

Dear Class Member,

Even as more and more Americans are receiving the Covid-19 vaccinations, a percentage of the populace remains adamant that they will not take the vaccine. Is this a religious matter? Is it a question of trust? Our next class gives us an opportunity to think through the matter of vaccine hesitancy at a time when many of the previously unconvinced have changed their minds and gotten (or will get) the shots.

The in-person and Zoom *Wired Word* classes are cancelled. We look forward to resuming in-person *The Present Word* classes Sundays at 9:00am on May 2, 9, 16, & 23. In the meantime, you can continue to use *The Wired Word* discussion sheets in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.

We continue to have 9:00am Tuesday morning Zoom Bible studies with Zion UCC: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes/adult-study-groups.html#ZionUCCBibleStudy>.

We are planning a six week series book discussion with Zion UCC of *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges & Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* by Zoom from 6:30-7:30pm on April 18 - May 23. Info at: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/recent-a-upcoming-events.html#PostQuarantine>



## **As More Americans Accept Covid Vaccinations, Some Say 'Definitely Not'**

*The Wired Word for the Week of April 11, 2021*

### **In the News**

A survey in mid-March shows that attitudes among Americans toward Covid vaccinations are growing more positive, with a larger number of people who have not yet had the shot(s) saying they will get it/them as soon as possible. As the number of people who had taken a "wait and see" position regarding the vaccinations continues to shrink, only those who have said "only if required" and "definitely not" remains about the same.

The poll, conducted March 15-22 by KFF, an endowed nonprofit organization focusing on national health issues, surveyed 1,862 adults and has a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points. It is the latest in the surveys about the progress of the U.S. Covid-19 vaccination program that KFF has conducted each month starting in December.

This most recent study found that as of last month, 32 percent of American adults had already received the vaccine (up from 18 percent in February), 30 percent were planning to get it as soon as possible (down from 37 percent in February since some have now gotten the shots), 17 percent waiting to see (down from 22 percent in February), 7 percent who will get the vaccination only if required (unchanged from February), and 13 percent saying definitely not (down from 15 percent in February).

Before the March survey, three groups had been noted as being among the most resistant to receiving the shots: African-Americans, Republicans and white evangelical Christians, with some overlap between the last two..

As a group, African-Americans have historic reasons to be distrustful of the medical community, including the [Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#) in Alabama, conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service and the story of [Henrietta Lacks](#). But with leadership from black pastors and others, that distrust is giving way regarding the Covid-19 vaccine.

In fact, the March poll showed that about 55 percent of black adults said they had been vaccinated or plan to be soon, up 14 percentage points from February. Their rate now approaches that of Hispanics, at 61 percent and whites at 64 percent. (Asian-Americans and Native Americans were not polled in sufficient numbers to compare their responses with

other racial and ethnic groups.)

There has been less change among Republicans and white evangelical Christians, with almost 30 percent of each group saying they will "definitely not" get a shot.

Nonetheless, 27 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of white evangelical Christians said they had already received at least one dose, the poll showed. Forty-two percent of Democrats said they have been vaccinated.

People who said they would "definitely not" receive a vaccine were asked to identify the main reason for their decision. The most common reason, at 17 percent, was that the vaccines are too new and not enough information is known about their long-term effects. Epidemiologists, however, say the development of the vaccine was not as rushed as it seems, because scientists have used the technology behind the Covid-19 vaccine for 20 years, which is why they were able to create the vaccine as fast as they did.

But only about 6 percent of the "definitely not" said hearing that argument made them more likely to get the vaccine.

Some change of mind may yet happen among white evangelicals who say definitely not, however, as some white evangelical leaders are now promoting getting the vaccine as a way to "love your neighbor."

One such leader is the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of the late Rev. Billy Graham. Graham's charity, Samaritan's Purse, has set up several field hospitals to treat Covid-19 patients around the world.

"We have seen firsthand -- at least I have -- what coronavirus can do to a person," Graham told NPR. "It's frightening, and you don't want it."

After posting on Facebook about his decision to get the Moderna vaccine, Graham received thousands of comments, some of which supported his position, but many expressing outrage -- some going so far as to brand Graham a false prophet.

Earlier last month, Michael Gerson, a neo-conservative who in 2005, was named by *TIME* as one of "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals In America," wrote a column for *The Washington Post* in which he traced evangelical resistance to the vaccine to the heritage of evangelicalism.

"From the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries, evangelicals developed a strained relationship with modern science," Gerson said. As reasons, he pointed out that "geology revealed ancient fossils and an old Earth. Biology traced the course of human evolution. Cosmology attributed the beginnings of an expanding universe to a Big Bang."

All this scientific description of reality, Gerson said, did not look to evangelical believers, "like the universe of their imagination." As a result, the scientific profession became an object of suspicion for "a substantial minority" of white evangelicals, said Gerson. And he said that vaccine hesitancy is "the symptom of a much broader alienation between evangelicals and the scientific enterprise."

Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), said misinformation and political polarization have contributed to the problem among evangelicals. The NAE is partnering with the Ad Council on a new initiative reaching out to evangelicals with the message that getting the coronavirus vaccine may be a way to "love your neighbor."

"The more we can move the discourse from a discourse about politics and political affiliation to one of mission, of love for neighbor, of following Jesus -- who would honor the image of God in others -- then I think we're tapping into something profoundly motivating for evangelicals," Kim said.

The poll found that some arguments were persuasive to those who had yet to make up their minds, especially hearing that the vaccines are nearly 100 percent effective at preventing hospitalization and death from Covid. With that information, some 41 percent said they were more likely to get the vaccine.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Covid Vaccine Hesitancy Drops Among All Americans, New Survey Shows. *KHN*

'Love Your Neighbor' and Get the Shot: White Evangelical Leaders Push Covid Vaccines. *NPR*

KFF Covid-19 Vaccine Monitor. *KFF* (The full survey results)

Opinion: White Evangelicals Are Wary of the Vaccine. It Shouldn't Come as a Surprise. *The Washington Post*

Evangelicals' Vaccine Skepticism Isn't Coming From the Pulpit. *Christianity Today*

Here's What Will Actually Convince People to Get Vaccinated. *TIME*

## Applying the News Story

For purposes of this lesson, a definition of "evangelical Christian" is useful. However, it must be said that both "white evangelical" and "evangelical" are often pigeonhole terms for the convenience of people who conduct surveys to allow them to clump responses to build toward conclusions. We suspect that "evangelicals" is not nearly as monolithic a group as the label suggests.

Nonetheless, there are some explanations that can help our understanding.

One of the ways the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) defines evangelicals is by using four primary characteristics:

- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a life-long process of following Jesus
- Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts
- Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority
- Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity

Evangelicals are found in virtually every Protestant denomination, but some denominations that have evangelical beliefs built into their doctrinal statements are likely to have a higher concentration of evangelical individuals.

Not everyone who self-identifies as an evangelical Christian necessarily holds to all of these statements to the same degree.

Some Christians who hold evangelical beliefs no longer use the term "evangelical" because, in their view, it has too often been melded with a political position.

Protestants who do not embrace evangelical views are sometimes referred to as "mainline Christians."

According to [Wikipedia](#), worldwide, about one in every four Christians is an evangelical, and the United States has the largest proportion of evangelicals of any nation, but the same caveats that we stated regarding survey clumpings likely apply to *Wikipedia* generalizations.

*The Wired Word* team includes both evangelicals and mainliners, as well as people from Christian bodies that don't use either term. And in any case, within our team, we don't find those terms particularly helpful or useful. We are more apt to discuss our various views regarding how to be faithful followers of Jesus in specific circumstances of life, and there, we usually find common ground.

NOTE: *It is not an aim of this lesson to debate the merits of evangelical Christian views. The definition above is only to aid the discussion about vaccine hesitancy.*

## The Big Questions

1. If you consider yourself an evangelical Christian, have you gotten (or do you plan to get) the shots? If you consider yourself more of a mainline Christian, have you gotten (or do you plan to get) the shots? To what degree, if at all, is your decision based on your religious beliefs?
2. If you initially had some hesitation about getting the Covid vaccine, but then decided to do so, what helped you make that decision? If you had no hesitancy about getting the vaccine, why do you think that was the case?
3. How should faith and science interact? Why?

4. Is getting the shots a case of "love your neighbor"? Why or why not? Is it also a case of "love your neighbor *as yourself*"? Why or why not?

5. Should the church be taking a position on receiving the vaccine? Why or why not?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Revelation 6:8**

*I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth. (For context, read 6:1-8.)*

In Revelation, the apocalyptic vision of John of Patmos, there are four horsemen in chapter 6. Bible interpreters have sometimes tied specific calamities to each of the four, which is certainly possible from the text, but as you read verses 1-8, you get the idea that none of the four is a bearer of peace and good news. We've quoted only the verse regarding the fourth of these riders, but the line about being "given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence ..." is often read as applying to all four, who collectively represent the reality of horrific destruction in the world.

But as we said, this is apocalyptic stuff. As such, it communicates in graphic symbolism about things that are not yet, such as the final judgment. But such things as war, famine and plague were realities the people of John's time knew all too much about, some from firsthand experience. And those things are realities in our day as well. But, unlike John's contemporaries, we have a vaccine to help against a plague.

**Questions:** How have conquest, strife, pestilence and death affected the church throughout history? Can the vaccines be considered gifts of God? Why or why not?

#### **Isaiah 55:1-2**

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. (For context, read 55:1-13.)*

Here the prophet compares God's covenant to a magnificent banquet to which the Israelites are invited and from which they can freely partake. The prophet's question about why his hearers would spend their money for that which is not bread suggests they are investing themselves in activities and practices that go against God's covenant and do not nourish them.

