

WORSHIP IN TIME OF PLAGUE



STEVE HAYS I

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Worship in Time of Plague

Suspending church services

Two related stories:

<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/03/11/washington-virginia-dioceses-to-close-all-churches-including-national-cathedral-over-coronavirus/>

The ECUSA should have closed shop long ago and returned property to faithful Anglican congregations.

@Trent_Horn

Suspending mass because of a pandemic shows prudence, not faithlessness. Charity demands we not unwittingly infect others and God gave us intellects to discover how to stop diseases. As the Bible says, "There is a time when success lies in the hands of physicians" (Sir. 38:13).

Would you agree sick people shouldn't go to mass? If so, then what do we with people who are sick without symptoms and don't know they are infecting and possibly causing grave harm to others?

https://twitter.com/Trent_Horn/status/1237998888386093057

i) Not what the *Bible* says, but OT *apocrypha*. Medical care during the time of Sirach wasn't notably successful. Usually did more harm than good.

ii) I don't take the position that weekly church attendance is absolutely obligatory. This post is more about the motivation to justify church closures during an epidemic.

iii) Life isn't risk-free. Christianity isn't risk-free. In India and the Muslim world, Christians take their life in their hands by going to church.

iv) There is, of course, an important moral distinction between a necessary risk and a gratuitous risk. But due to the corporate nature of Christian life, there's the additional principle of shared risk, shared suffering, and shared reward.

v) Refusing to attend church during an epidemic, or suspending church during an epidemic, betrays a lack of faith. I don't mean you should count on God to protect you from infection, even fatal infection. Rather, you should have the faith to attend church during an epidemic, not because it's risk-free, but because, even if you did contract a fatal infection, you died because you were acting faithfully. That's good way to die. There's no better way to die. You were acting faithfully by continuing to fellowship with God's people, share in corporate worship and prayer.

vi) That said, I'm fascinated by the assumption that it's safer to be outside church than insider church. Among other things, the church is a house of prayer. Isn't that the right kind of place to go during an epidemic? And to join with others there in prayer.

Is your church just a building with religious furniture, or is God present where his people are present? Does public worship confer no blessing? Is it more dangerous to be in church during an outbreak than to absent yourself? Only go back when the coast is clear? What do we expect to find when we go to church—in ordinary times? Does church make any appreciable difference?

vii) Where did some professing Christians ever get the idea that we're supposed to shun the sick? Think of those mission trips sponsored for church teens. They go off to some exotic location for a week or two to do mission. What if one of them develops the symptoms of a highly contagious, life-threatening illness. Should his roommates abandon him to fend for himself? Or should at least one of team risk his own life to stay behind and nurse him back to health?

viii) To some extent I think we've developed a mentality where we contract out the dangerous or distasteful jobs to "professionals". A number of doctors and nurses are at an age where they are more susceptible the infection. Some of them aren't even Christian. Should we expect more courage from them than from Christians?

Many modern-day Americans have never seen anyone die. In the past, that was commonplace.

By the same token, visitation ministry can be a valid alternative. But once again, that doesn't mean we should act like we pay the clergy to do take on the hazardous activities. That's not a proper view of Christian vocation generally.

ix) In fairness, Trent raises a valid question. Sure, if you have the flu, it would be more considerate to stay home. Likewise, Typhoid Mary shouldn't attend church. Indeed, she should be quarantined.

Yet this isn't about individual discretion, but a blanket ban. Moreover, he extends that to folks who may be sick but asymptomatic. Their illness hasn't manifested itself at that stage of the incubation process.

But consider what an extreme and paranoid principle that is. I shouldn't attend church if I *might* be sick but asymptomatic, and I should avoid church because other parishioners *might* be sick but asymptomatic. Well, who's left? That could apply to everyone?

x) In fairness, he's talking about an epidemic, where there's a greater presumption of asymptomatic people with a contagious, life-threatening disease. Yet there's a paradoxical sense in which it's more important to go to church the worse things are. Where Christians can pray with each other and not simply for each other.

What about hosting church services *especially* for the sick and dying. Those who are still able to come on their own or be brought? Pray over them. Sing together. Read Scripture together. That would be risky for the clergy, but so what? That goes with the territory. That would be risky those who brought them, but so what? Religion is ultimately about death and the world to come.

Suppose we had a recurrence of the Black Plague, only this was a new, incurable strain. Suppose 80% of the population succumbs. Should they die in overcrowded hospitals or die in church? Would it not be better for plague victims to take refuge in church? What better place to spend their final hours of life? What better place to die?

xi) There's an opportunity here for a Christian witness. The real or perceived threat of the pandemic has shaken up lots of folks who don't normally think about death. Thanks to modern medicine, we in the west haven't been exposed to pandemics for decades. That makes it a lot easier for folks to be worldly and suppress existential questions about the meaning of life, death, and the afterlife. Evangelical

churches should take advantage of the crisis, and swim against the tide.

Epidemics and atheism

Atheists have different attitudes to death. At least, what they say for public consumption. In reality, I assume most of them fear death.

One attitude is the Epicurean pose, in the classic quip attributed to Mark Twain:

“I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.”

On this view, death isn't good or bad.

Some atheists take a more brazen position, contending that death is a positive good. As Jeff Lowder put it:

“Death is what gives life meaning. The fact that life can be lost is what makes life meaningful.”

How many atheists who express these sentiments believe we must take drastic measures to contain and counteract the coronavirus? How many are panicking at the prospect that it will spiral out of control?

On the Epicurean view, death is a matter of indifference, while on Jeff's view, you might suppose the coronavirus is something to celebrate.

Epidemics and pandemics test the bravado of atheist rhetoric in the face of death. It ceases to be a safe abstraction and becomes an imminent reality.

In fairness, epidemics and pandemics and also test the bravado of Christians who sing about heaven but are spooked by a terminal prognosis. It's an opportunity for atheists to reconsider their atheism and Christians to take their faith more seriously.

Suspending conjugal relations

The next step is for mayors, governors, and heads-of-state to suspend conjugal relations—as well as banning married couples from even sharing the same bed. After all, your spouse might be infected but asymptomatic. Social distancing is our only hope!

MacArthur bows down to Caesar

Five years ago, in the wake of the Obergefell ruling, John MacArthur preached a defiant sermon. Among other things he said:

At the seminary, we put an article up on the seminary website about homosexuality. Within a matter of hours, we received a letter ordering us to cease and desist immediately or face a very severe lawsuit. Could we be sued for taking this position? Absolutely. Insurance companies that provide liability insurances for churches so that we're protected against lawsuits are beginning to say, "We will not accept responsibility for lawsuits on homosexual or same-sex marriage issues." The church is out there all on its own.

Now, just to make it clear: We don't bow down to Caesar. We bow to our king. But the faithful people didn't bow down. The unfaithful people bowed down to idols. They bowed down to monarchs. They bowed down to godless kings. Faithful people didn't bow down. Mordecai didn't bow down. Daniel didn't bow down; his friends didn't bow down. Jesus didn't bow down. Paul didn't bow down.

<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-425/we-will-not-bow>

It was a classic sermon. And it's striking to compare it to the current policy at Grace Community Church:

We were looking forward to our normal Sunday fellowship and worship. But we have been ordered by

the state authorities to limit gatherings to 250 people or less, which means we are unable to meet together.

<https://www.gracechurch.org/community/posts/1898>

So JMac bowed down to Caesar after all. Sure, it's on a different issue, but notice all it took for him to disband public corporate worship. A state order.

Notice he didn't switch to livestreaming services as an alternative to flatten the curve. They were planning to continue worship as usual. No, all it took was a state order, and he immediately capitulates. But there are two problems:

1. The bans are unconstitutional. Churches above the arbitrary numerical threshold—which varies from one locality to the next—should practice civil disobedience. In some cases there are ways to circumvent the numerical threshold by subdividing services, but in general, civil authorities who violate the free exercise of religion clause of the 1st amendment ought to be defied and a class action suit brought against them. When gov't officials ban public gatherings of 250 people (or whatever the figure), that's an indirect ban on church services with 250+ attendance. And that, in turn, is a Constitutional violation. Whether or not that's their intention, that's the effect.

2. This is the state disrupting the normal nature of Christian worship. This is the state redefining what is permissible Christian worship. Where the state dictates the size of a Christian worship service. Where the state proscribes how many Christians are allowed to meet at one time and place. And this may drag on for months. Moreover, it sets a dangerous precedent. It's fascinating to see how many

reputedly conservative churches have buckled under to numerical thresholds and disbanded physical fellowship.

3. Notice, I'm not commenting on churches which have substituted livestreaming because they think social distancing is necessary to bend the curve. That's a different argument. I've discussed that as well, but that's not the point I'm drawing attention to here.

Regulating the size of church services

Some pushback from my original post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2020/03/macarthur-bows-down-to-caesar.html>

@Phil_Johnson_

The GCC elders discussed whether the California ban on large gatherings is an Acts 5:29 issue or a Romans 13:1 situation.

Our consensus was that since this is a health emergency and applies to everyone (as opposed to a decree targeting the church for persecution) we're going to act in accord with Romans 13.

Problem with Phil's explanation is that it stands at odds with the official rationale:

We were looking forward to our normal Sunday fellowship and worship. But we have been ordered by the state authorities to limit gatherings to 250 people or less, which means we are unable to meet together.

<https://www.gracechurch.org/community/posts/1898>

Not only does the official rationale fail to mention a "health emergency" as the motivating factor, but it's contrary to the official rationale they do give, which is that they were planning to hold services as usual, and only canceled the service when the state forced their hand. But if the health emergency was their motivation, they'd take the initiative rather than waiting for the state mandated closure (of services over the arbitrary numerical limit).

For his part,

@Fred_Butler

Given the current health crisis, no one is currently concerned about constitutional rights.

Well, that's a rather damning oversight. When the state abrogates the authority to regulate the size of Christian gatherings, that's a serious issue.

Finishes w/ some odd comment about live streaming and bending the outbreak curve or something.

Nothing odd about that: the oft-cited rationalization is that we need to practice social distancing to flatten the outbreak curve. Large social gatherings supposedly contribute to the exponential infection rate. That's not a statement of my own position.

complains this is the state disrupting worship. Well, other than GCC's 4K plus members told to stay home, we held the standard worship service today. No disruption. Back to normal in a couple of Sundays.

It's *not* disruptive to public worship when a state mandate forces GCC's 4K plus members to say home rather than meet together for corporate fellowship?

All this simply because a state official picks a figure out of the hat about the size of public gatherings. There's a failure by Phil and Fred to integrate Rom 13 into the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. But under our system of gov't, the Rom 13 principle is mediated by the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Citizens are in submission to gov't via the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Social tug of war

There's a perennial tug of war between two types of people: alarmists and procrastinators. For convenience I'm using these as neutral designations, not pejorative terms.

In many times and places, most folks live on the edge. There is no margin for error. Little mistakes and oversights can get you killed. So you always have to think ahead. Take precautions. To survive, much less having any hope of thriving, you must be an alarmist.

But there are other times and places where most folks lead insulated lives. The culture has a lot in reserve. Redundant capacity. Many things can go wrong before it burns through the buffer. That fosters procrastinators.

