 2020b, 1m:39s).

'The plan was to use a pandemic to take over the globe.' Rodney Howard-Browne, 15 March 2020 (Howard-Browne 2020a, 10m:15s).

A Christian preacher ignores state restrictions to continue meetings in person during the pandemic. A prophet exercises judgement over covid-19. Another preacher warns his congregation of a global conspiracy. These are not the responses of most Christians but outliers from the widespread cooperation with local authorities across the world during lockdowns and subsequent public health restrictions on assembling and other preventative measures. Efforts to slow the transmission of the virus are directed at saving the lives of those most vulnerable and those for whom contracting it when in otherwise robust health turns out to be debilitating if not always fatal. When hospitals become overwhelmed acute and critical care cannot be available to everyone who requires it. Politicians are required to take decisions that balance public cooperation and the relative gains of rolling and/or regional lockdowns with the effects upon businesses, employment, mental health and education. It is reasonable to assume that Christians will rally to support endeavours to save lives and limit distress out of a fundamental orientation of loving care. Indeed, mainstream denominations have adopted approaches appropriately summed up by Bishop Kevin Pearson of the Scottish Episcopal Church when, conducting worship online from his cathedral in Oban on 26 April 2020, he says: 'The cathedral is empty, the doors are locked in love not in fear' (Pearson 2020, 2:05mins). The obligation upon Roman Catholics to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days is lifted *as*, not contrary to, the teaching of the Church, for as Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols affirms, 'this pandemic is the "serious reason" why this obligation does not apply at this time' (Nichols and McMahon 2020). The response of the Elim Pentecostal denomination in the UK is unequivocal: 'No place of worship will be able to reopen before a decision by the respective government and churches must follow this published guidance' (Elim Pentecostal 2020).

This article focuses, as the three epigraphs suggest, on some atypical responses. The label 'outlier' comes from statistical analysis where it is applied to a data point that differs significantly from other observations. The concept is familiar to those who follow opinion polls and latch on to unusually strong or weak data on voting intentions for a candidate. In a

classroom, a brilliant student may be an outlier in relation to general performance. I use the term as an analogy from statistics to draw attention to unusual, atypical and possibly anomalous or, as I conclude in this context, aberrant responses to government directives and guidance. Outliers can be complex for, as we will see, having an unusual theology need not exclude a church leader from the corridors of national power and influence. Members of the formally Established Church (of England) can be found pushing agendas as theological outliers. It is vital to study outliers for at least three reasons. First of all, proponents of fringe views may turn out to be forerunners of ideas that much of the mainstream adopts some time later; the charismatic movement being an example. A second reason for writing about non-representative perspectives in general lies in their threat to institutions by a combination of illicit influence and political maneuvering in order to gain control; arguably this has been the experience of some major political parties in the UK and the USA. More specifically in churches, outliers who radicalise members pose a clear and present danger of inciting extremist behaviour. In the immediate context of this global pandemic, this third reason assumes a degree of urgency as not only might the health of church members but also of many more in wider society be compromised, perhaps fatally. Bad advice under the guise of divine authorisation is culpable under any circumstances but in the battle against covid-19 may make some churches more part of the problem than of the solution.

In this article I focus on three dimensions of outlying responses to the situation from mid-March until early-July 2020. First, I consider refusals to lock-down, pressure to reopen churches and resistance to mask-wearing. Counter-intuitively, I interpret this as a *retreat* from civic engagement. In considering retreat we touch on questions of religious liberty, challenging its rendering in terms that veer towards rights to exit society, often pleading Christian exceptionalism. The second theme is spiritual warfare as a paradigm for interpreting the pandemic. The example of Copeland's claim to have authority over it has set the scene for me to examine promises of divine protection and or healing that are being made with the hermeneutics of a prosperity gospel. The third topic is the advancing of conspiracy theories by Christian preachers as to the underlying purpose of the virus being international tyranny and social control. Before bringing forward proposals for counter-actions I use a theological framing of the common good as a way to crystallise the inadequacies of the outlier responses. The counter-actions involve engaging in public life, endorsing public health strategies, and entombing conspiracy theories. Distinct as these are, I will conclude with what we might learn from their inter-relationship in current, and future, crises.

