

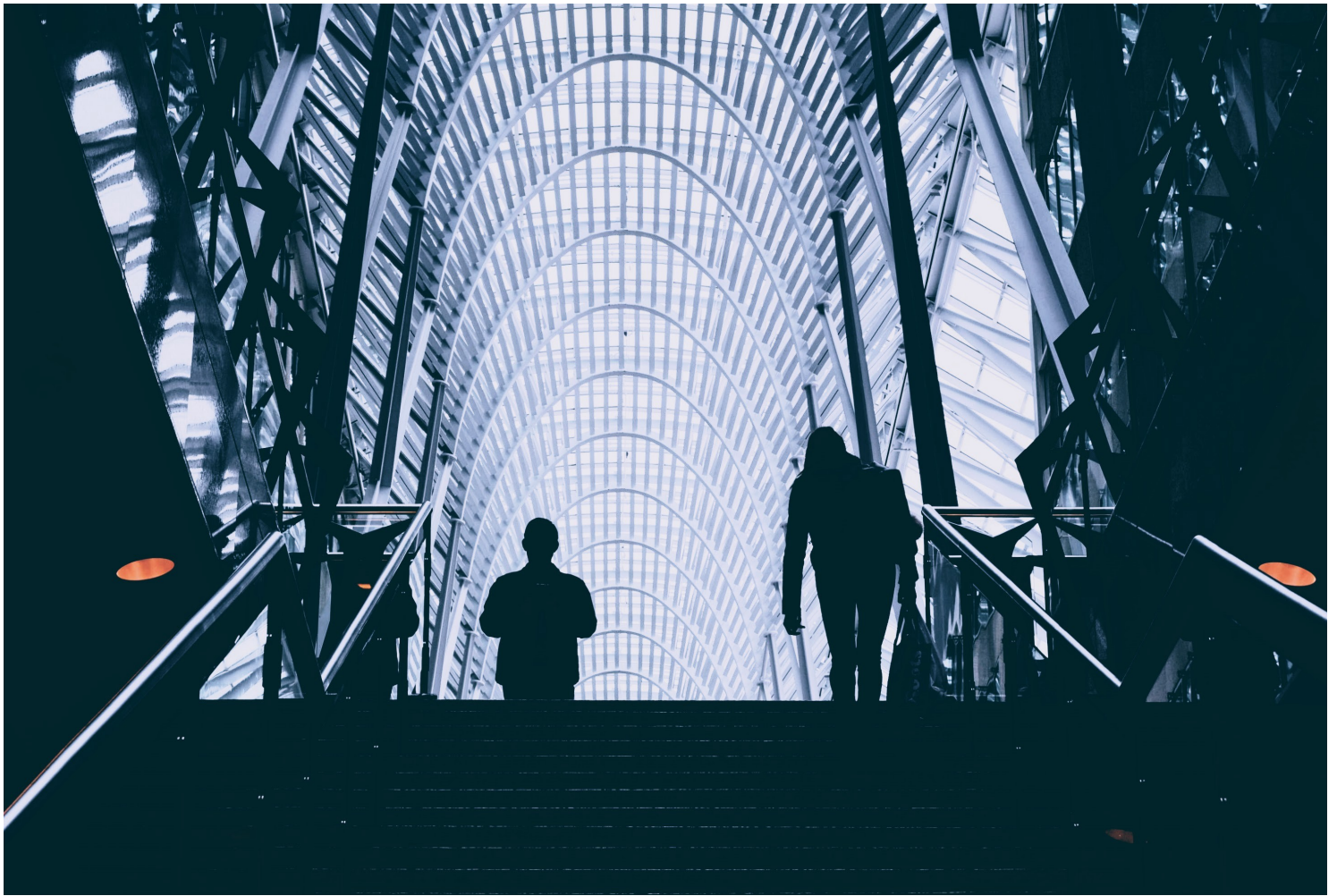
# Love in the Time of Coronavirus

A guide for Christian leaders.



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At this extraordinary moment, local leaders — people who lead groups of 10 to 1,000 people — have perhaps the greatest opportunity to shape culture in the United States that they have ever had. This is a guide for those of us who are Christian leaders at this moment.

