



# Being Neighbor in the Coming Pandemic Crisis: Thinking with Luther in the 21st Century<sup>1</sup>

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Rescue the weak and the needy. (Psalm 82:4)

Blessed is the one who considers the poor. (Psalm 41:1)

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (NRSV Luke 10:37). The teacher of God’s law in Luke 10 approached Jesus in a self-justifying manner by asking who was worthy to be his neighbor, and thus the target of his love. Jesus unsettled the teacher’s placid posture by reversing the question. By being neighborly we are the neighbors, not the other. Proactive neighborliness marks the Samaritan’s way of life. Indeed, God’s own neighborliness is Jesus himself, God’s love deep in the

<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: This article first appeared in 2008, and the author suggested that it was a timely piece to reprint, with which I agreed. Given the need to have this issue in print, we have not updated the statistics or the website attributions, which seem still to work. Reprinted with permission from Lutheran Services in America. The original appeared in *Caring Connections* 5, no. 1 (2008).

*Human history has regularly recorded the appearances of pandemic-type illnesses that spread across human populations. The responses to these incidents need to go beyond medical care, as the fear and social upheavals possible in such times call as well for a theological and ethical response on the part of social and religious leaders.*

flesh for a humanity fallen into the hands of the robbers named Sin, Death, and the Devil. Jesus not only commends but he induces neighborliness in his own body the church in a way surpassing even God's command to the state and the family to practice neighborliness. How jarring will Jesus's unsettling question be in the face of a coming pandemic crisis?

We will address this question in three ways. First, we will review the state of preparedness in the United States for pandemic flu. Second, we will think theologically and ethically along with Martin Luther who personally faced a lethal outbreak of bubonic plague. Finally, we will explore the office of neighbor in light of pandemic crisis.

### THE CURRENT STATE OF PREPAREDNESS

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak that spreads rapidly when a new, potentially lethal virus emerges for which people have no or little immunity and for which there is no vaccine. HIV/AIDS is an epidemic with potential pandemic characteristics. There have been three influenza pandemics in the twentieth century: in 1918 675,000 died in the U.S. and 50 million worldwide; in 1957 70,000 died in U.S. and 1–2 million worldwide; in 1968 34,000 died in U.S. and 700,000 worldwide. The highly pathogenic avian H5N1 virus—bird flu—that recently spread across eastern Asia and other countries could become a pandemic flu.<sup>2</sup>

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In October 2006 Harvard University's School of Public Health completed a pandemic influenza study that offers a glimpse of what we would be up against.<sup>3</sup> Forty-one percent of those surveyed knew what "pandemic flu" meant; 33% had heard of it but did not know what it meant; and 25% had never heard of the term.

In the Harvard study 94% of people surveyed said they would cooperate with public officials if told to stay at home for 7–10 days during a pandemic flu outbreak. Eighty-five percent said all members of the household would stay at home if one member had the flu. The vast majority of people said they would cooperate with

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<sup>2</sup> For a list of past and potential pandemics see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandemic> (accessed November 15, 2007); also see "Avian Flu and Pandemic Flu: The Difference—and the Connection" at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/flu/avian/avianpandemic.html> (accessed November 15, 2007); also see the World Health Organization's discussion of bird flu at: [http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian\\_influenza/avian\\_faqs/en/index.html#areall](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/avian_faqs/en/index.html#areall) (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Blendon et al., "Pandemic Influenza and the Public: Survey Findings" (October 2006) at: [http://www.keystone.org/Public\\_Policy/Panflu%20HSPH%20poll%20findings%20koonin.pdf](http://www.keystone.org/Public_Policy/Panflu%20HSPH%20poll%20findings%20koonin.pdf) (accessed November 15, 2007); there is more survey information than I have recounted.

public officials in the following ways: avoid travel (93%), avoid public events (92%), avoid malls and department stores (91%), limit use of public transit (89%), cancel non-critical medical appointments (89%), reduce contact with people outside one's household (88%), avoid church services (82%), and postpone family events (79%). Ninety percent were willing to cooperate with public officials if told to stay in their city or town and only 9% said they would not likely cooperate. Fifty-seven percent said they would stay at home if officials told them to even though their employer told them to come to work, while 35% said they would go to work.

In the Harvard study 85% reported that they were able to care for a sick household member for 7–10 days; 76% worried that they would get sick if they did; and 73% said they have someone that could care for them if they were sick. Of the other 24% who said they would not have anyone to care for them at home for 7–10 days 45% were in one-adult households; 34% were African Americans; 33% were disabled; and 32% were chronically ill. Of that same 24% 36% had incomes less than \$25 thousand; 25% had \$25–49.9 thousand; 22% had \$50–74.9 thousand; and 15% had incomes greater than \$75 thousand.