Both temperamental types are represented in every generation because life lacks a consistent pattern. Sometimes the gamble pays off—big time. Sometimes you lose the bet—big time. Sometimes playing it safe keeps you stuck in a rut.

Conversely, because there's so much padding, the procrastinator may get away with reckless, shortsighted behavior. Or even prosper. But sometimes it catches up with him.

When alarmists are wrong too often, they are discounted. They cried wolf one too many times. This means people tune them out even when their warnings are justified.

Some people are crisis-driven. They ignore warnings until it's too late. But sometimes the crisis never materializes.

To the alarmists, the voices of reason are dangerous. They lull people into a false sense of security until disaster overtakes them. What was preventable becomes inevitable. Avoidable catastrophes become unavoidable.

To the voices of reason, the alarmists are dangerous. They create nonexistent problems. They create an artificial crisis in their fanatical efforts to avert a crisis.

Because life is inconsistent, there is no generally successful or unsuccessful formula. Both strategies have winners and loses. Both sides can say, "If you only listened to me, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

Adages like "better safe than sorry" or "take necessary precautions" are useless in the abstract. They provide no practical guidance without feeding some facts into them.

A history of pandemics

This chart has been making the rounds:

<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/>

Ironically, I see both sides of the debate appealing to this kind of data. At one level it's useful to put our situation in perspective, but there are limitations on this comparison:

i) The basic problem is that because the coronavirus is an unfolding event, we won't have a basis of comparison until this particular pandemic has run its course. So the comparison is premature.

ii) At a psychological level, it isn't very consoling to compare a past disaster with a present disaster. You're not experiencing a disaster from generations ago. It's like telling a G.I. in the swamps of Vietnam that the trenches of WWI were even worse. Even if they were, that's a very abstract comparison. If, at any moment, you might step on a krait hidden in the underbrush, the historical comparison isn't terribly reassuring.

iii) I assume estimates of the fatalities from pandemics that happened centuries ago are very rough educated guesses. Indeed, even in the case of the Spanish Influenza, if you have mass burials, there's not much opportunity to do an accurate body count, and keeping meticulous records isn't a priority.

iv) In addition, the human population is smaller as we go back in time, so these pandemics killed a larger percentage of the human race

Gallows humor

Predictably, the pandemic is a source of gallows humor. There are critics who take umbrage or feign umbrage at satirical observations about the pandemic. What if a friend or relative of yours was stricken by the virus? Would you still think it's funny?

However, gallows humor, and humor in general, is a standard coping strategy to release stress. It's not essentially disrespectful.

Moreover, what's suitable for one person may not be suitable for another person, but that doesn't mean we should always avoid saying anything that might ever offend anyone. If a loved one of mine succumbed to the virus, I wouldn't find the gallows humor amusing. I might even resent it. But it wasn't directed at people in my situation, and rationally, I should take that into account and have the detachment not to expect the entire world to be tailored to my situation.

Furthermore, the objection is typically raised, not by those who've actually suffered a loss, but by sanctimonious critics who presume to speak on behalf of the bereaved. And it's less about showing compassion for the bereaved than giving the critic a chance to act morally superior.

Raising kids in a horror flick

I do wonder what the longterm psychological impact may be from the message we're sending younger kids during the pandemic. Don't go outside! It's dangerous outside!

Beware of everybody you see. Everybody you see may be dangerous! Every adult may be the carrier of an invisible disease that will kill you if you get too close.

Your playmates may be dangerous to you. They may be carriers.

Your brothers and sisters may be dangerous to you. Be afraid of sleeping with your brother or sister.

Your parents may be carriers of an invisible disease that will kill you. Be afraid of your parents touching you, hugging you, kissing you, bathing you, stroking your hair, holding you in their arms.

Be afraid at home. Be afraid outside. Be afraid in the park and playground. Be afraid in the front yard and back yard. The invisible disease is stalking you everywhere. Watch your back!

People aren't what they seem. They seem human on the outside, but there's a monster lurking on the inside, using their body as camouflage to ambush you.

Will children shrug this off after the crisis has passed? Or will it seep into their psyche and bedevil their subconscious for years to come?

Virus factories

David Silverman
@MrAtheistPants

If you went to church yesterday, you should feel guilty. You didn't need to go - you should have stayed home and prayed, but instead you went to a crowd when you know it's a virus factory and could lead to people dying (because you could be a carrier). Think about that next week.

Home is a virus factory. If one family member gets sick, that usually infects other family members. Families are contagious. Is that a novel concept for Silverman? Or does he live alone?

A tavern is a virus factory. Why didn't he do a tweet on that?

If you went to the bar yesterday, you should feel guilty. You didn't need to go - you should have stayed home and gotten intoxicated by yourself, but instead you went to a crowd when you know it's a virus factory and could lead to people dying (because you could be a carrier). Think about that next week.

A gym is a virus factory. Why no tweet on that? Why single out churches?

A supermarket is a virus factory. A drugstore is a virus factory. Bulk stores like Target, Costco, Walmart, and Fred Meyer are virus factories. Dollar stores and 7/11s are virus factories. Fastfood joints are virus factories. Passenger planes, with folks crammed in, breathing recirculated air, are virus factories.

Suppose you're infected, so you stay home and order delivery pizza or delivery Chinese food? At least, that's what you were going to do until the governor/mayor ordered a mandatory lockdown on "nonessential businesses," so now you're out of luck.

Church attendance is voluntary. Keeping churches open doesn't put a gun to your head. It doesn't force you to go. It simply gives you the freedom to do so.

It's natural for an atheist like Silverman to view churches as nothing other than danger zones, but that's hardly a Christian outlook. Worship services save lives. Not just "salvation" in the spiritual sense, but saves many people from self-destructive or suicidal behavior. They need the fellowship.

David Silverman
@MrAtheistPants

I look out my window at the normally busy but now empty street. The ice cream store is open, as is the take out seafood place. Nobody is there.

I've decided to go have some take-out seafood and ice cream for lunch. Gotta patronize.

But he might be an asymptomatic carrier. He might infect the waitress, cashier, or ice cream scooper. He didn't need to go, but he went there even though it could lead to employees dying. He should feel guilty. Will he think about that next week?

Can the state cancel church services?

From two different conversations:

Hays

The question at issue isn't whether it's permissible to cancel church under some circumstances, but the circumstances under which it's permissible to cancel church. The abstraction offers no guidance.

Wolfe

I think that for many it is whether it is permissible to cancel church. So you affirm?

Hays

It's easy to dream up examples. Take a church near a raging forest fire. The extreme examples are an easy call. The coronavirus is more disputable because the projections are so iffy (for one thing). There's a continuum between unmistakable justifications and hypothetical threats with varying degrees of likelihood and severity.

Wolfe

If it is disputable, then you defer to civil authority.

Hays

No I don't. I don't defer to Mayor Blasio or Gov Newsom or Gov Inslee.

Since you don't explain how if it's disputable, you defer to civil authority, it's hard to respond, since I don't know your underlying rationale. We could probably go layers deep on the issue.

i) If this is a Rom 13 thing, here's my general view of Rom 13:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/08/autocracy.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/06/christian-snitches.html>

ii) I'd add that even at a Rom 13 level, for Christian Americans there's a sense in which Rom 13 is mediated by the US Constitution inasmuch as submission to civil authority takes that particular form in our situation.

iii) If you subscribe to a generic deference to civil authority in case a public policy question is disputable, I disagree. That's too abstract. We always need to take the facts into consideration. If we know that a particular civil magistrate is a fool, we have no duty to defer to his judgment in policy matters. He has no wisdom or virtue. Indeed, we have a duty to dissent from his judgment in policy matters.

iv) I'd add that American officials have no authority to cancel church services. That violates the free exercise clause, further augmented by the RFRA. So it's not even civil disobedience to defy them in that regard.

v) There is, of course, a pragmatic dimension to this. We might defer to civil authority because it's too risky to resist. We must weigh the cost. Sometimes you can get away with it. If enough people disregard a law or policy, that often becomes moot.

i) This isn't directly about a general right regarding free assembly but an explicitly guaranteed Constitutional right regarding the exercise of religion. The exercise of religion includes public assembly, but is more specific.

ii) This is also about civil authorities taking it upon themselves to judge which kinds of goods and services are essential and which are nonessential, deeming public worship to be nonessential.

iii) I don't subscribe to mandatory evacuations. People should be free to stay at their own risk. Many people disregard mandatory evacuations. That's a gamble, sometimes they lose the bet. But it's their life.

iv) Much depends on examples. It ranges along a continuum. Sure, authorities can shut down a building (including a church) with a gas leak. Or it can cordon off a road with a gas leak, indirectly impeding access to a church.

If there's a raging forest fire, the authorities can block access to the area until the fire is under control. Temporary curfews are sometimes justified.

The question is whether these are valid analogies to an open-ended policy of criminalizing church services for the indefinite duration of a pandemic. Especially when restrictions about social distancing and essential/nonessential services are arbitrarily discriminatory.

Put another way, there's the fallacy of extrapolating from clear-cut examples to borderline cases to increasingly attenuated examples where the principle becomes ad hoc and tyrannical.

v) This isn't about shutting down a church building because it violates the fire code, but a sweeping ban on church services citywide and statewide.

Teach us to number our days

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*

*2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*3 You return man to dust
and say, "Return, O children of man!"*

*4 For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.*

*5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a
dream,*

*like grass that is renewed in the morning:
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.*

*7 For we are brought to an end by your anger;
by your wrath we are dismayed.*

*8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.*

*9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.*

*10 The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

*11 Who considers the power of your anger,
and your wrath according to the fear of you?*

*12 So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.*

*13 Return, O Lord! How long?
Have pity on your servants!*

*14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

*15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.*

*16 Let your work be shown to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.*

*17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish the work of our hands upon us;
yes, establish the work of our hands!*

(Ps 90)

Not surprisingly, politicians and the secular media have been obsessed with preparations to survive the coronavirus. And we should make reasonable preparations, although there are many conflicting projections and policies about how to contain it.

What's more striking is the reaction for the church. For instance, the entire Anglican Communion has folded like a bad hand of cards in the face of the pandemic:

<https://virtueonline.org/anglican-communion-shuts-down-over-coronavirus-pandemic-updated>

Likewise, flagship evangelical churches have suspended public worship. For instance:

<https://www.fpcphila.org/covid-19>

A question this raises is what message we're sending to believers and unbelievers alike. One message is that there's no overriding good in attending church at this time. Church is a hazard to be avoided.

Then there's the message we're not sending. While the world is making desperate preparations to survive, the church should be preparing believers and unbelievers alike on how to die. Not because death from the pandemic is

inevitable or even likely for most folks. But sooner or later, death comes to one and all, young or old.

Is that the message we're sending? Are we preparing people for death? Are we preparing believers to face death? Are we preparing unbelievers to face death, and make necessary changes before it's too late for them?

Where's the Christian witness of the church in this time of crisis? The world retreats behind locked doors and the church retreats behind locked doors. Who can tell the difference?

My late Aunt Grace was a missionary in Kenya for 13 years. One time her husband shot a black mamba on the front porch. Not only did he have to mop the porch after that, but he had to get down on his hands and knees to scrub it so that natives wouldn't be envenomated by residual poison seeping into cuts in their bare feet.