Shaping culture is a matter of changing “the horizons of possibility.” Culture tells us, in countless direct and indirect ways, what we are able to do, and what we are not able to do. And leaders play an outsized role in moving those horizons, especially at times of disruption and crisis. They play that role through both symbolic action — what they say, how they say it, even how they hold themselves and respond to others — and through decision-making on behalf of others.

A leader’s responsibility, as circumstances around us change, is to speak, live, and make decisions in such a way that the horizons of possibility move towards *shalom*, flourishing for everyone in our sphere of influence, especially the vulnerable.

With the arrival of COVID-19 in the United States, we need to change the horizons of possibility extremely rapidly in two fundamental ways:

1. *We need to change norms of social interaction literally overnight* to minimize the transmission of the virus. I will outline below what I believe are the most important steps, based on the best public information about SARS-CoV-2 (the virus) and COVID-19 (the disease). These steps feel drastic. Crucially, implementing them early enough will require tremendous leadership because they will *not* initially seem necessary to most of the people we lead. When dealing with pandemics, *the measures that will actually make a difference always need to be taken sooner than we think.*
2. *We need to redirect social energy from anxiety and panic to love and preparation.* This crisis presents an extraordinary opportunity to fortify small communities of love and care for our neighbors. That will only happen if we lead in a way that reduces fear, increases faith, and reorients all of us from self-protection to serving others

There are several reasons that now is an almost uniquely important moment for *local leaders*. We have become accustomed to culture being shaped “somewhere else” — by elected officials, especially national ones; by celebrities; by media. But we are dealing with a virus that is transmitted person to person, in small and large groups of actual

people. This is not a virtual crisis — it is a local, embodied one. Local, embodied responses will quite literally mean life and death for people.

Governors, mayors, and leaders of major businesses and institutions all have a part to play, but to an amazing degree the choices made by churches, small businesses, and nonprofit organizations will have a huge effect. This past week an outbreak in Massachusetts has been largely traced to a single meeting of about 175 people sponsored by the firm Biogen. Countless Christian leaders are involved in decision-making about groups of that size. We have decisions to make, and horizons to shape, which leaders at other levels cannot.

Most of all, while government at all levels can enforce a certain amount of behavior change, for example through quarantines and “lockdowns,” *it is almost impossible for coercive authority to increase people’s capacity for love and service to others*. This is the role of faith and above all, we believe, the Christian faith. Equipping Christians for moments like this is the role of Christian leaders.

The recommendations that follow are the result of about a month’s worth of intensive study of the medical and public health information about COVID-19 that has been available to the public. I have no specialist-level insight, nor any non-public sources. But my calling as a journalist, which was my profession for 15 years, is to make complicated things clear, quickly. (The length of this essay shows just how complicated the current moment is.)

If you have access to more specialized counsel, by all means make use of it. Many aspects of this crisis are highly localized, and every aspect will change on a daily basis for the foreseeable future. It also goes without saying that we should obey the directives of public officials in our area. But I hope this can be a general guide to swift and decisive leadership based on love and faith.

This essay has four parts. Feel free to skip to the one that is most relevant for you:

1. **What is happening?** An overview of the most important things for Christian leaders, anywhere in the United States, to know about SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19.

2. **What should we communicate?** A list of the most helpful messages others can hear from us — and the most harmful messages as well.
3. **What decisions should we make?** Recommendations for decisions about large gatherings, medium-size gatherings for Christian worship, and small groups meeting in households.
4. **What can we hope for?** A few reflections on the genuine possibility that our decisions in the next few weeks could reshape the practice of Christian faith in our nation and, God being merciful, lead to a revival of the church of Jesus Christ in America.

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## 1. What is happening?

The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, that presumably originated in China has arrived in the United States. Cases of COVID-19, the disease the virus causes, have been documented all over the country. It is highly contagious, though not extremely contagious like measles or Ebola — hand washing and “social distancing” can make a huge difference in its ultimate transmission rate. As of this writing on March 12, there are many places in the US that have not documented “community spread” of cases. But the evidence of other countries where the virus arrived in previous weeks suggests that *everyone, anywhere in the continental US, should assume that the virus is present in their community even if there have not yet been any reports of disease.*

COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, is *considerably more deadly than ordinary flu*, especially for vulnerable populations: the elderly and those with existing medical conditions. They are generally dying of bilateral interstitial pneumonia, the signature worst-case outcome of COVID-19. Support of patients with this late-stage disease requires immense amounts of specialized equipment and medical expertise. At the same time, the disease can be mild in many people, even unnoticed. But this actually increases the risk to others, as “asymptomatic” carriers can transmit the virus to the highly vulnerable without realizing they are infectious.

