



Luther's Theology and Ethics, and the Adapted Ministries of the Church, in the COVID Spring, 2020

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This article reflects on the issues that confronted local churches that adjusted their ministry to meet shelter-in-place guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ When guidelines took effect in March 2020, pastors and ministry staff in churches throughout the United States and Canada adapted in order to continue functioning. Their responses were unique, shaped by key factors such as their own congregation's culture, the strictures of their ministry orders, and the means of communication available to them. Even so, the generalization may be ventured that clergy relied on alternative means of communication, with some churches resorting to retrograde technologies while others utilized up-to-date platforms. Video-streaming, social media, email, landlines, and postal and courier services were relied on to connect with as many as possible in the fellowship.

While ministry from a social distance created new problems for pastors in terms of management, theological concerns also surfaced. Where could pastors

¹ For a glossary of terms and phrases in use in the COVID Spring of 2020, refer to <https://www.yalemedicine.org/stories/covid-19-glossary/>.

In a time of pandemic, what are the obligations of the church, and of those who lead it? Using Martin Luther's 1527 letter in a time of plague, this article suggests that the church and its leaders must continue their ministries as best as possible, given the necessities of public order and the need to supply the comforts of word and sacrament to those who need them.

turn who sought to frame the issues prophetically? What were the obligations of church leaders to law, government, and local guidelines? What was *koinonia* (the body life of Christian fellowship) for a church that was scattered to its private households, and how was the mystery of Christ's body to be discerned?

This article explores the sixteenth-century pamphlet "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague" by Martin Luther.² Highlights from this pamphlet establish that the pastor who supported social distance and abided by the guidelines of local jurisdictions during the COVID Spring stood on solid ground ethically, theologically, and scripturally. As the paper proceeds into the issue of discerning Christ's body during shelter-in-place, reference is made to Scripture and to liturgical traditions.

MARTIN LUTHER, "WHETHER ONE MAY FLEE FROM A DEADLY PLAGUE," 1527

The bubonic plague, at times called "the Black Death" and often called, simply, "the plague," scourged Asia, Europe, and the Mediterranean repeatedly from antiquity into modern times, most famously in 1348–1350, when around one-third of Europe's population died. An outbreak of the plague in German cities in 1527 was the occasion for the reformer Martin Luther to compose a pamphlet on how a Christian ought to respond during an epidemic. To wit, is a Christian permitted to escape?

Luther is quite moderate in the first third of the pamphlet, and then he abruptly changes his tone. In the first third, written in June of 1527, Luther allows that those who are weak in faith may act in their self-interest, provided that they remind themselves that they are also commended to the will of God and can take nothing for granted since "calamity and harm are everywhere."³ He further adds the proviso that there be no "detracting from our love and duty toward our neighbor." In the second two-thirds of the pamphlet, love of one's neighbor (Matthew 22:39) takes over as the dominant theme. "Anyone who forsakes [one's neighbor] and leaves him to his misfortune becomes a murderer in the sight of God, as St. John states in his epistles, "Whoever does not love his brother is a murderer. . . ." The reason for the change in tone is that Luther had not finished the pamphlet before the plague struck his own city of Wittenberg, and he saw selfishness and faithlessness rather than love for one's neighbor. When he returned to the subject in September, Luther urged Christians to serve the needy during an outbreak. With that in mind, he coaches the Christian to adopt this self-talk:

I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and

² Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 736–55. Lull retains Luther's sixteenth-century German convention of male-exclusive language.

³ Luther, "Deadly Plague," 742.

persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others.⁴

Not only is sheltering-in-place the clear moral *parallel* to Luther's insistence on loving one's neighbor; he coaches self-imposed restrictions on unnecessary travel and to "avoid places and persons," establishing in his ethical outlook a clear *precedent* for a mitigation strategy of social distance. Luther, in framing these ethics, sought to mitigate both the spread of disease and the powerful seductions of self-interest.

If only the issues were so clear that pastors were able to point, as Luther did, at a bourgeoisie feudal caste fleeing to their vacation homes to avoid the risks that fell on the less fortunate. However, the feudal society and inherited caste system of the Reformation era are a far cry from today's technologically advanced, financially complex, socially mobile society. Governments did not have the reach, nor feel the responsibility, to act on behalf of society's unfortunate. One reality that Luther decried was the near total absence of any kind of health system: hospitals with paid professional staff were known in Europe, but they were few and far between. He urged Germany's princes and municipalities to invest in creating such a system.⁵

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By contrast, the modern government not only has greater means; it also has higher ethical expectations thrust upon it. Yet the more complex the society, the more that vulnerability takes diverse and disguised forms. When it appears that the well-being of some is set in priority over the well-being of others, frustration

