**Daniel**: Welcome to this season of the Stetzer Leadership podcast, where we're helping Christian leaders navigate the cultural issues of our day. My name's Daniel Yang, the Director of the Send Institute. Today you'll be hearing an important conversation between Ed Stetzer and Dr. Francis Collins about the COVID-19 vaccine and what church leaders need to know about it.

Dr. Collins is well-known for leading the International Human Genome Project and was later appointed by President Barack Obama as the Director of the National Institute of Health, where Dr. Anthony Fauci serves under him. He's also a faithful follower of Jesus and has authored many books, including his well-known title, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. I think you'll find today's episode very helpful. Now let's hear from Ed and Dr. Collins.

**Ed:** Well, hi everybody. We're having an important conversation today about an important issue at an important time. There's so much going on in the country and the world. And unfortunately, sometimes we can forget that perhaps the biggest global news of our lifetimes is actually this ongoing pandemic and our response to it. And we're going to talk specifically about that today. We’re gonna take some questions that pastors and church leaders have about how we might respond to that and more. Let me mention to you that our guest today is actually Dr. Francis Collins. Dr. Collins is well-known for mapping the Human Genome, for leading the National Institute of Health and lots of other places that he has served and made a significant difference.

Let me give you a little more formal, right. MD-PhD is appointed the 16th Director of the National Institutes of Health and confirmed by the Senate. He was sworn in August 7th, 2009 and continues under both the Barack Obama administration and the Donald Trump administration. In this role, he oversees the work of the largest supporter of biomedical research in the world spanning the spectrum from basic to clinical research. His name may be less familiar to some, I guess I could say that he's a Dr. Fauci his boss, since we've all seen Dr. Fauci on the television, but he's a physician geneticists noted for his landmark discoveries of disease, germs, and his leadership of the International Human Genome project and more. There's more to his bio, but I also want you to know for our conversation today that he too is a person of faith. He's actually written on this. He actually received an award related to this. He's a person of faith, a committed Christian, who's deeply concerned that we might respond well as a nation, but I wanted to talk to him today in particular about the Christian community and how we might respond as well. So, Dr. Collins, thanks so much for joining us. Some of us are familiar with your work as a scientist may not be aware of your faith, which might be helpful for a lot of our listeners. Can you share a little bit about your faith journey?

**Francis:** I'd be glad to, and thank you. It's nice to have this conversation with you. Yes, I am a scientist, but I am a person of faith. I'm a follower of Jesus. I didn't grow up that way. I grew up in a home where faith wasn't really considered relevant. And based upon no foundation, I got to college and decided I was an agnostic. And then after I got to graduate school, I was an atheist. I really didn't have any use for anything that you could derive by scientific approaches. And then I went to medical school and sitting at the bedside of good people whose lives were coming to an end, oftentimes through no harm that they had done to make this happen. I was curious about how they were facing this and wondering how I would face that certainty myself and saw those who had faith, finding it to be a great source of support. Just when I thought they might be shaking their fist at God for letting this happen. Instead, they were comforted. And I figured some going on here, and I had a patient who was sort of grandmotherly person, who at one moment, sharing her faith, turned to me and asked me what I believed. Such a simple question.

And I had no answer. And I realized I had no answer that I'd arrived at this conclusion about whether there was a God without giving it really any serious investigation. And I was supposed to be one of those people who would look at the evidence before making a decision. And I assumed there wasn't any, but I'd better go and find it. And so over two years and through a lot of efforts talking to believers, and non-believers getting turned on to the writings of C.S. Lewis, by a friendly Methodist minister who happened to live down the street. I realized that atheism is the least rational of all the choices. It's the assertion of a universal negative, which one shouldn't do as a scientist. Bit by bit became aware of a compelling basis for belief, including signals from creation. The fact that there's something instead of nothing and that the universe had a beginning and that it follows these beautiful mathematical laws that seem to deal with selection of the mind, all of those things.