Therefore there is a serious risk beyond the virus's simple fatality rate: *its potential to overwhelm our health care system*, leading to many more otherwise preventable deaths from COVID-19 and other causes. In northern Italy, a region very much like the US in many ways (wealthy and culturally just as Teutonic as Latin), the health system, roughly comparable in resources to our own, is utterly overwhelmed. This is in spite of unprecedented quarantines, first at the city level, then at the regional, and now (with the results yet to be seen) the national level. Doctors in northern Italy report this week that they are resorting to wartime-style triage — simply not treating many who come to the hospital because they are too sick. This also means that people with “ordinary” medical issues, including critical ones, not related to the virus, may not receive even the most basic care.

*Public health leadership in the United States is decentralized.* This means that different metropolitan areas and regions will respond in different ways, and be affected differently. In the 1918–1920 Spanish Flu, St. Louis officials acted to shut down public life within days of the first reported cases; Philadelphia officials waited for more than a week and green-lighted a massive public parade in the meantime. In the end, Philadelphia had more than twice as high a death rate from flu as St. Louis. We can expect a similar range of outcomes in different parts of the United States.

*All this is having significant economic effects*, which are already hitting low-wage and hourly workers hard, especially in the hospitality and travel industries. It is likely we will enter an economic recession, or worse. Without question we are in for extended financial turmoil and real-world economic pain. Furthermore, our grocery stores and pharmacies are parts of global supply chain networks that may be significantly disrupted as different countries respond to the virus with work, trade, and travel stoppages, as the entire country of Italy did the evening of March 10.

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## 2. What should we communicate?

In shaping culture, nothing matters as much as action that carries symbolic weight. Sometimes this symbolic action takes the form of concrete steps, but sometimes it is simply well-chosen words and images. It may seem like our most urgent need is to make decisions, and of course we cannot neglect the decisions that are ours to make. But just as important for moving the horizons of possibility are what we say, how we say it, and even how we appear to others as we say these things. The way we communicate *will shape the choices others make*, and how they approach their own decision-making.

This means that all of us have a primary responsibility as leaders, as far as it depends on us, to be well-rested, soaked in prayer and contemplation, and free of personal fear and anxiety. We need to start and end each day as children of our heavenly Father, friends of Jesus, and grateful recipients of the Holy Spirit. We need to pray for genuine spiritual authority, rooted in the love that casts out fear, to guard and govern our lives as we lead, and trust that God will make up what is lacking in our own frail hearts, minds, and bodies.

Out of this basic posture we will communicate specific messages. Here are the messages that I judge to be the most harmful, and the most helpful, from Christian leaders right now.

### **We should not say, "Everything's going to be fine," or even, "You're going to be okay."**

This is not true even on the most normal day. Every human being will die; practically every person will endure terrible suffering of one kind or another. These phrases can be appropriate when used by a parent comforting a small child, but they are not the language of mature Christian comfort.

In particular, most people we interact with are going to experience a great deal of distress in the coming days. Almost certainly they will *witness* distress, through the media and in person. We should be preparing them for real difficulty, and the truth that God will be present in whatever difficulty they encounter.

### **We should not say to fearful people, "You're overreacting."**

It is absolutely true that people immersed in media of any kind react to news and rumors in unhelpful ways. But meeting anxiety with an accusation of overreacting is not likely to help. The biggest problem in most of the United States as I write is that many people, and many institutions, are not reacting quickly enough.

What is almost certainly true, however, is that our reactions are misplaced — that we are reacting in ways that do not increase our trust in God and our love of neighbor. And that is why we need to deliver several messages with all the confidence we can:

### **We should say, "Love is the reason we are changing our behavior."**

The reason to alter our practices, especially the way we gather (see below), is *not* self-protection. For one thing, in the case of this particular virus, if individuals are young and healthy, infection may pose not much more threat than the ordinary seasonal flu. The change is needed because our vulnerable neighbors — those of any age with compromised immune systems, and those over 70 years old — are at grave risk. One of the basic axioms of the Christian life is that the "strong" must consider the "weak" (see Rom. 15). We are making these choices not to minimize our own risk, but to protect others from risk.