Most of my examples come from either the USA, the UK and Nigeria. The USA is a major source of the 'prosperity gospel' otherwise known as 'the word of faith' movement whose particular approach in promising God's healing and protection from sickness impact greatly on public health during this pandemic. Megachurches, sharing similar prosperity gospel affinities and USA models of entrepreneurial 'Chief Executive Officer' styles of 'anointed' charismatic pastors are a significant feature of Nigerian Christian experience. (Kenneth Copeland publicly endorses and anoints Nigerian church leader, of whom we will say more shortly, David Oyedepo Senior and his wife Faith at a 2015 ministers' conference (International Ministers' Conference 2015). Two of Oyedepo's sons were apparently ordained by Copeland in 2007 (Believers Portal 2018).) A second emphasis, on liberty rights, in the USA resonates in the UK with appeals from some Evangelicals against church closures. Given also that the UK is the former colonial power over Nigeria (until independence in 1960) with continuing close links of immigration and Christian influence in some Nigerian diaspora

churches in the UK, questions of theological and spiritual influence circulating between the USA, UK and Nigeria make the choice of these three contexts highly apposite.

2.0 Retreat

Church leaders who resist lock-down or insist on immediate re-opening of places of worship and who advocate non-compliance to injunctions (sometimes requirements) to wear facemasks are taking public stances. However, although this is *in public* they are withdrawing from civic engagement as responsible citizens and retreating from the common good. In defiance of a state-wide ban on gatherings of 50 or more people, Life Tabernacle Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana meet on Tuesday evening 17 March 2020 as a congregation of around 300 (Silliman 2020). Pastor Tony Spell tells local media that covid-19 is 'politically motivated' and they will : 'assemble no matter what someone says" (Duhé 2020) because, for Christians, death is 'like a welcome friend' (TMZ 2020). David Oyedepo, the leader of one of Nigeria's largest megachurches holds a service on 22 March 2020 in defiance of a ban on assemblies of more than 50 or more people issued on 18 March 2020. In what is in effect an apology issued on 23 March 2020, Oyedop's spokesperson assures the public and his congregation that, 'Cooperation to safeguard public safety is not just a moral obligation or civic responsibility; the church also considers it a spiritual duty' (Living Faith Church 2020). On Monday 30 March 2020, Rodney Howard-Browne, the leader of The River Church in Tampa, Florida (and, in our terms an example of the complexity of outlier status, one of the pastors who laid hands on and prayed over Donald Trump in the Oval Office of the White House on 10 July 2017) is arrested and charged with unlawful assembly and violation of health emergency rules (Burke 2020).

As the first round of lock-downs begin to be eased churches turn to question their place in the sequence. In the USA, Liberty Council organises a ReOpen church campaign, arguing that churches ought to be treated like other 'essential businesses' and to do otherwise is against First Amendment rights of freedom of worship under the Constitution (Liberty Counsel 2020). The focus is on parity of treatment but also on the way in which restrictions impact upon *how* worship is conducted when parking lot services are in some case permitted. The complaint is that designating churches as 'non-essential' cannot be sustained if liquor stores are 'essential'; any attempt by a state governor (such as in Kentucky) to argue that online worship substitutes for in-person church is, it is claimed, spurious and unconstitutional. On 14 April 2020 Fox news runs an interview with Trump 2020 Advisory Board Member Harmeet Dhillon where she challenges the strategy of slowing transmission by imposing lock-down, claiming that it is unconstitutional to quarantine people who are not sick (Fox News 2020).