Theirs wasn't a ministry for the risk-averse. Theirs wasn't a ministry for Christians who play it safe.

Sick churchgoers

During the pandemic, suppose two things happen:

- i) A Christian goes to church
- ii) The same Christian develops the coronavirus

Is the presumption that he got sick by going to church? Or is that the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy?

Consider some other activities the Christian may have engaged in that week:

- Went to the supermarket
- Went to the drug store
- Got takeout from a Chinese joint
- Got delivery pizza
- Spoke face-to-face with some residents in his apartment complex or condo complex
- Checked in on an elderly neighbor to see how they were doing
- Walked his dog, in the course of which he got into a conversation with someone else walking their dog
- Self-quarantined with his wife and three kids

The list could be easily extended. Each of these encounters is a potential transmission vector. He might contract the

virus from the pizza delivery boy, or the cashier at the drug store or Chinese takeout joint, or from shoppers at the supermarket, or the elderly neighbor he checked in on, or a family members, and so on and so forth.

So why do critics single out church attendance as the default culprit? What if that's sheer coincidence, given a multiplicity of transmission vectors? Rationally, you could only pin it on church attendance by ruling out all the other transmission vectors. Are critics in a position to work through that process of elimination? Or is singling out church a reflexive indication of their bigotry?

Prayer meetings

Here's a thought-experiment: should churches hold prayer meetings about the pandemic? The prayers would focus on two things:

- i)** Pray for folks they know who've contracted the illness
- ii)** Pray that God will mitigate the pandemic

Parishioners at higher risk (elderly, immunocompromised) would be excluded from attending the prayer meeting for their own protection.

- 1.** There's the possibility of contracting infection at the prayer meeting.
- 2.** There's the possibility that God will grant some of the prayer requests. Petitions he wouldn't grant if they hadn't been offered in corporate prayer.
- 3.** There's the possibility that God will decline to answer their prayers.

How should a Christian balance these considerations or "risk factors"? Should we take the position that it's too risky to give God the opportunity to answer petitionary prayers regarding the pandemic at a prayer meeting?

Even if someone contracts the illness at the prayer meeting, or even if God declines to answer the prayers, it still honors God to hold prayer meetings and practice corporate prayer. So we can still expect God to bless Christians who honor him, even if the blessings are ancillary to the prayer request. Or can we?

Are we duty-bound to forego prayer-meetings where we come together pray for a crisis because it's too risky to seek divine intervention for that situation in that setting? Is the paradox that the worse the situation, the less reason to seek God in corporate prayer? We should only turn to God in corporate prayer when we're safe?

Corporate prayer

Corporate prayer and public worship wind back through Christianity to OT worship. The Psalms are corporate prayers, performed in corporate worship.

Are there any distinctive supernatural blessings indexed to public worship? Is the risk of contracting the coronavirus offset by any supernatural blessings indexed to public worship?

Does it ultimately make any difference whether or not you go to church? Are there certain kinds of blessings that God reserves when Christians pray and worship in fellowship?

Likewise, is there anything supernatural that ever results from public worship? Or is public worship at best a neutral experience, hanging in a balance, but the scales are easily tipped against it if a natural risk factor is added?

Chickenpox

@DrMichaelLBrown

When your little girl has chickenpox, do you bring her to the children's church on Sunday and say, "I have faith that none of the other children will be affected," or do you keep her home? I think you get the point.

<https://twitter.com/DrMichaelLBrown/status/1241473584083673088>

Yeah, I get the point.

i) The problem lies not with the hypothetical example but the implied comparison. Brown uses an example that no reasonable Christian can take issue with.

The problem is not the example but what he's using it to illustrate. A more accurate analogy would be canceling all church services because a parishioner might be asymptotically infected with chickenpox. Brown's illustration loses all plausibility when you spell out the parallel situation.

ii) Surely the irony is not lost on some readers that Brown is one of the world's most prominent charismatics, and he's not a charlatan, unlike many high-profile charismatics. But given his charismatic theology, it doesn't seem unreasonable to say "I have faith that none of the other children will be affected."

Are we in agreement that prayer doesn't work?

Expanding on a reply I left on Facebook:

Has anyone tried asking God to end the Coronavirus or are we all agreeing that prayer doesn't work?

That's a simplistic approach to prayer.

i) Whether or not a prayer-answering God exists isn't determined by unanswered prayer but by answered prayer. To seize on a particular example of unanswered prayer is arbitrarily restrictive, as if God granting that petition is the only salient evidence for a prayer-answering God.

ii) A pandemic is, by definition, a complex event, in this case becoming fairly global in scale. So it's not as if there's only one kind of prayer for God to answer in that situation. The fact that God doesn't prevent or halt the pandemic in toto doesn't mean God hasn't answered many prayers involving particular instances of the pandemic.

The pandemic impacts many people in many different ways, so I don't expect an undifferentiated response from God. Rather, I expect God's response to prayer about the pandemic to be varied and individualized.

iii) In a cause/effect world, just about every event has a domino effect, the more so with large-scale events like the pandemic. Evils like the pandemic can also be a source of good. Some good things will happen as a result of the pandemic that wouldn't happen if God prevented it. So it's a question of balancing the tradeoffs. Mitigating the pandemic in some respects without eliminating the beneficial side-effects.

Praying for protection

Atheists read the bible!

@AtheistsRead

Isn't it a little arrogant to pray for protection from a virus God created? Either God wants you to die or not. Who are we to question God's actions? We couldn't possibly understand his mysterious ways.

<https://twitter.com/AtheistsRead/status/1241872142733643781>

It's funny how atheists think comments like this are so insightful and clever and intelligent and devastating, as though they've got the Christians cornered. As if this is such a humdinger for Christians.

- i)** How God answers the prayer by or for someone mortally ill is, in itself, an indication of whether he wants them to live or die.
- ii)** One of the purposes of suffering is to inspire prayer.
- iii)** Regarding a phenomenon on the scale of a pandemic, there's no reason to think God has one and the same intentions for everyone impacted by the phenomenon.

Praying with the sick

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord (Jas 5:14).

How society responds to the pandemic is going to be the dominant issue for however long, and it's an issue with many practical repercussions, including Christian fellowship, so at the risk of belaboring the issue, here's another consideration:

For many Christians, the pandemic raises two concerns: how to minimize becoming infected, and how to minimize infecting others. There's an altruistic rationale for suspending church services: we don't want to infect other parishioners, and due to the incubation period of the coronavirus, you can unwittingly infect someone as if you're an asymptomatic carrier. So Christians have a duty to practical social distancing for the sake of others, during the pandemic. So goes the argument.

I'd add that these are interrelated. Even if your primary concern is not to protect yourself from infection but to avoid infecting others, yet if you become infected, that makes you a carrier, so there's a vicious cycle.

That's well-intentioned, and up to a point it has some merit, but however laudable the motive, is it a Christian duty? Compare that to the passage from [Jas 5:14](#).

One of the convenient things about prayer is that you can pray at a safe distance. You don't have to be present with the individual you pray for, and in some cases it isn't possible to be with them.

Yet despite that, in [James 5:14](#) it's not sufficient that the elders pray *for* the sick. They are obliged to pray *with* the sick or pray *over* the sick. Go to the Christian on his sickbed. Indeed, make direct physical contact with the sick by anointing their skin with oil. The polar opposite of social distancing.

If you think about it, that's naturally hazardous at several levels:

i) The elders run the risk of contracting a contagious illness from the sick Christian.

ii) That, in turn, makes them carriers. When they return home, they may infect their family and servants.

iii) In addition, infection was far more perilous in the 1C, which didn't have our pharmaceuticals.

iv) Finally, they risk infecting the sick Christian. Due to illness, his immune system is already weakened, which makes him more vulnerable if an elder has a communicable disease. And I daresay that in the 1C, many people suffered from chronic diseases. Not all of them were communicable, but given the primitive state of medicine, they had less knowledge that we do to draw that distinction.

Of course, [James 5:14-15](#) is a command to Christian elders, and not to Christians in general. But it does establish a principle.

Quaker Catholicism

It's fascinating to see Catholic apologists pivot on the sacraments in light of the hierarchy's response to the pandemic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpzG8q5s0W8>

Remember when Bishop Robert Barron was tearing his hair out over the fact that most American Catholics don't believe in transubstantiation? Remember how he extolled the value of Eucharistic Adoration?

Now, however, that the Catholic church has imposed an interdict in light of the pandemic, the sacraments turn out to be pretty dispensable. Overnight they've become Quaker Catholics.

Coping with the pandemic

I was asked how Christians should cope with the pandemic.

It's an opportunity for us to take seriously what we sing about in hymns. Life is precarious. Not something to take for granted. We should be mentally prepared for death because it comes to everyone sooner or later. What are we doing with our lives? When we look back on our lives on our deathbeds, what will we regret that we neglected? What can we do now to avoid neglecting those things? Also, meditate on the world to come.

Another way to put it, if a Christian is diagnosed with terminal cancer and given 6 months to live, what will he do with his remaining time? What will he do differently? Why wait until we're diagnosed with a terminal illness to prioritize and focus on what ultimately matters? If you were doing everything for the last time, what would you be doing?

Under mass house arrest

I have seen a few troubling comments online where Christian leaders are saying that the civil government doesn't have the right to cancel meetings of the church. They certainly don't have the the right to do that if their objection is that you are preaching the crown rights of King Jesus. In such a case, continue to meet. But if the fire chief told all the good Christians to get out now because the roof of the sanctuary was on fire, this is something he has the right and obligation to do...Following the mandates of the civil authority on quarantines and the closing of public meetings and such during a time of epidemic is not one of them.

So to be clear, if the governor of Idaho shuts down all public meetings because of COVID-19, churches included, then Christ Church would comply. Even if it happened to be the wrong decision, or a decision with which I differed, we would still happily comply. This is one of things that is well within their realm of jurisdiction. It is their call to make. This is their job.

In ancient Israel, the authorities had the right to tear down someone's house if it was afflicted with the creeping crud (Lev. 14:33-53). They had the right to make someone with a contagious disease into a permanent exile, having to live outside the camp (Lev. 13:45-46). This kind of thing, however unfortunate, is not a violation of anybody's rights.

In historic Presbyterian polity (all rise!), the civil magistrate had no authority in sacred things (in sacris), but he had definite authority surrounding sacred things (circa sacra). Put simply, the magistrate

has no right to tell the church what to preach, how to pray, how to administer the sacraments, who to discipline, etc. That is not their assigned task. They need to stay in their lane.

But when it comes to questions of public safety (which is exactly what this is), preachers need to stay in their lane. It would be different if we were talking about a monastery with a bunch of recluse hermit monks, and the magistrate told them they couldn't gather in their own chapel for prayers. That would be none of the magistrate's business. But if great herds of Baptists head out to the Golden Corral after services, and they do this during the time of an epidemic, the magistrate has full authority and obligation to tell all of them "not so fast." This is circa sacra...There are so many areas where the church should be resisting statism, it would be shame to waste our powder on any issue where the state is acting well within its rights.

