

DIGGING UP THE PAST: HOW CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE 1918 INFLUENZA  
EPIDEMIC INFLUENCE THE CHURCH'S APPROACH TO MODERN PANDEMICS

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the words and actions of Christians during the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic and the strain of influenza which they faced. By doing so, parallels are drawn to the modern pandemic of COVID-19, to determine any lessons which can be learned by modern Christians from their predecessors. Through this approach, four main lessons become clear: balance, patience, confidence, and in all things acting for the glory of God.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1951, just outside the town of Brevig Mission in Alaska, a young man digs in the dirt. The permafrost in Alaska runs deep, and in order to reach what has been buried he is forced to stop from time to time and light small fires to soften the ground. After days of grueling work, he finds what he has been looking for; the body of a young girl, still wearing her blue dress, with red ribbons in her hair.<sup>1</sup>

It is a grim scene, but Johan Hultin, a Swedish microbiologist and Ph.D. student at the University of Iowa, is no graverobber. He is hard at work excavating a mass grave that contains the remains of the former residents of Brevig Mission, from a time when only 80 adults called the remote village home. He is not looking for treasure, or even seeking to identify the unfortunate souls that lay preserved beneath him for nearly thirty-three years. Instead, Johan Hultin is looking for their killer.

Despite its remote location, the residents of Brevig Mission were unable to escape the reach of one of the most deadly pandemics in recorded history. A virulent strain of flu, known colloquially as the “Spanish Flu,” swept through much of the world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in November of 1918 it came to Brevig Mission. In just five days it claimed the lives of 72 of the village’s adult inhabitants, so quickly that there was no time for the survivors to safely give them all proper burials.

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1. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html#references>

Out of the tragedy that played out in this small Alaskan village grew the last opportunity for the true nature of this virus to finally be discovered. But the process would be far from easy, as more than five decades would come to pass from the time of Hultin's first gruesome expedition until the full reconstruction was completed and the subsequent study of the virus began. He had set out to gain new insight into a virus that had wreaked so much devastation in the lives of so many, but one man's drive to learn and understand what made this virus so singularly deadly grew and developed into a lifelong mission to protect the present by digging up the past.

It is that same spirit that drives this thesis. At the time of writing, a pandemic is sweeping across the world bringing unexpected changes, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, and raising a multitude of questions. The race to understand and combat this disease is ongoing, but even as scientists strive to set the mind of the public at ease, perhaps some questions can be answered not by looking ahead, but by looking behind. Is it possible that we can learn how to withstand the trials a pandemic can bring by understanding how those who came before us endured their own?

For members of the Christian Church, this question carries a special sense of urgency. As churches are shuttered or weighed down with limits on gathering sizes, and their members attempt to re-convene in digital settings, they begin to worry that the Church will never be the same again. When the shadow of disease has finally passed, will local congregations recover? How will interpersonal ministries fare in a world that has grown accustomed to avoiding personal contact for a year or more? And yet, just as society has moved on from a pandemic before, so has the Church – it still stands today, even though a hundred years stand between these two pandemics.

The goal of this thesis, then, is to address those questions and more by looking to the words and actions of Christians past. The ways in which they responded to the crisis at their doorstep may give us clues about what kind of action to take in the midst of our own. Their use of and reactions to technology, medicine, and government can give us insight into how we can apply those resources ourselves, wildly different though they may be. Perhaps most important of all will be to see how they used their greatest resource in God's Word as comfort and guide, to inform us of the timeless truths that can bring guidance and comfort to a disease-stricken world one century later.

## PART I: KNOW THY ENEMY

To be able to glean insight from the experiences and writing of those who lived during the time of the Spanish Flu, we first need to understand the formidable enemy they faced. The full account of the effort and the risks that were taken to provide closure to the saga of the Spanish Flu is essential to comprehending the realities and challenges that people were forced to overcome because of this disease.

### **The Alaskan Expedition**

Johan Hultin had his work cut out for him in his quest to obtain samples of the 1918 virus, though it involved far more than frozen Alaskan soil which would prove to be a mountainous challenge all its own. Hultin's challenges began with the discomfiting revelation that the U.S. Army was planning an expedition to do the very thing Hultin had planned to do – exhume victims of the influenza whose bodies had been preserved by the icy tundra.<sup>2</sup> With competition in the mix, time was of the essence, and so he set out for Alaska with two associates and some funds from the University of Iowa.

They narrowed their list to three sites and sent Hultin to scout ahead. Nome was promising, with a large Lutheran mission that had kept detailed records of deaths and had a permanent cemetery.<sup>3</sup> But the changing course of the nearby river had brought it too close to the graves, and as a result the ground had softened, compromising any potential samples. Wales, the

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2. Arnold, Catharine. *Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts From the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 268

3. Kolata, p. 102



next prospect, had experienced a similar setback when the sea advanced on the mass grave located there, which now sat on a bluff overlooking the water. Brevig was their last chance.

Yet even though they had finally found viable samples, there was one last obstacle in their way. The dry ice they had saved for the trip had long since evaporated, and the long journey back to the lab required multiple stops for refueling.<sup>4</sup> Despite all their efforts, even attempting to use fire extinguishers in place of ordinary dry ice to cool the samples,<sup>5</sup> they were unsuccessful in growing the virus in the lab at the University of Iowa.

### **A Second Chance**

After the failure of his monumental project, Hultin left it unfinished for decades. Years later, Jeffery Taubenberger at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology independently began research into the 1918 influenza virus. In 1996, he and his team had a breakthrough when they discovered genetic material from the virus in samples taken from Private Roscoe Vaughn from Fort Jackson, South Carolina.<sup>6</sup> They were unable to complete the RNA sequence for the virus from this sample alone, but they had made an incredible discovery nonetheless, and published their findings at that early stage in *Science* magazine in 1997.<sup>7</sup>

Hultin stumbled across that article, and it ignited his long-dormant fervor to learn the truth about the virus. He contacted Taubenberger and informed him of the work he had done at Brevig Mission, then set out on a self-funded expedition at the age of 72.<sup>8</sup> This time, with the help of some much younger men excavating the grave site, they made the discovery that Hultin

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4. Kolata, p. 112

5. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html#references>

6. Arnold, p. 272

7. Arnold, p.274

8. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html#references>

affectionately named “Lucy,” after the skeleton discovered in Ethiopia in 1974; an obese woman, whose fat had preserved her organs far better than any other victim from Brevig.<sup>9</sup>

