

“Conversations on this Present Distress  
with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Five

April 19, 2020 • Sunday Evening

One of the things the Bible tells us to do is to pray for wisdom and if there has ever been a time when God’s people need to pray for wisdom it has been through this time. How do we appropriately love our neighbor, engage in ministries of mercy and outreach, submit to our government yet always conscience of our God-given rights, our inalienable rights and also the Bill of Rights in our Constitution and not the least of which is that first amendment? Thankfully the Lord say He gives wisdom freely when we call upon Him. We have asked the Lord to give us wisdom in addressing these questions that have come to our attention during this present distress.

Bruce: Before we get to our questions on this present distress we have a carry-over question from Holy Week and Easter. This question is about the ascension. It was said in our last Q & A that the crosses in front of our church would be up until Ascension Sunday and so the question is when is Ascension Sunday and what Scripture walks us through what happened between the resurrection and the ascension?

Harry: Jesus had a 40 day ministry post resurrection, pre ascension and then the ascension is captured for us in Acts 1 particularly Acts 1:4–9. It is also referred to as Paul addresses Christ’s redemptive work in His church in the book of Ephesians. Ephesians 4:7–10 says [7] *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. [8] Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” [9] (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [10] He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)* This means that when He ascended He took us positionally, legally into the presence of God having redeemed us from our sins.

Most particularly the last couple of verses in Luke 24 and Luke’s second volume, Acts 1 so those would be key texts that would give more information of what happened around Christ’s ascension.

Bruce: So 40 days after resurrection which is Ascension Thursday so the Sunday after that is when we celebrate Ascension Sunday. Why do you think there is not more written about what Jesus actually did from His resurrection to His ascension?

Harry: Some of it is perfectly understandable. A person asked me ‘what holidays are binding in a reformed Presbyterian Church?’ That is easy – it’s Sunday and that’s it. Nothing else is binding, but what the early church did and intended to do was even when it liberated itself from the unnecessary, Biblical binding of the conscience on “holy days” it seemed to acknowledge many of the reformation churches over a period of time the value of having a feasting season for the church. In the Old Testament particularly mentioned in Leviticus 24 there were five feasts with three of them being major that were outlined, detailed and defined. Now Jesus fulfills those so they are no longer binding upon us to practice them. But the early church seemed to capture this feasting value to focus on particular glorious works of redemption.

The Passover in the Old Covenant focused on the deliverance from Egypt. The three feasts seasons became Advent (the four weeks leading up to the celebration of the Incarnation), Holy Week (including the days leading up to Holy Week) and lastly the 40 days after the resurrection which would be Ascension Sunday where they would celebrate Christ had risen, His engagement with others with numerous appearances Christ made, arguably 13 to 15, then He ascends and the outpouring of the Spirit of God, 50 days after the resurrection.

Some churches don't even acknowledge Christmas, Advent Season, Holy Week and others that we do but I would agree that the only thing binding for us is the Christian Sabbath, the Lord's Day, one day a week. I don't think it prohibits us for the sake of celebration, focus, discipleship and outreach to have seasons where we feast on the Word of God, fellowship together, celebrate and have outreach in the key areas of the work of redemption, Incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension which automatically puts an emphasis on the second coming of Christ. This is what the early church did out of the Reformation but again it's not binding and it's what we do as well.

Bruce: For many years I thought the word Pentecost actually described the coming of the Holy Spirit, only to find out it goes all the way back to Leviticus 23 and the pente is the 50 days. So there is Ascension Sunday and then the next Sunday is Pentecost.

Harry: There is 50 days from the Passover and then would be the celebration. There is the outpouring of the Spirit of God so that the people aren't living in booths, for the Holy Spirit is living in them.

Bruce: Recently there has been a lot of discussion about the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or the CARES Act so the first question related to that has to do with churches. Any thoughts on churches taking CARES stimulus money from the government?

Harry: We need to realize this CARES Act is unusual, pretty much unprecedented and therefore we need to think thoughtfully through it. We need to give liberty for Christians to think through it and don't be like 'my position is the final word from the Lord.' We try to do that here at Briarwood and in our initial discussion you surfaced the fact that there are three categories we need to look at.