And then also began to realize that this wasn't just a revelation about a God who had created the universe, but also a God who was interested in me. I struggled with what that meant and how to realize that a Holy God was probably not approachable by a very unholy me. I finally began to understand the meaning of Jesus Christ and what that meant for Jesus to walk the earth and die on the cross and to be born again. And so as a rather reluctant convert at age 27, I became a Christian and that has been the rock on which I stand for the last more than 40 years as a believer, as a scientist, and to the surprise of many, I have never encountered a conflict between those worldviews. As long as you're clear about which kind of question you're asking, you can be in a perfectly harmonious place as a Christian who trusts science to teach you about God's creation.

**Ed:** Fascinating. And part of our conversation will be dealing with what churches are doing. I know you're engaged in your local church, but your local church is also trying to figure out what these things. I don't know what it would be like to have Francis Collins at my church as we're trying to figure out how to gather. So what have you been doing personally, and as your church been doing, as you think about the midst of the pandemic?

**Francis:** Well, of course with the pandemic church services have reverted to virtual gatherings, and that has been a necessity in order to protect the vulnerable from what could be a very serious illness. And that is heartbreaking for all of us who valued those gatherings together, that fellowship. And yet at the present time, we have to recognize that if we care about those who are at greatest risk, the elderly, people with chronic illnesses, we simply cannot put them in that kind of vulnerable position and claim that we are people of love and concern. So as hard as it is, I have not been in a church or for a year now. It's all been virtual. I have a fellowship group that meets also virtually, and we keep connected in that way. And it does cause an ache in my heart that I can't have that experience of being face-to-face, praying together and giving somebody a hug. Boy, that would be such a nice thing to be able to do, but that is simply not safe. And as a physician, as a scientist, and a believer, I think we're doing all the right things when we say we're going to keep physical distance, we're going to wear our masks. We're going to avoid gathering indoors because that's how we can carry out our role as people of love and concern by not spreading this illness any further.

**Ed:** And it's been tricky for so many churches and so many Christians to unsure how to respond. And now the conversation about vaccines. I want us to get to in just a moment. Your church that you're engaged in is a church planting church. And so many of church plants have been put on pause and put on hold. Yet we believe that the moment we're in does not pause the mission we're on. So many churches are trying to figure out how they might take these next faithful steps. So you have been such a key voice in the midst of this, in your teams and the different areas that you lead as well. So we're asking now questions about when might we gather together again. And one of the things that we know is that is now tied together to things like the vaccine and more. So help us a little bit to understand the timeline. Give us some broad idea. Here's when I think there will be this far, here's what we think to be this far, knowing that maybe it's going a little slower than we expected, or maybe this is what you expected. So tell me a little bit and fill us in.

**Francis:** Well, it has now been a year that I've been working here from my home office. That's where I'm talking to you right now. I expect I'm going to be in this space for a few more months. Here we are at the beginning of 2021. This pandemic across our country is right now the worst it's been with 3000 people or more losing their lives every day. The bright spot of course, is a development of vaccines. And we do now have two such vaccines that are carefully reviewed, shown to be safe and effective by rigorous means and authorized by the FDA for emergency use. And we're doing everything we can to get those doses into people's arms, because that is how we are going to get past this. I know people of belief may have mixed feelings about the vaccines. For me as a scientist, it feels to me like God gave us the skills to be able to understand how these things work, to identify this pathogen, and to in record time, be able to come up with a vaccine that has 95% efficacy in very large scale trials, thanks to a hundred thousand or so volunteers who agreed to be part of the effort to figure out just how good could these be.

And they're actually a lot better than most of us dream we would have at the present time. So this is a gift, a real gift from God. A gift from science, a gift that we all need to embrace if we're going to get past this, but to be able to immunize 300 million people or so in this country is not something that can be done in less than a few months. I do think by June or thereabouts, we might be getting pretty close to that point where 80, 85% of the country is immune. And that at that point, the virus basically loses out and has to start fading away because there aren't enough people who could still be infected. I don't think, sad to say, that we'll be able to bring churches together for an Easter celebration this year. Although I would love if that were the case, but perhaps by the summer. Perhaps for vacation Bible school. Perhaps we'll get to go to a baseball game or one of those things that are sort of a tradition, which has been so off the plate. We're going to get there, but it is going to take all of us agreeing to participate.

