

LIVING JESUS' EXAMPLE

Chelsea Community Church of Christ

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Thoughts from the Secretary

[The following is an except from
www.abc.net.au/religion/coronavirus-a-healthy-christian-response-to-covid-19/12063556](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/coronavirus-a-healthy-christian-response-to-covid-19/12063556)

Martin Luther's response — and ours

A time-honored way is looking to the past. Historically, Christians were no strangers to epidemics. Vivian Nutton, the esteemed historian of medicine, writes that from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, “A town would experience an epidemic of plague approximately every decade, and a serious devastation once in every generation.” Disease outbreaks were part of the rhythm of life. Those outbreaks caused by bubonic plague were particularly dreadful, boasting a fatality rate of 60–90 percent (for COVID-19, it is “only” 1–3 percent).

In response to these outbreaks, Christians wrote many “flight theologies,” exploring what measures Christians could take in good conscience (whether, for example one may flee a diseased town). Today, the most famous of these flight theologies is Martin Luther's letter to his friend and fellow pastor Johann Hess, in response to Hess's question, “Whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague.” Luther himself was no stranger to suffering. He endured the death of many of his family and friends, including some of his own children, and a plethora of personal ailments. Indeed, Hess had to write twice entreating Luther for his thoughts, because Luther was too ill to reply to the first letter.

In 1527, plague struck Wittenberg — the university town where Luther lived — prompting classes to be moved to an unaffected town. Yet Luther refused to leave. He chose instead to venture his life on caring for the sick and dying and transformed his home into a makeshift hospital. So when Luther gave advice, he knew the consequences and the fear attending them.

For Luther, our loving God hiddenly but surely works for our good even in the places we do not expect, including amid the evil of deadly epidemics. The fear of bodily illness and death should drive us to pray and to care for our souls, remembering that this world is not our lasting home. An epidemic is one of many evils that beset us, and we have to take that seriously; but the greater evil is the evil within (Matthew 10:28, Luke 12:4). Therefore, responding to an epidemic or any other crisis must involve turning from our sins — chief of which is the selfish love that gives thought first to self, and only secondly, if we can assure our own health and safety, to others.

Luther regarded the epidemic as a temptation that tests and proves our faith and love: “our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor.” Through faith in God and out of love for neighbor, Christians must think first how to contribute to the physical and spiritual care of those who are vulnerable, self-isolated, sick, or dying.

Only then did Luther permit Christians to make private decisions about whether to flee. In an era without widespread institutionalized healthcare, Luther wrote that Christians are under a divine obligation to fill the gap: “We must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in any extremity or risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God.”

With lives at risk, Luther encourages Christians to find solace in the promises of God. The devil tempts us to “horror and repugnance in the presence of a sick person.” But striking a “blow against the devil is God’s mighty promise by which he encourages those who minister to the needy. He says in Psalm 41, ‘Blessed is he who considers the poor. The Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble.’” Therefore, “whoever serves the sick for the sake of God’s gracious promise ... has the great assurance that he shall in turn be cared for. God himself shall be his attendant and his physician, too. What an attendant he is! What a physician!”

What does this mean for us and COVID-19? Our attitude toward COVID-19 should be marked by the Christian virtue of *measured concern* (“temperate prudence” in classical terms): *measured*, not panicking but heeding our Saviour’s encouraging warning, “Do not be anxious about your life ... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matthew 6:25, 10:28); and *concern*, recognising the evil for what it is and not comforting ourselves with falsehoods. Instead of panicking and stockpiling so many masks that there aren’t enough for healthcare workers, or so much pasta and toilet paper that others can’t find any, we should be asking: *How can we as a church and I as an individual help those in need?*

Those who are researchers or health professionals should take courage in their divine calling to do good research, to seek truth and to care for the sick. Many of us in healthcare have taken oaths: “The health of our patients shall be our first consideration.” It is easy to take valiant oaths in times of tranquillity and bliss. Hardship does not nullify these oaths, but rather emphasizes their sacred, inviolable nature. For Christians, there is a special duty to fulfil them, since we have been told, “let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’.”

For those of us who do not have special training to participate on the medical front lines, we are called to responsibly play our part in society: in our jobs that help keep our economy going; in our families as parents, children or siblings; in the way we communicate, listen and respond to news; in the way we care for our neighbours, cities and communities. Above all, we are called to pray for and do our best to support good journalism, research and medical care. For Christians, truth is distinctly important. Every Christian has the responsibility to find and rely on accurate sources of information, having nothing to do with either sensationalizers or scoffers.

A website like the [Science Media Centre](#) can help one interpret the headlines level-headedly, and every region has its public health bulletins with advice specific to the region. We listen to and respect our public health officials, with the expectation that their recommendations will inevitably be imperfect. Rather than criticising them, we ought to pray for them daily.

COVID-19 reminds us that lasting contentment, security and happiness is not to be found in the present world but in the world to come. As [Augustine](#) put it:

As ‘we are saved by hope’, so we are made happy by hope. Neither our salvation nor our beatitude is here present, but ‘we wait for it’ in the future, and we wait ‘with patience’, precisely because we are surrounded by evils which patience must endure until we come to where all good things are sources of inexpressible happiness and where there will be no longer anything to endure. Such is to be our salvation in the hereafter, such our final blessedness.