<https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/contagion-cooties-and-covid-19.html>

Several problems with Wilson's analysis:

i) This isn't primarily a question of Christians standing up for their rights, as if we're only asserting our rights because we have them. Rights for the sake of rights. Rather, this is about religious rights in the service of the religious good.

ii) There's a point of tension in Wilson's position. If he thinks this is a public safety issue, then why wait for the authorities to shut down church meetings? If it justifies social distancing and quarantines, churches should do their part by taking the initiative. If it's analogous to a building

on fire, you self-evacuate the building; you don't just sit there waiting to be ordered to leave.

iii) A problem with his example is that if you find yourself in a burning building, the risk assessment is clearcut. The cost/benefit analysis is clearcut. Everything to lose and nothing to gain by staying there. But the pandemic is far more ambiguous. The projections are uncertain. The solutions are uncertain. There are severe tradeoffs.

iv) His analysis is too compartmentalized. It's not as if the state shutting down church meetings is just a public safety issue rather than a religious issue. Take the Governor of California's list of "authorized necessary activities." That demotes public worship to a nonessential activity which requires civil authorization. Is that a principle that Christians should concede? Or is that the state co-opting *our* lane?

v) There are some parallels between involuntary commitment and quarantine measures during a pandemic. The problem is the slide from unambiguous cases to ambiguous cases. Symptomatic carriers through asymptomatic carriers to the uninfected. Do you round up everybody indiscriminately and throw them into quarantine because some of them *might* be infected?

It's like involuntary commitment of someone who *might* be dangerous to himself or others because there's a family history of mental illness, even though he himself hasn't manifested any signs of mental illness—yet. But if you wait, it *might* be too late. So it's safer to lock him up just in case, for the common good, even if he never suffers from mental illness.

We're not quite at that point, and testing may help to sort things out, although we can't test 300 million Americans, and even if we could, some of them might become infected a week after they passed the test. But if politicians become desperate, don't count out preemptive measures like **28**

WEEKS LATER. Governors have already put whole populations under mass house arrest.

vi) Is this just a public health and safety issue? That's so this-worldly and lacking in a Godward outlook. Why do they go to church at all, even during normal times? Wilson acts like it's balancing one natural event against another natural event. Does he think the fellowship of God's people in corporate worship has no supernatural dimension that offsets what happens in the world?

I don't mean "supernatural" in a sensational signs-and-wonders sense, but just that God blesses faithful corporate worship. Does Wilson think churchgoers are just pew warmers? Does it make a difference, other than at the level of social psychology and emotional uplift? If the ban goes on for months, with electronic worship as the alternative, will many parishioners return if and when the ban is lifted? And why should they?

I say this from the standpoint of faith rather than experience. It's not that I consciously experience the supernatural when I attend church. And I don't expect to since I think the supernatural usually operates at a subliminal level in public worship. My point is that if Christianity is true, then certain kinds of supernatural blessings are conditional on communal Christian experience.

The role of atheism in the pandemic

1. What does atheism have to do with the pandemic? I thought you'd never ask!

The regime in Red China takes the lion's share of the blame for the pandemic. It has systematically bungled the crisis. Part of this is due to a fanatical, paranoid concern to maintain total social control.

2. But there's a theological element as well. It cuts against the grain of human nature to admit error, much less wrongdoing. You lose face when you do that. In fact, it can be hard for people to admit to themselves that they are morally flawed and guilty of moral failure, much less admit that to others.

As I've noted in the past, one of the liberating side-effects of Christianity is that it frees us to admit error and wrongdoing. If everyone is a sinner, if Christ redeemed you, if God forgave you, then it's safe to admit error and wrongdoing. That lowers our natural defensiveness. We have nothing much to lose by coming clean.

But atheists in the Communist regime don't have that insulation. Saving face is all-important, no matter the harm to others.

3. There's also the fact that if you're a consistent atheist, life is cheap. You may value your own life, but other human beings are disposable. What does the death toll amount to in a nation with a population the size of China? Unless you have reason to believe each human life is important, why should the regime care about the death of so many

Chinese? Individual lives are so expendable and replaceable. Like weeds.

The dominion of death and the devil

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Heb 2:14-15).

Fear of death exerts enormous coercive power over unbelievers. It's a key weapon in the Devil's arsenal. The coronavirus has illustrated the coercive power of death.

Part of that lies in the element of uncertainty. The virus is like a stalker. You don't know when, where, or how hard it will hit a particular region.

Fear of death can easily cause normally friendly, trustworthy people to turn on each other if they feel that you pose a threat to their safety. Competitive survival dissolves the glue of civilization.

The coronavirus generates a dilemma. On the one hand, it may be the kind of pathogen you need to get ahead of. You may need to take preemptive measures, even drastic measures, to contain it and control it. If you procrastinate, it's too late to undo the damage. One side blames the other side for dragging its heels.

On the other hand, we don't know enough about the coronavirus to know the scale of the threat or what's most effective. As a result, public officials are enacting uninformed policies. Policies that are wrecking the economy. So there's the perceived need to act early, combined with the danger of acting prematurely.

There's a comparison between knowns and unknowns. The dire projections might be accurate or widely exaggerated. But we do know the damage it's wreaking on the economy. That has lethal consequences, too.

Moreover, it's not clear that preemptive measures are what's required. One proposed solution is based on social isolation, but another proposed solution is based on herd immunity. Let it naturally spread to stimulate the immune system and trigger the development of antibodies in the population (while we feverishly work on next-generation vaccines). Don't these two solutions tug in opposite directions?

What if you can't afford to be wrong, but you don't know what's the right thing to do and the wrong thing to do? What if one cup contains the antidote while the other cup contains poison? You can't tell which is which.

It's striking how the fear of death causes so many humans not only to surrender basic freedoms, but their livelihood. Their current and future financial security.

Christians should take reasonable precautions against gratuitous harm—assuming we know what precautions are reasonable. But we're not paralyzed by the prospect of death. The devil can't use that as leverage to make us follow his orders. Betray each other. The devil is like an SS officer who gives you a choice: you can shoot one of your comrades to save the life of another comrade; if you refuse, he will shoot both. Christianity frees us from that morally corrupting coercion.

Slamming the door in the face of the unchurched

With tens of millions of Americans under house arrest, this would be an ideal time for unchurched Americans who are bored out of their wits to check out a church. Unfortunately, most of them will find locked church doors. One of the great, unrepeatable lost opportunities in Christian history to reach out to the unsaved.

Livestream services are fine as a complement to public worship, but livestream services cater to church members, not the unchurched.

Is church attendance a pact with the devil?

It's revealing to compare these two positions by David French: On the one hand, voting for Trump in the 2016 general election was a betrayal of Christian faith. Caving into worldly fear. Diametrically opposed to 2 Tim 1:7.

Instead, the evangelical church is called to be a source of light in a darkening world. It is not given the luxury of fear-based decisionmaking. Indeed, of all the groups in American life who believe they have the least to fear from American politics, Christians should top the list. The faithful should reject fear.

This is made plain to young Christians from the early days of Sunday school. There, many millions of young believers are taught the biblical verse: "For God gave us not a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control."

But in 2016, something snapped. I saw Christian men and women whom I've known and respected for years respond with raw fear at the very idea of a Hillary Clinton presidency.

<https://time.com/5615617/why-evangelicals-support-trump/>

On the other hand, when Christians appeal to the same verse to justify church attendance during the pandemic, that's succumbing to the diabolical temptation, when Satan tried to strike a bargain with Jesus in the wilderness:

Even within those churches that have chosen to comply with public health warnings and temporarily cancel

services, there are rumblings of dissent and discontent. You see it all over social media. And whether sophisticated or simple, these impulses toward defiance are virtually all grounded in a similar question: Why should Christians surrender to fear? People of faith should reject the guidance of public officials. Our gatherings are different. After all, isn't it true that "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control"?

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:5-7).

The first set of verses represents the second of the three great temptations of Jesus as outlined in the book of Matthew. Satan demanded that Christ perform an ostentatious display of power and faith—that he throw himself from a great height to demonstrate his invulnerability. Yet Christ refused, declaring that such a ridiculous and ostentatious act would put God to the test.

<https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/coronavirus-courage-and-the-second>

Now, I agree with French that going to church is not a talisman that will safeguard parishioners from contracting the virus. Some of them might even contract it by going to church. Mind you, there are so many ways to contract the virus that I think the vector of transmission is often untraceable. But it's a malicious caricature to attribute that motive to every churchgoer or would-be churchgoer during the pandemic.

What's striking, though, is French's priorities. Voting for Trump was (and still is, by his lights) a cowardly, faithless action. But keeping church services available during the pandemic is tantamount to making a pact with the devil. French's theological priorities and elastic use of Scripture are so inverted that it's hard to know what more to say.

Bishop Wright's response to the pandemic

No doubt the usual silly suspects will tell us why God is doing this to us. A punishment? A warning? A sign? These are knee-jerk would-be Christian reactions in a culture which, generations back, embraced rationalism: everything must have an explanation. But supposing it doesn't?

The point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it's an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness and sheer inability to understand what is happening or why. The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible.

God was grieved to his heart, Genesis declares, over the violent wickedness of his human creatures. He was devastated when his own bride, the people of Israel, turned away from him. And when God came back to his people in person—the story of Jesus is meaningless unless that's what it's about—he wept at the tomb of his friend. St. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit “groaning” within us, as we ourselves groan within the pain of the whole creation. The ancient doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to recognize the One God in the tears of Jesus and the anguish of the Spirit.

It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead.

<https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

1. N. T. Wright has always been a mixed bag. As I recall, he developed a conservative reputation by debating Jesus Seminar types, and he was pretty good on his side of the debate. He also wrote a classic defense of the Resurrection. But in addition he churns out hasty, forgettable potboilers. He spreads himself way too thin. He's overrated and overexposed. He's become an oracle who's expected to have something wise to say about everything.

2. His appeal to Scripture is selective. On the one hand he appeals to the biblical lament tradition. On the other hand, he dismisses out of hand as "silly" the idea that a natural disaster might be a divine punishment, warning, or sign—even though there are many examples of natural disasters having that function in Scripture.

Mind you, I'm not saying we should interpret the pandemic as a divine punishment, warning, or sign. Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Providence is often inscrutable. But we should make allowance for the possibility.

3. It's ambiguous to deny that everything must have an explanation. It could be an epistemological denial: everything has an explanation, but we don't know what the explanation is. Or it could be a metaphysical denial: some events are ultimately inexplicable. They happen for no good reason.

4. He jumbles together a number of distinct claims:
Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and

unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible.

As written, he seems to deny each of those propositions. God doesn't know everything, is not in charge of everything, is not unaffected by the troubles of the world. If so, He seems to operate with an open theist hermeneutic and doctrine of providence.

5. Even if you're a freewill theist, you can't drive a wedge between God and natural disasters. Assuming that the coronavirus is a natural pathogen, it's exempt from the freewill defense. If God prevented the virus or stopped it, his intervention wouldn't violate its libertarian freedom, since a pathogen is not a rational agent.

Freewill theists sometimes justify the existence of natural evils on the grounds that the natural world must have sufficient stability so that we can make choices with reasonably predicible consequences. Be that as it may, the pandemic is quite unpredictable in its scale, lethality, and distribution, so that's not a very promising theodicy in this case.

6. There's another fundamental distinction which Wright fails to draw. And that's the distinction between knowing the actual reason for a particular event and having a general list of possible reasons for why certain kinds of things happen. The fact that we don't have a specific explanation for a specific example doesn't mean we're completely in the dark. It might be one of several explanations.