With the lung samples acquired from “Lucy,” coupled with the RNA strands sequenced from Private Vaughn, a complete sequence of the 1918 virus’s hemagglutinin (HA) gene was produced in 1999.<sup>10</sup> This was the crucial next step on the path to recreating the 1918 influenza virus in a modern laboratory. According to the CDC, “The HA gene of an influenza virus determines the properties of the virus’s HA surface proteins. These HA surface proteins allow an influenza virus to enter and infect a healthy respiratory tract cell. HA is also targeted by antibodies produced by the immune system to fight infection. Modern flu vaccines work by targeting an influenza virus’ unique HA.”<sup>11</sup>

With this crucial phase complete, and following the subsequent sequencing of the remaining 7 flu genes<sup>12</sup>, the stage was set for the ultimate challenge: recreating, from scratch, a virus that claimed the lives of millions. The process would require the highest of safety protocols, and a brave and tenacious researcher to perform the task.

### **Resurrecting a Frozen Foe**

Dr. Terrence Tumpey was chosen to be the sole person responsible for reconstructing the virus. The location would be the highly secure laboratory at the headquarters of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. In order to reduce the risk of contamination as much as possible, Dr. Tumpey was required to follow extreme safety precautions, including working entirely alone

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9. Arnold, p. 275

10. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html#references>

11. *Ibid*

12. *Ibid*

after hours, so that no-one else would be in the building.<sup>13</sup> In July of 2005, he succeeded, and research on the virus commenced the next month.<sup>14</sup>

What they discovered was, in a word, chilling. It is a well-known fact of influenza viruses that strains of the virus undergo a gradual change called antigenic drift, where the genes of the virus deteriorate and change over time as it reproduces through copying its genetic structure, or as it combines portions of its unique HA structure with other strains of influenza.<sup>15</sup> This means that every year, a new influenza vaccine needs to be developed that can address those changes. Antigenic drift has another effect on influenza strains – they tend to trend towards higher rates of infectivity, and less towards lethality. Put simply, an insentient virus wants only to replicate, and to do that it needs a viable host; viable hosts incubate far better alive than dead, and more hosts are always better.

Despite this trend in modern strains of influenza, when they looked at the 1918 influenza virus they discovered it had capabilities far beyond the strains we are accustomed to encountering today. In just 4 days, it was able to reproduce itself 39,000 times more than the modern strains of flu viruses used in the study, while at the same time producing effects that made it at least 100 times more lethal.<sup>16</sup> This virus was indeed unique, and terrifyingly so.

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13. *Ibid*

14. *Ibid*

15. Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Deadliest Virus Ever Known." *The New Yorker*, Sept. 29, 1997. P.16

16. Tumpey, T. M., Basler, C. F., Aguilar, P. V., Zeng, H., Solórzano, A., Swayne, D. E., Cox, N. J., Katz, J. M., Taubenberger, J. K., Palese, P., & García-Sastre, A. Characterization of the reconstructed 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic virus. *Science* (New York, 2005), 77–80.

## PART II: COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Catharine Arnold, after concluding her work in studying eyewitness accounts from the 1918 pandemic, calls it “the forgotten tragedy, so traumatic that it was apparently wiped from the collective memory,”<sup>17</sup> and she certainly seems to have a point. Compared to other events that were committed to ink and paper in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, relatively little space was dedicated for accounts of the influenza. There are several reasons why this may have happened, starting with the complexity of accurately reporting a global pandemic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Seeing in Part**

In fairness to the many authors that contributed to publications during this period, it was some time before the public was fully aware of the seriousness of the influenza outbreak that was upon them. This undoubtedly contributed, at least in part, to the relatively little ink they chose to dedicate to the subject. Further complicating the ability of anyone to pinpoint the spread of the virus is the fact that according to what historians and researchers have been able to uncover, the influenza pandemic of 1918 can be broken down into at least two, if not three separate outbreaks.<sup>18</sup>

### **Addressing a Misnomer**

The origin of and starting point for this disease are topics of continued study.<sup>19</sup> One thing should be made clear before moving into this topic; even at the time of the pandemic, the name “Spanish

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17. Arnold, p. 299

18. Patterson, K. David and Pyle, Gerald F. “The Geography and Mortality of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, SPRING 1991, Vol. 65, No. 1 (SPRING 1991), pp. 4-21, 4

19. Humphries, Mark Osborne. “Paths of Infection: The First World War and the Origins of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic.” *War in History* vol.21(1) pp. 55 –81, p. 59

Flu” was known to be a misnomer. It came about because it was Spanish newspapers in May of 1918 who first reported outbreaks of the disease publicly, due in large part to the comparative permissiveness of the Spanish authorities in respect to censorship.<sup>20</sup> Because of this, coupled with the fact that high-profile Spaniards were contracting the disease, including King Alfonso XIII,<sup>21</sup> it was quickly assumed the disease originated there.

### **The First Wave**

The grim reality is that not only had influenza been seen well before May of 1918, the strain of the virus that eventually plagued the world may have mutated from the variant that traveled across the Atlantic carried by American soldiers. It makes for a bitterly ironic twist that millions may have perished because the same men who were cheered as the liberators of Europe had brought an unseen killer along on their journey. This theory comes from reports of influenza outbreaks in military camps in the United States as early as March of 1918<sup>22</sup>, which coincided with reports of similar disease in France and Britain in April that same year.<sup>23</sup>

What is certain is that this “first” or “Spring wave” of influenza was different from the devastating “second” or “Autumn wave.” It spread quickly from person to person, and it regularly incapacitated even healthy individuals, but it had a much lower fatality rate.<sup>24</sup> The relatively innocuous nature of the first wave, despite its ability to spread, meant that it largely passed the notice of a global population more concerned with the unprecedented war taking place

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20. Patterson and Pyle, p. 7

21. Arnold, p. 59

22. Arnold, p. 36

23. Kolata, p. 11

24. Patterson and Pyle, p. 8

than with yet another outbreak of influenza. With the second wave, this generally apathetic response would no longer be possible.