Perhaps we can hear this in our present context as a question about why some are not partaking of the freely offered vaccines and are instead investing themselves in untruths or even conspiracy theories about them that are not efficacious.

**Question:** What can you do to determine whether unsupported claims about the dangers of the vaccines have any validity?

#### **Psalms 91:1-6**

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. (For context, read 91:1-16.)*

This psalm declares that those who trust in God, the Most High, will be delivered from "the pestilence that stalks in darkness" and "the destruction that wastes at noonday" as well as some other calamities. The psalmist speaks of God in preventive terms -- "he will cover you ... under his wings you will find refuge ... [he] is a shield and buckler" -- preventive almost in the way vaccines can be.

Of course, there is no once-and-for-all "God injection," but rather the steadiness of a relationship nourished through prayer, scripture and other spiritual practices.

**Questions:** In what ways has God's grace prevented you from engaging in disastrous behavior? What is the meaning of providence and why is it sometimes used as a synonym for God?

### **Mark 12:29-31**

*Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (For context, read 12:28-34.)*

Christians cannot (and should not want to) escape this statement from Jesus. The first command is to love God. The second is to love one's neighbor (and Jesus' Good Samaritan parable shows that Jesus had a BIG neighborhood in mind). We cannot rightly claim to be Christians -- evangelical or mainline -- if we don't attempt to do both things.

**Questions:** Why are these two commandments -- love God and love neighbor -- the greatest? How do they shape Christianity? How does needing a large majority of vaccinated people to reach "herd immunity" figure into the love-your-neighbor equation?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. [This article from \*The New Yorker\*](#) discusses the main social and political factors that enable the spread of disease today -- including those that reach pandemic proportions. Read and respond to the following paragraphs from the article:

War and Pestilence ride together as two of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and there is no shortage of historical precedent to demonstrate the aptness of the allegory. The great influenza pandemic that began in 1918 was propelled, in part, by troop movements and population shifts at the end of the First World War. Both the First and the Second World Wars produced typhus epidemics. Armed conflicts cause malnutrition, poor pest control, and sanitation problems; even the soil often becomes contaminated. Medical facilities are destroyed; doctors and nurses, diverted to combat duty, are unable to provide care, and vaccination and other mass-treatment programs usually falter.

The first two decades of this century have furnished many fresh examples. The ongoing conflict in Yemen has produced the largest cholera outbreak in history, which has infected two and a half million people since it began, in 2016. Wars in Syria and Iraq led to a resurgence of measles and polio. The collapse of insect-control programs sparked the spread of cutaneous leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease that results in disfiguring skin ulcers.

While none of these diseases is in epidemic proportions in the United States, the article maintains that there is "a cluster of non-medical drivers of deadly outbreaks -- war, political instability, human migration [including travel], poverty, urbanization, anti-science and nationalist sentiment, and climate change." Some of these have played a role in taking the Covid-19 infection to a pandemic state, the article suggests.

2. Consider this, from TWW team member Heidi Mann: "My sister is Native American, and she is very hesitant to get the vaccine. I asked her why, and her response was that she doesn't trust the government. One can hardly blame Indigenous people (or black people, or those of other ethnicities) for not trusting the U.S. government after all the

atrocities that have been done to their peoples, past and present. But I am doing everything I can to encourage her and her adult children to get vaccinated, especially since one of her kids has Type 1 diabetes."

What might you say to Heidi's sister or her adult kids?

3. Respond to this from a TWW consultant: I am a conservative Christian and a scientist. I also hang around online with a fair number who consider themselves "evangelical" as the term is used in this lesson. Many of them are also in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) professions. Of that group, only one has expressed concern about the vaccine; most have already started the vaccination process or are eagerly waiting.

What my wife and I have seen in our NextDoor neighborhood discussions is opposition to the vaccine from vegans and from holistic (Eastern or alternative) medicine proponents. Anecdotally, I've seen that perhaps one of 50 conservative/evangelical individuals is vaccine-hesitant, while a much larger percentage of vegans and alternative medicine advocates have expressed such sentiments.

All of the anti-vaxxers, no matter the source, have articulated reasons that make sense to themselves, although the reasons are debatable. I do not see the hesitancy of the vegan/holistic group much mentioned in the dominant media. In fact, the published items differ so much from my experience that I suspect other causes, such as selection bias, skewing the data. In any event, I think that we should be discerning and not accepting at face value narratives that derogate groups such as "white evangelicals." People have many and varied reasons for their opinions, and it should concern us when stereotypes are used in advocacy.

### **Responding to the News**

This is a good time to check into volunteer opportunities at local vaccination clinics. Some places are looking for volunteers to register people as they arrive and perform other nonmedical duties. Qualified individuals might even be needed to give vaccines.

### **Prayer**

Thank you, Lord, for the hope the vaccines bring. We pray that no human-caused or natural catastrophe will keep them from being distributed to all who want them. In Jesus' name. Amen.