



ARTICLE

How should Christians engage with their unbelieving neighbors during COVID-19?

BY NEAL HARDIN

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The COVID-19 outbreak is without doubt a culture-defining moment in our present time. Much of our society and our routines have become uprooted. For Christians, we can tangibly see this in how we have changed meeting together with our local church bodies. Much of our interaction with one another has moved online for the time being.

These things are no less true for our unbelieving neighbors. The same inconveniences that are affecting us are affecting them too, whether that's having children at home unexpectedly, losing a job or being put on leave, not being able to interact with friends and family, going to the grocery store and being unable to find basic items, etc.

With the unique challenges of the coronavirus come unique opportunities for Christians to engage with their unbelieving neighbors.

First, Christians have the unique opportunity “to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

In light of any tragedy, when people's felt needs are greatest, the world around us looks for answers to those gnawing questions that they might otherwise ignore. This may come in the form of questions such as, “Why would God allow this to happen?” (Here is one [article](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/problem-of-evil-is-problem-for-everyone/) (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/problem-of-evil-is-problem-for-everyone/>) on the “problem of evil” question). However, the questions could even be much simpler and open-ended, like, “What should I do? What should I think about this?”

Maybe God will even open the door for evangelism more directly when your friend, neighbor, or co-worker asks, “What do you think about these events? What is Christianity's response to events like these?” These are the kinds of questions we should be ready to answer in order that we might be able to point to Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of the gospel.

One aspect of 1 Peter 3:15 that I want to point out is how it mentions hope (“the hope that is in you”). During challenges such as the coronavirus, it is easy for the world to lose hope because many people do not place hope in anything beyond this earthly life. So, when our earthly life seems to fall apart, hope can seem to disappear right along with it. Again, it is the gospel which gives us hope. Paul wrote that, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). How true this would be! But our hope is not merely in this life only, but for all eternity. Paul writes in Titus 2:11-14:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Because of the gospel, we have hope in the future return of Christ to rule, reign, and restore all things, where there will no longer be death or pain or suffering (Rev. 21:4-5). We have hope and security in our eternal life in Christ.

With the unique challenges of the coronavirus come unique opportunities for Christians to engage with their unbelieving neighbors.

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The amazing thing about having hope for the future is that it gives us hope and purpose in the present as well. We do not merely sit idly by and wait for Jesus to return. Having a future hope gives us purpose today that should motivate us

to be zealous for good works, as Paul wrote to Titus. This leads me to the second opportunity Christians have in light of our present circumstances.

Second, Christians have a unique opportunity to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31).

With unique challenges come unique needs. I've already discussed the spiritual needs, especially the need for hope. Yet, we are also presented with the opportunity to meet people's tangible needs, whether physical or emotional.

This can take different forms:

- Do you have an elderly neighbor or someone who is part of one of the higher risk categories for the coronavirus? Offer to go grocery shopping for them so that they don't have to risk exposing themselves to a large group of people.
- With all the social distancing that is going on, people (especially single individuals, those without families, and the elderly who are being quarantined in care facilities) are more likely to feel lonely and isolated. Thankfully, we live in an age where we have several alternate means of communication. Whether you reach out by phone, text, social media, or meet one-on-one (if circumstances permit), let people know that they are loved and cherished.
- Are you single yourself? Do you know parents who are overwhelmed with having their children at home 24/7? Perhaps you can help watch them for a few hours.
- Is someone you know without a job or struggling financially during this crisis? Be generous with your earthly wealth, and, as Jesus commanded, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when

it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9).

Of course, in all these suggestions, use wisdom and discernment. One of the greatest ways we can love our neighbor is by not spreading the coronavirus itself.

Above all else, pray and ask for the Spirit’s leading. Perhaps he wants you to do something else which I have not mentioned. Be obedient to his leading so that you can be a blessing to a watching world and so bring glory to Christ.

Conclusion

We should always remember that in light of the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves, the gospel message remains the same and is sufficient for our needs, as it has been sufficient for the church in its 2,000-year history. Let’s remember that the church has dealt with the challenges of disease and pestilence already (Read this [letter \(https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf\)](https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf) from Martin Luther who had dealt with a plague). As before, now in our present time, we should let the gospel point toward the hope found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and compel us to love our neighbor and meet their needs so that they might ask, “What is the reason for the hope that is in you?”



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