One is the individual person, in our case the individual Christian. Two there is the business owner and in our case oversight, counseling and discipling about a Christian business owner. Thirdly, there is the church, because the government did carve out that non-profits and churches could apply for this.

So let's look at the churches. It wasn't really a big decision for us because technically we don't really qualify. This is being administered among the small business association (SBA) and therefore it has certain metrics to it. But what if we did qualify, what would we do? We had to answer this because I have a lot of friends who pastor churches and have asked me about this so I have gently walked them through it in the way that I see it.

I have seven reasons why I do not believe the church should go to 'Caesar' for support. I'm just going to give you two of these reasons that are show stoppers for the sake of time. This is just my advice. A person said to me 'Harry this is free money so how can the church leave it on the table?' I reminded them that there is no such thing as free money. All wealth had been created. It has a source. The source of this wealth is twofold. One is that it comes from tax

money that is in place that is being drawn out to give to businesses in general and churches that apply for it or, it's being drawn from money that is anticipated from taxes that is going to come back to the government because of the right use of this money of maintaining the business and therefore the business will continue to pay taxes. Secondly, it's just money that's being printed.

If I'm not mistaken, we are now printing six times as much money to accommodate this Act, in addition to what had normally been printed. Basically we have upped the printing six times more than it was in the Obama stimulus package. That's about six trillion dollars being printed. That's going to cost the next generation. You can't just print that money and it not have an impact on the economy in various ways, such as inflation, deflation, recessions, depressions and that means it throws a burden on the future on our children. It's basically coming from money printed or tax money. It's not free money.

Here's my problem with churches getting this. Churches don't pay taxes and rightly so. The fact that churches don't pay taxes is not a benefit to the church. It's a recognition that when you tax something you control it. Therefore historically the state has never taxed the church and the church does not tax the state. That was part of the deal – church, state and family. The state practiced free practice of religion but it did not establish a national church nor did they pay tax to support the church. The churches did not pay taxes nor did they take the tax money. It was a separation.

If churches take this money it is from or anticipated from tax money but we don't pay taxes. There is nothing in that pot that the church contributed to therefore the church is drawing out money that other businesses and individuals have paid into that tax. Briarwood has never had a church tax to pay to the state nor will we in the future be paying taxes, at least God willing we won't be. So I don't believe I can take that money as if it's 'free money' knowing I am taking from something that I did not put into nor will we as a church put into it. So for a church to take this money from my own ethical point of view I would feel like I was stealing since the church didn't put money into where the money is coming from. Church employees will pay taxes so they can decide if they want to use this money for them personally or not.

Now let's look at individual Christians and business people. That is not true there. Christian men and women can deal with this personally because they have paid taxes and will be paying taxes so they can pray through whether they want to participate in this or not. I don't see that being an ethical issue for the individual or business who pay taxes, like I do the church. It may be a prudence issue but it's not an ethical issue. This is the same for a business who pays taxes therefore I think it is fine for them to think through this for their business as well.

My second reason as a church is it's coming through a Small Business Association (SBA), therefore if we as a church participate then in the future we can come back and not only make the point we participated in governmental money, then we're basically setting ourselves up as a business. I don't think it's going to happen in this administration but there is an election coming up this November 2020 and there may be another administration that may or may not be in place. And Christian churches are currently being affected by the sexual revolution going on now and being closed down. How many preachers would stand up and say 'the church is not a business, now we have good business practices but we're not a business' yet we are coming to an SBA in order to qualify for money as a business and that to me is debilitating in terms of the church's future.

It also sets up in the future for other administrations to say 'hey you took money from Caesar so Caesar can control you.' That's the old golden rule. I understand all the lawyers have said we're protected but we're only protected so far as this administration. There will be another

administration and those who can come back and address these issues. I think this is an area we as a church need to be very careful on. I do not see anything good in the future for the church if it goes to 'Caesar' for support at a time like this. This is certainly a fair thing for businesses and individuals to work through since they pay taxes.

A third reason is that this is limited and there is only so much money available. I think we as the church ought to tell the world that we're going to look to the Lord for our support and the generosity and sacrificial giving of God's people.