In England during June 2020, Christian Concern progresses its campaign, including seeking a judicial review, against ongoing restrictions on public worship being imposed (rather than voluntary) (Christian Concern 2020, 17). On the Christian Concern website, the chief executive Andrea Williams, (an elected member of the General Synod of the Church of England and thus another example of complex outlier status) explains their position. It is church leaders, 'not MPs, Lords or Health and Safety Inspectors – who have authority and responsibility over their flock...Now we've conceded that health and safety rules over our worship, what comes next?' (Williams 2020). Christian Concern finds the more measured response of the more mainstream (in the evangelical world) Evangelical Alliance to be, in contrast to persecuted churches in other nations, a dangerous compromise of 'passive

compliance' (Boot 2020). The same talking point used in the USA against preventative spreading of the virus appears in Christian Concern's position that finds no biblical text 'where Christ or his apostles hid from the diseased and destitute, the lonely, depressed or dying in the interest of loving and saving them'. (Boot 2020).

Continuing the discussion into 3 July 2020, Christian Concern posts a paper by Dave Brennan of Brephos UK who pitches the issue as one of the Lordship of Christ and holds up the Victorian evangelical preacher C.H. Spurgeon, who ministered during the 1854 cholera epidemic in London, as an exemplar (Brennan 2020). This becomes, under Christian Concern's endorsement, an argument to consider breaking social-distancing regulations because the Church has a unique authority under Christ. Christian Concern is not advocating here freedom of religion, but a particular freedom for Christians and, we can infer, for a particular type of Christian (that is, Evangelical). This theological reasoning would not extend the freedom to breach quarantine, social distancing, and lock-down by any other faith community.

This brings us back to the USA and the politicising (and theologising) of mandatory mask-wearing. Andrew Wommack, a tele-evangelist from Colorado, questions in a livestream on 5 May 2020 whether 'they have a Constitutional right to require you to wear a face mask and stuff like this' (Coalition 2020, 47m:22s). Striving to be like Christ poses, for Wommack, a problem: 'I just can't even picture Jesus wearing a mask as he goes around praying for people' (Coalition 2020, 48m:25s). Such a theological contention might seem inconsequential but Ohio State Representative Nino Vitale, makes much the same point in a Facebook video he had posted just the day before (4 May 2020) when he equates the image of God with the visible face of a Christian believer (Vitale 2020, 1m:25-32s).

3.0 Rebuke

Copeland's attempt to exert prophetic authority over covid-19, with which this article opened, is an apt illustration of a spiritual warfare stance towards the pandemic. Both the virus and the fear felt by people watching its spread are, in this outlier, to be rebuked in Jesus' name. Mike Bickle (director of the International House of Prayer and previously closely associated with the 'Kansas City prophets' in the late 1980s), speaking on 22 March 2020 understands the virus as a strategy of the devil, 'a strike from the kingdom of darkness' to hinder the evangelistic efforts that are planned as 20 stadium events around the USA in 2020 (Bickle 2020, 16m:39s and 16m:46s). David Oyedepo in Nigeria, in a sermon that same day, declares, "The curse of coronavirus is over finally today, in the name of Jesus' (Oyedepo 2020, 5:41). Kenneth Copeland executes judgment against the virus in the USA on 29 March 2020 (Copeland 2020b, 01m:39s) and dispels covid-19 again on 4 April 2020 by blowing it away in act of prophetic authority which he bases on Exodus 15:10 'Thou didst blow with they wind, the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters' (KJV): 'covid-19 [Copeland blows] and go, the wind of God on you. You are destroyed for ever and you will never be back' (Copeland 2020a, 29m:12-29s).

Preaching at the Dynamis Glory Dome in Abuja, Nigeria on 22 March 2020 (a venue of 100,000 capacity), Paul Eneche tells his congregation that there is a church in China he knows where no-one was 'scratched' by the virus (Eneche 2020, 10m:11s). Assuring his people that there is no virus powerful enough to take them out before their time, 'you shall fulfil your days' (13:21). Eneche conducts the congregation in reading out loud together Ps

