



After It Is All Over

Times of upheaval and crisis often lead to societal conflict, and the current crisis is no different, as we are well aware. There is a huge amount of unfocused anxiety and pent-up energy in the country (and in the world), and it swirls around us, anxiety feeding on anxiety. All this needs an outlet, perhaps an explosion of something, somewhere—it is hard to know when or where it will surface. This is as true in our personal lives as it is in our congregations and our communities; the question swirling around us is, What will things be like when it is “all over”?

There is much speculation about how the world will be different, and many feel that nothing will ever be the same after this pandemic. They are not sure *how* things will be different—just that they will be different. Certainly, in our congregations and institutions we have learned much in a short time about how to cope with such an occurrence, especially how to use media to connect with one another. We’ve also learned firsthand the shortcomings of such new technologies. We have been holding things together but are not sure how long we can continue to do so. We long for a time when it is “all over.”

There are those who would seize on this crisis for their own agendas. There is a saying, attributed to Winston Churchill, that one should “never let a good crisis go to waste.” For some, this means that such a time of crisis is useful in pushing through those kinds of far-reaching changes that would not have been possible without the crisis itself. When people’s attention is distracted by uncertainty and anxiety, they may not notice the revolutions going on around them. The history of the twentieth century has numerous examples of this.

History also shows that often after momentous events people simply want things to go back to the way they were before; they want things to go back to normal (whatever that is). It is a strong and often deeply held wish. And here is where a dangerous clash is possible, between those who seek to use the crisis as a means of significant change and those who want things to go back to normal. My guess is that many, many people in our congregations will be in the latter camp, wanting nothing but a return to normal. My guess is also that a significant number of our

church leaders will be in the former camp, seeking significant change. This sets up a situation of great danger and potential conflict within our congregations. Wise Christian leaders will understand this, and will honor people's needs for "normal," even if changes have to be made.

The current pandemic is serious, and this should never be doubted. On the other hand, there is also a danger in over-hyping the crisis. There have been many other situations far worse than this one. The 1918 influenza epidemic killed 50 million people world-wide, 675,000 people in the United States (at a time when our population was less than one-third of what it is now). Humans are resilient, and we will get through this. Perhaps the current crisis seems so much worse because, in our hubris, we had thought that our own "modern" efforts had made us immune from such things. We think we are so powerful that we do not need God—that we can save ourselves. And then a crisis such as this comes along, and we learn again that life is fragile.

Post-pandemic, the mission of the church of Jesus Christ will be unchanged: to proclaim the saving power of God in Christ Jesus, to call people back to God in repentance, and to gather them together to worship and praise God. This mission has not changed since the day of Pentecost. How we carry out this mission shifts across time and place, but the mission itself is unchanged. Perhaps if this pandemic does nothing else, it will strip away our self-centered hubris, our faith in the "modernity" we have built, and will help us to see that in every time and every place, we need God's presence in our lives and in our world. If this crisis can help us refocus on the grace and the mission that God has set before us, then the "after it is all over" will be a time of blessing and renewal.

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There is a new translation of Luther's letter on the plague, available online.

Martin Luther: What to do During an Epidemic (Dr. William Russell, translator) is a fresh translation, reintroduced and annotated, of Luther's 1527 advice about how faithful people might respond to an outbreak of an epidemic. Luther's wisdom has surprising resonance in our time, stemming from his understanding of the Christian life, lived in the public sphere—each Christian receives a vocation in their Baptism. And every believer, by virtue of her or his particular office, is to serve the common good. Because Christians live and work in the various spheres of human life (the ecclesiastical, the civil, and the economic), they are called to serve the thriving of their neighbors.

<http://alpb.org/books/what-to-do-during-an-epidemic-by-martin-luther/>