

Responding with Faith not Fear

God is in control. The Coronavirus, the cancellations, the financial downturn—none of this is outside of his control. In fact, he is using it all to draw us closer to him (Romans 8:28).

The great challenge for Christians living during this pandemic is to live “as” Christians during this pandemic. As Christians we are called to live every moment of our lives in constant dependence upon our Lord. This means living by faith, which is the opposite of fear. The commands “do not worry” and “do not fear” are the most repeated commands in Scripture. When God repeats something, he really wants us to get the point! The point is that, although we will continually be tempted to fear, we do not have to give in to that fear, indeed we are commanded not to give into that fear, because we have a God who is faithful in every circumstance.

Not only is God in control of everything, but he loves us and everything he does is for our good. We do not need to fear anything. And yet, while we are commanded not to worry, we are also commanded to act wisely. We must learn to walk the middle path of wisdom. We must avoid the extremes of living fearfully, on the one hand, or living foolishly on the other. In the context of the Coronavirus, living fearfully means overreacting to the present threat and living foolishly means to underreact to the present threat. But how do we do this? What is a biblical response to this present pandemic?

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, was faced with a similar question in his day. Ten years after the start of the Reformation a deadly plague broke out in Germany. One of Luther’s fellow pastors, Johann Hess, wrote to him asking whether one may flee from a deadly plague. Luther responded with pastoral wisdom. He said that pastors have a duty to minister to the souls of men at all times and especially when their time on the earth seems to be nearing the end, for “when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death.” Luther reminds us that “if it be God’s will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us.” It is faith in God, not faith in our own protective acts, that is most important. Therefore, let us commend ourselves 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.”

Luther points out that fear is always stirred up by the devil, for “he is such a bitter, knavish devil that he not only unceasingly tries to slay and kill, but also takes delight in making us deathly afraid, worried, and apprehensive so that we should regard dying as horrible and have no rest or peace all through our life.” However, “because we know that it is the devil’s game to induce such fear and dread, we should in turn minimize it, take such courage as to spite and annoy him, and send those terrors right back to him. And we should arm ourselves with this answer to the devil: ‘Get away, you devil, with your terrors! Just because you hate it, I’ll spite you by going the more quickly to help my sick neighbor.’”

We also have this great comfort—that even in the midst of sickness we are cared for by the Great Physician. Wrote Luther of the Christian, “God himself shall be his attendant and his physician, too. What an attendant he is! What a physician! Friend, what are all the physicians, apothecaries [pharmacists], and attendants in comparison to God...What do all kinds of pestilence or devils

Responding with Faith not Fear

mean over against God, who binds and obliges himself to be our attendant and physician? What would it avail you if all physicians and the entire world were at your service, but God were not present? Again, what harm could overtake you if the whole world were to desert you and no physician would remain with you, but God would abide with you with his assurance? Do you not know that you are surrounded as by thousands of angels who watch over you?" Therefore, we need not worry when we face uncertain circumstances, because we trust in the all-powerful, all-good and all-loving God.

However, trusting in God does not mean tempting God. Faith is not foolishness. God created us as reasonable creatures, and we must use our reason to think through our present circumstances and act with godly prudence. Luther, referring to those who foolishly took no precaution during the plague, wrote, "They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them, he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.... It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have. He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over."

When deciding how to respond to this pandemic we must take advantage of all the resources God has given us, including our reason and the authorities God has placed over us, since all authority comes from God (Romans 13:1). The government and medical professionals have given us clear directives and it would be foolish not to listen to the wise advice of those God has both appointed to these positions and gifted to serve in these positions.

The question we need to ask when making any decision is how does this decision align with the law of God? The law is summarized in love for God and love for neighbor. What is the most loving thing we can do in any situation? Should we gather for worship, as we are commanded to do by the fourth commandment, during this pandemic? Only if it does not put our neighbor at risk, for that would violate the sixth commandment. The fourth commandment is important (God is to be worshipped) but the sixth commandment is equally important (the life of our neighbor, who is created in the image of God, is to be protected from harm).

In conclusion, there is nothing to fear, because God is in control. Since we are Christians, let us live as Christians, not fearfully or foolishly but with godly wisdom and love. As Christians we have three great God-given opportunities during this pandemic. First, we have the opportunity to have our faith tested and to grow in our trust in God. Second, we have the opportunity to demonstrate our faith before a world that is living in fear. Third, we have the opportunity to show our love to God our neighbor by looking out for the health and well-being of those created in God's image.

Pastor Campbell