91 emphasising for them that God's promise is for a 'long life, not short life' (Eneche 2020, 16m:41s). Giving a video-streamed interview on 9 April 2020, Zimbabwean mega-church preacher Emmanuel Makandiwa assures viewers that those listening to him will be protected: 'There's not even one person listening to me tonight who shall be killed by this disease...You will not die because the Son (Jesus) is involved in what we are doing (Makandiwa 2020, 1m:00s and 1m:16s). The day before (8 April 2020) US evangelist Andrew Wommack offers his viewers God's promises of protection from the virus for it is possible be found 'walking in divine health' (Wommack 2020, 11m:28s). Wommack continues by way of explanation: 'you have a force field around you (11:37) and no sickness can penetrate that and get to you'. This is more than an offer of God's healing should a person become sick: 'And if we get sick, it's not God who failed, it's me that failed.'" (12m:20s) ... 'It's even better to believe God not to get sick (12m:46s) to walk in divine health.'

For Pentecostals like Copeland, fear is certainly a sin, but it is also a power in itself that can bring about harmful effects:

You can be afraid of something and bring it to yourself
(Copeland 2020c, 13m:30s) ... you're asking for the virus, you've
got faith in it (19m:40s) ... Fear is a magnet for sickness and
disease (19m:42s) ... The moment you begin to fear ... the devil
goes to work on you (20m:55s).

In this sermon of 11 March 2020, in the context of the emergence of the virus in the US, Copeland confidentially asserts that it is 'a very weak strain of flu' (2m:20s) and that a Christian who fears catching the virus is 'giving the devil a pathway to your body (22m:16s) It may take 'til the next flu season for the old kind of flu to kill you' (22m:22s). Claiming God's protection from the virus includes rejecting fear lest a weak believer, it seems, make themselves *more* susceptible to a demonically-influenced, if not actually controlled, disease.

4. 0 Recite

For some preachers the framing of the virus in terms of spiritual warfare occurs within a bundle of conspiracy theories. As communities look to their church leaders for guidance, spiritual nurture, hope and an explanation for the pandemic not a few hear recitation of unfounded, often complex, narratives including those of a New World Order. On 15 March 2020 Howard-Browne preaches casting doubt on the existence of the virus: 'I've asked people if you know anybody who has coronavirus, nobody knows. Do you know anybody?' (Howard-Browne 2020a, 11m:09s). Quoting from a 10 years old Rockefeller Institute scenario testing document (2010) that actually maps out four possible future responses as a way of resilience planning, Howard-Browne finds evidence of a global conspiracy. He is convinced that the pandemic is a strategy for control of the world: 'Using the World Health Organisation to then come in and take control over nations and then they're going to bring in vaccines - the vaccines have been there already (20m:00s) - and there's going to be forced vaccines which they can kill off many people with vaccines ' (20m:07s). In a sermon on 24 May 2020 Howard-Browne preaches about 'mandatory vaccines' (Howard-Browne 2020b, 3h:11m:26-32s) and asserts that in such a scenario, 'People are not obligated to serve the government' (3h:11m:33s). 'We have the right to remove them from office by the vote, and other means as a last resort' (3h:11m:48s).

In Nigeria on 5 April 2020, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome delivers an online presentation

that goes into considerable detail about a supposed relationship between 5G mobile communications, covid-19 and mind-control. First on 5 April 2020 he claims that 'the [5g] signals create a sickening effect that will make you want [the vaccine]' (Oyakhilome 2020a, 8:51). On 8 April 2020 Oyakhilome continues the theme (Oyakhilome 2020b):

satan wants to create a new man, and because he can't do it like God it will be part man, part machine (8m:52s)... And that's the reason for the vaccine because of what it can help introduce into you (09m:15s) with which you can now communicate with the 5G. What's the big deal?...it understands your thoughts because your thoughts have become electronic signals (10m:13s).

Granted, Oyakhilome backtracks somewhat on 12 April 2020 by focusing on what he perceives to be its health risks (Aworinde 2020).