⁴ Luther, "Deadly Plague," 749. He follows this by stating, "If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely." This in no way mitigates the impact of the quoted paragraph. Rather, this statement is best understood in reference to living in an area that has no public health system. Luther assumes that the absence of such a system is socially normative, and is a proponent for its expansion. He writes that where there are "municipal homes and hospitals staffed with people to take care of the sick," then it "should not be necessary for every citizen to maintain a hospital in his own home." But when Luther wrote, such institutions existed "only in a few places" (742-43). In the absence of professional health services, as may be found in underdeveloped nations, the response of a Christian to a COVID-19 case may indeed be very different from the response of an American believer whose loved one is intubated in a hospital staffed by caregivers in PPE.

⁵ Luther, "Deadly Plague," 743.

is natural and human. In the COVID Spring, these tensions were reflected in the constellation of suspicions and conspiracy theories, protests at state capitols, and pseudoscientific counternarratives. The social polarity that resulted cast the altruistic, who insisted that closing the economy was somehow viable indefinitely, versus those whose vitriol against the suppression of civil liberties smacked of Frederick Nietzsche's disregard for the weak.⁶

History has yet to determine the effect of the church's ethical leadership in the COVID Spring and afterward. As the social challenges arising from pandemics appear to be more likely than not in the church's future, it may be time to stake out a third position, grounded ethically and theologically. I propose a position that extends and adapts Matthew 22:39, to love our neighbors as ourselves, as Luther did throughout his pamphlet. Applied to the American and Canadian contexts of the twenty-first century, this can mean the following:

1) Christians set a distinct manner of behaving toward all with humility and respect, including in social media. What ministry staff teach, preach, and post ought not demean or denigrate those whose frustration over lost income and bureaucratic inertia is growing into desperation. As part of this, Christians should take a principled stand against Nietzschean vitriol, no matter how subconscious it may be in its utterance, and no matter from whom its origin.

2) Church leaders should keep to the high ground of protecting the vulnerable. During disease outbreaks, Protestants and evangelicals have always held that the best course is to follow consensus medical guidelines. Therefore, ministry staff and lay leaders should insist that their church follow the policies crafted by local health officials. Church leaders are on solid ecclesial, theological, historical, spiritual, ethical, moral, and biblical ground who take this view.⁷

3) During the COVID Spring, many church leaders felt pressured to rush into reopening. When government permissions cut against the grain of medical opinion, the good medical advice should prevail. In Luke 17, Jesus had those he cured of leprosy show themselves to the priests, the medical experts of the time, according to the stipulations of Leviticus 14. God's healing activity is not a matter of wishful thinking but of careful discernment, including ratification by experts. During an outbreak, followers of Jesus must be the first to love their neighbors, and the last to insist upon their own preferences.

4) Among the frustrations of the COVID Spring were the bottlenecks in the federal aid that saw many people who needed the benefits the most lose out on such issues as access to payroll loans. Christians can advocate publicly that government

⁶ Nietzsche was a nineteenth-century German philosopher who posed that Europe's aristocracy had priority by nature, writing that such a social elite "should therefore accept with a good conscience the sacrifice of a legion of individuals . . . society is not allowed to exist for its own sake, but only as a foundation and scaffolding, by means of which a select class of beings may be able to elevate themselves . . . and exhibit their happiness." Frederick Nietzsche, in *Ethics*, 9th ed., ed. Oliver A. Johnson and Andrews Wreath (Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2004), 266.

⁷ Among the texts that Luther treats in the last two-thirds of his pamphlet: Matt 25:31–46 (743), 1 John 3:13–15 (743–44), Matt 7:12 (744), Ps 41:1–3 (745), and the whole can be seen as rooted in Matthew 22:39b, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (744, 747).

needs to craft its actions in such ways that the aid reaches those for whom it is intended. Luther addresses the concern vividly in the pamphlet when he states: "How will they fare who rob the poor of the little they have . . . ?"⁸

THE OBLIGATIONS OF CHRISTIANS TO LAW, GOVERNMENT, AND ORDER

During an outbreak the social responsibility of government, for Luther, was limited to his vision for a comprehensive infrastructure of health care. In the absence of such a system, he writes, "we must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in any extremity or risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God. . . . Matthew 7[:12] 'So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.'" It is by no means a stretch of Luther's ethical premise that where hospitals stand and medical professionals put themselves at risk in the care of pandemic victims, they should be equipped with what they need. If the government is unable to fill the breach, Christians should step up until the government catches up.