7. Wright's response exempts God from complicity by consigning him to irrelevance. Who needs a God that "laments" over natural disasters? You fall back on lament if

that's your only resort, but if you have it within your power to avert the lamentable disaster, then lamentation is an inexcusable substitute and cop-out.

Imagine if a child runs out into a busy intersection. Suppose you can rescue him before he's run over. But suppose, instead of intervening to save his life, you stand by while he's mowed down by the traffic, then lament his untimely death.

Wright's response won't be satisfying to unbelievers. It will reinforce their view that Christianity doesn't have answers to tough questions. Doesn't have answers to the most important questions. When the going gets tough, Christianity comes up empty.

Likewise, if God is that clueless and ineffectual, then is God a prayer-answering God? Why should we pray to God unless he is able and sometimes willing to intervene regarding natural evils? Does Bishop Wright ever pray for miraculous healing. Or is nature an autonomous machine that God created, but has no control over? Is nature a Frankenstein monster? God made it, but it slipped the leash. He can't make nature do his bidding? He's at its mercy. Please be a good monster! Play nice. Don't stomp on my little human creatures! I can't stop you. I can only plead with you.

What if Wright's God unwittingly made a doomsday machine? He switched it on but it has no off-switch. God watches helplessly as it destroys everything in its path.

8. Theodicy is unavoidable because we must play the hand we were dealt. It would be pleasant if we didn't have to wrestle with the problem of evil, but that's not an abstract thought-experiment. The coexistence of God and evil forces us to think about their interrelationship whether we'd like to

or not. That's not optional. That's imposed on us by the ubiquitous pressure of reality. We live in the shadow of that reality every day. So the question is inescapable. When Wright tries to evade it, he disqualifies Christianity from seriously consideration.

9. One of the ironic things about Wright is how he moves seamlessly between condescension and superficiality. He adopts a patronizing tone of dismissive superiority and contempt, followed by a shallow response that ducks the philosophical and theological challenges—as well as the philosophical and theological resources to address the same challenges. He combines intellectual pretentiousness with intellectual impatience.

The cult of expertise

During the pandemic, public officials have consulted medical experts on social policy. Expert advice is often indispensable. There are, however, limitations on expert advice:

- 1.** Epidemiologists seem to be the primary consultants. That's fine up to a point. But it can lead to tunnel vision. For instance, an ER physician has a legitimate viewpoint but his professional experience is hardly a representative sample of society in general.
- 2.** There may be lack of consensus among experience in the same field.
- 3.** Medical science is highly specialized and interdisciplinary. There are many medical specialists in cognate disciplines with relevant expertise.
- 4.** Outside of medicine, there are experts on growth curves. They know how changing a variable here or there can drastically change the projection.
- 5.** There are other areas of expertise directly germane to the crisis. Take economists.

Likewise, psychologists, sociologists, and historians. Economic collapse will lead to joblessness, homelessness, higher property crimes, substance abuse, clinical depression, suicide, and general social unrest.

- 6.** And it shouldn't be confined to the "experts". Small businessmen ought to have input on policies that adversely impact the local (state, national, and international) business

community.

7. Experts can be highly politicized. Indeed, an entire field can become highly politicized.

Plague and providence

1. Thus far I haven't commented on the pandemic from a theodical standpoint. One reason is that I've written so much about theodicy in general that anything I have to say about the pandemic is apt to be repetitious to some degree, and repetition is boring.

2. In addition, there are atheists who act like every time there's some new natural disaster, such as the Christmas Day tsunami (2004) or the Japanese tsunami (2011), this is supposed to shake the faith of Christians. That every natural disaster ought to send us back to the drawing board. But in Christian theology, moral and natural evils are to be expected. And we have a number of preexisting theodical strategies to deal with these events. Natural and moral evil aren't something new, and theodicies aren't generally new, although they undergo refinement.

3. There's a sense in which I agree with unbelievers that evil can call into question God's existence. By that I mean, many people labor under a faulty concept of God, and evil may expose their faulty concept of God. In that regard, evil can have a winnowing effect on theology.

4. It's common to ask why God allows evil. When a Calvinist uses that terminology, some freewill theists object that it's deceptive for a Calvinist to characterize evil in terms of divine permission. According to Calvinism, God predestined evil.

That's true, but when I say God allows evil, I simply mean that God did not prevent a particular evil. You allow something you were in a position to prevent. That's a coherent concept. To say "allow"/"didn't prevent" are

stylistic variations on the same idea.

5. Moral and natural evils are not unplanned events. They happen for a purpose. I'd add that even according to influential models of freewill theism like Molinism and simple foreknowledge, these aren't unplanned events.

In open theism, God doesn't have a master plan for the world, but a set of contingency plans.

6. A basic function of theodicy is not to explain why God allowed a particular evil, but to show how that's consistent with God's existence. There may be different reasons God had for allowing the evil in question. Even if we lack the information to narrow it down to one "correct" explanation, we can offer a number of potential reasons showing that the evil is consistent with God's existence.

7. Some Christians deny that natural evils or natural disasters preexisted the Fall. I disagree. I think they serve a necessary purpose to maintain the balance of nature.

I think one effect of the fall is to expose humans to natural dangers that always existed, from the time of creation. In an unfallen world, humans would be divinely shielded from certain natural hazards, but due to the fall, God withdrew his providential protection.

8. This doesn't mean God directly created a pathogen like the coronavirus. God created a world in which natural organisms adapt and mutate.

9. Although Christian theologians tend to focus on the punitive aspect of death, as divine punishment for original or personal sin, that's one-sided. Human mortality has other spiritual purposes. Nothing exposes human

vulnerability and helplessness like death. So death provides an opportunity for humans to renounce their feigned autonomy and admit their total dependence on God's mercy and provision.

10. We like to be in control. An unnerving aspect of the coronavirus is the element of uncertainty in terms of scale, lethality, and distribution. It's so unpredictable. Who will it strike next? For unbelievers and nominal believers who live in denial regarding the inevitability of death, who shove the prospect of death into the back of their minds or only think of death in abstract terms, the coronavirus forces them to confront their mortality and lack of control.

11. It exposes the ineptitude of many public officials. It chastens blind faith in the cult of expertise. It's a test of moral character, revealing what people are really like when altruism is costly. Does ruthless self-interest dominate?

12. It raises questions about the importance and relevance, or unimportance and irrelevance, of public worship. By the same token, it raises questions about how we prioritize risk assessment. Is a supermarket an essential business but a church service is inessential?

13. Several standard theodicies are germane to the pandemic. For instance:

i) The soul-building theodicy, where suffering is an opportunity to tap into compassion and cultivate sacrificial virtues.

ii) Second-order goods. There are certain kinds of goods whose existence is contingent on the existence of evil. If you eliminate the evil, you eliminate the resultant or compensatory good. So there are tradeoffs. Some evils a

necessary evils, in the sense of conditional necessity. They don't have to exist, but they're a necessary source of certain otherwise unobtainable goods.

In that respect, there are tradeoffs. It's easy to imagine ways the world might be a better place, yet that mental exercise involves freezing the goods in place while changing some variables to eliminate the evils. Yet in a cause/effect world, that's artificially compartmentalized.

iii) Events in a cause/effect world have a domino effect. Like time-travel stories, changing a variable in the past changes the future. And the change is more far-reaching the farther it extends into the future. When we think about improving the world, we artificially isolate or insulate causes and effects. But it's not possible to strike an optimal balance where a single world history or timeline contains all the distinctive goods, devoid of evil.

iv) Apropos (ii-iii), housebound couples will result in a baby boom a few months from now. Although many people will die as a result of the pandemic, many new lives will come into being as a result of the pandemic. Individuals who'd never experience the gift of life had it not been for the pandemic. The dying already had an opportunity to live. The tragic death of some creates a situation where others will now have the same opportunity.

v) Human life is brief. What ultimately matters is the world to come (i.e. the New Eden). But you can't participate in the world to come unless you participate in the lifecycle. You must be brought into existence, and you must die, before you can step into eternity. Of course, many humans fail to take advantage of that. They live for what this world has to offer, so the world lets them down. They lose what they had

while missing out on what they might have had by squandering their opportunities.

One death is a tragedy, one million a statistic

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Replying to

@DrOakley1689

So then what? I suppose the Holocaust wasn't that bad in comparison, because only 6,000,000 died... I mean, 56,000,000 people die each year, so what's the fuss, right? COVID-19 is just getting started. $R_0 > 2$, CFR 2% (assuming hospitals not overwhelmed). Where will it be in a year?

<https://twitter.com/ClevelandSharts/status/1241180245526528003>

This comment makes two points:

1. It's premature to make historical comparisons with other causes of death until COVID-19 has run its course. We don't know the final death toll.

2. The first point is more ethical:

i) There are different ways to assess the significance of death. Not all deaths are morally equivalent. Death in a plane crash is not in the same moral category as mass murder, even if more people die in the plane crash. So the significance of death isn't a crass utilitarian calculation about comparative statistics.

ii) That said, when formulating public policy, it's legitimate to ask why we should prioritize COVID-19 while there are other causes of death with far higher fatalities, yet we don't take the same measures to lower those rates. Not to

mention the collateral damage of lockdowns and mass house arrest in response to COVID-19.

So contrasting the fatality rates from different causes of death isn't an inherently heartless, mechanical comparison, but raises issues of moral consistency, the allocation of resources, and the limits of social control.

The "religious exemption"

Atheists like Jeff Lowder and Richard Dawkins, as well as apostate Randal Rauser have been expressing outrage at a CNN report about "at least 14 states exempting religious gatherings from stay at home orders."

(Strictly speaking, Lowder simply retweeted someone else, but it's safe to say this reflects his own consternation.)

Dawkins said:

A church is an enclosed space where people right next to each other sing their lungs out into the air. A church is virus heaven: a focal point where people get infected, then go out & infect others

<https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1246350531297042433>

There are several issues that need to be sorted out:

1. There's a distinctively American issue. The "religious exemption" is a Constitutional exemption: the free exercise clause in the first amendment. This isn't an exception that some mayors and governors are inventing for churches and synagogues. Rather, this is a case of mayors and governors defending a Constitutional right. The Bill of Rights contains a number of exemptions from the heavy-hand of gov't. It's no different than freedom of speech, assembly, the press, the right to bear arms, 4th and 5th amendment protections and civil liberties.

2. Then there's the ethical issue. Dawkins' point seems to be that we have no right to endanger others. If that's his point, it's simplistic and needs to be qualified:

i) Church attendance is voluntary. It's not like parishioners attend at gunpoint. Insofar as attending church carries the risk of infection, parishioners mutually consent to the risk. And that's hardly unique to church.

Shopping at Lowe's, Home Depot, Target, Walmart, Fred Meyers, &c. carries the risk of contracting the virus, then spreading it to others. Yet shoppers assume that risk by mutual consent.

ii) At the same time, they are putting others in the community at risk who did not consent to becoming infected by the shoppers because some of them didn't shop at Lowe's or Home Depot, &c.