And here's where if I may, I am concerned that people of faith, in some instances at least, seem reluctant to embrace this as a gift. And instead are someone are resistant for various reasons. And it's not just about you. It's also about our whole nation's chance to get past this. If only half of Americans decided to take the vaccine, we're not going to be past this anytime soon. The COVID pandemic will linger on and on and on. We have to get to that point where most of the population is immune, or we haven't really ended this.

**Ed**: One are the questions that pastors have shared is, Jack Brown asks, what advice would you give to pastors who've had congregations that are largely anti-science, especially regarding COVID 19. There's a lot out there it's conspiracy theories. I've written widely on those things and get a lot of pushback, but are worried that if pastors take a more strong science stance or a pro-vaccine stance, it might even cost them their jobs, or certainly cause substantial conflict. Why should pastors, church leaders, and Christians weigh into advocacy around this vaccine?

**Francis:** Well, first let me say what a terrible tragedy is that there is a strong anti-science sense amongst many people that believe. Where did that come from? Francis Bacon had this wonderful way of describing the way in which God has basically blessed us with two books. God gave us the book of God's Words, the Bible. I read that almost every morning. It is the source of wisdom and spiritual strength. When I pick up Psalm 46 and it says, “God is our refuge and strength and ever present help in trouble”. I think, “Boy, sure talking to me today”. But he gave us another book. Another book of God's works, which is nature. How could those two books be in conflict? And how could it be a bad thing for a believer to want to read both them?

This is a great tragedy and it's particularly true in the United States of America. And it has roots that go back to the 150 years ago with Darwin and evolution that became such a source of difficulty and controversy and conflict. I wrote a book called *The Language of God*, which from my perspective, lays out how science and faith are actually existing in wonderful harmony. If you stand back from some of the noise and really look at the facts and out of that came a foundation called Bio Logos. And I would encourage anybody who wants to see what kind of dialogue is happening between very serious Christians who were also seriously interested in science about how these things can fit together. And you will see there this incredible sense of joy about how one can harmoniously put these worldviews together in a way that represents worship of God. I think science is a form of worship. You're investigating things that God knew, and we're just starting to find out. But yet so many churches, the idea that science might be a threat, it seems to be engaged with on many quarters.

And I am afraid that spills over, even in the circumstance of life-saving vaccines in a way that could do great harm and add further to the terrible toll that this pandemic has taken on more than 300,000 lives. So if people would like to stand back for a minute and say, no, wait a minute. If I have a concern about vaccines as being somehow anti-faith, where does that come from? Let's look at the facts. Let's embrace reason and truth. Let's embrace a spiritual perspective and let's embrace a sense of Christian Lolve for each other. And I think we could sort this out and I do think pastors have a role to play there in a loving way as a shepherd of the flock to try to keep the sheep from ending up in trouble.

**Ed**: So when we talk about some of the objections, I just want to go through some of the objections and see if we can maybe have you give us some helpful response. Some of the objections are, well, this was rushed. We've never had a vaccine. That's true. This has never been seen this quickly before. Is this rushed, is this dangerous?

**Francis:** We did move this more quickly than has ever happened, partly because of new technologies that were developed over the last 25 years. And thank God we're ready for this moment. Yes, there is this term called operation Warp Speed, which I think maybe was not well chosen and caused people to think we were cutting corners. Let me assure you as a physician scientist in the middle of these vaccine developments over the last year, the only corners that were cut, where the bureaucratic ones. The science is as rigorous as anything we have ever done in terms of vaccine development and the ultimate conclusion about safety and efficacy, which is out there in the public domain. You can go and look at it in the FDA's website and see exactly what the data looks like. It's incredibly compelling. 30,000 people who enrolled in these trials in 95% efficacy turns up and no real evidence of any safety concern, the data's there. So ignore the conspiracy theories and look at the evidence. That's what we're all called to do, for sure.

