

Faith in Times of Crisis

A Christian Response to the Coronavirus

Compiled and written by Jean-Luc Krieg
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Introduction

Last night the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States made an urgent call that all public gatherings of more than 50 people be cancelled for two full months. Just today, the U.S. President called on the public to avoid crowds of over ten people. Like in many countries of Europe and the Far East, extreme measures are being considered in the Western hemisphere's largest nation to contain COVID-19. The implications for the global economy are far more critical than most people realize. As stock markets are crashing, it is very likely that we will enter a recession, which will bring the entire global economy to a painful halt. Mexico has been scarily slow to respond to this pandemic, which will have very unfortunate consequences for our country, but as of this weekend, more severe measures are taking hold. Schools will be closed for four weeks, beginning Friday, March 20. The Ministry of Health has just recommended the temporary suspension of non-essential activities for the public, social and private sectors, as of March 23. It may well be that public gatherings of more than ten people will be shut down very soon too. In Colombia, authorities have already ordered the public not to meet in groups of more than ten people. Absolutely follow instructions from doctors and government agencies regarding preparedness, testing, social distancing, and quarantine so as not to spread coronavirus to others. This reflection **in no way** encourages you to disregard the very real public health issues we are facing. But now, it's time to talk about faith.¹

What does faith in Jesus look like in the midst of this crisis? What might be some distinctively Christian things to say and do during a global pandemic? What theological issues are being raised by potential quarantining, wall-to-wall media coverage; limitations to travel; economic crisis; pressure on health services; and heightened vulnerability among the aged and ill?² How can we as churches respond to this crisis and the panic with which many people are responding to this pandemic, both within our churches as well as in our neighborhoods and cities? What does it mean to be Christian for each of us in this situation?

Love your Neighbor

From Christianity's earliest days, it was known as a movement of compassion and care for those in need. Such teaching is embedded in the gospels and in John, James and Paul. Their teaching is in turn rooted in the Jewish scriptures which speak of God's impartial love for the widow, alien and stranger. Christianity lay behind the development of hospitals and the idea that all people, made in the image of God, are worth caring for. Such love is costly and other-focused. It is impartial, given to those in need, rather than classifying who is worth loving and merits support.³ The twist in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus told, is that loving your neighbour means practically caring for your enemy and not just your loved ones.⁴

The early Christians tried to imitate Christ by practically showing God's love to people in need, even to those who were beyond the boundaries of family and faith. As Cyprian, the martyred bishop of Carthage in the third century, explained: "There is nothing extraordinary in treasuring our own people and duly caring for them with love... Therefore, good must be done to all people, not simply to those in the household of faith". Eusebius' Church History, written in the fourth century, furthermore, tells of how the early church was known for its sacrificial care for the sick in times of war, famine and plague. The following is a description of the Christian response to the great plague of Rome, as recorded by Dionysius: "This plague was a more dreadful calamity to them [the pagans] than any other. To us, however, it... was a school to exercise our faith. Most of our brothers were relentless in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness. Without sparing any effort, they clung to each other and visited the sick fearlessly, and ministered to them continually, serving them in Christ... And many of those who cared for the sick and gave strength to others died, having transferred their death to themselves Among the pagans it was quite the opposite. They abandoned those who began to be sick and avoided their dearest friends. They threw them into the streets half-dead or threw them out when they were already dead without burying them, shunning any participation or fellowship with death."⁵

Because Christian communities were characterized by mercy and practical love of neighbour, they grew exponentially during the third century. According to historian Rodney Stark, not only were pagans impressed by their courage and care, but



Christians who got the plague were more likely to survive because their Christian relatives and friends stayed and cared for them, whilst pagans were abandoned by their relatives.⁶ In fact, it is considered that death rates in cities with Christian communities may have been just half that of other cities.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, love of neighbor means considering others before yourself. For example, love of neighbor will not lead to panic buying in supermarkets, where we think only of our own family and not of others. Obviously, self-care is part of loving our neighbor; you don't want to catch COVID-19 and pass it on to others. But the pandemic calls Christians to consider more than just protecting themselves.⁷ How can we, as churches prioritize helping the weak, the isolated, the vulnerable and the elderly, the people who will be disproportionately affected by this virus, and who may not have the resources and physical ability to care for themselves? What plans do we have and what could we do practically? How can we get involved in visiting the sick, or going grocery shopping for those no longer able to do so? How can we contribute to the financial and childcare needs of those who can no longer go to work?