Another reason is that I think we're taking away from God's people the opportunity to sustain His church. It has been pointed out to me how gracious and sacrificial God's people were to support our ministries, our world missions during the 2008 and 2009 recession. That's a testimony we all now have of what God did through His people. I don't want to take that away now. I want God's people to have the opportunity to say 'we love Christ, we love the Lord's church and we're going to be used of the Lord in this day so we can have a testimony to the government, the world and to ourselves that we can be encouraged by.' I believe that is really important for us to lead the church in that direction.

We as a church also are not going to take this money because we know that there are more business men and women who are in need of it. Some are already being turned down because they are running out of money at certain banks and situations.

Bruce: Word came out recently that the money given in this first wave has been tapped out and there is not an approved second wave yet but there's legislation in place for it to take place. We have been asked some questions but business owners about loans. Is there anything in Scripture that would prohibit me from taking a loan for my business with a deal that I wouldn't have to pay it back?

Harry: I don't think debt is a sin, but you can be sinfully in debt. If you can rent a building then you can rent money. Romans 13:8 says [8] *Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* But you have to look at the context. In the Bible it talks about when to stand for surety, how to stand for surety and when not to and it had seven year limitations on debts. When debts are appropriately done, you have collateral to take care of it and it's temporary then I think you can take a loan. I don't think the fact that it's a loan is sin in and of itself but you can sinfully indebt yourself beyond your capabilities, anticipations and resources so I would say to be careful there.

If I had a business where I knew that when the economy began to turn around my business would be back in place then I would probably look toward the PPP (Paycheck Protection Program) part of what is being offered today. As we know at Briarwood, do not look to me for insightful financial advice but I can give you the theological principles.

Bruce: The President has rolled out his opening up America again guidelines that gave proper gave direction but also discretion to the governors so do you have any thoughts or ideas on that?

Harry: I was in a lengthy counseling session the night it came out so I haven't had much time to gain a lot of thought on it. I have been trying to catch up on it since then. These governors are getting together in these regional councils and it seems to me the President and his task force wanted to get out ahead of that, but did not want to overprescribe anything. I think your language is absolutely on target and constitutional. This is federalism. The government can give

oversight for the general welfare but the states ought to be the clinics, the laboratories. Each one is different. Alabama and New York are not alike so let's just face that. Alabama's and New York's corona situation are not alike. So why not give direction and discretion and that is what the President has given – basic guidelines – so now the governors need to get counsel around them as they look at their state's particular situation and determine their state's phase 1, 2 and 3 guidelines that the medical and economic experts recommend based on their state to get their economy up and going. I personally think this honors our federalism as a nation where the federal government doesn't have authority beyond what the constitution assigns to it and recognizes that the power and authority ought to be as close to the people as possible.

I am very grateful for our governor, Kay Ivy, here in Alabama and the measured approach she has done. So I am perfectly at home without someone who has not been to Alabama giving us direction here making those application decisions within that framework.

Bruce: How is Briarwood going to respond to the President's new guidelines? We are still under the guidelines that were set forth by our governor. She and her task force would have to adjust those and we'll respond to what they are giving us because we'll continue to function for the protection of the people.

Harry: We know some change is coming starting around May 1 to some degree but certain metrics have to be met. Those guidelines kind of work on two week frameworks. At Briarwood we had the interim worship and ministry plan A that was replaced in one week. Now we have the interim worship and ministry plan B. We are already under the guidance of our elders. We are working as a staff on an interim worship and ministry plan C that can be rolled out as these metrics are met. Bruce is leading that task force with elders, deacons and staff to think through three possibilities and what will be the best one. We don't want to get ahead for the sake of personal and medical safety. On the other hand we want to get God's people together for the means of grace on the Lord's Day which is so crucial, in the best possible way that we can moving toward the unhindered gathering of the Lord's people each Lord's Day in the future. We are particularly seeking guidance from elders who are in business with professional expertise as well as have theological expertise to help understand those things and how it would apply to Briarwood.

