

## Introduction

Practical theology says care, sacrifice, and community are as vital as ever in times of public health crisis or pandemics that have global implications. The church has been handling and operating in epidemics for 2000 years. The idea of a global illness that wreaks havoc on millions of people was seen in the Old Testament even so research can take that statement back even farther than 2000 years. The early church dealt with all types of infestations, illnesses, famine, and floods (some of which were directly inflicted by God. The question that is arising today in current culture is what is the church doing in the midst of the devastation and more importantly, what is the ethical responsibility of the church? Christians can look for this answer in the Bible but also have to be aware of the cultural construct that the church operates in today and how does that color the ethics of the church and its members. The questions of whether churches should be gathering during times of crisis when government officials have put out requirements for people to stay at home and not gather all the way to how much danger should Christians put themselves in to take care of the sick if there is a personal threat to their safety are being asked. How should pastors respond to these questions and what leadership principles should be enacted during these times? This paper will address the questions what churches have done during past epidemics and how the response has or has not changed in present times. What is the ethical responsibility of the church outside its physical walls during times of crisis? Over centuries of church involvement, there has been a variety of responses seen to illness and devastation with some conflict and disagreement about what that should look like. The global church has opportunity in crisis but also potential to cause confusion and strife with local civil leaders and lawmakers. The church should be seen as a light and a help during these times and not as a separate organization from society that is promoting division and rule breaking. The Bible calls us to adhere to our

governance and to follow our leaders. What is the church saying from an ethical standpoint when they are accused of not helping or conversely not conforming to the law in the name of helping?

### Past Pandemics

The Black Death or Bubonic plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was one of the most prolific times of death and chaos in history. One of the leading theologians and scholars of the time, Martin Luther, decided to stay in the city and help based on his belief in a strong faith and the protection that provided him. He stated in his letter “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague” that faith played a large part in whether a Christian should stay or go. He stated that “In such a situation, everyone has a plain mandate and command not to flee but rather to suffer death”<sup>1</sup> Luther went on to back up this thought process through scripture that he believed showed that this mandate came from the Bible. He quoted several scriptures about the Christian protection from Matthew and John as well as charging the Christians (especially pastors) with their ethical responsibility to stay and that a spiritual ministry is necessary in times of death.

During the Spanish flu outbreak in the 1900’s, churches were ordered to close but some defied the order and were arrested for breaking civic law. Other Christian organizations and individuals continued to go about the business of serving the sick and dying public through serving food, supplying clothing and basic needs at the risk of their own health and safety. This epidemic is the most remembered by modern culture as well as what are categorized as smaller scale epidemics such as Ebola, MERS, and SARS. All of these illnesses have had devastating consequences for the human race at different times in history and it has been reported that during the plague and Spanish flu outbreaks, church participation actually grew and the number of people seeking Christianity increased because of the church’s response to the illness within

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Luther’s Works: Devotional Writings, 481.

their communities. So, the question now takes on a different shape. Is it the churches ethical responsibility to grow the church through these crises and/or is it the churches responsibility to serve no matter what the outcome and only from a place of doing Jesus' work with no agenda involved?

### Is there a "Right Answer"?

Does the Bible address the ethical responsibility of the church during crisis and if so, what is it telling Christians to do during these times? Scripture can be and is interpreted many different ways and this situation is no different. Many Biblical scholars have discussed and disagreed over what scripture tells the church to do during these times of illness and death. Luther even seems to have contradicted himself on this subject in different writings and both have been used to argue the same point. As previously stated in this paper, Luther admonished all Christian leaders to stay in place and that their duties turn to crosses, preparing them to die if necessary. In a separate writing by Luther in the Catechism for Christian instruction, He tells everyone that the commandment to not murder actually applies to our own bodies and that we should never be reckless with God's creation and should adhere to quarantine and cleanliness orders<sup>2</sup>. Other examples of prominent church leaders giving instruction on responsibility can be seen all throughout history up to as well as Christian religious practices being stated as an exacerbator to the spread of illness during the Ebola crisis of 2014. Transmission of Ebola during this outbreak was driven in part by religious and traditional spiritual practices, such as washing and wrapping the body during burial rituals. Because these practices involved extensive handling of the body, they represented a common route of transmission of the Ebola virus. Public health officials initially called for an end to such practices. Their efforts were unsuccessful; in fact, they were

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<sup>2</sup> Luther, Catechism for Christian Instruction, 25.