So, yeah, that ought to be of some reassurance. I know there are other factors that kick in there it's meant in terms of conspiracies. There's also this question about where human fetal tissues used to make these vaccines. No, they were not. There are fetal cell lines derived in the 1960s, which have been used for two of the vaccines, although they're not yet approved. The Johnson and Johnson vaccine and the AstraZeneca vaccine as part of the process. And you could argue, I think reasonable people would, maybe that's not something a Christian should be taking advantage of. Although the Catholic church in very thoughtful ways has looked at this and it's felt that it was legitimate how for Christians to take advantage of such vaccines, if there were no other alternatives. But the Pfizer and the modern vaccines, which are this thing called messenger RNA, those don't involve growth in those cell lines at all. And so I would think for Christians who looked at the evidence, those would be seen as entirely acceptable. So when people are talking to you about fetal tissue, first of all, no fetal tissue currently for any of these, only these cell lines derived 50 years ago are potentially involved. And several of the vaccines don't use those for their production. So that really shouldn't be seen, I think, is such an issue.

**Ed**: Okay. So one of the objections could be, you know, I just don't want to partake in the vaccine for whatever reason. It could be related to some mentioned here or others. Yet there is an argument that you've made briefly here, but in other places I've seen you talk, that it's also a way that you love your neighbor. So help us understand how taking a vaccine is actually something to do to help other people, not just myself.

**Francis:** Right. Well, in two ways. We do know that this particular virus is very good at infecting people and not necessarily causing any symptoms, but then they become contagious. That's different than most viruses we've ever dealt with. And that's one of the reasons this one has been so hard to manage. If you're not vaccinated, you're still the kind of person that may get infected with this virus and then may spread it to others around you. Your neighbors, particularly vulnerable people, your parents, your grandparents. So vaccination is a way to try to reduce that risk. But then on a larger scale, if we are all part of a community, a community of other folks around us. If we are going to be able to say goodbye to SARS COVID, we really need all of us engaged in this effort to generate what's called herd immunity and a substantial fraction saying, no thank you means that this fails for everybody and more lives will be lost.

So yeah, I mean, this is not so different, I don't think, than other things you've been asked to do, like put on a seatbelt when you get in the car. That's partly to save you, but it's partly to save other people. It's partly the same reasons that we say people shouldn't get behind the wheel when they've had alcohol, because that's dangerous. We have laws about that. Nobody wants to make vaccination a law, but as a sort of moral responsibility, I think you can make a pretty strong case that we all really have to take this seriously as something we need to be part of, if we're going to save the lives of the most vulnerable. So love your neighbor, take your vaccine.

**Ed:** Some of the questions that we've had are kind of built around timetables. You've already mentioned Easter, but I want to come back to Easter. Doug Sauder, pastor at Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale is kind of asking the question and their church is gathering. I recognize that not all churches are and in different places in the country, people are responding differently. In most places that they are meeting, they're being very responsible. They’re practicing social distancing, rows are distanced, and all those sorts of things. So when we look at Easter, we have to think at some point, if we get to a million doses a day, which is president-elect Biden has used that language to describe where he wants to be. Is Easter not going to be any different or tell us more what you think about, I'm guessing everyone's still wearing masks, but where would we be in this process recognizing that you don't have the perfect ability to the future?

**Francis:** Yeah, well, we'll be better than we are now. That's for sure. I think by April we should be at the point where a hundred million people will have received the vaccination if they're willing to do so. And as I say, I sure hope they will be, but that still leaves us with a lot of people who haven't quite gotten the jab yet. That means those folks are vulnerable. And I know how much people want to gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. I will as well want to do that celebration.