### **The Second Wave**

Suddenly, just like every wave of influenza that had come before it, the virus of 1918 vanished. But unlike other strains of flu, it returned just as suddenly, even stronger than before, and became the scourge of the world. Beginning in July, the second wave tore across the globe, reaching India, Africa, Japan, and the United States in less than four months.<sup>25</sup> Its transmission was greatly aided by troop movements, as large ships were overcrowded with eager young soldiers ready to join the fight, as well as a host of stock animals to maintain them.<sup>26</sup>

The second wave of the pandemic began in July and did not subside until January of the next year, when it reached as far as Australia.<sup>27</sup> There is disagreement about whether or not there was a third wave that followed after, from winter to spring of 1919, but this may be the result of projection from studies of the pandemic that occurred in 1889-90.<sup>28</sup> This ebb and flow meant that staying informed about the disease was increasingly difficult, both for those in positions of leadership and for the public. The shifting presence of the disease was far from the only challenge it presented, however.

### **Inflicting trauma**

The swift transmission of the disease, coupled with its ability to mutate quickly in the ideal conditions presented by the war effort, turned the 1918 strain of influenza into a merciless killer

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25. Arnold, p. 89

26. Humphries, p. 58

27. Patterson and Pyle, p. 11

28. Patterson and Pyle, p. 4

that struck fear into the hearts of even seasoned medical professionals.<sup>29</sup> This is because not only were the symptoms the new form of influenza produced in its victims as unique as the virus itself, it was killing the young and healthy in disproportionate numbers, flying in the face of the strains of influenza that people had experienced before.<sup>30</sup> Both of these factors combined to cause a deep impact in the collective psyche of the survivors of this era of history.

As a result, it may have dissuaded prospective writers from recording their experiences – things they would have preferred to forget. Or, in the case of George Bowersox, a contributor to *The Lutheran Quarterly*, that trauma may have planted seeds that only sprouted in later writing. In an article titled “Religion in Everyday Life” published in 1921, Bowersox uses a striking choice of vocabulary: words like “sterilized,” “contagious,” and “infect” are applied liberally to describe both the “disease” of the “contagion of (social) evil” and even the state of Christianity itself.<sup>31</sup>

### Aggressive Symptoms

First, the symptoms. Influenza has lost much of its bite in the century since the 1918 pandemic, though make no mistake; in the right conditions, any strain of influenza can be life-threatening. But this strain was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before; victims sometimes dropped on the spot, “as if struck by lightning.”<sup>32</sup> The fast-acting influenza sometimes killed them before

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29. Four doctors were sent by the U.S Surgeon General to evaluate the situation at Fort Devens, Massachusetts: William Henry Welch, Col. Victor C. Vaughan, Dr. Rufus Cole, and Simeon Walbach. All highly experienced and renowned men, they were shocked to the core by what they saw at Devens. Upon viewing an autopsy of a victim of the influenza, Cole wrote, “When the chest was opened and the blue swollen lungs were removed and opened, and Dr. Welch saw the wet, foamy surfaces with little real consolidation, he turned.” He described it as “the only time I ever saw Dr. Welch really worried and disturbed.” Kolata, pp. 15-17

30. <https://www.wiscontext.org/virus-shut-down-wisconsin-great-flu-pandemic-1918>

31. *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 51, pp.420-422

32. A grim scene was witnessed by several onlookers in Spain during the summer of 1918; “A funeral that was making its way along a central street saw, to the amazement of those who witnessed it, the coach driver fall from his seat to the ground dead, as if struck by lightning, and one of the mourners keeled over on the ground, having also died suddenly.” Arnold, p. 62

they even realized its severity. In the cases of those who made it to seek medical attention, a new kind of horror awaited; fever, delirium, and rapid weight loss were common. Pneumonia occurred in roughly 20 percent of all cases.<sup>33</sup> After that came a phenomenon called heliotrope cyanosis, where coagulated blood accumulates in the patient's lungs, quickly depriving them of oxygen and turning their extremities blue.<sup>34</sup> Family members, caretakers, and hospital staff could do nothing but watch as people effectively drowned while lying in their beds. For survivors of the influenza virus itself, the danger was not always over. The combination of these symptoms often resulted in lasting complications, which left them susceptible to secondary infections such as pneumonia or tuberculosis.

#### Unusual Curves

Those who survived the disease but had to witness its effects first-hand must have been deeply affected by that experience. That effect was compounded because of the demographic which was most affected by it; young people in their prime, from ages 25 to 40.<sup>35</sup> Theories abound as to how this was possible, since influenza epidemics typically have a more lethal effect on those at the extreme ends of the age range – the very old or the very young. The most popular theory is that in healthy adolescents and adults, their strong immune systems may have overcompensated for the effects of the disease, resulting in a “cytokine storm” that left them even weaker and more susceptible to complications.<sup>36</sup> In the case of some, like the unnamed wife of one Ernst Birkholz, bouts of other illnesses left them weakened and at increased risk from the influenza – an infection of typhoid five years before her death in 1919 is blamed for her untimely death. Her

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33. <https://www.wiscontext.org/virus-shut-down-wisconsin-great-flu-pandemic-1918>

34. Arnold, p. 30

35. <https://www.wiscontext.org/virus-shut-down-wisconsin-great-flu-pandemic-1918>

36. Kindrachuk, Jason and Nickol, Michaela E. “A Year of Terror and a Century of Reflection: Perspectives on the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 – 1919.” BMC Infectious Diseases. Winnipeg, Canada. 2019. P. 5



obituary fails to list her name but is painfully exact in relating her age: she was 27 years, 8 months, and 8 days old.<sup>37</sup>

With a global conflict in full swing, which was drawing away both huge numbers of men in that age range for military service as well as young women who served as nurses, camp clerks, and other support roles, the loss of young people on the home front to disease while others were lost at war was especially devastating.<sup>38</sup> In fact, between casualties of war and fatalities from the pandemic, the fatality rate for young adults was so severe that the average life expectancy in the United States dropped in 1918 by almost 12 years.<sup>39</sup>

#### Insurmountable Limitations

In addition to the helplessness of seeing the healthy and young fall victim to such a fast-moving disease was the inability of scientists and medical professionals to slow the spread, treat the symptoms, or find a cure. Medical knowledge and practice simply was not up to the task – germs had long since been identified, but the true nature of viruses that affected humans, and how they resulted in influenza, would not be discovered until 1933.<sup>40</sup> Without even basic knowledge of how the influenza virus functioned, there was no hope for a cure.