We don't have an unfathomable depth of talent here, people with talent, but any of our people working on making all we're doing now possible could have come down with something. So what many don't know is that we went ahead and spent hours digitally recording worship services in case we were stopped. Now thankfully in God's kind providence we didn't have to use those and were able to live stream the 8am Sunday service as well as stream it afterwards. That was a lot of work for a lot of people that did that so there have been multiple plans we have done but as this current crisis evolves we have had to shelve them and do something else. I'm so grateful for our elders, deacons and indefatigable energy our staff has exhibited and our volunteer staff in the worship and technology areas.

Bruce: Pastor you have done a lot of preaching and not all of it has made it out to the public but I haven't heard you complain about doing a lot of preaching. Our last question for this time is focused upon being essential. Praise the Lord that our governor did carve out space for us to be essential and not every state has experienced that. So the question is, shouldn't we be concerned

that other states have taken a much more restrictive position related to churches not being essential?

Harry: Yes we should and yes I have. I'm going to assume that whoever sent this question does not listen to our 10 minute radio program Today in Perspective, dealing with issues of the day from a Christian world and life view with Gospel solutions or they did listen to it and wanted it highlighted in this program.

I believe in Greenville Mississippi there was a predominately white Baptist church, Temple Baptist Church, a predominately African American Baptist church, King James Baptist Church and a big situation in Louisville, Kentucky. Then there were these overstatements by the mayor and governor of New York as well as the state of Michigan. We have covered those so please go and listen to my programs that address that on our website (<https://briarwood.org/in-perspective/home/today-in-perspective/>). In fact we have another program addressing that this week. So yes we should be concerned.

I have supported the government guidelines because they have been generally applied without targeting churches but I think there is going to come a time after this that we reevaluate how we responded to this. But right now, being supportive, loving our neighbor and submitting to the civil magistrates very much the way Christian churches did back during the Spanish flu of 1918. That has been my example. I think what is really important here is that whenever the state moves beyond, particularly an individual, an elected official that general application and begins to target churches or religious institutions that is a bridge too far.

Thankfully a judge who is being nominated to the appeals court in the Washington DC area, struck that down in Louisville with no uncertain terms of how the Louisville mayor had targeted churches, how the Greenville mayor targeted churches, our Department of Justice went after that one and that was struck down. Then it was perfectly obvious when the New York mayor said they were going to punitively find churches and close them perpetually. There is no way constitutionally that is allowed by any mayor, governor or president according to the Bill of Rights.

I think we need to be alert to it, speak to it, but shouldn't have a knee jerk reaction. Don't let a few over the top statements that are arrogant and beyond the constitution stop us from valuing what other governors and mayors are doing to the best of their ability within the bounds of the constitution. Then we need to continue to pray that the Lord would stop those that would use a crisis for nefarious purposes and pray for those who need wisdom for doing their best in this crisis for good public policy and human flourishing. In the midst of all of this let's go to our knees and learn from Nehemiah's foundational and urgent response in crisis yet it wasn't his only response. You can listen to my sermon on Nehemiah [by clicking here](#) or going to: [briarwood.org/audio/series/crisis-and-the-christian-in-biblical-perspective/](https://briarwood.org/audio/series/crisis-and-the-christian-in-biblical-perspective/).

I want to thank you for the privilege to walk through this with you. I never thought we would be in this situation but I'm so grateful for the staff here at Briarwood and I'm grateful for you with all your letters, questions, emails, calls, texts and prayer support. All of your encouragement has just been an extraordinary blessing to those who are laboring right now. Some have thought that since I may not have meetings that this time is like having a sabbatical but I haven't worked this hard in a long time. All the emails, letters and texts have quadrupled in my life and it's not exactly playing to my strengths and skill set, but we have people that are strong in that area so that things have moved along in a way that the Lord has shown Himself glorious and faithful and it's been our privilege to walk through this with you.

Pray that the Lord would bless in extraordinary ways. Pray for a Gospel awakening. Pray for revival. Pray the Lord is doing something in a way that we would never expect. That is one of the things Christians do always in times of crisis – Lord, You're sovereign, what are You doing, I know You're multi-tasking, give me confession of sin and a petition for wisdom as to how to respond to honor You through this.

Bruce: Continue to send your questions to [askthepastor@briarwood.org](mailto:askthepastor@briarwood.org).

Harry: The Lord bless you. I pray the rest of this day will be precious in anticipation of how you will grow in grace this coming week.