Yet critics of churchgoers presumably don't think it's wrong to expose others to potential infection because you went shopping at Home Depot but they didn't. Presumably, critics of the churchgoers accept a generalized risk where a shopper at Home Depot might infect a shopper at Target.

iii) Presumably, critics of churchgoers draw the line because they think drugstores, bulk stores, supermarkets, &c. provide "essential goods and services"—whereas public worship doesn't provide an essential good or service. So the risk is warranted or unwarranted depending on whether you classify the transaction as an essential good or service.

Of course, that just means many critics have a secular view of Christianity. But that begs the question. Christians are hardly obligated to share the same view of Christianity as atheists.

iv) Jeff Lowder lives in a state that legalized pot. As a rule, decriminalizing a product or behavior makes the usage or behavior more prevalent. Driving under the influence endangers the life and health of the other drivers, bikers, cyclists, and pedestrians. But how many critics of churchgoers are equally critical of legalizing pot? If the objection is that it's wrong to put others at risk, and if they were morally consistent, then they'd be opposed to legalizing weed.

v) In addition, I've read that many pot shops have been exempted from lockdowns. Pot shops are treated as if they provide an essential good or service—unlike churches. Do critics of churchgoers regard pot shops as essential businesses? There's a lack of moral seriousness in the criticisms and comparisons. Lots of irrational, contradictory indignation.

The pornographic church

1. In my observation, evangelical leaders who support the suspension of public worship during the pandemic use three arguments.

i) All things being equal, Christians have a duty to obey civil authorities. This prima facie civic duty can be overridden, but the pandemic is not one of the exceptions to the norm.

ii) It's permissible to temporarily suspend public worship to avoid gratuitous risk of infecting others with a life-threatening pathogen.

iii) We're under obligation not to expose others to a life-threatening pathogen.

(ii)-(iii) are independent of (i). Some churches suspended public worship voluntarily.

2. One problem is that (ii) and (iii) are contradictory. (iii) is an argument from principle. It's intrinsically wrong to put others at gratuitous risk of contracting a potentially life-threatening pathogen. In this case, social events of a particular size.

But if that's the argument, then the logic of the principle is open-ended. That demands an indefinite suspension of public worship. Christians are obligated to forgo church for the duration of the pandemic. The obligation is not that it's permissible to expose the public to the pathogen so long as you temporarily practice social distancing, then discontinue social distancing after a specified time regardless of whether the pandemic has subsided.

So (iii) is an open-ended commitment that obviates (ii). The suspension of public worship will only be as temporary as the pandemic.

3. Another complication is that if you subscribe to (i), then you ceded to civil authorities the determination of when it's safe to return to church. Civil authorities determine when it's no longer too risky.

4. A further complication is that if public worship remains in abeyance beyond a certain duration, churches will be permanently closed because they weren't taking in enough revenue to pay the overhead.

5. So (ii) is based on luck. Maybe we'll get lucky and the pandemic will shortly subside.

6. An additional problem is the precedent which (i) & (iii) establish. I'm no expert, but from what I've read, medical authorities have been warning for years that we may be on the brink of reentering the age of pandemics due to the increasing emergence of superbugs. Even if we develop a vaccine for COVID-19, it may evolve a resistant strain that outsmarts the vaccine. And there are other pathogens hovering in the wings. Other superbugs which may spawn pandemics.

If pandemics become intermittent, have evangelical denominations acquiesced to a policy of the chronic, indefinite suspension of public worship for the duration of the pandemic du jour? To be determined by civil authorities? Maybe we'll get lucky. If not, what kind of paint thinner will they use to extricate themselves from the corner they painted themselves into?

7. On a related note, there's a striking parallel between virtual worship and virtual sex. Evangelicals condemn pornography and sexbots as an unacceptable substitute for real sex. Sex is supposed to be an essentially social dynamic between real people, face-to-face. A personal encounter. But that's what's missing in virtual worship, too.

Yet during the pandemic, evangelical critics of pornography and sexbots are using the electronic church as a substitute for public worship. This is justified on the grounds of minimizing the risk of disease transmission.

But why is risk-free worship obligatory while risk-free sex is prohibitory? Pornography and sexbots eliminate the risk of transmitting STDs, unplanned pregnancies, unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, and the treacherous emotional entanglements of intimacy between real men and women.

BTW, although I'm no expert, I don't think Christian marriage precludes the possibility of STDs. That's because many Christians are converts who had a sexual history before their conversion. So they can bring STDs into a marriage from a priori history of premarital sex and promiscuity.

If the argument is that we have a duty not to risk infecting other people, why is virtual sex impermissible while virtual worship is permissible? Isn't a steady diet of electronic worship ecclesiastical pornography? There are exceptions, like the situation of shut-ins, but I'm not referring to special cases.

7. Evangelicals need to develop a theology of risk. Humans constantly make risk-benefit assessments. As I recently noted:

i) Due to human mortality, men and women routinely assume calculated gratuitous risks. Playing many sports carries the risk of permanent injury, sometimes physical or mental incapacitation, or even death. Because they know that death is inevitable, they gamble the future on the present.

ii) Having kids is risky. Your kid might die of cancer. Or your teenager might become a hopeless drug addict, die from an overdose or commit suicide? Or your child might be damned. Or your wife might have a miscarriage. Why take that risk if you don't have to?

iii) Childbearing used to be very hazardous for mothers. Many died in childbirth. Should wives before the advent of modern medical science refuse sex with their husband after child #3?

iv) As I explained in my post on [Jas 5:14-15](#), it was hazardous to elders to anoint the sick. Are the elders in [Jas 5:14-15](#) foolish because they didn't practice social distancing? They exposed themselves to the sick through direct physical contact. They could infect the sick (in their already weakened condition) with their own diseases. And they could infect their families when they went back home after doing visitation ministry with the sick.

v) This is in part about freedom. Freedom to attend church or freedom to boycott church. The problem is when we create a society that revolves around hypochondriacs.

Is God sending us a message?

Thus far I haven't offered a theological interpretation of the pandemic. That's because I don't have the answer. It can bring discredit on the Christian faith when spiritual leaders presume to interpret providential disasters. Unbelievers, not without reason, don't think spiritual leaders are privy to God's rationale, even if there was a God, so they think spiritual leaders are just exploiting the situation. Despite the fact that they don't know what they're talking about, they take advantage of tragedy to score theological points. Not that I'm a spiritual leader. I'm not that high on the pecking order. But I'm just stating a general principle. The exercise can fuel the cynicism of unbelievers—or even believers.

That said, there's value in running through a list of potential explanations, and assessing their pros and cons. We just need to avoid dogmatism.

A . PROVOKING QUESTIONS

Just being forced to stop and ask if God sending us/me a message is a useful exercise—especially for the spiritually indifferent. Shakes them out of their complacency.

B. A SIGN

1. A prima facie difficulty with saying the pandemic is a divine sign is that, in general, there needs to be agreement on what a sign means for it to be a sign. How can it send a message unless we understand the significance of the sign? Yet one problem with the pandemic is that it's open to more than one theological interpretation. So the whole notion

ambiguous signaling seems to contradict to the purpose of a sign. (Mind you, these needn't all be mutually exclusive explanations.)

2. Perhaps, though, that's prematurely dismissive. Suppose I drive to a park. When I return to my car, after jogging, there's a handwritten sign on my windshield which says "I saw what you did Friday!"

Now that's ambiguous on different levels:

i) Maybe it's just a prank by somebody who picked out my car at random. He never saw me do anything on Friday.

ii) Or the sign might be a veiled threat. Perhaps he did see me do something wrong or illegal. Maybe he's going to turn me in! Or more sinister yet, maybe he's coming after me!

iii) Perhaps I don't remember doing anything wrong on Friday. But the sign forces me to jog my memory. Maybe I unwittingly did something to tick him off.

iv) Or maybe I don't remember, not because I did nothing wrong, but because I'm a dishonest person for whom wrongdoing is so routine that's all a blur. Yes, I did something wrong on Friday, and the day before, and the day after.

I'm used to getting away with it. But this time I ticked off the wrong person. Someone who will exact revenge. This time my dishonesty caught up with me.

v) Or maybe I'm generally honest, but Friday was the exception. I did something wrong or illegal. Unbeknownst to me, there was a witness.

Now the sign can be ambiguous by design. The ominous sign is intended to instill fear and anxiety. Make me uncertain about what the future holds for me. Throw me off balance.

C. JUDGMENT

1. In Scripture, some natural evils are divine judgments. Yet in Scripture, some natural evils have a different purpose. They're not punitive.

2. A problem with the judicial interpretation is that the pandemic is so indiscriminate. When it falls on the righteous and wicked alike, that makes it harder to recognize as divine judgment rather than some morally random event.

Mind you, collective guilt isn't a necessary condition for collective punishment. As I often say, due to fact that human beings are social creatures, the innocent are often collateral damage in collective punishment. They aren't the targets.

3. But another problem with the judicial interpretation is the message it sends. Divine judgment can have deterrent value when recognized as divine judgment. But unbelievers don't think God exists, and for them, the pandemic is just one more item in the problem of evil.

4. Another problem with the judicial interpretation is the timing. Why now? Is the human race wickeder than it was 5 or 10 or 15 years ago?

Perhaps, though, God needs to bring judgment on the human race every so often because, if he never he punishes evil prior to the Final Judgment, then evil will spiral out of

control. So even if the timing is somewhat arbitrary, periodic judgment is necessary to keep evil from getting completely out of hand.

But if that's the reason, it raises the question of how natural disasters like the pandemic are a check on evil. Will that make the wicked mend their ways?

D. WARNING

A problem with this interpretation is that given all the kinds of natural disasters and causes of death, what makes the pandemic a distinctive divine warning? Of course, we could treat them all as warnings and in sense we should, but practical speaking, the impact is diluted by their range and frequency. Like the judicial interpretation, it seems to be too indiscriminate to function as a clear-cut warning rather than a morally random event.

E. REMINDER

The pandemic is undoubtedly a reminder of our vulnerability. Despite the fact that human technology becomes exponentially more powerful, nature is incomparably more powerful than human technology. Our technology can't protect us from many natural disasters. We're at the mercy of natural disasters beyond our ken or control. Nature will always be more powerful than technology because technology depends on natural forces and natural processes.

That's a salutary reminder to people who avoid thinking about death or the meaning of life. It shakes them up.

F. DISRUPTION

The pandemic is very disruptive to the status quo. While that's bad in some ways, it's good in other ways. Over time, power naturally concentrates in the hands of evil. The disruptive impact of the pandemic forces the wicked to fall back, regroup, and rebuild. They may not be able to restore the status quo. So it slows them down. Impedes their dominance. Buys the righteous some breathing room.

If so, that's not a case of God sending a message, but has a different purpose.

Is the church being obedient?

Some comments on these two posts:

<http://theologicalsushi.blogspot.com/2020/04/stop-conspiracy-theories-about-covid-19.html>

<http://theologicalsushi.blogspot.com/2020/04/is-church-being-most-obedient-it-can-be.html>

i) Regarding the first, I'm not sure what Hodge is alluding to with respect to conspiracy theories. Does he mean the suspicion that COVID-19 is a hoax? Or does he mean the suspicion that the gov't response is cover to suppress Christianity?

ii) To begin with, some Democrat officials have made it clear that they are using the crisis as a pretext to target and discriminate against Christians. So that, in itself, isn't paranoid.

iii) There is, though, the question of how far we can generalize from those examples. It's not so much that the intention of the containment policies is to single out Christians. Because the containment policies are general, they have the effect of shutting down public worship because they restrict social gatherings generally, of which church services are a subset.

iv) When, however, public officials distinguish between essential and nonessential goods and services, and when they demote public worship to a nonessential good and service, that exposes their irreligious bias. They think Christianity is, at best, something to be tolerated.