In addition, medical practice was ill equipped to treat even the secondary infections brought on by the influenza. With hospitals filled to their limits and exhausted medical staff unable to keep up with demand for their services or even succumbing to the virus themselves, the situation was dire for anyone in need of medical assistance. Reports from doctors like Victor

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37. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 6, p.24(February 9th, 1919)

38. The American Red Cross was becoming desperate for more nurses to aid at the front, as indicated by an advertisement in *The Lutheran Standard* in October of 1918. The writer asks any able-bodied person with nursing experience to apply, noting that “The epidemic that is upon us is making the need tenfold greater for the present.”

39. Kindrachuk and Nicol, p. 5

40. Kolata, p. 76

Vaughan give insight into the grim status of hospitals at the time: “They are placed on the cots until every bed is full and yet others crowd in. The faces soon wear a bluish cast; a distressing cough brings up the bloodstained sputum. In the morning, the dead bodies are stacked about the morgue like cord wood.”<sup>41</sup>

Such a widely shared and deeply traumatic experience could very well be a reason why there has been relatively little written about this period of history from those who lived through it.<sup>42</sup> It is a mark of a different time and a different outlook on life – difficult to imagine modern bloggers and social media users missing an opportunity to write or talk about their day-to-day experiences – but reservation is the mark of a more stoic generation. Even so, stoic does not mean mute; they were not entirely silent about their experience

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41. <http://www.influenzaarchive.org/>

42. Arnold, p. 299

### PART III: CHRISTIAN VOICES

Despite the relative rarity of available sources on account of the reasons named above, among the places we are able to turn in order to find first-hand accounts of what happened during the pandemic of 1918 are the responses of churches and missionaries who found themselves directly affected by the virus. Christians across the United States were challenged to meet the needs of their congregations and their communities in new and unexpected ways, and their records give us a new perspective on what that experience meant. Their approach, based more on Scriptural principle than medical dogma, stands out most especially to modern Christians seeking to understand how to respond in a Christ-like way to modern pandemics.

Even from an outsider's perspective, the contributions of Christian people to the collection of knowledge that has led to a greater understanding of the pandemic are noteworthy. For example, in preparation for his expedition to Alaska, Johan Hultin spent time consulting with local missionaries to find ideal potential dig sites. He even chose the city of Nome as his first stop not only because it was situated above the permafrost line, but also because there was a long-standing Lutheran mission there that had kept a good record of deaths.<sup>43</sup> In remote Norway House, an outpost in Canada, the parish registers from the Christian mission there showed that the epidemic was causing some 183 deaths per 1,000 in the area, figures which have assisted in gaining a more complete picture of the effects of the virus.<sup>44</sup>

But mere record-keeping is far from the only writing that Christians were doing during this period; they continued to publish periodicals, preach sermons, and write journals and

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43. Kolata, p. 102

44. Arnold, p. 140

memoirs, just as they had before. In fact, some committed to continuing to publish theological works regularly, even in the face of setbacks brought on by the pandemic. In the January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1920 issue, the periodical department of the Ohio Synod periodical *The Lutheran Standard* made a plea to pastors only to send discontinuations and new subscriptions to their office, on account of two of their clerks being away for over a week with sickness.<sup>45</sup> Using print as their means of communication, they sought to alleviate fears of the moment while continuing to preserve and protect sound doctrine and teaching.

### **Divided Attention Presents Challenges**

While understandable due to the circumstances, this divided attention of Christian writers presents a challenge to the prospective researcher. There were several pressing social issues on the minds of Christian writers which, despite their relative importance, drew the focus away from the pandemic. At the same time, the effects of the virus were being felt by Christian people just as they were by all who lived through the pandemic. Added to this were the limitations of the time: technology, medical science, and communication. How, then, did this influence the way they approached the subject of influenza?

### **The War to End All Wars**

In respect to social issues, it is hardly a surprise that the lion's share of printed material during this period was dedicated to the war. From the very beginning of the conflict that consumed the attention, resources, and lives of people the world over, both the War and Christianity were inextricably linked. Chaplains were specifically requested by governments and placed into service in all areas of the war. Lutheran publications encouraged able-bodied young men and

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45. *The Lutheran Standard* Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>, 1920

women to join the war effort, just as if they were major newspapers or radio broadcasters.<sup>46</sup> *The Lutheran Standard* kept count, as best as they were able, of how many Lutheran boys had enlisted.

For Christians in times of war, there are a multitude of difficult questions to consider. Dealing with death and destruction was on the minds of many, especially on the unprecedented scale of the First World War. Pastors and lay people were forced to wrestle with the grim realities of ministering to a world that had been torn apart by global war. As one contributor to *The Lutheran Standard* put it in a meditation on the prophet Jeremiah:

We cannot get away from the fact that we and the whole world have become brutalized and degraded through the mere constant reading about this awful butchering of human beings that has been going on, and it will take us a long time before we again realize the great value and sacredness of human life as we did before the war, if indeed in our lifetime we reach that level again. In other words, the desolation wrought by the war is not all on the battlefield, or in Europe, or outside of us; much of it, and for us the worst of it, is within the scope of our own hearts and our own thoughts.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, the war was traumatic not only for those who fought in it but also for those who, through following the actions of the participants, experienced a darker and more violent part of the human experience which they otherwise might have never come to know. Such experiences demanded to be addressed by leaders, both political and spiritual, and they certainly were. But for every war headline and every opinion piece about the effects of the conflict, there was less space both on the page and in the consciousness of the average person for the pandemic.

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46. *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol. 76, p.617-18(Oct. 19, 1918)

47. *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol. 77, p.25(Jan 11, 1919)

## Social Concerns

Even when writers were able to overcome these barriers and began to write about their own experiences or those of others, secondary concerns still affected their writing. How would governmental measures affect the spiritual well-being of Christian people who were cut off from their church homes? What role would new methods of communication take, or not take, in the post-pandemic world? As their perspective on the pandemic developed, it was told through a lens that was colored by these concerns.

### *Communication Methods*

As communication technology progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for the modern person to comprehend the difficulties faced by people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it came to interpersonal communication. Today, distance is hardly a factor when there are myriad options readily available to nearly every person to contact anyone anywhere on the globe at any time. But for Christian people during the 1918 pandemic, maintaining a connection to other people who were quarantined at home was a much more challenging prospect.

For Christians, communication is essential. “How can they hear without someone preaching to them?” Paul asks of the proclamation of the gospel message in Romans 10:14. Without the ability to bring God’s Word to another person, Christian ministry cannot go on. For pastors and laymen alike, the prospect of sending the gospel out into a world with few means available was a daunting one.