Putting others first at risk to ourselves is profoundly Christian. It is not every man or woman or family for themselves, but how we as disciples and faith communities can care for those in need. Of course, we must try to reduce the risk of infection. It is important to protect people and ourselves as much as humanly possible. Nonetheless, the call to love neighbour does not stop because of a virus. Caring for people always involves risk. But behind such a caring action is the belief that death does not have the last word. Christians believe that death has already been overcome in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Death has lost its sting and power.⁸

Do on to Others as You Would Have Them do Unto You

The 'golden rule' should govern all Christian behaviour all the time: "You got to do unto others, like you'd have them do unto you." As much as possible we are to be responsible for not unnecessarily risking the health of others. Especially if in good health and/or young, we may think there is massive hype about the coronavirus, after what is probably something like a dose of flu. But Jesus' teaching calls us to put ourselves in other's shoes – and those include the slippers of the elderly, the vulnerable, and those with respiratory health problems.⁹

What does this mean for us churches? Already today, numerous countries have taken steps to ban indoor gatherings of more than 10 people, which, of course, is putting a halt to a lot of live church meetings. And it is necessary. Some pastors have said though: "Jesus, will safeguard us, so we can continue to have large worship gatherings, and don't have to follow the instructions of worldly authorities." While they may feel very spiritual and faith-filled for saying so, they actually lack practical faith, love of neighbour, and understanding of how they too are called to safeguard the people around them. In fact, they should be blamed for being negligent leaders

In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit, Martin Luther refused calls to flee the city and protect himself. Rather, he stayed, enduring great sacrifice, and ministered to the sick. Nonetheless, he was not reckless in doing so: "I will ask God to mercifully protect us. Then I will fumigate, help purify the air, administer the medicine and take it. I will avoid places and people where my presence is not necessary so as not to contaminate myself and thus inflict and infect others and cause their death as a result of my negligence. However, if my neighbor needs me, I will not avoid them, nor their place; I will go freely... See, this is a God-fearing faith, for it is not shameless or reckless and does not tempt God."¹⁰ We have a responsibility — a societal responsibility — to protect the vulnerable, and we do that, by not letting ourselves get infected because we need to make sure that we don't inadvertently pass on the infection to someone who would not fare as well as we fared.

So how can we as churches be prudent, while continuing to meet the spiritual, emotional and relational needs of our people? Could it be that we encourage our members to meet in their homes, in small gatherings of 5-10 people? How could we use this time to foster discipleship and love of neighbor in our congregants? The Church is you and me—people who love Jesus, follow Him, and point others towards Him. So, find ways to engage and bless your community. Consider starting a Bible Study at your home (remember, keep it less than 5-10 people. You could even have it outside, on the street or in your patio. Scroll through your phone and see which friend you can call to offer a word of encouragement. Who in your community can you check in on? This is an incredible time for us to show the world the love of Jesus.

Hope, not Fear

There's a lot of fear and panic going around in these moments. Not only for our health, but also for the economy, for our jobs and all that they represent. There must be proper and responsible caution in trying to contain the virus and take care of ourselves. But when does concern for health and safety become unfounded fear? Fear that becomes corrosive and



destructive? Fear that becomes too self-protective? Fear is not a Christian trait. The crisis we are currently experiencing should reveal the virtues of the Christian faith, love and hope, not anxiety, selfishness and despair.¹¹

