



Black Power and the COVID-19 Vaccine

I am writing and posting this because I am hearing from far too many Black people that they are waiting or don't want to get a COVID-19 vaccine. My message to everyone among us, the community that suffers most from contraction and death from this virus, the community that always has the highest risk and the least access to health care of any ethnic group in any health crisis, is this: **GET THE VACCINE. I think it is essential. I trust the science. I trust the development process, and I love you and our community too much not to do everything possible to stop this death spiral!**

Let me share a bit about my journey with COVID-19 on the way to telling you why.

I was called to ministry from a career in pharmaceutical research and development. Yes, your crazy pastor was a research scientist working to make bacteria and other cells make proteins that could cure disease. I was working on the technology and processes that helped us get vaccines developed so fast for the COVID-19 crisis in the mid-eighties and nineties, and I have had to write the data management sections of the applications biopharmaceutical companies submit to the FDA for approval of new drugs and biologics like vaccines. The FDA process remains the gold standard in the world for the development of therapeutics, and I say so because I used to have to abide by their rigorous standards and answer their nit-picky questions about the applications I helped submit. **I know from experience the drug development process, and I trust that the process works.**

This is not to ignore some of the blatant things our government has done in the past to Black people in the name of scientific research. The Tuskegee experiment was a tragedy and a horror, and we should always remain vigilant about our bodies because systemically-racist institutions have no respect for either our bodies or our communities. The good news is that many of the current policies and guidelines for clinical research were developed so that Tuskegee could never happen again.

That brings me to the next point in my COVID-19 journey. It is our responsibility to make sure there is enough Black power in clinical trial data. FDA regulations mandate that clinical trials are done in such a way that the patients are well-informed of the risks and the benefits before participating, and that neither the patients nor the physicians know which patients get the drug and which don't. They also mandate that there are always those who get a fake dose (placebo) so that their data can be measured directly against those who actually got the drug. They call these randomized, double-blind trials.

There is a power problem that can happen if researchers are not very careful. In statistics there is a concept called power. In this case, it is the number of subjects in the clinical trial that is sufficient to be able to see statistical differences between any of the sub-groups in the study. It helps answer important questions like, "Does the vaccine impact Black people differently than other racial groups?" In this case, Moderna slowed down enrollment because they were afraid there would not be enough Black people in the trial to answer this question. I give them all the credit in the world for that! You can see how a reluctance to get in the trial could lead to disastrous results for our community, not because anyone was trying to do anything to us, but because we didn't participate enough to prevent it. That's the reason I got in the trial in the first place.

When I heard this, I enrolled because I knew and trusted the science enough to know that the risk was very minimal, and that our community would be at much greater risk otherwise. As it turns out, I got the placebo, and while that data is very important, it meant I did not get the vaccine.

Over the Christmas holiday, I actually contracted the virus, and thankfully it was a mild case, the symptoms of which (loss of taste and smell, fatigue and body aches) resolved steadily within a couple of weeks. Despite your best efforts, it can find you. You never see it coming. I thank God for His hand of protection because we have seen that it could have been much worse.

Over that same period of time, Moderna's application got emergency approval, which does not mean a less rigorous examination of the data, but only an expedited process for the sake of resolving a public health emergency. This resulted in Moderna entering its placebo patients into a cross-over trial where we were informed that we only got placebo (I obviously already knew), and would be offered the vaccine and still be followed for our long-term safety data. That's the picture above that I took recently.

So I got the vaccine hoping that it would boost my immunity, and it did. I felt it the day after my 1st dose because to my body, it was the second dose, since I had already contracted and recovered from the actual virus. When I lost energy and had some body aches the next day, I was confident that the vaccine was preparing my immune system even further to recognize and fight this virus. I was confident because I knew that there was no virus at all in the vaccine. I knew that there were lots of strands of messenger RNA in my body that made proteins that look like pieces of the virus so that my body could get ready to fight it. I felt confident because I had already worked on the science decades ago, and I knew how much thinking had already gone into this. I knew that my work then was precisely how the vaccine was created and approved so quickly. More than anything, I knew the data from my experience would help scientists know whether the vaccine or the virus interact in any peculiar way in Black patients.

I urge every one of you, for your own sake, and for the sake of our community, to get this vaccine as soon as you can.

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." (2 Timothy 1:7, KJV)