counterproductive. Religious and local leaders had compelling reasons to continue these long-standing rituals, refusing public health mandates. Across Western African contexts, these rituals express important familial, cultural, and political meanings. They signify and help constitute the societies in which they are practiced and cannot be dismissed merely as a cultural obstacle to be overcome as part of an Ebola response.<sup>3</sup> Christians cannot merely think of the ethics and tradition we believe we have to adhere to in complete disregard for public health initiatives. What is our responsibility to listen to and collaborate with science and medical advice during these times? A leader will have to pay attention to the cultural implications and be able to balance them with public health in the midst of death and illness. Religious practices cannot add to the death toll in crisis but what can be done to give people some sense of their faith and tradition during a time where normalcy has been interrupted for the greater good. The world is seeing examples of that in recent times with the order to not be able to gather for funerals or even be at the bedside of a dying patient. Weddings and births have taken on entirely new constructs with no one being allowed to be present except the participants. Christians want to have faith that their God will protect them no matter what the situation but as Luther also warned, do not test God. Christian leadership has to help their people be prudent and adherent to government rules while still instilling a sense of faith and trust in our God. The idea of Christian reaction has not just been limited to plague and pestilence but also to a multitude of other crisis times the world has faced throughout centuries. C.S. Lewis wrote about his thoughts reference the atomic bomb threat and gave his wisdom for how Christians should react during a crisis. “We think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb,” To those who wonder how it’s possible to go on in the face of such a threat, Lewis recalls that theirs was not the first generation to live under a threatening shadow. In fact, if we are honest, we all live under a sentence of death, and for some of us, that

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<sup>3</sup> Blevins, Faith and Global Health Practices in Ebola Outbreak, 2.

death could even be “unpleasant.” The important question, says Lewis, is not whether or how we will die but if in the meantime we will be doing “sensible” and “human” things like “praying, working ... reading, listening to music, bathing the children.” Lewis asks his readers to consider the important but unsettling truth that “Nature does not, in the long run, favor life.” It’s an ominous observation that points to an essential worldview truth: “If Nature is all that exists — in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort somewhere outside of Nature — then all stories “will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without the hope of return.”<sup>4</sup> This isn’t exactly a beacon of hope but it is practical and less dramatic than some of the other answers that have been posited. Lewis calls for calm and for Christians to live as they always have. Leaders have given their guidance throughout time, but people still have continued to trumpet the question “what does the Bible tell us to do?” Frankly, the Bible can be confusing on these issues and not prescriptive in nature.

#### Does the Bible Address These Questions?

Most scholars will take the tack of using the lack of a specific scripture for this event with the idea that the Bible often teaches us through modeling behavior and so what would Jesus have done is the basis for scriptural guidance. Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves and so that would translate to most as caring for your neighbors as you are yourself which means you cannot leave them and not use your resources to help them. However, in a climate of social distancing and the civil leadership ordering stay at home orders and not allowing gatherings, Christians have been put in a situation that requires some innovation. If churches are not allowed to gather, what are other ways they can show love to their neighbors? Jesus was always attending to the sick in the gospels and never was afraid to approach any illness or disease. It would seem

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *On Living in an Atomic Age*, 2.

that by example this should be the stance that Christians are able to take but it would also seem that is not the most prudent response in a global health crisis. Jesus knew he had protection from those he was healing as he knew when his end would come and in what form. While his example for how to treat people is a model for Christians to follow, the idea of all Christians operating in the exact same manner has been put up for debate. D.A. Carson writes about how Christians should approach suffering and what is deemed “evil”. He brings us into the thought process of whether these types of pandemics are caused by a vengeful God or by a fallen humanity. He gives so many scriptures that connect death to sin and tells Christians that death and suffering are directly connected to sin and that we have an active part in our own death. He further tells Christians that death is the final result of our sin, but we can still rage against the ugliness of it but not rage against God for the death. We can vent against our loss and frustration, but the Bible is always clear that the wages of sin is death.<sup>5</sup> The Bible talks about death and destruction as well as the grieving process that can be undertaken by Christians but that we should never assume that evil and horrible events will not befall us even as we worship our God. Does this cause confusion to those that are looking at the Christian faith and trying to decide what it means to them? This can cause a conundrum for Christians in respect to how we speak from a Biblical perspective to those that do not believe or are confused during this time. Erickson explains God’s presence as being present within all the natural patterns of nature and that even what is seen as a natural event is still God’s doing and he is at work in them.<sup>6</sup> From a theological standpoint, this is what we want to feel and hang on to but in the converse, we then wonder if God is in all the natural events, why would he allow a pandemic of epic proportions to indiscriminately (at least to our eyes) kill and harm so many. As we read what prominent leader and scholars tell us about

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<sup>5</sup> D.A. Carson, *How Long, O’Lord*, 208.

