



Are you concerned about the  
Covid-19 corona virus?

Learn from history:

# HOW THE EARLY CHURCH HANDLED TWO DEVASTATING EPIDEMICS

... and doubled in size!

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**In the light of the current COVID-19 outbreak, how can Christians respond effectively in times of crisis? Church history can teach us an important lesson - to keep calm, to care for others, and to focus on God's Kingdom.**

In 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect that it was the first appearance of smallpox in the West. It was lethal. During the 15-year duration of the epidemic, from a quarter to a third (!) of the empire's population died from it.

Then in 251 AD a new and equally devastating epidemic hit the rural areas as hard as the cities. This time it may have been measles, producing a similar massive mortality rate. The epidemics weakened the Roman military and societal structures. So many people died that cities and villages in Italy and in the provinces were abandoned and fell into ruin.

Compared to the situation back then, the recent outbreak of COVID-19, the 'coronavirus', is actually a minor threat. It can help to put things in a historical perspective. As we already noted in our previous edition [JNI 1112](#), today's world is doing much better in terms of health and life expectancy. Medical science has made giant leaps in the past century. So we're much less at risk than in the old days.

### **An outnumbered minority**

How did the tiny Christian church in the Roman Empire respond to this existential crisis? In the year 165 AD Christians made up only 0.08% of the population of the empire, approximately 45,000 people. This is comparable to today's Christian population of Afghanistan, which is one of

the lowest in the world. By the year 251 AD this had increased to 1.9%, or 1,171,000 people. The Christians were highly outnumbered by pagans and operated out of a place of vulnerability.

Sociology of religion professor Rodney Stark is convinced that the epidemics, that left classical society disrupted and demoralised, helped catalyse the Christian faith. In his eloquent book 'The Rise of Christianity. How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries', he dedicated a whole chapter to 'Epidemics, networks and conversion'.

### **A crisis is always an opportunity**

Church fathers like Cyprian, Dionysius and Eusebius expressed in their writings that the epidemics made major contributions to the Christian cause. The pagan and Hellenic philosophies of that time could not provide any meaning or comfort. In contrast, Christianity offered a more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful portrait of the future. The Christians' faith made life meaningful, even amid sudden death.

Another factor is that when disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope, due to their care for each other and their strong social networks, which resulted in substantially higher rates of survival. So in the aftermath of each epidemic, Christians made up a larger percentage of the population even without new converts. This perceived 'miracle' brought even more pagans to the Christian faith.

It's a sociological notion that in times of trouble religions

frequently are discarded and new ones accepted. In other words: a crisis is always an opportunity that can be seized or lost. In the midst of the epidemics in the Roman Empire, Christianity proved to be efficacious. It became a 'revitalisation movement', it mobilised people to collective action, thus proving its validity.

## **Welcoming the epidemic as a test of love**

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, almost welcomed the great epidemic of his time. Writing in 251 AD he described the plague as an opportunity to 'refreshment':

*"How suitable, how necessary it is that this pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and everyone and examines the minds of the human race; whether they well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted."*

He exhorted his fellow Christians to learn not to fear death and to view those who perished as the pioneers of new life.

Christian doctrine - that we can only please God if we sacrificially love one another - provided a revolutionary prescription for action. In 260 AD Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives while caring for others. Pagans tended to flee the cities and push the sufferers away during plagues, but Christians were more likely to stay and minister to the suffering.

According to Dionysius,

*“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. The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”*

### **Creating a miniature welfare state**

This Christian moral character and benevolence in times of crisis spurred the growth of the church. A century later the emperor Julian lamented that pagan charity paled in comparison to that of “the Galileans”, because the Christians had created a miniature welfare state in an empire that lacked social services. Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25:35-40 shows the power of this new morality:

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Truly, I say to you, as you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”*

The Christian church appointed deacons, leaders who were set apart for the support of the sick, infirm, poor, and disabled. They were doers of good works, exercising day and night supervision over those in distress, that they were properly cared for with church funds. As Christians ministered not just to their own, but also to others, many pagans owed their lives to their Christian neighbours, and joined their ranks.

## **What doesn't kill you makes you stronger**

But if the Christians were risking their own lives by caring for the sick, how did they emerge from the epidemic so much stronger?