At the same time, some people are taking steps, sometimes extreme ones, to protect themselves and their families, often out of terrible anxiety, and this will likely increase in the coming days. This is not a Christian posture. We do not change our behavior out of fear. In a very different context, the Apostle Paul wrote, "I want you to be free of anxieties" so that his community could serve the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32). We prepare for our expected needs, and others', so that we can be free of anxieties and serve freely when the time comes.

It is entirely possible to prepare, even to prepare urgently, out of love. Rapid decisions to prepare are not panic unless they are accompanied by aggression and anxiety. Christians *should* be preparing — urgently in some cases — but not panicking.

### **We should say, "Prepare for trouble."**

This is *not* the same as saying, "Worry about trouble," or a violation of Jesus' command in Matthew 6 not to give thought for tomorrow. Our model here is Jesus,

who warned his disciples over and over that their worst case scenario was going to come true. “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected . . . , and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly” (Mark 8:31–32). Looking beyond his own fate, he also predicted the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem by Roman forces even as he wept over the city’s refusal to listen to his message of peace (Luke 19:41–43).

On the night before he faced the ultimate tragedy and disaster of Golgotha and the Cross, none of his disciples had any real idea what was coming in the days and years ahead (tradition says that all eleven original apostles died as martyrs). So even as he spoke words of comfort, Jesus made clear that his friends would suffer: “In the world you will have tribulation — but take heart, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

There is no reason to expect COVID-19 to be the “end of the world” in any sense. Instead it falls in the large category of events that Jesus also prepared his disciples for, the “wars and rumors of wars” that would *not* mean the end of the world (Matthew 24:6).

So we should help those we lead prepare for trouble, facing whatever today and tomorrow bring, without anxiety. The best definition I’ve ever heard of anxiety is “imagining the future without Jesus in it.” When we realize that Jesus is present today and will be present tomorrow, we can be set free from worry. We need to teach and practice the Christian disciplines of prayer, praise, petition, and lament that help us see Jesus in our sufferings, both real and anticipated, and place our trust in him.

### **Above all we should say, “Do not be afraid.”**

In some ways this is the first word of the Christian life. Certainly it is the first word angels speak in the New Testament. We do not need to be afraid of anything — that will be true even when we are on our own death bed. The only thing to fear, as Jesus said, is the one who can cast body and soul into hell. But we have been rescued from that fear, and having been rescued there is truly nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

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### 3. What decisions do we need to make?

Simply put, anyone, anywhere in the United States, who has responsibility for any group of people needs to change the way those groups gather, immediately and drastically. The steps required would have been unthinkable even a few weeks ago. Now they are essential if we are to protect those vulnerable to COVID-19 and the health system that will need to care for them. My summary recommendations are these:

*Gathering for worship should continue, after whatever initial cancellations are needed to put new protocols in place, but ideally in numbers less than 100 and with dramatic precautions that few people in the United States have ever seen.*

*Other gatherings of more than 100 people scheduled less than four weeks away should be canceled immediately.*

*Small groups can continue to meet and work together. But we must make significant modifications to the way we interact with one another in our homes and workplaces.*

There is one huge difference between Christian leaders and the leaders of colleges, the NCAA, businesses, and others who have already made drastic decisions: *Many of our groups need to continue meeting* in some form. These groups are essential for people's spiritual, emotional, and in the deepest sense bodily health.

This is true above all of worship. "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24–25). The author of these words, who lived in a world that knew the danger of plagues very well (though not the exact mechanism), who urged his congregation to meet even when they expected an imminent Day of Judgment, would hardly have said that we ought to stop meeting for worship under the conditions of an infectious disease.

Worship is essential for human flourishing. For one thing, we are all worshipping something all the time. The idolatries that fester, even in a well-disciplined Christian heart, when we are confronted with nonstop news of terror and rumors, can only really be put to rest when we gather with others to “set forth God’s praise, hear his Holy Word, and ask, for ourselves and others, those things that are necessary for our life and salvation” (The Book of Common Prayer).

In particular, most Christians believe that the sacrament of Communion or Holy Eucharist is the very real presence of Christ. Even traditions that place less emphasis on the bread and cup see the church as the Body of Christ, his real presence on earth. We need his presence more than ever.