<sup>6</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 577.

how the Bible speaks to death and crisis, we see a mixture of a just God with a loving, all powerful God who did not cause the pandemic, but has the ability to stop it. What type of confusing message must that convey to those that are not sure who God is and what he intends for his creation. Hollinger talks about this idea of consequentialism and states we can't speak about what we are to do but rather speak about what we are to be. He says we don't need to analyze the results of our actions, as would be the case if death is the consequence of sin, but to look at our inner core and discern who we are and what we are to be in the midst of all of this and not concern ourselves with the action that may have brought destruction about.<sup>7</sup> This type of questioning puts us into a place of really understanding the scripture in Isaiah where it tells us that God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. It would seem the answer is to have this "faith" that is often talked about and be able to operate within the ambiguity of trusting our God and still living through scary and unpredictable times. The overarching theme from scholars is that God is still in control and is still true to who he is in character and nature so if that is the case, these types of instances will drive Christians to a greater sense of faith and trust. As we look at the mental health crisis that will arise after the illness itself has been contained, church leaders will have to start to try to figure out how to speak to people about how they are feeling. Dr Wright tells us in his book on Trauma counseling that the basic expression that will be needed by the church is compassion. He states that this was a basic characteristic in Jesus' approach and that he went about this by relationship building and continued to see people through their potential and hopes despite the problems.<sup>8</sup> Some theologians have stated that the church's main function in times of suffering is to love and that if we get that part right, the rest will work itself out. Loving those around us should be the main

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<sup>7</sup> Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling*, 27.

objective. Helmut Thielicke stated “Tell me how much you know the sufferings of your fellow men and I will tell you how much you have loved them.”<sup>9</sup> If the Bible isn’t explicit in its guidance, do we model Jesus’ behavior in our response and take our own agendas off the table? Do we continue to shepherd and disciple people in the same way we would have done it without the pandemic and leave some key questions unanswered but to be left up to God?

### Conclusion

As the world grapples with this unpredictable time it is operating in and tries to find a sense of reason and structure to it, the church has a responsibility to be involved in the discussion and, some would say, leading the discussion. Christian ethics would demand that we be a voice and a light for God in this dark time. The church does not have the luxury to ride this out with everyone else as a passive participant. The exact construct of how the church should be responding and what Biblical basis that rests on seems to be a point of debate among leaders but everyone is agreed on the fact that this is a time for the church to step up and be involved in the solution as well as asking and walking out what God is trying to do for his kingdom during and after this time. The world has endured these same types of occurrences for as long as recorded history has been maintained and the overarching theme is that the church should not shut its doors and hunker down remaining silent. Different tactics may be used as well as differing thought processes all with the goal of bringing God’s kingdom down to earth in some tangible, lasting way. Bill Johnson speaks to the idea of bringing God’s kingdom down in his book “When Heaven Invades Earth”. He tells us that Jesus never separated teaching from his doing and that he was always teaching into an encounter. Johnson speaks to the idea of instructing people of how to live and bring God’s power down to earth through signs and wonders.<sup>10</sup> Some may not

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<sup>9</sup> Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, 114.

fully buy into Johnson's idea of the human ability to bring God's power down through miracle healings and casting out demons but what is resonant in his words is the idea that the church should never separate the teaching from the doing. The church has to be aware of what they have been teaching in times of peace so that they enact those very principles into times of strife and crisis. The church cannot be hypocritical on this issue. One of the most important points in times of crisis is consistency and believing and living into what you have taught all along. If the church suddenly takes a left turn from love, compassion, and service in a time of crisis then the message will be impotent to the hearer from now on. The church must look at what God wants to do with his people during and after a crisis and not become a barrier to that by causing confusion and inconsistent actions. Keller, a leader in the city where our seminary resides, speaks to Niebuhr's models about culture and how we must relate to the culture we are ministering to. Is it a one size fits all? Is there a right answer to every situation with no nuance? According to Keller, we cannot make sense of what people do or how they think without relating to them in their communities and modeling for them and that if cultural thought is what will be the driving force to bring people to Christ then we have to look at the pandemic, or any other issue, through their eyes with compassion and understanding.<sup>11</sup> In conclusion, the answers are not clear and leaders have begun to speak again in earnest about what we should be doing. Everyone in ministry wants to have an answer for their people and to be able to help shepherd them through this difficult time but it would seem the answer is to keep doing what we were called to do all along: love your neighbors and trust your faith in God. None of the pandemic effects have negated the powerful, loving God we worship.

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<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Loving the City*, 231.

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