In the Harvard study 56% of employed people with incomes less than \$25 thousand said they would have serious financial problems if they had to miss work for 7–10 days; 29% with incomes \$25–49.9 thousand said they would; 15% of those between \$50–74.9 thousand and of those above \$75 said they would have serious financial problems. If employed people had to miss work for one month the percentages jumped respectively across the four income brackets to 84%, 69%, 50%, and 37%. When the time missed at work jumped to three months, the percentages rose to 93%, 84%, 71%, and 64% respectively. Twenty-seven percent of the employed people surveyed said they would likely lose their job or business if they had to stay at home for 7–10 days. Of that 27% 41% were African American; 53% were Hispanic; and 41% had incomes less than \$25 thousand.

The Harvard study found that 48% of everyone surveyed said they would lose pay and have money problems if they had to stay home for 7–10 days. Forty-six percent said they would have a hard time being stuck at home; 45% said they would be unable to get baby formula and diapers; 43% would be unable to get health care and prescription drugs. Thirty-six percent would be unable or find it difficult to care for a disabled household member; 35% said taking care of an older household member and 32% said taking care of a child under five would be impossible or difficult. While everyone would surely be affected by a pandemic flu outbreak, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and those with fewer economic resources will experience more serious consequences.

## PRACTICING NEIGHBORLINESS DURING THE PLAGUE

Black Death, in the differing forms of bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic plague, repeatedly struck Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe for over 400 years during medieval times. Black Death killed an estimated 20–30 million in Europe—one-third to two-thirds of the population—in over 100 pandemic outbreaks and

over 75 million people world-wide.<sup>4</sup> The mortality rate ranged between 30%–95%, and death arrived with great pain within 2–5 days after infection.

Black Death outbreaks happened in Germany during Martin Luther's times and struck his hometown of Wittenberg on August 2, 1527. On August 10 Elector John ordered Luther and the entire university community to leave town. Luther and his own pastor, John Bugenhagen, refused and stayed to minister to the sick and terrified. Eighteen died by August 19. Luther was at hand when the mayor's wife died. Katie Luther was pregnant and she and Martin set up a hospital in their house. Two women in their house were sick, little Hans Luther didn't eat for three days, Pastor Bugenhagen and his family moved in with the Luthers, and university chaplain, George Rörer's pregnant wife died along with her fetus.

Earlier in the summer of 1527 the city of Breslau had asked Luther to instruct them whether it is proper for a Christian to flee from a deadly pestilence. The plague hit Breslau on August 10, but he was not able to complete his treatise, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," until early November. First, he told them that they themselves have the responsibility and the competences—both theological and moral—to come to their own mind on the question. Second, he said they should do so with as much agreement as possible, as St. Paul teaches both the Corinthians and the Philippians. He did, however, submit his considered opinion to them for their judgment. In that spirit we too can hear Luther's theologizing for being neighbor in preparation for coming pandemic crises in our era.

At the time there were two [principal] opinions on the subject. One opinion held that Christians should not and need not run away. Death after all is God's punishment for sin of some sort, even if not one's own sin, and Christians must submit to God's punishment with a firm faith; to flee is an outright wrong and lack of belief in God. Another opinion held that Christians may properly flee, particularly those who do not hold a public office. Luther commended the first position without much analysis or comment. He, however, approached the question in quite a different manner. Rather than treating it as a matter of invariable moral principle, he took it up more contextually and thereby through wise moral reflection and pastoral sensitivity and care.

First, noted Luther, there are strong and weak Christians, and far more fall under the latter description. God does not, therefore, place the same burden on the weak as on the strong. Second, fleeing death may happen in one of two ways: either through out and out disobedience to God's direct ordinance and command, or through weak faith in the face of probable death. Luther took up the question of disobedience first. His reflections still remain thought provoking even though enormous structural transformations have taken place since.

Three great institutions gave sociological shape to Western medieval civilization. These three hierarchically structured "estates" were church, government, and

<sup>4</sup> See "Black Death," Wikipedia, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_death](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_death) (accessed November 15, 2007); and "Bubonic Plague," Wikipedia, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bubonic\\_plague](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bubonic_plague) (accessed November 15, 2007).

household, with the latter including the extended family and most of the domestic economy. Like everyone else Luther imagined God as the author of these estates and the giver of their ordered structure. God conferred each estate with particular offices and public duties. People were installed into office according to the divine ordinances and obligations peculiar to each estate. God gives “a plain command” to officers within each estate, and this command obligates them in specific ways.<sup>5</sup> To flee the obligations of one’s office is therefore to disobey God and is not simply a matter of weak faith.