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Conversely, Luther does not address the obligations of the Christian to the government in this pamphlet of 1527. In writing extensively on the topic elsewhere, he takes Romans 13:1–7, Paul's exhortation to respect those in government, in its plain sense.⁹ However, in the 1527 pamphlet, the authority that Luther accords medical professionals can be applied to our society's respect for government during a pandemic:

Others sin on the right hand (*sic*). . . . They disdain the use of medicine; they do not avoid places and persons infected with by plague, but light-heartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. . . . 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. If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God's eyes. . . . It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail

⁸ Luther, "Deadly Plague," 743.

⁹ Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 655–703.

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. . . . No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine . . . fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence.¹⁰

Abiding by guidelines means more than merely doing what is permitted in any given jurisdiction. Applying Luther's approach, where there is less law—as, for example, where external constraints such as lock-downs are lifted—one might still self-impose restrictions on travel and social distance, setting a personal example. In any case, all Christians everywhere have an obligation to love, to be humble, to be at peace with all, and to respect the government where they live. Social obligation was taken for granted by Luther, who wished that the government would take a greater, not lesser, share of responsibility for leadership and aid in an epidemic in general, and in care for the poor in particular.

In some respects, individual agency is paramount to Luther's theological and ethical framework. His 1520 treatise, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, sounds almost libertarian when he insists that in Christ the believer is "a free lord of all, subject to none." However, the justified life sets self-interest beneath Christ's command to love one's neighbor, and thus the Christian is "a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."¹¹

Furthermore, church leaders are called to advocate for those who are made desperate by lock-downs and lay-offs, by lifting up ongoing stewardship among those who are doing well and by channeling benevolence to households where needed. Pastors can learn about the frustrations of small-business owners who were promised payroll loans, and can advocate for families waiting for stimulus monies. The lock-down policies of the COVID Spring pointed out the inequities already in existence in power, opportunity, and choice. Such circumstances provide church leaders the opportunity to look between and beyond the nation's dipolar political disorder and brainstorm new ways to deliver justice.

KOINONIA IN THE SCATTERED CHURCH

As it concerns conduct during a pandemic, Luther's pamphlet addresses the Christian's calling to be just and caring, but it is silent on the church's function in worship, proclamation, and sacrament. Given nearly five hundred years of changes in germ theory, technology, economy, and government since Luther lived, the church sailed into truly uncharted waters during the COVID Spring. The church's calling

¹⁰ Luther, "Deadly Plague," 748–49.

¹¹ Martin Luther, "On the Freedom of the Christian," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 596.

to be a worshipping community, gathered for proclamation and sacrament, was challenged by the limitations of social distance and by bans on large gatherings.

Some scriptures may be drawn upon to console a church that must shelter in place. The clearest word to apply to such a dynamic is Christ's promise, stated in Matthew 18:19–20, that where two or three gather, he is in their midst. Even to the one who is sheltering alone that promise pertains, for Christ himself is that second person, and other scriptures are enriched in this context, such as Matthew 6:6, which describes one who prays alone and "in secret."

The mainstream churches of the Reformation, Protestant and evangelical, have always put an emphasis on the Scripture's requirement to the corporate life of the gathered congregation. The assumption that the body gathers for worship, proclamation, and sacrament is reflected in the very term that describes the faithful; it is the "gathering" (*ekklesia*), which in English translates as "church." Rules and liturgies reflect this function across denominations and across time.¹² The danger to normative ecclesiology is that millions of laypeople, during the COVID Spring, have learned how much more convenient it is to simply log in to church rather than to show up to the sanctuary with the gathered community. The author of Hebrews urges believers not to neglect "to meet together, as is the habit of some," since gathering is a means of encouraging one other "to love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24–25). If an ecclesiology of shelter-in-place might be posed for unusual times when the function of gathering is unavailable, no ecclesiology can justify making shelter-in-place ministry the normative function of the church.

On the strength of anecdotes from personal experience and the local ecumenical Protestant community, I would venture this generalization, that the least disconcerting adaptation to shelter-in-place ministry was the shift to a technological transmission of the proclamation. Radio and television have long been used to extend the reach of the word of God into private homes. The reorientation of skillsets to meet the requirements of technology may have been a drain on pastoral energy, but there is little doubt that these methods are appropriate.

The pastor may feel that the corporate worship experience provided by these means is incomplete, perhaps even insufficient, when the body is scattered to private homes. For some pastors, the discouragement of the video stream is that they do not discern life or energy within that means in the same way as when bodies are seated in the sanctuary. Perhaps the problem is one of focus. The Acts 2 model of Spirit as fire and energy in the midst of thousands might not be the best model for discerning God's presence during shelter-in-place. Instead, the Spirit as *Paraclete*—that is, a comforting or consoling presence as described in John 16—might be more discernible. The same Holy Spirit who is sovereign over the times of high energy is also sovereign over the times of that peace which surpasses understanding.