### **So worship should continue, ideally in groups of under 100, but with dramatic new protocols enforced.**

There is a very good guide to this topic by Lyman Stone, a Christian missionary in Hong Kong who is also a professional demographer with deep training in statistics and fields adjacent to public health. Rather than repeating his advice here, I would refer leaders of church worship services to his guide: *Prepare Your Church for COVID*

In essence, leaders must enforce total adherence to disinfection protocols and create the conditions for effective social distancing before, during, and after worship services. This will be extremely difficult for larger churches to implement and they need to consider alternative worship schedules that will allow for smaller groups. But if the proper protocols are in place and the numbers are manageable, both worship and fellowship can continue in churches even in the midst of an epidemic.

*I am adding this paragraph at 6:40 EDT on March 12, and I have slightly edited the corresponding summary of this point above: Please understand, until your church is able and willing to fully implement Stone’s very demanding and difficult protocol, I cannot recommend that you meet for public worship services. The best course is to suspend services until you can comply with it.*

Another helpful manual and planning template specifically for churches, with in-depth tactical assistance for implementing a church-wide response plan, has been

created by the Wheaton College Humanitarian Disaster Institute and is found on their COVID-19 web page.

**Until it is clear that transmission of the virus has stopped and the curve has bent definitively in the other direction, the right choice is to cancel all public events, especially of more than 100 people, that are not worship of God in Word and Sacrament. Events scheduled for less than four weeks away should be canceled immediately.**

In ordinary times, we rejoice in gathering for all kinds of public events that provide entertainment, teaching, and all other kinds of enrichment, but are not specifically settings of worship in community.

For the moment, all these public events, certainly all that involve more than about 100 people, should cease. They are not essential in the way worship and fellowship are, and they pose unmanageable risks of viral transmission.

This will seem like drastic counsel in areas that are not currently seeing a disease load from the virus. There is no doubt that there are *some* events in *some* locations that could actually proceed without any real risk. But we cannot know which events, nor which locations. Even rural areas almost certainly already have virus carriers in their midst, and rural areas tend to have a higher proportion of elderly, and thus vulnerable, residents. If such gatherings were essential for human life and health in the way worship is, they should continue. But given that they are not essential, the prudent and loving thing is to postpone or cancel all of them, everywhere.

If I may put this especially dramatically: if you knew that a beloved older person would die because they attended your event, or were simply exposed to someone who did attend, and canceling your event would have prevented that death, would you cancel? It is my view that for regular Christian worship, once all possible precautions have been taken, we *ought not* cancel for this reason. We do not fear death in and of itself, and gathering and worshipping God is the calling of the people of God. But putting someone else at risk for a concert, a lecture, a conference, a fundraising banquet, or even a wedding party? Given all that we know and do not know right now, this seems unconscionable.

Many of us are decision-makers about events in the future. It is extremely difficult to predict the course of SARS-CoV-2 in any given part of the United States, and that course will itself be dramatically affected by choices we all make today. At the moment, almost all travel providers have waived fees for changes of travel plans. Given all this uncertainty, making decisions about events more than four weeks out seems premature. There is just too much that we do not know. At some point, even in the very worst scenario, transmission of the virus will have demonstrably peaked and begun to decline, and we will be able to begin to make at least tentative plans a month or more ahead.

But today, it is vital that we cancel events less than a month away, for two reasons. One is that it is exceedingly unlikely that the threat of viral transmission will have passed in this time given the 14-day window in which individuals can transmit the virus to others. The second, more important reason is symbolic action. *Canceling events that are in the future shapes the horizons of possibility for difficult decisions today.* It helps create the rapid change in behavior that is absolutely essential today, whatever the conditions may be in four weeks. For this reason, even if we could somehow know for sure that there would be a public-health “all clear” in four weeks, canceling that event today would still be the right decision.

To be clear, as a professional musician and speaker, I not only love these kinds of events but make a substantial part of my income from them (indirectly — my speaking fees are paid to the organization I work for). Until the threat of this epidemic has passed, I will be cancelling my participation in all of them on a rolling four-week basis, and reimbursing my nonprofit employer for its lost income — not to protect myself but to help leaders make the tremendously hard decision to cancel such events.