5.0 Theological Inadequacies

Retreating from civic engagement, rebuking the virus as demonic and reciting conspiracy theories taken together demonstrate an inadequate theology of the common good. The Catholic Catechism defines the common good as 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily' (Roman Catholic Church 2020, §1906). It is not for one community to dictate to all in their nation-state the meaning of 'fulfilment'. There is an intrinsic good in engaging in negotiating the complex (and indeed often conflicting) understandings of the good. Whilst that goes on, in what is really a never-finished process, there can be considerable agreement on needs and obstacles that large numbers of people encounter. For Christians, winning any 'war' on defining 'the good' ought not be the ambition but, as Benedict XVI observes, 'The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them' (Benedict XVI 2009, §7). Pursuing the common good can be costly for anyone who is currently in a position of advantage and Christians, particularly but not exclusively, are called by Pope Francis to be willing 'to renounce their privileges' (Francis 2013, §218). The opposite of the common good is a political theory (and a spiritual disposition) of demanding to be left alone to pursue one's own goals and goods. Such a stance fails to realise that everyone's good is interrelated with the flourishing of others. Furthermore, it so emphasizes personal responsibility that this disposition neglects issues of *structural* disadvantage. Here the prosperity gospel is singularly inadequate in its wedding of God's promises of health and wealth to a theology of only personal responsibility. If one is not healed or prosperous then one has failed to claim God's promises. When Christians appeal so one-dimensionally to religious liberty (against suspending public worship) they err in a slightly different direction by failing to appreciate the value of partnership in society. Rather than seeking the common good, this stance either seeks to control the public or, as is more often the case, withdraws not merely into pietism but into victimhood when rights are balanced in ways that do not privilege Christians.

A robust theology of the common good cannot accommodate denigrating the state as inveterately wicked. Premillennialist anxieties, as we explore in more detail later, focus around division, unleashing of evil, rapture and Christian deliverance, setting God's face so

implacably against the world that negotiation and partnership are unimaginable or apostate. Why work for the common good if God is against the world? In a similar vein, although not necessarily premillennialist, Reformed understandings of God and the world are similarly inadequate for pursuing the common good. The ever-present danger is compromise of Christian truth and purity as the people of the world need salvation, brought to them with the faithful proclamation of the Gospel (in Protestant Evangelical terms). Public worship, in this framework, becomes an inviolable sign of faithfulness and 'witness'.

Concern for the common good (for loving one's neighbour) should mean ensuring that one's faith stances fail safe. This is analogous to devices that are built to mitigate damage should a critical component fail. For example, brakes on an elevator are held off by tension in the lift cable. Should the cable snap, the brakes engage to stop the lift falling. One can be as fervent in belief in God's protection and healing as one might wish to be, but love for neighbour requires that one's mistakes, or what turns out to be foolishness, does as little harm as possible to others. In claiming God's healing or immunity from covid-19 a robust theology would still require strategies to limit virus transmission to others – in case a believer's faith is misplaced. Seeking the common good out of love for others means taking precautions; those precautions are not indicators of lack of faith. Although the primary issue is the common good, we can critique more specifically and propose alternative strategies to the three approaches of reciting conspiracies, rebuking the virus and fear as demonic, and retreating from civic engagement.

6.0 Entomb (not recite)

Closing down a conspiracy theory by not even obliquely endorsing it in a sermon and declining to post it on social media is a better response; to entomb rather than recite the conspiracy. Frederick Jameson offers in 1960 what becomes a classic definition of conspiracy theory as, 'the poor man's cognitive map' (Jameson 1960). This response fits well into what Richard Hofstadter calls, first in 1964 and then more fully in 1968, the 'paranoid style' of politics (Hofstadter 1968). To Karl Popper, writing in 1966, conspiracy theories are the 'secularisation of a religious superstition' (Popper 2013, 306). Timothy Melley frames anxiety about a perceived loss of autonomy in the face of control by external agents as 'agency panic' (Melley 2000, vii). Recent theorising appreciates that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is more complex than generally appreciated. Differentiated from 'pathological conspiracism', conspiracy thinking need not be mistaken for it could be a rational political response to systematic injustices and inequalities in national and international politics' (Hellinger 2019, 2). According to Hellinger, conspiracy theories can at least generate forms of political response. They can be deployed by populist politicians to mobilise support but can also result in people being mobilised to protest genuine abuses of power (Hellinger 2019, 24). This does not, however, dissipate or wholly account for the ways in which groups of people perceive the threat of shifts in their power relative to others and 'revamp and recoup from losses' (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 132). In religious (but not specifically Christian) contexts, David Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal identify: 'a network-based circulation of "rejected knowledge," with a shared identity based on deviance and opposition to perceived orthodoxies. It defines itself through what it opposes and which takes place in a milieu of 'millennialism, or apocalypticism' (Robertson and Dyrendal 2018, 414-5) Within certain quarters of the Evangelical world, the novels of the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins prove popular with their vivid depictions of a post-rapture world under the