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Luther opened his reflections with the example of martyrdom. In Matthew 10 Jesus commands Christians not to renounce their faith even in the face of persecution or death. Luther then noted that pastors are obligated to “remain steadfast before the peril of death,” citing Jesus’s word, “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees” (John 10:11).<sup>6</sup> When Black Death knocks, people need pastors. And now comes Luther’s contextually sensitive moral reasoning. “However, where enough preachers are available in one locality and they agree to encourage the other clergy to leave in order not to expose themselves needlessly to danger, I do not consider such conduct sinful because spiritual services are provided for and because they would have been ready and willing to stay if it had been necessary.”<sup>7</sup> He then cited historical and biblical precedents for this moral judgment.

Luther addressed government officials from a similar point of view. God constitutes political authority with its accompanying duties to oversee and implement the common good, as the well-known Pauline text makes clear (Romans 13:1–4). “To abandon an entire community which one has been called to govern and to leave it without official or government, exposed to all kinds of danger such as fires, murder, riots, and every imaginable disaster is,” noted Luther, “a great sin. It is the kind of disaster the devil would like to instigate wherever there is no law and order.”<sup>8</sup> If, however, political officials, like the pastors in the previous case, pro-

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague,” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 43 (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1986), 121. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

<sup>6</sup> *LW*, 43:121.

<sup>7</sup> *LW*, 43:121.

<sup>8</sup> *LW*, 43:121.

vide “capable substitutes” and “continually and carefully supervise them,” government officials could then flee and it “would be proper.”<sup>9</sup>

Luther addressed the estate of the household with its offices, ordinances, and duties in like manner. Parents obviously have the sacred inviolable duty to serve and help their children; and children have like obligations toward their parents. Masters-mistresses and servants-maids have asymmetrical obligations, according to Luther’s time-tempered imagination. But in pandemic times, each pair is duty bound to the other and thus not simply at liberty to flee, masters-mistresses according to the ordinance of care and servants-maids according to the ordinance of obedience. Various kinds of employer-employee relationships parallel the master-mistress and servant-maid obligatory bond. Employers and employees may flee the plague in a moral way only after they, by mutual agreement, make emergency provisions for the basic goods of the community. In our own modern globalized economy such agreements and obligations are quite obviously more radically complex than Luther could have ever imagined. We will have to use our best available competences to figure this out in our circumstances, and it is obvious that our governments will need to be crucial players.

#### IMAGINING THE OFFICE OF NEIGHBOR

“Yes, no one should dare leave his neighbor unless there are others who will take care of the sick in their stead and nurse them.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus’s word, “I was sick and you did not visit me,” still speaks ominously to those who fail the basic responsibility and work of neighborliness by fleeing the plague. To forsake the office of neighbor is to become a murderer in the sight of God, as Saint John proclaims, “Whoever does not love his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15).

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Luther imagined a kind of general office of neighbor that permeates and pervades civilizations across the otherwise quite different estates, ordinances, offices, and obligations. This office underlay civilizations of the past as well as those emerging now and in the future. God’s ongoing creative work will see to it. Like the one fruit of the Spirit—love—which then takes many forms depending on what is needed by another (is it joy or peace or patience or kindness or generosity

<sup>9</sup> LW, 43:122.

<sup>10</sup> LW, 43:122.

or . . . ?), the one form of neighbor is pluriform. Governments, the economy, families, friendships, and in our day global civil society are all different forms of being neighbor with attendant obligations that must be given careful attention. Being prepared for the coming pandemic crisis means considering the general office of neighbor, which always takes on enfleshed particularity.

To forsake the office of neighbor is the very definition of a tyrant, emphasized Luther. In this vein he urged the princes and municipal governments to build and maintain homes and hospitals for the sick. In this way, governments exercise distributive justice. Luther considered justice—retributive, distributive, and restorative—to be the second general virtue of a prince, in this case “to help the poor, the orphans, and the widows to justice, and to further their cause.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, to help prevent people from becoming poor is part and parcel of this same princely virtue.