Perhaps the most readily available method of communication was through print, in newspapers, letters, and other publications. When the virus reached Washington, D.C. in September of 1918, Health Officer Dr. W. C. Fowler warned the public to be cautious about influenza but said he did

not yet expect a full-on pandemic.<sup>48</sup> By October 4<sup>th</sup>, all public gathering spaces, including churches, had been ordered closed. The following day, Protestant ministers in the city held an emergency meeting, and shared their decision with the *Evening Star* newspaper. By October 6<sup>th</sup>, the entire D.C. area was aware that every minister in the area was in full support of the measures, and they intended to “cheerfully comply.”<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, that exact sentiment was echoed by M.C. Kurfees, of the Campbell Street Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He chose to contact his members with a letter, urging them to comply with the Kentucky Board of Health’s recommendations for health and public safety. “It behooves us,” he wrote, “to cheerfully submit to this order and to exert all our energies in an earnest and sympathetic effort to cooperate with the benevolent purpose of our government to check the deplorable disease.”<sup>50</sup>

In an op-ed article printed in *The Lutheran Standard*, a contributor noted the power and effectiveness of printed media to advance the work of the church. He was clearly confident in its ability to spread the gospel message far and wide, even going so far as to assert “We are sure that, if the art of printing had been known at the time of the apostles, they would have employed the press in publishing the Gospel broadcast.”<sup>51</sup> Yet even as some were feeling confident in the power of the printed word, others were expressing doubts about other, newer methods of communication.

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48. <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-dc-churches-responded-when-the-government-banned-public-gatherings-during-the-spanish-flu-of-1918/>

49. *Ibid*

50. <https://christianchronicle.org/how-churches-of-christ-responded-when-the-1918-spanish-flu-killed-millions/>  
51. *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol. 77, p. 5 (Jan 4, 1919)

A contributor to *The Northwestern Lutheran* less than a month before commented on the Vatican's recent request for a private telegraph line. "The Vatican asks to have its own telegraph system so that it may communicate with its nuncios and with foreign governments without using the regular Italian wires and offices. It would be an embarrassment for any other Christian church of which we know, to have such a private telegraph system." And later, "Heaven preserve us from a church that has plans which shun the light of publicity."<sup>52</sup> Hardly a positive view of emerging communication technology, though whether the author would maintain such a position if another denomination were involved is perhaps debatable.

### ***Home Worship***

While there may have been some difference of opinion about how to apply these new methods to communication of the Gospel, there could be little disagreement over the need for Christian people who had been unexpectedly separated from one another to have continued and regular access to God's Word. The sudden arrival of influenza had placed local and national authorities into difficult positions to protect their citizens, which resulted in the declaration of sweeping quarantine procedures that affected all areas of life, including the churches.

Notes taken from council meetings at Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee include one made on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918, to comply with the order of the Health Commissioner "until further notice."<sup>53</sup> A later note shows that services had still not resumed by Christmas of that year.<sup>54</sup> *The Northwestern Lutheran* observed that the state of Wisconsin closed down all churches and schools for a time, but that Northwestern College had reopened on October 22.<sup>55</sup> This was the

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52. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 5, p. 196(Dec. 15th, 1918)

53. Grace Church minutes, October 1918

54. *Ibid*

55. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 5, p.176(Nov. 3rd, 1918)



result of remarkably foresighted action by Wisconsin's State Health Officer Dr. Cornelius A. Hopper, who had ordered all public institutions in Wisconsin closed on October 10.<sup>56</sup>

As it happened, Grace was just one of many churches that needed to re-evaluate their mission during the time of the pandemic. In Montreal, the Roman Catholic Church sounded the bells on Notre Dame Cathedral, announcing the start of Mass. Their priests then celebrated the Mass in their members' stead, and afterwards brought the elements of the Sacrament to their houses.<sup>57</sup> Extraordinary times called for unconventional methods, even if they caused a disruption of deeply held belief and long-standing custom.

Christian people in such diverse places as Fayette City, PA, Adairville, KY, and Fort Collins, CO took to organizing small worship services in their homes, "as was sometimes done in the days of the apostles."<sup>58</sup> *The Washington Times* reported that D.C. area churches were actively planning to hold "open-air" services in public spaces, an effort that was short-lived on account of the local health commissioner.<sup>59</sup>

Ingenuity when it came to reaching people who were quarantined at home did not stop there. In *The Lutheran Witness*, a call went out to families to begin home devotions in place of attending worship, making use of "the public press, or otherwise." The writer offered comment on the effectiveness of this approach: "In those homes in which this had been a custom before it was easily arranged. To others it was a novel experience."<sup>60</sup> In *The Lutheran Standard*, readers were provided a short service template called "A Service for the Home," accompanied by these

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56. <https://www.wiscontext.org/virus-shut-down-wisconsin-great-flu-pandemic-1918>

57. Goldenberg, Susan, and Woodrow Wilson. "Killer Flu." *Beaver* 86, no. 5 (October 2006): 27–32.

58. How Churches of Christ responded when the 1918 'Spanish flu' killed millions

59. "The Washington Times," October 06, 1918, NATIONAL EDITION, Page 19.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1918-10-06/ed-1/seq-19/>.

60. *The Lutheran Witness*, Vol. 37, p.359(Nov. 12, 1918)

hopeful words; “Note from the Editor: By the time the reader gets this the epidemic may be past and the churches open again; but cut it out and lay it in your Bible for other occasions when the family cannot go to church.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Uncertain Times*

“Uncertain times” seems to be the often-repeated mantra of corporations and organizations today when trying to address the unusual situations in which many of us find ourselves during a modern pandemic. As we have seen, Christian people in the time of the Spanish Flu knew very well what uncertainty could be like. As they struggled to cope with recovery after a global conflict, endure the horrible sights of an invisible killer of the young and strong, and adjust long-standing traditions to accommodate new experiences, they could hardly avoid uncertainty, and it affected the way that they thought and talked about what they were experiencing.

### **Responding to Need**

Fortunately, despite these roadblocks, some records of what these Christians did remain. We can find, if we look, some ways in which they responded to the call of the needy, the sick, and the dying. They responded in many ways, across a variety of contexts: in military settings, worship settings, in missions, and in the home. And through it all, they advanced the healing power of the gospel message to those who needed it most.