But when I see what happens in churches that are gathering, even now, they're careful about doing the physical distancing and the mask wearing. The scariest time is the 10 minutes after the service is over. And then of course you'd want to go and see those people you haven't seen for weeks.

And yeah, then you're up close. And sometimes you're taking off your mask. If people are bunched up around the door to say, thank you to the pastor. And then all of the efforts that were done to try to prevent contagion, maybe didn't happen at all. And we can see that happen. So I know it's painful, but think of this as really, this is a war against an unseen enemy. And if this was a war of a more familiar sort, involving bombs and military actions, we would all want to sacrifice anything to save the lives of our friends and neighbors. That's what we're up against here too. And this isn't going to go on forever. We can see the light at the end of this tunnel, just hang in there for a few more months people. And you can be part of the solution. Part of the lifesaving efforts that we all need to do.

**Ed:** As someone is deeply cares about evangelism, I lead the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center. We care deeply about evangelism in a hard time. It's hard time to invite someone to church. Even if you might be comfortable, others would not be. Engaging online has been a response to that in many, many cases in we've had conversations recently with the director of Alpha, for example, and about what it looks like to do online conversations with people who don't know the Lord and invite and share with them. But this is a hard time to share our faith. So people are asking, when would that come a little bit back to more normal?

So let's move forward. You have mentioned the summertime, you know, pastors, churches, Christians. If we think of liturgical seasons, I'm not using, but there's that spring and then summer you've mentioned a little more openness. It sounds like we'll have the most vulnerable people vaccinated by April, but still some significant concerns. But summertime, are we talking, again asking your guess, your forecast, are we talking Christian camps and vacation Bible school? Are we still wearing masks? Are we still social distancing and doing those things? Or what is the level of mitigation at that point?

**Francis:** I wish I could be more precise, but I would be more of a favor to try to say, I can that precisely into what's coming. Some of this will depend on whether other vaccines also get approved. Right now we have two. There are six that are being studied. The more that get approved, the more shots we have, the quicker we can get to where we need to. Another question is what about vaccinating children? Right now we're not doing that. Those studies have to be done to ensure that the vaccine is safe and effective in kids. They're getting underway now, but I don't quite know how that's going to play out. And that'll obviously be important to have camps and vacation Bible schools. So there's a lot of uncertainty. Nobody should sort of have their heart set on everything being back to normal in June. That would be an optimistic view.

I do think by the fall, certainly we ought to be in a pretty good place. Tony Fauci is pretty careful to sort of talk about the fall and not the summer. And maybe I'm being a little optimistic to talk about the summer, but I don't think it's totally unrealistic to think we might be in a place by June or July to start to have a lot more public gatherings, including churches and including things like Christian camps. But I cannot promise that because I have no certainty based on what we know. And frankly, it comes back to what we were talking about earlier. If as the poll suggests 30 or 40% of Americans say, I don't want this vaccine, then we're basically not going to get there. Not by summer, not by fall. It's up to us to put this behind us.

Ed: For sure. And so when you say that it's going to be different in the fall, which as you said, Dr. Fauci has been using that language. And I actually appreciate your slightly more optimistic possibility in the summer, because partly what somebody was trying to do is to say to Christians, we'll wait a little while longer. And the language we've all maybe adopted in churches, we're planning, but we can't promise. And so many of us are planning now, vacation Bible school and things of that sort. But we can't promise. We don't know what new variants would do. But so let's say things do move forward that we get maybe more rapidity on the distribution and more. When you say fall is better, what does that mean? Because we read different articles that show up and it says we'll be wearing masks for three years. So are we wearing masks in the fall? Are we sitting next to each other in church in the fall? Again, not asking for you to promise, but kind of talk to us. What does a new normal look like in October?