To endow hospitals and help poor people is, indeed, a precious good work in itself. But when such a hospital becomes so great that a whole land, and especially the really poor people of that land, enjoy it, then it is a general, true, princely, and indeed, a heavenly and divine hospital. . . . For them the overlord is providing in this hospital. For so to help a man that he does not need to become a beggar is just as much of a good work and a virtue and an alms as to give to a man and to help a man who has already become a beggar.<sup>12</sup>

Luther wrapped up his consideration of justice and the prince with an unmatched rhetorical and theological flourish.

In a word, after the Gospel or the ministry, there is on earth no better jewel, no greater treasure, no richer alms, no fairer endowment, no finer possession than a ruler who makes and preserves just laws. . . . [I]t is not [God’s] will that it shall be a lazy, empty, idle estate, in which people seek only honor, power, luxury, selfish profit, and self-will. He would have them full of great, innumerable, unspeakable good works, so that they may be partakers of His divine majesty and help Him to do divine and superhuman works.<sup>13</sup>

Pray that our governments today become such partakers of divine majesty.

Once people fulfill the specific office of neighbor entrusted to them, then, stated Luther, “I judge that they have an equal choice either to flee or to remain,” and to do either “in God’s name.”<sup>14</sup> Luther was a realist regarding both the strong in faith and the weak. Confronted with pandemic crisis the weak in faith merely

<sup>11</sup> Luther, “Commentary on Psalm 82,” *LW* 13, 53. On the basis of Psalm 82 Luther argued that the prince’s first public virtue is to provide for the free exercise of preaching God’s word.

<sup>12</sup> *LW*, 53–54.

<sup>13</sup> *LW*, 13:54–55.

<sup>14</sup> “Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague,” *LW* 13:122–23.

follow “a natural tendency, implanted by God and not forbidden unless it be against God and neighbor.”<sup>15</sup> Once neighborliness is upheld, Luther could faithfully retrieve the natural law right of self-preservation and biblically cite multiple precedents. If it were immoral *per se* to flee natural or social evil, because it might be God’s punishment as some had asserted, then we would even have to quit praying, “Deliver us from evil. Amen,” argued Luther. But pray away and live accordingly.

Pandemics induce horror, repugnance, fear, dread, and despair in both the weak and the strong and keep Christians in a certain simultaneous solidarity with all peoples everywhere. These inducements are Satan’s own special work, thought Luther. Two little words can fell him: helping my neighbor is a deed well-pleasing to God and the angels; and God’s mighty promise accompanies those who minister to the sick for “Blessed is the one who considers the poor” (Psalm 41:1).<sup>16</sup> For the church the office of neighbor is less commanded than induced. Congregations, for instance, bear the office of neighbor somewhat like skin cells that become induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS cells). Such iPS cells, like the Apostle Paul, become different things to different people as situations arise and the Holy Spirit guides.<sup>17</sup>

Civilization continues to be morally messy especially in light of the coming pandemic crisis. The two little words that Luther commended still remain the alpha and omega for all preparations. Being church in such times means attending to the ministry of the Gospel as well as preparing for the general vocation of neighbor in its various forms under excruciating conditions. In order to live neighborly in the coming pandemic crisis, civilizations will surely need, among other things, recognition of God’s ordinance and command; intensely situated moral wisdom; community leadership, deliberation, discernment, and agreement; and above all the Gospel of God’s mercy.

“Our Father in heaven, deliver us from evil. Amen.” ⊕

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<sup>15</sup> LW, 13:123.

<sup>16</sup> LW, 13:127–28.

<sup>17</sup> For the development of induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS cells) see Gina Kolata, “Scientists Bypass Need for Embryo to Get Stem Cells,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2007 at [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/21/science/21stem.html?\\_r=1&ref=todayspaper&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/21/science/21stem.html?_r=1&ref=todayspaper&oref=slogin) (accessed November 21, 2007); also see James A. Thomson, “Induced Pluripotent Stem Cell Lines Derived from Human Somatic Cells,” *Science* (November 20, 2007) at <https://tinyurl.com/w5hjupe> (accessed November 22, 2007); also see Kazutoshi Takahashi, “Induction of Pluripotent Stem Cells from Adult Human Fibroblasts by Defined Factors,” *Cell* (November 30, 2007) at <http://images.cell.com/images/Edimages/Cell/IEPs/3661.pdf> (accessed November 22, 2007); also see “Stem Cells: Early Research” on the Public Broadcasting Station at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3209/04.html>; also see “Stem Cell Basics” at the National Institute of Health at <http://stemcells.nih.gov/info/basics/basics2.asp> (accessed November 22, 2007).