Then there's Hodge's statement that:

The truth is that if you do not have all of the information that the government does and have expertise in the right disciplines of medical research in order to assess that information correctly so that you would come to a correct conclusion of what is going on, then wisdom dictates that you zip your lip about it, not go off spouting whatever theory "might" be true.

i) To begin with, while medical expertise should be one source of information in formulating a public policy to deal with the pandemic, that's not the only relevant sphere of expertise. The risk assessment must not only take the projected harm of the pandemic into account, but the unintended consequences of a containment policy with regard to economic collapse.

ii) And the idea that we should just trust public officials because we don't have all the information the government has is woefully gullible. During this crisis, many public officials have shown themselves to be reactionary, shortsighted fools who have no idea what the solution is, but just want to be seen as saviors.

i) Regarding the second post, what I've seen is the opposite of what Hodge has seen. Evangelical leaders stampeding to agree with public health officials, with very little pushback.

ii) Regarding the risk of public worship, I don't have anything new to say. Hodge's objection is one-sided. It's a stock objection. I've responded in detail to that objection. Hodge hasn't engaged my arguments.

I'm not suggesting that he has any obligation to interact with my arguments, and his post was not specifically

directed at anything I've written. My point is simply that I don't find his objection persuasive because I've dealt with that stock objection, and since he offers no counterargument, it's unconvincing. To be persuasive, he'd need to refute my counterargument.

Again, it's fine with me if his objective was never to engage my side of the argument. But it leaves my side of the argument untouched.

iii) Hodge's principal argument is that physical fellowship was more necessary for 1C Christians (and even back then it wasn't absolute) than it is for 21C, hitech Christians who can achieve the same goals through technology.

There's certainly a grain of truth to what Hodge says. To some degree the activities of the church as described in the NT reflect what was possible in the 1C. When we apply these principles to the 21C, we can adapt and update them to our own situation. We don't have the same limitations. And part of fidelity is to take advantage of resources which were not available to 1C Christians.

iv) The question, though, is whether physical fellowship is just a timebound convention that can be replaced by the electronic church—or something essential to the communal dimension of Christianity.

To take a comparison, artificial insemination can take the place of conjugal relations, and there are situations where artificial insemination is justifiable, but the mere fact that we have that alternative doesn't mean artificial insemination should replace conjugal relations in marital life. The normative practice is sex between husband and wife. Artificial insemination is an exception due to extenuating circumstances.

v) Hodge himself doesn't seem to think the electronic church ought to be a permanent substitute for public worship, but instead a necessary yet temporary compromise during the pandemic. And I myself am not adverse to reasonable compromises during the pandemic.

But that pushes the question back to what is a reasonable compromise? How temporary is temporary? Hodge's analysis suffers from the myopic fixation on risk factors, as if that's the only salient consideration, as if nothing happens in public worship to offset and compensate for risk factors, as if there are no blessings distinctive to public worship which will be sacrificed by suspending public worship. Why have public worship at all unless God assigns some distinctive supernatural blessings to public worship?

vi) As far as I can tell, Hodge has a very authoritarian view of church eldership. Ironically, he absolutizes 1C church eldership while relativizing 1C church fellowship. So he's quite selective about updating his theological principles. But surely it could be argued that 21C Christian laymen are in a very different situation in relation to church elders than 1C Christian laymen. In the 1C, illiteracy was widespread. Private copies of the Bible were rare. To some degree Christians could rely on living memory of the ministry of Christ. Many 1C elders were either eyewitnesses to the public ministry of Christ or disciples of the apostles. But that situation can't be replicated in the 21C.

By contrast, literacy is almost universal among 21C Christians in the West. Many are colleges graduates. Every layman can own a Bible. Every layman can read Bible commentaries and systematic theologies. They can read whatever the pastor can read. An elder doesn't have a unique source of theological information. Elders and laymen

are in the same boat. So why is Hodge's view of the lay/elder dynamic frozen in the circumstances of the 1C when he's so flexible about public worship?

Dying young and old

1. Cultural warrior Ben Shapiro got into hot water recently by suggesting that death of the elderly from COVID19 isn't equivalent to the death of 30-something from COVID19. Shapiro is not a bioethicist, so his assessment is intuitive. There are lots of critics who wish to indulge in moral grandstanding and lob accusations of hypocrisy rather than have a serious ethical discussion.

2. One issue is whether it's more tragic to die young or have a natural lifespan. For instance, Mickey Mantle died shortly after a liver transplant. The question was whether the donor liver was wasted on a poor candidate. Should that have gone to a patient in a better prospect of survival?

Dick Cheney's heart transplant at 71 was criticized. Should that go to someone with more life ahead of him?

Not life threatening, but criticisms were raised about Prince Philip receiving a hip replacement at 96.

3. Returning to (2), there's a sense in which the elderly have both more to lose and less to lose. On the one hand they have a cumulative lifetime of memories. A lifetime of experience.

On the other hand, the young miss out on their future. They never had those experiences.

4. There's also the issue of squandering the gift of life. Blowing opportunities. Can you forfeit the right to demand a second chance when your second chance denies someone else a first chance? Someone who through no fault of their own never had the opportunity you abused?

5. Then there's the question of a normal lifespan. Surgery, medication, and good diet can extend life beyond what would be a natural lifespan. Is that an entitlement or a windfall? Is that something we should get used to? Should we feel cheated if we don't have a normal lifespan? Or is that a boon?

6. Artificially prolonging life carries the risk of increasing exposure to raving diseases like Parkinson's and senile dementia. So there are tradeoffs. It's tempting fate.

7. From what I've read, the death toll for COVID-19 is inflated by classifying the cause of death as COVID-19 even when comorbidities were necessary contributors to death. It was the coronavirus in combination with preexisting or underlying conditions that pushed them over the edge.

8. From what I've read, we have the opposite of quarantine measures for the elderly. Rather, we round them up in retirement homes and nursing homes which are infection vectors. They die at high rates because they infect each other and have low resistance. So if this was really about protecting the elderly, they wouldn't be concentrated in nursing homes and retirement homes where the density of exposure and low resistance guarantees high fatalities

9. Death is inevitable. We can sometimes postpone the inevitable, but the ultimate issue is the significance of human life. Is this life all there is? What ultimately matters is not how long you live but what's in store for you when you die.

10. Theologically, it's an interesting question what constitutes a normal or natural lifespan. As I read Genesis, humans were naturally mortal, naturally subject to the

aging process, but they were created with the unrealized capacity for immortality. They'd naturally age and died, perhaps at a slower rate, but the potential for immortality wasn't automatic. Rather, that's a gift conferred by the tree of life. And for the dead in Christ, that's reversed by the resurrection of the just.

If it saves just one life

Hovering in the background of church closures is the view that I have no right to put you at risk. Related to this is the ethical assumption that restrictions are justified "if they save just one life".

But as a matter of public policy and private behavior, no one actually operates with the principle that a restriction is justified or morally mandatory if it saves just one life. To begin with, that's hopelessly unrealistic. Life contains inevitable tradeoffs. Overprotective policies that save some lives do so at the expense of taking other lives. Policies have unintended consequences. There are no cost-free solutions.

So what we're really dealing with is the sorites paradox or little-by-little arguments. There is no intrinsic cutoff. So it's a question of degree. How much risk is acceptable? How much is too much? How much is too little? There is no ideal answer. But we need to avoid certain extremes that lead to moral and practical paralysis of action.

Spectral koinonia

<https://theologicalsushi.blogspot.com/2020/05/are-we-disembodied-and-digitized-by.html>

It's good for people to think through this new territory and I understand the suspicion toward what is completely new. We should be suspicious. We should ask, Why is this new thing presented to us? Is it harmful or helpful?

I don't know what new thing Hodge has in mind. The electronic church isn't new. Jews and Christians have practiced physical fellowship for millennia. Christians have continued to worship during time of plague for centuries. Perhaps Hodge means his own understanding of the church.

No. I've tried to make this clear. The ideal is to be physically present with one another, but such is not the ideal because it is somehow more obedient to meet physically than meeting online in a time when the risk of physically meeting is assessed to be a greater threat than not meeting physically.

i) That, of course, is the stock excuse to suspend public worship. During times when it's deemed to be riskier to meet together than to avoid meeting together.

ii) One problem, as I recently noted, is that it's a matter of degree:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2020/04/if-it-saves-just-one-life.html>

How risky is too risky? Does Hodge think there should be a moratorium on public worship until we develop a vaccine?

As I noted in another post, the ancient church didn't practice social distancing:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2020/03/praying-with-sick.html>

It is ideal because it provides a basic human component to human health, as Steve mentions below. But this is a basic human need that all humans, believer or unbeliever, have. I just believe it should be primarily met with other believers when possible. So if the church can meet physically in the same place without this threat, it should. Furthermore, when the church does again meet physically, anyone not doing so would be in sin, since they are not in submission to the elders nor partaking in a church that is meeting in all of the aspects of ministry I mentioned before. Along those same lines, watching Youtube videos or listening to podcasts alone is not meeting as the church online. Fellowship and all it assumes, the meeting of needs, spiritual and physical, must remain as essential components of the assembly.

So is it essential or just ideal?

Steve hasn't referred to it with the word "sacrament." That is true. However, when he speaks as though there is something supernatural or mystical happening due to our physical presence in the same place, as though a

grace, a transformation, or a power is given to us through it, then this is, in fact, a sacramental idea. It isn't biblical, but you can see how tradition has shaped our thinking, even if subconsciously. We think there is something mystical happening when we physically meet in the same place. But what does physically meeting in the same place do that meeting through some other means not do?

i) To begin with, it's revealing that Hodge has no categories for what I describe, so he substitutes categories like "sacramental" and "mystical" that I don't use. Classic examples of sacramentalism would be baptismal regeneration, penance, and reception of the real body and blood of Christ in the eucharist. But I haven't used those examples because I don't subscribe to that kind of sacramentalism.

ii) Another kind of supernaturalism would be something like xenoglossy, miraculous healing, prophetic insight and foresight. But I haven't used those examples.

iii) Take more mundane examples like answer to prayer. An answer to prayer is supernatural in the sense that it's something that wouldn't naturally happen. God must grant the petition. It may not be supernatural in a spectacular or sensational sense, but it's not just something that was going happened whether or not the prayer request was made. Does Hodge think answered prayer is "mystical"?

Another example is sanctification. That's supernatural, but it can use the means of grace. Ordinary public worship can facilitate sanctification.

Now, I would argue for the sacramental nature of the assembly as God's temple, but as argued before, this is

not limited by what geographical area we occupy. The church is the temple when they do not meet. The temple is enlarged when they do meet so that sacred space is enlarged to a greater geographical area. God's life-giving glory/presence occupies and flows from sacred space. This is only magnified when meeting online, not diminished.