**Francis:** Well, there is a big unanswered question. Whether the vaccine completely prevents somebody from actually being contagious with the virus, even though they don't have any symptoms, would they still spread it? That is being intensely investigated right now. And because we don't have the answer right now for people who are vaccinated, we are telling them you still need to wear your mask because we can't be absolutely sure that you might not still be part of the problem. If it turns out that we can say confidently that vaccinating people means not only they don't get sick, but they can't actually convey the virus to other people, then the mask wearing will start to get a whole lot less compelling for people who've had their two doses of the vaccine and we will have by the fall, then not expect those people to be covering their faces.

I certainly hope that's the answer, but again, I don't want to mislead you by saying I know him more than I do right now. And it's still possible. We might, if that turns out not to be quite as compelling, want to have people wearing masks when they're in close quarters in the fall. I don't think so, but let's keep that option open.

We have to live with uncertainty. I guess we've been doing that for our whole lives, especially in the last year, but we're going to need to have that as part of our existence. And I don't know when people say, I'm going to go back to being normal. Well, there will be things that will be different. I don't know about you. I probably will do a lot more meetings virtually in the future than I did two years ago, because it actually works pretty well in a lot of situations and not spending a lot of time on airplanes and traveling around for business and science meetings is going to be okay with me. I'm all right with that part. So we will change. We will be changed by this experience, but I want to be changed in a way that is empowering and lifts us up. What we’ve had to deal with so far doesn't fit that description.

**Ed:** We just have a couple of minutes left. And I wonder if in those couple of minutes, a lot of Christians, pastors, leaders, they are unsure and you already shared a lot of the details, but feel free to summarize them again in this context, but take two minutes and maybe share why Christians should be engaged in taking the vaccine and helping to others consider taking these vaccines. I shouldn't just say singular. Take two minutes and cast that vision for us so that we might maybe take that and share it with you.

**Francis**: Well, this is not the first plague that has afflicted our world or that Christians have had to deal with going back centuries. And Christians have always had the courage to try to identify what they can do to help while others might be running away, trying to hide. Christians have generally run towards the problem and tried to figure out how to assist others. We should be doing that now as well. In that instance, though, we're not going to be helping others if we're ignoring the public health majors, getting infected and then passing it on to others. We won't be helping the situation. If we are skeptical about vaccines and avoid getting ourselves immunized and contribute, therefore the prolongation of this. But we are able to help in lots of other ways. You talked about evangelism and how important it is that we spread the good news of Jesus to people who don't know it.

One of the ways they're checking us out now is our behaviors. Are we, in fact, looking like the kind of group they'd want to be part of us? Aren't we embracing facts and knowledge and a science that's going to get us through this, or are we kind of running away from that? That doesn't look like something that a lot of people would want to sign up for. And are we in fact doing what we can with the food banks, with reaching out to our neighbors who are vulnerable to say, can I go to the grocery store for you and leave those groceries on your footsteps so that you don't have to put yourself at risk? Are we reaching out to people who are lonely? This is a tough time. People who are anxious, people are suffering economically, being a listening ear, virtually of course.

Those are all the things that we can do that will make Christianity look like the kind of worldview that everybody wants to be part of. Let's focus on those things and not try to push back against what seems to be good advice, but it just doesn't sound like something we want to do right now. I think we can get through this, but we're going to have to get through it together. And I'm probably sounding in the course of this interview, somewhat critical of my fellow Christians. I don't mean to. We are after all bonded together while we are all children of God, we are joined by love. We must love each other through all these things, but I think we can love each other in a fashion that demonstrates to the world that we are loving everyone else as well. That's who we are.

**Ed**: Dr. Francis Collins, thanks for taking the time and thanks for your good and important work.

**Francis:** Thanks. It's nice to have this conversation.

**Daniel:** You've been listening to this very important conversation between Ed Stetzer and Dr. Francis Collins. He's the director of the National Institute of Health. To learn more about the COVID 19 vaccines and Dr. Collins’ work, go to nih.gov. Also, if you haven't already, remember to subscribe and share this podcast and whatever app you're using. On behalf of our host, Ed, thanks for joining us for this episode of the Stetzer Leadership Podcast. We'll see you in the next episode.