



**ARTICLE**

# **What does a Christian owe their neighbor in a time of crisis?**

Martin Luther and an ethic of responsible love

**BY ANDREW T. WALKER**

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Like many around me, I have thought about what is required of the Christian in a time of national crisis, much like the one presented to us with COVID-19.

I recalled an essay in the collected works of Martin Luther titled, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague” that aims at just this question. In characteristic Luther flair, it is filled with practical advice and theological reflection on what a Christian should do in a time of plague or pestilence. The essay can be read in

full by visiting [here \(http://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf\)](http://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf). I recommend reading it not only for the sage advice it offers, but to understand that our present fears have been met before by an age that precedes us.

Luther addresses almost every question relevant to our present concerns: Who should stay? Who can go? Should one use medicine? What about hospitals? Should one avoid crowds? Should one throw caution to the wind and just continue acting normally?

## **An ethic of responsible love**

My purpose is not to rehash all of what Luther writes. Rather, I want to summarize what Luther seems to be calling for as a general principle to inform our understanding: *An ethic of responsible love*. An ethic of this approach is why Luther can simultaneously insist that one should serve the sick to the best of their ability using wisdom, yet, where one has no obligations, they are right to abstain from crowds.

Luther insists that one should neither fear nor disregard. He says that a Christian should trust God, exercise godly wisdom, and above all, act sacrificially and responsibly toward your neighbor. This is why he counsels utilizing the best practices available to prevent a disease's spread while acknowledging that our fate is in God's hands and we are called above all, to a concern for those around us out of our service to Christ.

Luther does not command one action for all persons. Here is one quote from Luther that I think captures the heart of his advice:

Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together (as previously indicated) so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another [...] our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor.

[...]

We must pray against every form of evil and guard against it to the best of our ability in order not to act contrary to God, as was previously explained. If it be God's will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us. Everybody must take this to heart: first of all, if he feels bound to remain where death rages in order to serve his neighbor, let him commend himself to God and say, "Lord, I am in thy hands; thou hast kept me here; thy will be done. I am thy lowly creature. Thou canst kill me or preserve me in this pestilence in the same way as if I were in fire, water, drought, or any other danger." If a man is free, however, and can escape, let him commend himself and say, "Lord God, I am weak and fearful. Therefore I am running away from evil and am doing what I can to protect myself against it. I am nevertheless in thy hands in this danger as in any other which might overtake me. Thy will be done. My flight alone will not succeed of itself because calamity and harm are everywhere. Moreover, the devil never sleeps. He is a murderer from the beginning [John 8:44] and tries everywhere to instigate murder and misfortune.

In the same way we must and we owe it to our neighbor to accord him the same treatment in other troubles and perils, also. If his house is on fire, love compels me to run to help him extinguish the flames. If there are enough other people around to put the fire out, I may either go home or remain to help. If he falls into the water or into a pit I dare not turn away but must hurry to help him as best I can. If there are others to do it, I am released. If I see that he is hungry or thirsty, I cannot ignore him but must offer food and drink, not considering whether I would risk impoverishing myself by doing so. A man who will not help or support others unless he can do so without affecting his safety or his property will never help his neighbor. He will always reckon with the possibility that doing so will bring some disadvantage and damage, danger and loss. No neighbor can live alongside another without risk to his safety, property, wife, or child. He must run the risk that fire or some other accident will start in the neighbor's house and destroy him bodily or deprive him of his goods, wife, children, and all he has.

Notice that Luther says we should guard against a disease's spread to the best of our ability while at the same time look for ways to serve our neighbor. Luther is calling us to an ethic of responsible love.

We are obligated to not cast off the wisdom made available to us that would chasten the disease's spread. We are called first to exercise watchful care over each space that has called us. We act this way out of a deferential concern for our neighbor—to serve them. For some, love will mean exercising the proper judgment in serving those who might be quarantined by making a grocery run on their behalf. For others with particularly vulnerable medical conditions, the

loving thing to do for your family is to remain isolated—*on their behalf*. What underwrites each of these responses is love mediated through responsible action.

Right now, there's the temptation to moralize or judge others for how each responds to the coronavirus emergency. I've seen churches criticized for suspending services, as though doing so means pastors are operating on the basis of fear, not faith. Please, do not do that. Luther in fact criticizes those who take brazen disregard for their lives and the lives of those around them. Be cautious and assume the best. Pastors are making excruciating decisions to best serve their congregations through a myriad of concerns and matrixes. Each person (and church) is processing matters differently using their individual and collective wisdom.

If we are to call on each other to do anything, let us call on each other to pursue an ethic of loving responsibility and do our best to understand what that means for each and every person and each and every church. Scoffing cynicism and careless disregard for government instruction runs contrary not only to Luther, but to Scripture's ordination of civil government.

I close with a final quote from Luther's essay that brilliantly captures an ethic of responsible love:

Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city.

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