

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 19 APRIL 2020



Christians Responding to the Pandemic

Peter Barnes

It seems that there is but one topic of conversation these days: COVID-19. If we are not suffering from the virus, we must be suffering from fatigue as a result of news about the virus. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile for us to make some points about the Christian response to the threat of plague.

(1) We ought to obey necessary laws for the good of society.

In exceptional circumstances, exceptional measures are called for. In Leviticus 13 there are 59 verses that deal with the isolation of any person with leprosy, and in Leviticus 14 there are 57 verses that deal with any possible restoration to normal society.

This should not be regarded as something primitive and lacking in compassion. Isolation was needed because leprosy is contagious and could have devastating effects on any community.

The Son of God could clearly touch a leper and cleanse him (Matthew 8:3), but if anybody else tried it, he would be likely to catch the disease. There is nothing intrinsically evil or unchristian about isolation and quarantine.

Nor should we resist to the death any special exercise of power by the civil authorities. In order to combat a coming seven years of famine in Egypt, Joseph was installed as second in command to the Pharaoh who considered himself the incarnation of the sun god. In fact, it was Pharaoh who told the people: “Go to

Joseph; whatever he says to you, do” (Genesis 41:55). For the next seven years, Joseph stored up food and supplies for the approaching famine, and in so doing, entrenched the state with great power.

Are there dangers in the present accumulation of civil power by the authorities? Yes, there certainly are, and we ought to be very wary of them. A government’s definition of “interim measures” is somewhat akin to a preacher’s definition of the word “finally...” in a sermon. Those

in power are rarely keen on relinquishing it. Ronald Reagan once quipped that a temporary government

*Are there dangers
in the present
accumulation of
civil power by the
authorities? Yes,
there certainly
are...*

program was the closest thing we have on earth to everlasting life.

Each side needs to listen to the other. Government powers regarding quarantine and isolation are most unwelcome and could well be prone to abuse. A former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has already called for a global government to combat the disease – an indication of the ever-present readiness of many to look to the civil powers, whether national or international, to solve all problems.

At the moment, however, sensible extensions of government power in certain circumstances are surely necessary. Although not without controversy and opposition, most Australians accepted restrictions during the Spanish 'flu of 1918-1919.

(2) These times should help us to focus on the Lord of the temple rather than the temple of the Lord.

The people of Judah in Jeremiah's day trusted in lying words: "This is the temple of the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:1-4), little realizing that it would soon be destroyed, and God would teach them that His glory was not trapped inside the temple (Ezekiel chapters 1 & 10).

At one time the Psalmist lamented: "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival" (Psalm 42:4).

A skipped meal makes the next one that much more enjoyable, and the absence of corporate worship for a time can be used by the Lord to enhance our appreciation of why David was pleased when people urged him to join in worship with them (Psalm 122).

When Arians (those who rejected the full deity of Christ) took over many of the churches in the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria responded: "they hold the places, but you the Apostolic Faith... Let us

consider what is the greater – the place or the Faith." His answer was: "Clearly the true Faith." We need the same perspective.

The second temple was something of a disappointment to many who had seen the glory of the first temple (Ezra 3:12-13). Nevertheless, God's message to Joshua (the high priest) and Zerubbabel (the governor) was to be strong, not to fear, to realise the Spirit was with them, and to get on with the Lord's work (Haggai 2:1-5). The ideal and the necessary ought not to be mistaken for one another; and we can be thankful that God works through both.

(3) God's Word and Spirit are still at work.

The word of God is not bound (2 Timothy 2:9), and the Spirit goes where He wills (John 3:8). When the Italian fascist army invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935 the Protestant missionaries were evicted. By the time they returned after the war, the

Church had not declined but grown.

Something similar happened after the Maoist take-over of China in 1949. Christianity barely had a toe-hold in the country – perhaps a million or so – but today there may be 80-100 million Chinese identifying as Christians. God's kingdom will not collapse because our programmes have suffered some disorder.

God's kingdom is in God's hands. That should give us both peace and energy. "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

God's kingdom will not collapse because our programmes have suffered some disorder.

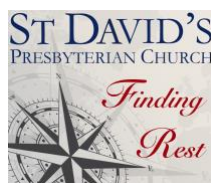


The Right Rev Dr Peter Barnes is Moderator General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church in Sydney, NSW.

Source: <https://presbyterian.org.au/index.php/resources/moderator-s-comments/191-christians-responding-to-the-pandemic>

For the complete library of St David's Articles, please go to rest.org.au.

Kindly pass on this article.



We seek to promote and share biblical teaching for the benefit and encouragement of all.

Our regular Sunday services are at 9:30 am at 46 Mary Street, North Toowoomba.

You are warmly invited to attend. rest.org.au