**At the same time, it has never been more important to gather in small groups.**

Close Christian fellowship — gathering with others who know us by name, who are our literal neighboring brothers and sisters in Christ, to study God’s Word, break

bread, and pray together — is not an optional extra for Christians, but the very source of our life and flourishing in Christ. It is not good for people to be alone.

Furthermore, much of the best work is done in small teams. It is appropriate that large businesses, especially those with large offices, are shifting to work-from-home policies. But small businesses and organizations do not pose the same level of risk as a large, unmanaged office building. Even those who could work from home need collaboration and community.

My informed judgment is that, *provided no one is sick, and no one has reason to believe they have been exposed to SARS-CoV-2 and are within the 14-day window of potential infectious transmission*, there is no strong epidemiological reason not to meet together for fellowship, encouragement, shared work, and celebration and recreation — *as long as we dramatically change the way we interact with one another*.

**Groups of less than ten people *can* meet together with minimal risk, provided that**

- 1) no one present is sick or has any reason to think they have been exposed to SARS-CoV-2,**
- 2) shared surfaces are disinfected before and after the meeting,**
- 3) everyone washes their hands thoroughly (more than 20 seconds) upon arrival and upon returning to their home,**
- 4) food and drink are served individually, and**
- 5) as much distance as possible is maintained between members of different households and their belongings.**

On Tuesday, March 9, my wife and I joyfully hosted eight visiting students from a New England college in our home near Philadelphia. We shared table fellowship in the form of scones and tea, shared our stories, sang in worship, and prayed together.

But Catherine and I changed our behavior, and that of our guests, in a number of crucial ways. We had disinfected all doorknobs and fixtures in the home before their arrival. We had them all wash their hands thoroughly when they arrived. We minimized common contact with food and drink, serving each person individually.

Another measure we should have taken, and will be better at taking in the future, is to arrange for seating that left a reasonable distance between each person — 1 meter, or about three feet, is ideal.

The only real problem was how difficult it was to carry out these measures, not because they are intrinsically hard to do, but because they are such a deviation from unspoken cultural norms. It took everything in me to resist the urge to hug or shake hands, and to stand further from people as I talked with them. The entire purpose of this guide is to mobilize enough of us as leaders so that these measures come inside “the horizons of the possible” and become matter of course for us all — allowing us to continue to meet in homes and household-size work environments and build the social connections that are essential for love and service to others.

### **In all these dramatic changes, leaders must lead.**

It was clear, as our hopeful, excited student guests arrived on Tuesday, that changing social norms in order to protect one another from the virus was barely if at all on their minds. Very little they would have seen in their travel from their college to our home would have caused any alarm or sense that what was “normal” was about to change. It undoubtedly felt strange to walk into someone’s home and immediately be asked to wash your hands.

Any changes we impose on others will seem “too early” to most of them. In fact, if those changes do not seem “too early” — if we wait until there is evident crisis in our community — they will almost certainly be too late. Countless people will have been exposed to risks they wouldn’t have borne if we had led more decisively and courageously.

So we have to use every ounce of social capital we possess — whatever formal and informal authority we have — to change behavior. And while the decisions I have covered here are focused narrowly on the urgent needs of public health, ultimately this is what all leadership consists in, the kind of leadership that will be needed in all the dimensions of this crisis: the personal, emotional, painstaking work of moving the horizons of possibility for others so that everyone we are responsible for, especially the vulnerable, can flourish.

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## 4. What can we hope for?

First, we have every reason to trust that *this epidemic will pass*. Even the Spanish Flu, which killed something like 3% of the entire world's population in the midst of a horrific war, receded as human beings' amazing immune systems adapted to the virus. Possibly in a few months, almost certainly in a few years, the worst of this terrible time will be past us.

We can reasonably hope that the economic costs of this epidemic, though severe in the short run, will be limited in the way that past epidemics have been. A V- or U-shaped recovery is, historically speaking, the most likely, unless this event reveals systemic weaknesses in the global financial system (which is, alas, not out of the question, and could lead to the long L-shaped recovery the world experienced after 2008–2009).

But even though we can hope for these things alongside our neighbors, and for the sake of our neighbors, these medical and economic outcomes are not the real focus for Christians.