### **In the Military**

Possibly the most striking example of Christians responding to this crisis is the saga that unfolded around the Great Lakes Naval Training Station near Chicago. On September 11, 1918,

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61. The Lutheran Standard, Vol. 76, p.642(Oct. 26, 1918)

the influenza reached the station, just 30 miles north of Chicago. Within a week, there were 2,600 sailors crowded into the infirmary there.<sup>62</sup> At the height of the epidemic, nearly 6,000 of the 173,000 men at Great Lakes were in hospitals.<sup>63</sup>

The critical situation prompted action. In *The Lutheran Standard* on November 23, we learn how quickly the situation developed, and how swiftly it was met. “On Tuesday, Sept. 17, the Brotherhood (Lutheran Brotherhood of America) building at Great Lakes Training Station was converted into a temporary hospital, due to an epidemic of Spanish influenza. The building will be taxed to its utmost capacity to take care of the sick.... As Lutherans we are glad to be of some service to the boys and to the government even in this unusual way.”<sup>64</sup>

The conversion of the Brotherhood building into a hospital was only the start. In the December 28 issue is an update from a Pastor E. Lack, who had spent some time working with the enlisted at the Naval Station. He details the efforts that were undertaken by the Lutheran workers there<sup>65</sup>, making special note of how “the representatives of the different church denominations displayed a true Christian spirit of unity, each ministering to all with whom they came in contact, and at the same time each respecting the doctrines and faiths of the others.”<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps the most striking is his account of the effects that the preaching of the Gospel had on the men in his care. Pastor Lack recounts the tale of a particular young man who, in fear for his life from influenza but having heard the promises of God, asked immediately to be

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62. Arnold, p. 131

63. Arnold, p. 134

64. *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol. 76, p.686(Nov. 23, 1918)

65. “Thus the whole staff of religious workers in the Lutheran Brotherhood Building was set to work...in the day time the writer had to look after about four hundred patients, and when on night duty, sixteen hundred men...at times we could only snatch a few hours sleep and go back to work.” *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol. 76, p. 768(Dec. 28, 1918)

66. *Ibid*

baptized. After several operations and a long period of healing, Pastor Lack notes that not only was he on the road to recovery, but that others in the ward were “sitting around reading their Testament or other devotional books, and they were not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.”<sup>67</sup>

This attitude and approach to service was not confined to the Great Lakes Training Station. Bernard J. McNamara wrote an article for *America Magazine* that was published on November 23, 1918. In it he echoes the sentiments of Pastor Lack, applying them to the work of the Catholic priests who were serving as army chaplains in the United States. He notes that “a wonderful impression was created upon the doctors, nurses and orderlies and also on the Protestant patients” because of the actions of those priests.<sup>68</sup> “The doctors admired the priests not only because they saw them assist the dying to die well, but also because they came to realize the material help that was given them in bringing back their patients to health.”<sup>69</sup>

One final comment from Pastor Lack is worth noting. Just before he ends his letter, he writes that “As a matter of course, our regular services finally had to be cancelled until all danger was over.”<sup>70</sup> It is very nearly ironic to see how Pastor Lack, and those with him, were unafraid to place themselves in harm’s way to care for the sick and dying in order to offer them words of comfort from the Gospel, and at the same time were taking precautions against infection in other areas of worship.

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67. *Ibid*

68. McNamara, Bernard J. “Army Chaplains and the Epidemic.” *America Press, Inc.*, Nov. 23, 1918. P. 40

69. McNamara, p. 41

70. *Ibid*

## In Mission Fields

This selfless attitude of service despite personal risk found expression outside of the forts and camps of the military as well – even in the midst of crisis, Christians could be found actively pursuing work in mission fields. As an example, we have the testimony of a missionary who reported on the work being done at Apache reservations in the West. He mentions that already 288 lives had been lost on the San Carlos reservation, and more at the East Cedar Creek and North Fork reservations, though residents there had fled to the mountains quickly and been saved by their swift quarantine.<sup>71</sup>

The situation was grim, and there was little help to be had. But about the missionaries there he writes: “Had it not been for their efforts we would have lost many more. They certainly worked with them; they were ready night or day and spent time and money. I am sure they should have the Indians’ everlasting gratitude.”<sup>72</sup> Amazingly, not a single one of the missionaries, nor their children, succumbed to influenza while providing this aid, something for which the author reminds his readers to thank God for.<sup>73</sup>

The hopeful tone of the accounts of the work being done for the Apaches stands in contrast to grim reports from other mission fields around the world. Missionaries told cautionary tales of the state of other countries in more tropical climes dealing with the influenza epidemic. From Pernambuco, Brazil, a missionary recounts:

Our health department laughed at the idea of any peril of an epidemic. The physician who was its spokesman has just died. Everything in the city life is paralyzed. Many stores are closed, even drug-stores, for the lack of people to run them ... a blind preacher here had his wife, sister-in-law and all the children sick and he the only one to wait on them. The

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71. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 6, p. 110 (July 13th, 1919)

72. *Ibid*

73. *Ibid*

price of medicine and food has gone up terribly ... the depot is stacked up with freight that cannot be moved, there are almost no telegraph agents, postal service is limited, ships cannot unload, and churches have nearly quit gathering.<sup>74</sup>

### In Communities and At Home

Of course, no self-respecting pastor would presume to leave his flock unattended in such a time. A person would rightly expect a Christian leader to do his best to care for the people in his charge in any circumstance, and in many places ministers of the gospel did not disappoint. What is surprising, however, are the accounts of Christian people going above and beyond to serve others in their homes, their congregations, and their communities, sometimes at great personal risk.

J.D. Northcut, a 43-year-old minister from Tracy City, TN, fell ill with influenza that developed into pneumonia and died at the age of 43, after he had been giving “almost continual attention to sufferers near him.”<sup>75</sup> *The Milwaukee Journal* found that despite churches closing their doors, local pastors did not have “any surplus of leisure on their hands” as they devoted even more time to pastoral care and sick calls.<sup>76</sup> The Russell Street Church of Christ in Nashville opened its doors to become a hospital, funded and staffed by members.<sup>77</sup> Christian people continued to do the work to which they had been called, which to some sent a message that the disease was not to be feared, and to others that the commands of the government were not entirely binding. In reading what they wrote and said, some of these misconceptions are dispelled.