¹² *The Book of Common Worship: General Assembly of the PCUSA* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly PCUSA, 1946), 155–67; *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, 1995), 57–120; *The Covenant Book of Worship* (Chicago: Covenant, 2003), 161–178.

More discomfiting for many clergy was whether and how to make the Eucharist available during shelter-in-place. For pastors in traditions where communion is occasional, once per month or less, the issue became acute as the lock-down measures were extended to encompass Holy Week and Easter. Communion is most appropriately an action of the gathered community, and has been understood that way from earliest practice. The apostle Paul makes a clear distinction between the sacred meal for the gathered church and eating at home (1 Cor 11:17–34). He joins the Eucharist to the service of proclamation (v. 26) as part of “discerning the body” (v. 29). This mystery is expressed in the liturgy of my tradition, which espouses that the gathered congregation becomes one body by sharing in one loaf.¹³

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To apply this normative ecclesiology meant that the church, scattered to its homes, must feast separately on the body and blood of Christ. This did not seem fitting in the church’s most important festivals of the year. As I wrestled with this for my own congregation, I came to rest on two Bible stories. In Exodus 12, the first Passover that took place involved the people of God sheltering in their own households, covered by the blood of the lamb, while a plague of death stalked the land. Second, the Emmaus disciples recognized Christ in the breaking of bread in a private home (Luke 24:30–35).

From there I noted the long-approved exception to the normative custom of communion, in which communion is brought to the shut-in, the isolated, and the dying.¹⁴ This custom is treated as an afterword in Luther’s pamphlet of 1527, as a connected but separate subject to the Christian’s service in an epidemic.¹⁵ It is a given, certainly it was Luther’s assumption, that part of the impact of communion to shut-ins is the pastor’s personal presence, and that must remain the normative assumption in the usual function of ministry to shut-ins.

The uncharted waters of the COVID Spring presented exceptional circumstances. Sheltering in place meant that the pastors and diaconal ministers who normally visited shut-ins were shut-in themselves, as were all households. Yet by means of technology, the pastors whether by phone call, video conference, or pre-recorded video, could be brought into the shut-in homes, and blessing conveyed on the elements that each home provided for itself (Luke 24:30–35).

¹³ “Holy Communion I” in *The Covenant Book of Worship*, 166.

¹⁴ Provisions for shut-ins are made in “Holy Communion IV” in *The Covenant Book of Worship*, 179–181.

¹⁵ Luther, “Deadly Plague,” 751–755.

In normal conditions this procedure is not permissible. Nevertheless, this “shut-in to shut-in” approach was more acceptable to my conscience than would have been the attempt to substitute a virtual body for the gathered body. It seemed to me more appropriate to treat us all alike as shut-ins under these circumstances, and to treat the mysteries of gospel and grace accordingly, rather than to pretend that I could conjure a virtual body and then discern it as real.

Within my own denominational and ecumenical districts there was a range of convictions and approaches. Some drew upon the New Testament’s language of a “priesthood of all believers.” My mind concerning discerning the body started to change and open after a colleague correctly identified cyberspace as mental space and, as such, as a realm in which and through which the Holy Spirit can work to knit together in spirit those who are separated in body. Others were stricter in their insistence that communion had to be served to the gathered church, and that the shelter-in-place circumstances of the COVID Spring did not warrant innovations in the administration of the Eucharist. The issue bears reflection, debate, and perhaps the construction of policy at denominational levels. It behooves most active clergy today, and those ministeriums holding their credentials, to expect pandemic conditions to surface again.

In Luke 24:30–35, once the Emmaus disciples recognized the risen Christ, they *immediately* returned to the gathered community to share their testimony. The gathered church was their priority, and it remains the priority of most pastors and lay leaders. Knowing that this priority is normative, the church can be consoled by the Emmaus communion experience, and by the first Passover, that God is present in Christ even where only two or three are gathered, even in the private household during unusual times of crisis such as a pandemic.

During the COVID Spring *koinonia* still functioned in the scattered churches, even on lock-down. In addition to the streaming videos, social media, emails, phone calls, and letters, many thousands of pastors administered communion while sheltered in place. But this was not treated casually. These thousands examined themselves and come to their best discernment of the body and its needs (1 Cor 11:27–29). It would be anachronistic to argue that Luther could have imagined such days. Still, these efforts—just as much as facemasks, social distancing, and heeding medical advice—were also inspired by the love that pastors have for their churches and their neighbors. ⊕

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