Real Christian hope is our ultimate confidence, rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that the Creator of the world is also the Redeemer and Sustainer of the world, and will one day return to renew the entire creation. This hope is not just cosmic but personal, in the astonishing and wonderful words of the Heidelberg Catechism:

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*What is your only hope in life and death?*

That I am not my own,  
but belong with body and soul,  
both in life and in death,  
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.  
He has fully paid for all my sins  
with his precious blood,

and has set me free  
from all the power of the devil.  
He also preserves me in such a way  
that without the will of my heavenly Father  
not a hair can fall from my head;  
indeed, all things must work together  
for my salvation.  
Therefore, by his Holy Spirit  
he also assures me  
of eternal life  
and makes me heartily willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.

One of the great opportunities of this crisis is the chance to relearn these words, teach them to our children and to new Christians for the first time, and live them out together.

But between the merely secular hopes of recovered health and prosperity, and the ultimate hope of the renewal of all things, I think there are several other distinctly Christian “penultimate” hopes that should animate our leadership.

## **1. We have an unprecedented chance to act redemptively in the midst of crisis and fear.**

At Praxis we have come to distinguish between exploitative, ethical, and redemptive modes of action. Much of the world operates *exploitatively*, especially in situations of scarcity and threat. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic there will be unfortunate examples of people and institutions acting merely to protect themselves at any cost.

Thankfully, most human beings and many institutions aspire to act *ethically* — to do what is right in the trust that we can do good and do well at the same time. We are already seeing many exceptional examples of ethical action in this crisis.

But Christians are called beyond ethical action to *redemptive* action, which is characterized by *creative restoration through sacrifice*. We and the organizations we



lead have the chance to banish all exploitative practices, to go beyond merely ethical ones, and to make courageous, creative, sacrificial choices that restore what has been broken.

In the coming days my Praxis colleagues and I will be providing more resources for leaders of businesses and nonprofits that want to seize this opportunity not to protect ourselves, our wealth, or our organizations, but to die to ourselves, renew culture, and bless people.

## **2. We can reclaim the household as the fundamental unit of personhood, the place where we all are best known and cared for.**

Many of us are members of our own family households, but we are also part of the household of God. And many members of our church and community have no real family other than the church. In the history of the church, over and over it has been local “households,” extended-family-size outposts of the Kingdom of God, that have been able to most effectively mobilize care of the vulnerable in their midst, and to reach out and care for the vulnerable around them.

In this time when large gatherings have shaped our imagination of what “church” is and means, and even more so when media and celebrity have colonized all of our imaginations and made us think that true influence and value is somewhere else, we have a window of opportunity to rebuild the foundation of all real love and care — a circle of people, related to one another as brother and sister, who know and are known, love and are loved, and who move out in service to the world.

This can be an indescribable gift. And if we steward this gift well, not retreating into protective huddles but assembling in small, welcoming communities of love, we may even realize a third, most audacious hope.

## **3. We may see the revival of genuine Christian faith and discipleship, and the renewal of the church of Jesus Christ in the United States.**

The Roman world was full of plagues. Epidemics regularly decimated cities and regions. Though ancient people did not understand the germ theory of disease, they knew enough to flee cities, if they had the means to do so.

The first Christians, who saw themselves as the household of God in their cities, did not flee the plagues. They stayed, and they served. In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark develops a statistical argument that this commitment to providing meaningful care to people stricken by the plague was, all by itself, a major contributor to the growth of the church in the first centuries of the common era.

After you had recovered from the plague, after all, where would you want to worship? The pagan temple whose priests and elite benefactors had fled at the first sign of trouble? Or the household of the neighbor who had brought you food and water, care and concern, at great risk to themselves?

When this plague has passed, what will our neighbors remember of us? Will they remember that the Christians took immediate, decisive action to protect the vulnerable, even at great personal and organizational cost? Will they remember that, being prepared and free from panic, the households of their Christian neighbors were able to visit the needy (while protecting them by keeping appropriate social distance!), provide for their needs, and bring hope? Will they remember that, having ensured safety in all the ways we could, we still gathered to worship and praise God together, week after week, celebrating the resurrection — that even as we ceased doing inessential things, we made clear that serving and worshipping God was the greatest and most essential task of our lives?

How will we move the horizons of possibility, not just for those we directly lead, but for our whole culture, in the time of coronavirus?

More than ever in my lifetime, the direction of the culture around us, and the future of all those we love and care for, is quite literally in our hands. May God direct the decisions we make, and the way we communicate, today.

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