When all normal services break down, even elementary nursing greatly reduces mortality. Simply providing food and water, for instance, allows people who are temporarily too weak to cope on their own to recover instead of dying miserably of neglect. Modern medical experts believe that conscientious nursing even without any medication could be responsible for cutting mortality rates by two-thirds or even more. So, where the mortality rate among the pagan population ran to 30%, the likely rate among the Christians could have been as low as 10%. By the time the epidemic waned, more Christians had survived and their percentage on the total population had increased.

Being more exposed to the epidemic, the Christians who survived became immune and could therefore pass among the afflicted with seeming invulnerability, which at that time – without today's medical knowledge – was considered a miracle. After the epidemics there was a more positive bias towards Christians in society, and the pagans who did survive tended to have closer relationships with people they knew to be Christians.

Professor Stark draws the conclusion that the two epidemics and the Christian response to this crisis, doubled the number of Christians in the Roman Empire. By the year 300 AD, Christians made up 10.9% of the population and in the year 350 AD 56.5%.

How is that for a perspective on the corona crisis?

## **Living it out today**

History can provide inspiration, but how we apply this in our own time and context is up to us. For those who look for specific guidance in today's corona crisis, we offer the following advice:

### **1. *Keep calm***

2 Timothy 1:7 says: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (or self-discipline)." Christians don't need to panic. After all, we live for Christ, who empowers us to do good to others with a mindful attitude. Every time we are tempted to give in to fear, we can make a conscious choice to respond in trust and openness. Prayer helps to surrender fear to God, to start blessing others, and to ask God to accomplish his purposes in the midst of difficult circumstances.

### **2. *Care for others***

Caring for others starts with informing ourselves and following the sound advice of healthcare authorities and the government. Temporarily refraining from meeting, hugging or shaking hands is common sense in an epidemic.

But let's look further. How can we support neighbours and others in our network who have been infected, or who are particularly vulnerable and housebound, like the elderly and people with chronic health conditions? There's nothing like a friendly voice to offer solace when someone is worried. Churches should check daily if people in their community need medical care or groceries and organise it for them.

Caring for others also implies not hoarding more food or sanitary products than we reasonably need for a self-quarantine, because hoarding limits availability for others who may need it more. Let's practise the Christian discipline of sharing. Instead, consider asking those who are ill or quarantined what they need and doing our best to help them get it. We shouldn't demonise or discriminate anyone or any group, but rather show solidarity with anyone who is most affected by the crisis.

If you live in an area where hospitals can't cope with the number of patients, or where people can't afford to pay for healthcare, consider stepping in as a church. Churches can offer buildings, people and resources for the common good. Let's put ourselves on the line when and where it matters most.

### ***3. Focus on God's Kingdom***

In Italy all church services have been cancelled for at least a whole month. What a great opportunity to explore what it means to be the church of Jesus out of our comfort zone. We might discover that we're less dependent on church services than we thought. House churches seem to be more resilient in epidemics than large churches.

The internet can be a great place to connect and organise demand and supply chains. Many people around us could use practical help. Overburdened doctors and hospitals might need assistance. For inspiration you can check out our edition [JNI 1160](#) on how Christians in Wuhan, China, responded to the COVID-19 outbreak and put the government to shame. They embraced the crisis as an opportunity for the Gospel.



Being in forced quarantine while not infected can be an opportunity to slow down, take time to read, spend more quality time with relatives and learn new spiritual disciplines. Take the example of a Christian woman in Wuhan who has been in quarantine for 48 days now, locked up in her apartment. People may only leave with the permission of the police and under supervision. She writes: "Each of us is dealing in some way with resentment, guilt, fear, anxiety, uncertainty - all at different levels, each handling it in our own ways."

But then it comes: "Our family life has never been better. for seven weeks, we've been home together with little outside distraction, forced to reconnect with one another, learn how to communicate better, give each other space, slow down our pace, and be a stronger family than ever before. During this time, we've had to rely on others to show us how to get food and other things we need. I've reconnected with lots of old friends. Because of this quarantine, we have bonded with and supported each other in ways that I've never experienced in 9 years of living here."

In times of crisis people look for hope. Let's be that hope.

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