As Christians, there is no need to be paralyzed by fear and extreme panic. That's the antithesis of finding our security in God: *"Such love has no fear, because perfect love casts out all fear."*¹² *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power and love and self-control."*¹³ God is watching over our comings and goings with fatherly and tender care *"for the eternal God is your refuge, and his everlasting arms uphold you."*¹⁴ The Psalmist declares, *"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty and will say to the Lord: He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*¹⁵ God promises that *He will never abandon or forsake us*¹⁶ *but will always be with us*¹⁷. His name is Emmanuel, which of course means *"God with us"*¹⁸. Eventually we will all die; we could die the next month of Coronavirus or we could live to be a hundred and die peacefully surrounded by our loved ones. We don't know. But we know this with absolute certainty: that God is with us and that we will eventually meet him face to face. Then finally all the fear will be over.¹⁹

Whether this current season of crisis fades quickly or has a serious and long-lasting impact, we have our lives secured in God for all eternity. Therefore, let us choose to live differently: not with a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and self-control. As Christians, the security that our faith provides needs to be expressed in healthier responses than many others in our communities and cities are capable of giving. Again, it is important to follow safety protocols as they are put into place. I also fully hope that the Spirit will birth unique ways among God's people to respond to the needs of our communities and cities, thus sharing the hope we have in Christ in the midst of this crisis.²⁰ So, how can we as churches be bearers of a message of hope in our surroundings? How can we give concrete, faith-based responses to the fears and concerns of the people around us? I look forward to hearing the stories of God working in and through you.

Pray and Witness to the Hope you Have

Prayer is taking our worries and fears to God in faith and trust. It is asking his blessing on others and praying that He will use us to bring blessings to those who need to feel His loving touch. Prayer brings us consciously into His presence and redirects us to think, speak and act in light of the truth that God is God and we are not. As Paul said to the Philippians: *"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you."*²¹

Finally, the work of each disciple, whether in a pandemic or not, is this: "Worship Christ as the Lord of your life. If anyone asks you about the hope you have as a believer, always be prepared to give an explanation; but do so with humility and respect."²² It is times like this, that will show what our hope and faith are truly made of. If you have hard time embracing and living out the four key insights presented above, this may be a good opportunity to turn to God and seek deeper faith, so you too can embrace the hope and lived-out faith that Christ offers us.

In conclusion, "surviving this crisis will require a change of mentality, and that is more difficult than we think, especially when we are afraid. Fear and anxiety can lead us to focus on ourselves. This global pandemic is a real case of 'getting sick together' or 'staying well together'. Walking away from collective action at this time, tempting as it may be, will only generate more pain. Owning and embracing our global interconnectedness (from a safe distance) and thinking about others as we make decisions is, ironically, our only path to safety for ourselves and the people we love. We can all get very upset, very quickly, when we are afraid. It's very normal for us all to be nervous. But, like it or not, we cannot abandon others. We are all we have. Be brave and kind. Love each other. Spread calm."²³ And also make sure to wash your hands regularly with soap, pray to God for your community and city while doing so, follow safety protocols, trust God, care for the sick, help the weak, and share your hope for life beyond death.



Footnotes

¹ Adapted from https://loganleadership.com/faith-in-times-of-crisis/?mc_cid=e1796e9867&mc_eid=0f6908d0cf

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/march/coronavirus-and-christian-theology.html>

³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/march/coronavirus-and-christian-theology.html>

⁴ Luke 10:30-37

⁵ Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 7.22.7-10

⁶ <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/responding-faithfully-to-the-coronavirus/>

⁷ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/march/coronavirus-and-christian-theology.html>

⁸ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/march/coronavirus-and-christian-theology.html>

⁹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/march/coronavirus-and-christian-theology.html>

¹⁰ Translated from Spanish: Obras de Lutero, Vol. 43, pg. 132

¹¹ https://loganleadership.com/faith-in-times-of-crisis/?mc_cid=e1796e9867&mc_eid=0f6908d0cf

¹² 1 John 4:18

¹³ 2 Timothy 1:7

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 33:27

¹⁵ Psalm 91:1

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5

¹⁷ Mathew 28:20

¹⁸ Mathew 1:23

¹⁹ <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/responding-faithfully-to-the-coronavirus/>

²⁰ https://loganleadership.com/faith-in-times-of-crisis/?mc_cid=e1796e9867&mc_eid=0f6908d0cf

²¹ Philippians 4:6-9

²² 1 Peter 3:15-16

²³ From Brené Brown