increasing control of the antichrist, under the alias Nicolae Carpathia. The United Nations is used as a means towards one-world government and social control; a plot deeply conspiratorial in its design. Of the many distributing messages within the novels, Gershom Gorenberg's observation is insightful:

they reject the very idea of open, democratic debate. In the world of *Left Behind*, there exists a single truth, based on a purportedly literal reading of Scripture; anyone who disagrees with that truth is deceived or evil (Gorenberg 2002).

This is not to say that Christian conspiracy theories are merely the *Left Behind* series transposed from fiction into non-fiction. However, Gorenberg's warning is a salutary one, that 'the *Left Behind* books are giving millions of people an interpretive paradigm in which extreme views seem sensible' (Gorenberg 2002). Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center, takes Christians to task for imbibing and repeating conspiracy theories, not least because this is an act of bearing false witness (Stetzer 2020). Whilst not all fake news is conspiracy theory, Pope Francis's warns in 2018 about the former as a twisting of truth in contrast to godly communication as 'an effective expression of our responsible search for truth and our pursuit of goodness' (Francis 2018). Francis advocates not only discernment but that, 'We need to unmask what could be called the "snake-tactics" used by those who disguise themselves in order to strike at any time and place' (Francis 2018). This makes sense when the challenge is fake news but to engage in a rational discussion with a conspiracy theorist is often a hopeless task because there is always one more piece of 'evidence' against your rebuttal. You are an outsider, duped by the system, who is unwilling to investigate the 'evidence' that a brave few have found against the attempts of the authorities to keep it hidden.

7.0 Endorse (not rebuke)

The approach of rebuking the virus (in one way or another) is consistent within the hermeneutics of the prosperity gospel that present health and wealth as the earthly inheritance of Christians to be claimed by faith. Also known as Word of Faith theology, once having laid claim to God's promise, continuing symptoms of an illness or financial lack point towards a deficit in faith including perhaps un-repented sin. In this paradigm faith is, as Kate Bowler observes in her ethnographic study: 'a causal agent, a power that actualizes events and objects in the real world' (Bowler 2013, 141). Believers are not to be misled by their 'sense knowledge' but are to act as if healing or prosperity has been granted. This involves praise that claims the promises of God for, as Bowler also observes in her study, believers had to assiduously avoid hindering their blessing: Saints who had "claimed their healing" must maintain their faith until the physical evidence corresponded to the mind's assent, a process known as "keeping their healing." (Bowler 2013, 152).

What is particularly worrying in the context of a pandemic is the logic of this faith. We see this in Wommack's teaching about walking in health and Copeland's emphasis on victory. Attending to continuing symptoms is a mark of faith/essness - a problem that Bowler observes: 'some saints when ill avoided or were discouraged from asking for continued help because it might identify them as faithless' (Bowler 2013, 176). In the more immediate context of covid-19, taking authority over the virus, claiming healing or protection necessitates not only faith in God but a determination (seen as itself a gift of God's grace) to

ignore symptoms. Such a paradigm itself woven with end-time scenarios may well have 'deadly consequences' (Gagné 2020). There is, however, an important role for influential preachers to disseminate accurate information and endorse ways of slowing transmission of the virus, although more education is required (Chimbidzikai 2020). Whilst quoting Psalm 91 might help anxious Christians, claims that this offers a protection from the virus to be claimed in faith is not only a form of Christian exceptionalism but threatens efforts in public health. That being said, Xavier Moyet finds fractures in an edifice behind which high-profile Nigerian preachers are not criticised. The Nigerian public has challenged these celebrities, particularly via social media, when sermons have not been conducive to public health strategies (Moyet 2020).

