

WHAT COULD CHRISTIANS BE DOING NOW?

Ajith Fernando, May 2020

While the Bible does not dwell much on the “whys” of things like epidemics, it clearly teaches that when there is a great need, Christians must seek to be involved. Our God is [the God] who acts, and he often acts through us. Let us look at some biblical principles which we need to be asking how we should apply at this time.

- Prayer is a powerful force at work in the world (Jas. 5:16). Prayer can change the course of a nation (Jer. 26:19); so God’s people pray for their nation (Dan. 9:3-21). When my wife and I were praying a few days ago, I felt urged to pray the grand prayer of asking God to intervene and bring a stop to this epidemic worldwide. Too optimistic? No! We bow to God’s sovereignty in all things, but we also know that our prayers do influence history. Pray alone. Pray as a family. Pray as leadership groups. Pray with a group you feel an affinity with (I am part of a daily Zoom prayer meeting with a few pastors and leaders). Encourage fellow Christians to pray. May what Paul said about his release from Prison be true about the world’s release from Covid-19: “I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (Phil. 1:19). Key among our prayer requests is prayer for those serving in the frontlines. We express thanks for them and pray for their protection and their needs. Leaders who make key decisions also need our prayers.
- Many, many people are suffering financially because of a loss of income. This is a time to take seriously the advice of John the Baptist, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise” (Luke 3:11). We should do this personally, with our personal contacts, and organisationally in a systematic way (finding who among the needy we should concentrate on and what is the best way for us to meet those needs). Without regular offerings many pastors are struggling to pay rents and feed their children. Some needy people will not come to us and tell us how they are struggling. We must go after those that come to mind and ask about their needs. Each leader, group, and individual Christian should be asking who God wants us to be helping at this time. This is an urgent need. It should leave us restless and drive us to sacrificial giving and acting.
- Nine times the Bible tells us “Love your neighbour as yourself.” “As yourself” makes it an extremely high priority. The isolation lockdown brings makes it a little difficult to do this. But we should be looking for ways to show love to our neighbours (not only our Christian friends). We can share food and provisions, call to see how they are doing, and meet other needs they may have. Historically Christians have been in the forefront of helping during epidemics. During two epidemics in the first three centuries, the love Christians expressed towards their sick neighbours did much to turn people’s hearts towards the gospel. Listen to what third-century Bishop Dionysius says, about Christian service during an epidemic:

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 disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains.^[1]

This is a time when people are being hindered from burying their dead because neighbours fear contamination. In a time when the mood of self-preservation predominates, may Christians be known as people who love the vulnerable and risk expressing that love in radical ways.

- One of the best ways to help people these days is talking on the phone. The classic idea of a phone being for healthy conversation has been revived—thank God! Some are angry; others are sad, lonely, bored, fearful, or anxious. Many savour the opportunity of having a long chat with somebody. Jesus spent hours and hours chatting with his disciples. What used to be called “Holy Conversation” was an important part of Christian community. Long chats about issues and about life from a Christian perspective, is a Christian practice which has been lost in this busy age. This is a good time to bring it back. This is how we are going to disciple and mentor our people today. We must leave time in our schedules for relaxed conversations with those we care for.
- The lockdown can afford an opportunity for spiritual check-ups. When I ask people how their prayer and Bible study life is going, often the answer I get is that they are struggling to find time for it. Now most people have less busy schedules than before. This is a good time to return to the discipline of spending time with God. This is also a good time to do some repair work in our family life. Being with each other for long periods would have surfaced some family-life challenges. We can do something about those. Godly members should seek to be gracious agents of love and healing in their families. With Sunday School not functioning, this lockdown also brings into focus the responsibility of parents for the spiritual nurture of their children. This is the biblical model, and it is an ideal time for parents to recapture this role.
- This is also a time when people could get addicted in areas of weakness and when addictions could become worse. I am thinking of addictions like alcohol, drugs, pornography, gaming, anger, and gossip. For overcoming addiction, we know that prayer alone may not suffice (though prayer is primary). The Bible prescribes that we “Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness... *along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart*” (2 Tim. 2:22). Often we are more embarrassed when our friends find out about an addiction than when God finds out! Knowing this God prescribed the help of friends. How sad that many Christians do not have trustworthy friends who can help them with their weaknesses. Leaders, it is your duty to ensure that your people are cared for with good accountability to help them in their walk with God. Check how their faring regularly. Of course, if leaders are not accountable, it is unlikely that the people will be!
- Sexual and physical abuse of children has intensified during this lockdown. Frightening reports of the growth of this are emerging from Sri Lanka and the world. We should always be bringing up this topic in our conversation, especially in our preaching. Unless we bring it out into the open, victims will not be emboldened to do anything about it. Reports indicate that the related problem of spouse abuse has also intensified during this time. We must think hard about what we can do to protect these vulnerable people.

- The call to evangelise remains as urgent as ever. Unbelief and independence from God remain the most serious epidemics in the world. The lockdown has provided an opportunity for creative Christians to find ways of evangelising through the internet. I am so thrilled with some of the things our YFC staff have produced in my language, Sinhala. In the history of the church, difficult times have always produced bold, creative expressions of Christianity. Us older not-so-creative folk have the privilege of encouraging and being theological consultants for such projects.
- In crisis times people try to blame groups that are different to them. These days we are encountering a lot of hate speech, unfounded conspiracy theories, and the forwarding of fake news. Some are trying to rouse up ethno-religious animosity by blaming some groups (e.g. Christians and Muslims) for the problems. We must warn our people against such and do our best to defuse these evil influences. The temptation to spread such stories is almost irresistible. But the Bible has stern warnings about the seriousness of false witness.
- Those who are qualified and able can add to the national conversation on the issues we face at this time. Others in influential positions could have a major role in the nation at this time, like Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah and Esther had. Instead of criticising such, as Christians often do, we should pray for them and encourage them in any way possible.

Individually we may seem to be small entities in solving the massive needs faced by the world at this time. But each of us can do our part and contribute to the work of millions who are committed to helping solve the crises we face.

^[1] From Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: HarperCollins Chap, 4), Cited by Brian Stiller in “An Open Letter to Evangelicals,” (WEA, *Dispatches from the Global Village*, April 2020).

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