

Infringement of Our Rights or Love Your Neighbor as Yourself?

As Americans, we are fiercely independent. We are not a collectivist society like China, which can mandate the behavior of an entire nation (note the quote here about China from a South Korean professor). We are individualists, and we prize our freedoms. How, then, should we respond when our government restricts these freedoms in the name of public safety? Is this an infringement of our constitutional rights? Or is it an opportunity to love our neighbor?

Before answering these questions, we would do well to consider what is at stake. The *New York Times* paints this grim picture from Italy:

“Hospital morgues there are inundated. Bergamo’s mayor, Giorgio Gori, issued an ordinance that closed the local cemetery this week for the first time since World War II, though he guaranteed that its mortuary would still accept coffins. Many of them had been sent to the Church of All Saints in Bergamo, located in the closed cemetery, where scores of waxed wooden coffins form a macabre line for cremations.”

And what, exactly, does this look like?

“‘Unfortunately, we don’t know where to put them,’ said Brother Marco Bergamelli, one of the priests at the church. He said that with hundreds dying each day, and with each body taking more than an hour to cremate, there was an awful backlog. ‘It takes time and the dead are many.’”

This is what happens when the coronavirus is not checked in time. This is what we could be facing in America.

One more glimpse from the *Times*:

“At around midnight on Wednesday, Renzo Carlo Testa, 85, died from the coronavirus in a hospital in the northern Italian town of Bergamo. Five days later, his body was still sitting in a coffin, one of scores lined head-to-toe in the church of the local cemetery, which is itself closed to the public.

“His wife of 50 years, Franca Stefanelli, would like to give him a proper funeral. But traditional funeral services are illegal throughout Italy now, part of the national restrictions against gatherings and going out that have been put in place to try to stem the spread of Europe’s worst outbreak of the coronavirus. In any case, she and her sons could not attend anyway, because they are themselves sick and in quarantine.”

Would you like this to happen to your family? Your city?

In short, this is not about me or my freedoms. It is about caring for my neighbor.

Consequently, if the government feels the need to put reasonable, mandatory restrictions on the populace in order to save lives, then as much as possible, I will comply. I am willing to be restricted so as not to be a potential carrier of the disease to others.

“But,” someone will surely say, “this opens the door for the government to do anything. This is just a trial run to see how we will respond. There is nothing random or unplanned about it. The restrictions are part of a larger, national (or even international) plot.” (For related thoughts from an evangelical leader, see [here](#).)

To be sure, I do not put absolute trust in our government. Not a chance. I do not believe in Washington the way I believe in God. (Not within a million miles.)

But do we honestly think that President Trump is part of this conspiracy? That his entire administration is part of a plot to steal our liberties and subject us to a one-world government? That Trump will be coming for our guns next?

I could understand some conservatives being up in arms if George H. W. Bush were our current president, with his frequent references to a "New World Order." And I could understand more skepticism from the right if this was happening under President Barack Obama (or, more scarily, under a President Bernie Sanders).

But let's be realistic.

This is happening under Donald Trump. He is nobody's puppet. And he is no friend of the "New World Order."

It was Germany's Angela Merkel who complained about the damage Trump was doing to this very order. And the Foreign Policy website noted on Dec. 27, 2018, that, "From his earliest days on the campaign trail, U.S. President Donald Trump made clear his disdain for the international organizations that have regulated trade, promoted human rights, and advanced international peace since the end of World War II."

That's why I reject the idea that the restrictions being placed on us are part of a larger, nefarious plot.

It's possible that some leaders want to exploit this crisis to advance their own, controlling agendas. (That is certainly the case in China.) But I truly believe that our health experts are doing their best to prevent millions of deaths and our national leaders are doing their best to respond with wisdom.

For people of faith, though, the restrictions raise another issue.

Many of us wonder, "Aren't these restrictions based on fear? And isn't faith the opposite of fear? We don't run from the

conflict and the crisis. We run to it.”

To be sure, during times of plague and pestilences, Christians have often served the sick and dying, even at the loss of their own lives.

As recounted by Glen Scrivener, summarizing the research of historian Rodney Stark, “In AD 260, while Marcus Aurelius was emperor, a plague struck (some have thought it was smallpox). Over a 15-year period, it killed a quarter to a third of the Roman Empire. Stark estimates that at this time there were 45,000 Christians in existence, just percent of the empire. Despite their numbers, their response to this pandemic won admiration and a greater following.

“Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, reported: ‘Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.’”

That is an extraordinary demonstration of the love of Christ, and I have no doubt that many frontline caregivers today are Christians, willing to sacrifice their well-being for the well-being of others.

At the same time, even if I am not concerned about my own health, I run the risk of becoming infected, carrying the virus to someone else. And so, when hundreds of us gather together for a church service, unless we can guarantee that every person there has sufficient faith not to be infected, then our gathering presents a health hazard to others.

That’s why I do not see this an infringement of our rights as

much as an opportunity to love my neighbor.

There is also the question of wisdom, and the same God who gives faith also gives wisdom. As it is written in Proverbs 22:3, "A prudent man foresees the evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished."

What's interesting is that the Hebrew word translated here with "take cover" comes from the same root (s-t-r) found in Psalm 91:1, speaking of God being our "hiding place." And this is the psalm famous for its promise of protection during plague.

The same God who provides us with a spiritual "hiding place" also provides us with a natural "hiding place."

It is not either-or. It is both-and.

For me, personally, fear does not affect my ministry decisions.

If I am called by God to go into a dangerous area and preach, I will do it.