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74. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 6, p.50(April 6th, 1919)

75. <https://christianchronicle.org/how-churches-of-christ-responded-when-the-1918-spanish-flu-killed-millions/>

76. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2020/03/influenza-pandemic-1918-churches/>

77. <https://christianchronicle.org/how-churches-of-christ-responded-when-the-1918-spanish-flu-killed-millions/>

In a powerful sermon delivered on the first Sunday after being allowed to resume in-person worship, Reverend J. Francis Grimke defended the government's decision to ban all public gathering, including worship. "The fact that the churches were places of religious gathering, and the others not, would not affect in the least the health question involved. If avoiding crowds lessens the danger of being infected, it was wise to take the precaution and not needlessly run in danger and expect God to protect us."<sup>78</sup>

Reverend Grimke's sermon dispels the idea that Christians were completely free to live without any concern for the virus and also to act without consequence from the government which God had set up to rule for the benefit of Christian people.. E.C. Fuqua of Fort Collins, CO felt that it was possible for Christians to worship in ways that were lawful to the government, and to God, and thus show "loyalty to both."<sup>79</sup> For some Christians, God's providence was absolute, and thus meant they were afforded miraculous protection from all ills. For others, it was better to make use of what they saw as God-given gifts of science and medicine rather than to tempt God's mercy.<sup>80</sup>

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78. Grimké, F. J. (Francis James), Butcher, C. Simpson. "Some reflections, growing out of the recent epidemic of influenza that afflicted our city: a discourse delivered in the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C." (1918).

79. <https://christianchronicle.org/how-churches-of-christ-responded-when-the-1918-spanish-flu-killed-millions/>  
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## PART IV: DRAWING PARALLELS AND CONCLUSIONS

The author of “Influenza Among the Apaches” concludes his letter with an introspective paragraph that asks his readers some challenging questions. Rather than wondering how many of those on the reservation that had died were believers, he urges his readers to ask themselves what they have done to further the Gospel in their own lives. Interestingly, he acknowledges the difficulty of ministering to a people accustomed to a nomadic life, and just as accustomed to ignorance from white men, though that does little to dampen his spirits. Instead, he asks for gifts and prayers for the workers who are assisting the Apaches, because there are so few of them there to help.<sup>81</sup>

Just as the author of this report forces his readers to ask difficult questions of themselves, the words and actions of Christians during the 1918 pandemic raise difficult questions for modern readers. On the one hand, with the benefit of hindsight, we are afforded the opportunity to look critically at their mistakes and commit to leaving them in the past where they belong. On the other, we have the solemn responsibility to take their successes and failures to heart, to both condemn our own shortcomings and encourage new and positive action.

### **Watch What You Say and Do**

The most difficult lesson we can learn from Christian writers from the time of the pandemic is to be judicious with what is published. What we say may be forgotten, but what is written down will last for generations to come and give them opportunity to view our thoughts with a critical eye. Admittedly, this idea seems to be at odds with the rest of this paper; what we have seen as

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81. *Ibid*



one of the most prominent challenges to the prospective researcher of this topic is the distinct *lack* of written material on the subject, something which has been discussed at length. But there is something to be said about the writing that has made its way to us; some of it has aged far better than others.

### Using the Common Cup

As an example of not taking the time to carefully evaluate what is being written, take these two articles: one printed in *The Northwestern Lutheran* in the May 18 edition of 1919, and another from *The Lutheran Witness* later that same month. Evidently, restrictions on gatherings had been relaxed by that time, as the discussion centers around whether to use the Common Cup in distributing the Lord's Supper, or to use other means. Acting as a catalyst for the discussion was the fact that the Board of Health of Minnesota had recently issued a recommendation that churches abolish the practice of the Common Cup until a later time.<sup>82</sup>

These two articles are similar in style and tone, highlighted by the fact that both are based on the opinion of one Dr. Malcolm MacLean, and both can be summed up with a quotation from him: "Germs are all around, why fear the ones on the Cup?"<sup>83</sup> The authors saw no reason, based on the understanding of the day, to allow the civil government to restrict church practice in such a way. Hindsight grants us a perspective on the subject that medical science in 1919 did not; virology was only in its infancy, and the differences between germs and viruses was not widely known. It took nearly one hundred years for that strain of influenza virus to even be

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82. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 6, p.76(May 18th, 1919)

83. *The Lutheran Witness*, Vol. 38, p.171(May 27, 1919)

reconstructed, much less fully understood. And yet these authors approach the subject with a confidence that might be charitably described as “unwarranted.”

In this example, we are invited to reflect on our own perspectives and opinions, and the way in which we express them. Taking the time to carefully consider a response, as opposed to making reactive statements publicly, is a mark of wisdom. This kind of humble patience is proved even more valuable in situations like the ones in which we find ourselves during a pandemic when few people – if any – know with any certainty the correct course of action.

#### Cues from Christian Scientists

In another example, along a similar line of thought to writing too hastily, we can also read about people taking action without carefully considering the potential outcomes. Christian Scientist groups in Boston were caught holding services, in spite of government orders against such gatherings. The author of the article from *The Lutheran Witness* compares the situation in Boston with a similar one in Milwaukee, where a group of Christian Scientists were shut down by police on the orders of the Health Commissioner.<sup>84</sup> Noting that Boston, which did nothing to prevent the gathering of Christian Scientists there, was hit much harder than Milwaukee by the influenza, the author comments that “The next time an epidemic sweeps the country, Boston will be less transcendently tolerant.”<sup>85</sup>

Actions bear consequences, as the above example shows. Not just that defiance of civil authorities can result in the use of force by those authorities to restore order, but also that the public perception of the offender is changed by such action. The author predicts that Bostonian

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84. *The Lutheran Witness*, Vol. 37, p.398(Dec. 10, 1918)

85. *Ibid*

officials will likely be less inclined to turn a blind eye to such actions in the future, but it also implies a degree of prejudice that may have taken root. How had their feelings towards Christian Scientists changed, now that they had seen what they prioritized?