Two things here. 1. Steve seems to be suggesting that we are becoming digitized ourselves, disembodied. We aren't living in the Matrix. Everyone online is still embodied. Everyone meeting is still physical. I don't know how physical church gets for people, but I've never heard anyone make the argument that you did not go to church unless you physically touched someone. So what exactly does disembodied worship/fellowship look like?

It looks like the electronic church.

Have we been practicing it even when we do physically meet in the same room? Our physical brains engaged, our physical mouths take communion, our physical vocal chords sing, our physical tongues speak the truth. I'm one of the biggest adversaries toward gnostic thinking in our culture that I know of, but online worship is very physical and hardly disembodied.

He keeps missing the point of coming together for physical fellowship.

For some reason, Hodge is hung up on "geography". The primary principle is physical assembly. A common space is simply a necessary instrumental means to that end. It could be inside or outside, although weather can be a practical factor.

2. The problem with this line of argumentation is that it will eventually have to argue that Christ can't join us in our worship/fellowship in the way that He should because He is not meeting with us physically but through the Spirit. Likewise, those in heaven can have no real worship and fellowship with Christ because they are spirits and disembodied at the moment. If embodied worship is a necessity, then they all are deficient in it.

i) There's a sense in which heaven (i.e. the intermediate state) is deficient. It's a temporary stopgap until the resurrection of the just.

ii) However, the comparison is off because, to judge by visions of heaven in Scripture, it's like a collective dream where the saints have simulated bodies and interact with each other as if they were embodied agents.

What does "physical interaction" mean? I agree that what is devoid of technology is natural, but confusing what is natural with what is ultimately good or ideal has implications on numerous things. If Christians must shun technology for the natural as an ethical good then we must all reconsider becoming Amish. What is natural is normative by necessity in a non-technical age, not something that is ideal. I see no biblical argument in suggesting otherwise. We sing together, have face-to-face interactions with one another online, so the only thing missing is physical touch. Is that actually necessary for fellowship? Have you not fellowshiped or gone to church until you physically touch someone? Does that mean that men should never fellowship or worship with women? Certainly, in church history, unmarried men and women

did not touch one another in the assembly. I'm not sure that even married people did so. Does this mean they were all out of fellowship and had forsaken the assembly? Is it necessary to just touch one person or all of them? All joking aside, touch is a part of a physical need that Christians can provide for one another and should when they are able. It is not a necessary component of fellowship and worship though. If you are a leper, and it's not Jesus or an apostle with a healing gift you're reaching out for, please love people and keep your hands to yourself.

i) There are shutins who can't attend church. The electronic church will suffice for them, although they still require visitation ministry.

ii) Hodge trivialized the role of touch, but consider how much physical touch figured in the public ministry of Christ. Consider the role of touch in ecclesiastical prayer for healing:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2020/03/praying-with-sick.html>

iii) Embodied experience, embodied interaction are part of Christian worship, not in the first place because we're Christian, but because we're human, and so that's something we bring to the proceeding, whether inside church or outside church. That's just how God made us. It conditions our humanity.

iv) Physical interaction can mean many things. Eye-contact. Speaking face-to-face. Singing alongside each other. Praying in unison.

v) By Hodge/s logic, a married couple might as well conduct their marital life entirely through cellphones. They could raise their kids entirely through cellphones. No physical interaction required. Just the electronic voice and the image on the screen. Have domestic robots provide for the physical necessities while we communicate with our kids through cellphones.

That's really not my argument at all. It was normative because it was the only way a church could meet together.

That just begs the question. Were conjugal relations never normative but just a temporary stopgap until we developed artificial insemination?

Nowadays you don't need to hug your kids or hold their hands or take them in your arms or give them piggyback rides if you have domestic robots can do that. You don't need to read to your kids. A computer can do that.

By Hodge's logic, there was never any intrinsic necessity in Christians meeting together for worship. Why bother with house-churches or the agape feast?

Now that isn't the case. If by "normative," Steve means "an essential component of the command" then my entire post refuted that idea. If it was normative then none of these things could be done by proxy, and they were even in the early church.

That's a non sequitur. The fact that some things can be done by proxy doesn't mean that's a permanent alternative. Is bottle-feeding preferable to breastfeeding? Is it preferable for able-bodied teenagers to use electric skateboards instead of using their own muscles to walk?

This is a new technology which allows for it in our day, which is really why what I am saying is so shocking to people. It simply is unfamiliar, and therefore, uncomfortable, not disobedient.

There's nothing unfamiliar or shocking about the electronic church. The question at issue is whether that should be treated as a normative substitute for physical fellowship.

Maybe I have an oddly Holy Ghostly view. LOL. Here we see again this idea that if one is communicating through video he is somehow disembodied. Does everyone who speaks to someone through a camera go out of their bodies? Is Steven suggesting again that some mystical thing happens through the physical body being present in the same geographical location with other physical bodies? Certainly, chemical things happen. This is why people like going to places where there are lots of other people. It's why they like visiting friends and family. There is something very natural that happens, but I don't see anything supernatural about it that only believers can fill.

Why did God institute public worship in the first place unless he reserves certain kinds of blessings for public worship? It's striking how Hodge trivializes the importance of the body in social interactions. Does he subscribe to remote control parenting where domestic robots do the hands-on stuff, the physical contact, while parents and children only interact via computers and cameras?

Again, is the communion digitized? Are we all eating gigabytes? No. We're all eating physical bread and drinking physical wine while we meet and see one another's faces as an elder conducts the communion

ceremony. It remains a very physical thing we are doing with our physical bodies. We are all still connected because of the digital media.

This reminds me of Televangelists who instruct viewers to put their hands on the TV screen to receive healing.

Preaching has always been non-physical. The non-physical word is the medium through which we worship God and are transformed as His church.

Preaching has always been physical. I think what he means is that the message is abstract.

Sure, but my argument wasn't about the economics of the localized church either. It was solely about whether believers are being obedient to their ministry by meeting online in order to protect the church's members from plague.

But Hodge doesn't seem to think there's any spiritual benefit to physical fellowship. Certainly nothing to outweigh the alleged physical risk.

I never suggested expert opinion was monolithic, but the people equipped to disagree with experts are other experts, not some armchair experts who read a bunch of articles on the internet and watched Youtube videos that are contrarian to expert opinions.

i) But Hodge is very selective and one-sided about the experts he listens to. He's totally sold on the social distancing model. He shrugs off the herd immunity model. Or discriminating quarantine based on individuals who test positive.

ii) And what if the projections of the experts appear to be seriously inflated? The infection rate tells you something about the fatality rate. The problem as I understand it is an inverse relation between the percentage of infected in relation to the percentage of fatalities. The higher the "exponential" transmission rate combined with most of the infected population not developing life-threatening conditions means the fatality rate is diminished/diluted in relation to the percentage of the population that's infected. If you have a higher percentage infected, but that doesn't correlate with comparable death toll, then the pathogen is less dangerous.

Digitized communion

<https://theologicalsushi.blogspot.com/2020/05/my-argument-unaddressed.html>

I'm not familiar with Steve's argument as to why we must physically meet in the same room, but if he has summarized it above as a distinction between corporate and private/family worship then he did not read my post carefully, as I am not arguing for family or private worship. I am arguing for corporate worship through the means of online media.

But is online media a permanent alternative to corporate worship? Is that what's meant by corporate worship?

If he is arguing that something supernatural happens from us being physically in a room together then he also didn't read it carefully because I argue that this is not why we meet from a biblical standpoint. He can believe that physicality is sacramental, but that isn't biblical.

i) I haven't referred to the sacraments or sacramental grace. I'm Zwinglian. I haven't suggested that physicality is sacramental.

ii) However, human beings aren't angels. We're embodied agents. Embodied souls. Even the intermediate state is a temporary stopgap.

We are physical beings by design. Physical interaction is a natural component of corporate worship. In person

fellowship. The role of touch in human relations. Face-to-face conversation. Singing together. Praying together.

iii) It's not necessarily about meeting in the same room, but meeting together. Weather permitting, it could be an out-door event, although buildings provide shelter from the inclement elements.

iv) By Hodge's logic, to assemble in public worship was never a normative feature of Christian (or Jewish?) worship? There's no obligation or necessity for Christians to ever meet together in physical worship. There are no supernatural blessings that God reserves for public worship. It could all be cubical and disembodied.

There are situations where representatives communicated through letter rather than in person. In some cases that's a practical necessity. And it can have the advantage of a permanent verbal record for posterity. But worship and instruction are distinct, if often related.

v) Hodge has an oddly ghostly view of Christian worship, as if embodied agency is generally expendable or superfluous. Simulated physical fellowship. Spectral worship. Digitized communion.

My argument has little to do with what people do with work and the economy because it is strictly an argument about the nature of the church and whether it is a necessity to meet physically due to whether an inherent component of physical presence exists in the practice of corporate worship. I wasn't arguing why everyone should stay at home and be unemployed. The cost-risk assessment when it comes to church is an issue for each church to think about independently of the economic issue in the larger culture.

Indefinite lockdowns will cause churches to go broke. They will never reopen. Moreover, Tech Giants are cracking down on the electronic church.

It's simply foolish to speak as though one is an expert who understands how the data should be read, or that he or she even has the right data.

Expert opinion isn't monolithic. At the same time, expert opinion can become insular and ingrown.

I don't trust "experts" on the co-ed military or indoctrinating students about transgenderism or obliterating the distinction between boys' teams and girls' teams. I don't delegate that to the "experts". Credulity is not intellectual or theological virtue for Christians to cultivate. That's not something we're entitled to delegate to unaccountable experts driven by a secular social agenda.

The Plague, by Camus

Camus wrote a novel about a plague. In the novel Camus poses a dilemma: if a plague is sent by God, is it impious to fight the plague? Are we fighting God by fighting a heaven-sent plague?

Since the world is currently experiencing a pandemic, this is a good time to revisit the proposed dilemma.

1. God sends adversity to change people. It can be designed to change them in different ways.

Historically, for instance, plagues were an opportunity for Christians to practice sacrificial compassion. The pagan response to plagues was to cast the sick outside and leave them to fend for themselves. As a result, the fatality rate was extremely high for plagues, because in many cases, the sick would have been able to survive if someone cared for them and nursed them through the illness.

By contrast, Christians, emboldened by the hope of heaven, practiced heroic compassion by taking in the sick and nursing them. Christians took the risk of contracting a fatal infection. Not only did this save many lives, but it was also a powerful witness to the pagan world. Todd Wood discussed this in a recent video:

<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2020/04/neandertal-twine-and-covid-19.html>

2. Sometimes God sends adversity for adversity to be overcome. Opposing the adversity isn't contrary God's will; to the contrary, the purpose of adversity, in such cases, is

to pose a challenge to be surmounted. Take the cultivation of soul-building virtues.

3. Sometimes God sends adversity to overcome us. For instance, God striking Nebuchadnezzar with lycanthropy to humble him.

4. What these examples of different kinds of change share in common is that God doesn't send adversity for us to do nothing in response. We're not to passively submit to adversity in the sense that we don't allow it to make any difference, but just sit there and take it without letting it have any effect on us. No, we're supposed to interact with the adversity. We're supposed to grapple with the adversity. So the dilemma posed by Camus is a false dilemma.