

Views on vaccinations

Tim Palmer – Oct 2021

Jesus said, "by this all people will know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another". John 13:35

The purpose of this reflection is simply to listen and understand the perspective of others.

I'm trying to be a better listener when others have a view that's different to mine. I'm really concerned about the division being caused by different opinions about vaccination. I have friends whose families are splitting through polarising disagreement. Friends who are likely to lose their job, and those who worry that the Christian community will exclude them from church gatherings.

I chose not to publicise my position on social media, because I was observing this growing division, and wanted to understand it better. I've found it helpful to hear and recognise at least 15x different perspectives, mostly from people I know, which I've tried to articulate below. There may be more, or combinations of these views. This has helped me to stop stereo-typing or allowing a particular group to become an enemy.

I've found myself respecting and sympathising with some of the concerns of my unvaccinated friends, some of whom would typically be pro-vaccination. It has been helpful. As a pastor I'm deeply disturbed about some "Christian" views that I believe are damaging. I'm also concerned for those who, for whatever reason, feel threatened by friends and family, to the point that they can't make the decision they believe is right. Ultimately, I'm troubled by the increasing divisions.

Here are some examples of different perspectives I'm observing:

UNVACCINATED (despite usually being pro-vaccination).

1. *Pro-vaccination generally, but unvaccinated because of caution about the Pfizer vaccine.* They would be happy with a different COVID-19 vaccine option. Therefore they want to wait until another vaccine option is made available. Or they want more time for testing relating to the specific health conditions they have.
2. *Pro-vaccination generally, but opposed to increasing government control and restrictions.* They don't believe it's right for people to lose their jobs, or their rights, or be excluded from groups because of their personal choices. Therefore they've chosen not to have this vaccination as a way of standing for what they believe is right, or a form of protest.
3. *Pro-vaccination generally, but anti- Pfizer, because of concerns about corruption, greed, and injustice within pharmaceutical companies.* They feel that supporting this company is un-ethical.
4. *Pro-vaccination, but in this case unvaccinated because of fear.* Some want to be vaccinated but are experiencing significant pressure from peers and family who are opposed to the current situation. They've chosen not to have this vaccination out of genuine fear of rejection from family or friends, or the fear of what people are speculating about the vaccination.
5. *Those who sense God has told them personally not to be vaccinated in this situation, or to wait.* These ones walk closely with the Lord and have trusted his guidance through the years.
6. *Those who are unable to be vaccinated, because of their health situation, as recommended by medical professionals.*

ANTI-VACCINATION

7. *Anti-vaccination, and they are being consistent* with the position they have already held for years. There are a wide range of different views within the anti-vax community, ranging from health philosophies, to spirituality, to differing worldviews.
8. *Anti-vaccination, based on conclusions they've come to by doing their own reading.* Some question the credibility of the information most widely available.

9. *Anti-vaccination, based on fear.* For example, fear of making the wrong choice, or fear of the vaccine itself.
10. *Anti-vaccination, based on speculation that the vaccination and restrictions are part of a political move to control people.* These views may range from subtle concerns about vaccination passports, to theories about population control.
11. *Anti-vaccination, may hold the views above, but also linked with a unique interpretation of the Bible.* This view tries to place current events into the book of Revelation, anticipating a one world government, that introduces a "mark", which will determine trade and restriction. For these ones, the vaccination is (or could be) seen as a "precursor" to this system, and is therefore aligning with evil and/or rebellion against God's will.

VACCINATED

12. *Vaccinated, in contrast to above, Christians who see science and medicine as a gift from God.* These are drawn to research based recommendations. For them, the decision has not been based on fear or politics, and fits comfortably within their Biblical worldview. Some receive the vaccination as part of their Christian action and worship, in a desire to honour God, their community, and their own lives.
13. *Vaccinated, because they trust the professional medical advice given by their doctor.* Pfizer was considered the safest vaccine when NZ health professionals sought advice around the world.
14. *Vaccinated, for society but against their own preference.* They personally would have liked to wait or not be vaccinated, and would be comfortable to face the personal risk of getting COVID. But they recognise the pressure on our health system of a COVID outbreak, and want to support a strategy to reach a vaccination level target.
15. *Vaccinated, just because everyone else is.* They haven't thought about wider issues in any depth, and are not bothered by this. They see no point in taking time to consider the medical, social, political or spiritual factors involved in the decision.
16. *Vaccinated, based on fear of COVID-19 itself.*
17. *Vaccinated, based on negative pressure, from the work place, family or peers.* Their decision was affected by concerns about potential for losing their job, or exclusion from family, groups or travel.

Personally, I was fully vaccinated last month, and identify most with #12 and #14.

I'm not hearing all of these views represented evenly across society. The vast majority of my peers and connections have embraced this vaccination. There are views on the list that I deeply disagree with. However my current concern is that we treat one another with respect when we see things differently. I do not believe that there is any place for division on this issue. Personally I disagree with potential restrictions on church gatherings based exclusively on immunisation. I am concerned if this issue causes Christians to break fellowship with others.

Jesus calls us to love as we have been loved. To be a neighbour to the "stranger" who is different from us. He said that love would be a witness to the world, that they may know we are His followers. I believe that we can and must find ways to walk together in unity.

Grace and peace,
Tim Palmer

P.S. I'd like to follow up this reflection with some questions for us to consider personally, and to discuss collectively as we move toward regathering again.

(Note - This document was originally intended for a specific local church context)