8.0 Engage (not retreat)

Divine protection and healing is one set of claims, constitutional rights is another. Robin West identifies a move towards Christians claiming 'exit rights' (West 2016, 402). West's contention is that exit rights, 'burden weaker members of the sovereign communities they create by stripping those members of otherwise available legal protections' (West 2016, 403). Furthermore, there is a cost to equality and of splintering at a broader level of the aspirations of civil societies to be spheres of 'inclusiveness, participation, and integration' (West 2016, 403). It is this claim of 'exit right' that is particularly dominant in the UK Christian Concern argument against government health and safety requirements being imposed upon churches who are under the Lordship of Christ. This is more than being against state-established religion and beyond the customary understanding of spiritual independence that rejects state interference in, for example, the appointment of ministers. To claim that health and safety regulations ought only be advisory for churches is both extreme and unsustainable because it replaces community accountability with a hyper-individualism; the autonomous 'individual' in this case being a Christian congregation. Exit rights are emblematic, if not totemic, for Christians who want to have their cake and eat it. They enjoy religious freedom but chafe against religious responsibility. Religious freedom is always qualified. For example, incest, bigamy, and many forms of abuse remain against the law whether or not individuals consent on religious grounds.

If, instead of exceptional treatment, Christians wish to make simplistic comparisons between places of worship and of commerce as a claim for identical treatment this would surely rebound. The state might well be able, and willing, to dictate how people conduct themselves in shops or pubs. Some Christians' worship is sedentary and social distanced under normal circumstances; others' is much different. Social distancing and other measures applied to churches indiscriminately and in ways identical to commercial venues would involve the state in controlling the *style* of worship but without taking into consideration those religious practices that are less risky and those that are more risky than in a shop or pub. Rather than acknowledging that we flourish only if we are aiding the flourishing of others, the exit rights movement asserts that to flourish we require that others be sequestered from us. Churches being slower to open and then with greater restrictions could well be acts contributing to the common good more than mirroring over-eager re-opening of commercial enterprises with fewer restrictions than might be wise.

9.0 Conclusion

Although this paper has treated three themes discretely, retreat, rebuke, and recite are inter-related. It is difficult to envisage engaging positively in civic life if one perceives it as a conspiracy theorist. Arguably, withdrawing from participating in public life could make one more susceptible to falling for conspiracy theories; greater withdrawal exacerbating agency panic. Under the burden of individually claiming - and walking in - God's protection against disease and deprivation, commitment to challenging systemic injustice is diminished. It is up to each person to be successful and protected; failure is a lack of faith, likely generated from fear or other sin. Why endorse wearing a mask and observing social distancing if your preacher has proclaimed God's victory in defeating the virus? Why self-isolate when showing symptoms of a virus? This is to resort to the un-faith of sense knowledge instead of claiming and walking in divinely-granted health. Why trust scientific experts if they are agents of the anti-christ's institutions such as the World Health Organisation? If a vaccine is produced, how can you know that it is not a device for social control or population reduction? From within the theologically inadequate positions we have seen, only one's Holy Spirit-inspired pastor can be trusted to provide truthful information.

Where outliers concede to social distancing and sanitising procedures in places of worship there is some cause for hope. However, where these strategies are underpinned - or more accurately, undermined - by framing the virus as demonic, part of a global conspiracy, or by claiming exceptional rights for churches, it is difficult to see how Christian responses will be anything other than detrimental to public health. It will be another episode in the shameful legacy of the church. Rather than being forerunners of necessary change, the preachers undermining efforts to address the pandemic will not only delude their congregations but harm the public. The Christianity that emerges post-pandemic will have to deal with the fall-out from a gospel that in some instances turned out to be anything but good news in a global health crisis.

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