To approach the subject from another angle, consider the words of a Christian Scientist named Peter V. Ross from northern California. His published response to the mayor of San Francisco re-issuing a new mask regulation not only informs us of the typical Christian Scientist view towards medical practice, but also reveals a startling continuity between the influenza and coronavirus pandemics and the emotions they elicit. “There is no proof that the wearing of masks has had any influence in checking the influenza epidemic. But if any one has faith in them let him wear one. He is then safe, and he need not be concerned about the safety of his neighbor who does not wear one.”<sup>86</sup>

Even over a century ago, reactions to the lifestyle changes a pandemic brings carry a structure and tone remarkably similar to ones espoused today. Almost as if to demonstrate a key difference in the way people expressed themselves then as compared to now, an author from *The Lutheran Witness* expressed his position more bluntly:

They [local Board of Health] told us that influenza and pneumonia are very real and very dangerous diseases, which are communicated by infection. Sane people knew that. The thousands who died all about us in the last few weeks are so many demonstrations of this fact. But you may be sure of this that not only has sin so weakened the bodies of men that disease and death have laid hold of them, but sin has also so weakened and corrupted the minds of men that, in the face of all this sickness and dying, there are thousands who still insist that there *is* no sickness or death.<sup>87</sup>

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86. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.5020flu.0016.205>

87. *The Lutheran Witness*, Vol. 37, p.360(Nov. 12, 1918)

## Lessons Learned

The parallels between the pandemic of 1918 and the one we live through today are undeniable. While the diseases, culture, and approaches to medicine are very different, many things remain the same. Pandemics still inspire the same emotions in people today as they did 100 years ago. They still force physical separation between us, end the lives of some while forcing others to contemplate their own mortality, and cause divisions over what the correct course of action might be. As we look back, there must be something for us to learn from those who came before us that can help us to endure our own trials. What lessons can we take with us from the words and works of Christians who survived a pandemic, as God willing, we also may?

### Patience

One critical lesson seems to be, from the example of the articles on the use of the Common Cup, that we ought to exercise patience and care before making public statements concerning health crises. This is not to say that before any sort of decision is made, that Christians ought to wait a hundred years or more to be certain of all the factors. But it does bring to the forefront of our minds the question of exactly how a Christian ought to put into practice one's trust in God. If the total trust that is on display in these articles is one extreme, and abject terror that drives a person away from living a full life is the other, can Christian people discern a valid middle ground? One that trusts in God to guide all things for the good of those who love Him, but also makes full use of all His gifts, including science and medicine?

This is a deeply challenging lesson to take to heart in the midst of crisis. Time is something we have precious little of when a disease is spreading, and fear continues to grow. But consider the effect that a calm and patient presence has in a tense situation, as witnessed in the

infirmary at the Great Lakes Naval Station. The peace and comfort that the gospel brings to troubled hearts and minds is a powerful tool in the face of danger and fear, something that brings its own kind of healing to bear.

Emulating that kind of patient endurance, then, could have several beneficial effects for Christians in times of crisis. On a personal level, taking time to remember and trust in the words and works of Jesus brings a confidence to withstand calamity. On a congregational level, a calming presence and refuge from the storms of uncertainty can be a powerful statement to a community seeking safe harbor. In respect to the world's perception of God's Church, it is a benefit and a blessing to be a light of God's peace to the world, both in what is said and in what is left unsaid. To humbly accept that there are things in this world that others may understand better than we, and to take that opportunity to share what we know best, is a valuable thing to learn from our predecessors.

### Balance

Another lesson for us is how to respond to crises in a way that manages to achieve a type of balance. This is more than another facet of patience, this is the application of lessons learned, both through consideration and trial and error. An example might be how a Christian person approaches a subject like health safety measures. Servants of God that fall victim to illness simply cannot accomplish what healthy ones can, and so our objective might be to remain as safe and healthy as we are able. At the same time, we may recognize that in difficult times fear is never far from anyone. That fear can lead to suspicion – especially from those outside the church. A response might be to take care to speak and act in ways that are above reproach, whether from a spiritual or a worldly perspective.

While preparation and intuition are important, it is equally important to learn from both successful and unsuccessful actions – and to have the presence of mind to be evaluating both regularly. It was initially thought that the 1918 quarantines would be short-lived affairs, and little was done to change regular practices. As isolation grew longer, however, that changed. In the same way that Christians of yesterday found the ability to be flexible and innovative in their efforts to bring people and the gospel together, we have the opportunity to find a balance between caution and confidence, and between action and inaction.

### Confidence

Something that cannot be missed as we read the accounts of missionaries who were dealing with incredibly difficult situations in varied locations is that they were still out in mission fields, doing the work they had been called to do at a time when it would have been easy to abandon it. They were confident that their efforts were not in vain, and that their work was meaningful and had purpose. That confidence gave them the strength to persevere, and it can inspire us, too. The work and the mission of God's people not only continues during a pandemic, it can thrive!

It is doubtful that this means that in our own time these examples should serve as motivation to begin new missions in the midst of a pandemic. Rather, let them be comfort for those who are worried or anxious that the physical separation that comes with disease is an insurmountable barrier to the spread of the gospel. The confidence and hope of the few missionaries of yesterday was in the same God that guides and sustains the many of us today. If our God is constant, let the confidence in Him be as well!

## For the Glory of God

Ultimately, just as it was for many who cared for others who were on the brink of death in hospitals and infirmaries around the world, our goal is that through our words and deeds that God is glorified. It is through faith in Him that Christians have the confidence to face even an enemy as terrifying as a seemingly unstoppable disease, the patience to endure the trials that a pandemic can bring, and the wisdom to find a balance in our approach to ministry in increasingly unusual and unexpected situations. And, just as a disdain for civil leadership or modern medicine can cause offence in the eyes of the world, the selfless service and loving care of Christian people makes a powerful testimony to those seeking comfort and peace in times of trouble.

It is no small measure of comfort to know that a Christian can testify to the truth of God's Word simply by living out their respective vocations to the best of their abilities. What we learn from Christians of pandemics past is that when much of ordinary life has changed for so many, even simple actions can take on new levels of meaning. The sharing of a word of comfort from Scripture, the unspoken commitment to serve the community, or even the simple gesture of being present to offer relief and support in sickness become powerful statements of faith to observers, survivors, and readers alike.

Perhaps the best lesson of all is to take to heart the same words of comfort that provided a light to both Christians and non-Christians alike in the dark times of the 1918 pandemic. Can we hold close the words of Psalm 27:14, just as the sailors at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station did, and "wait on the LORD?" Or can we simply meditate on Psalm 90:12, as the writer only identified as H.K.M wrote in *The Northwestern Lutheran* in December of 1918:

It is manifestly a trial when the counsel and solace of God's Word is the most precious recourse of the afflicted Christian. God's Hand is lying upon us, let us look up to Him to give us balm for the wounds he has inflicted. If the church doors be locked by government orders may every Christian family eagerly turn to its home prayers and Scripture lessons to find the one true help in this as in all other troubles. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."



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