

6-1-2023

The Impact of a Virus: A High Level View

Steve Case

Involve Youth, steve@involveyouth.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jayyam>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Case, Steve (2023) "The Impact of a Virus: A High Level View," *Journal of Adventist Youth and Young Adult Ministries*: Vol. 1, Article 4.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jayyam/vol1/iss1/4/>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jayyam/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Adventist Youth and Young Adult Ministries* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

THE IMPACT OF A VIRUS

A High Level View

Steve Case, PhD

FEW HIGH school or college history classes spent much time teaching students about the H1N1 virus that created a severe pandemic in 1918. Although no universal consensus determined the origins of this virus, it came to be known as “The Spanish flu” because countries involved in World War I suppressed news reports of its spread in their countries. But Spain, being neutral in the war, did report its presence. That led most countries to associate this pandemic with Spain, ignoring its presence in their own respective countries. Selective news reporting led people to a caricature of reality to the point of misnaming it (Andrews 2020). About one-third of the world’s population became infected, and the estimated number of deaths reached 50 million, with about 675,000 in the United States (CDC n.d.). With biased reporting, denial of its existence, and no vaccine, attempts to thwart the virus varied from place to place. The best most people could do was to isolate, quarantine, wear masks where the disease was present, practice good hygiene, disinfect, and limit public gatherings. Major relief came when the virus mutated from deadly, to sickening, to inconvenient.

Sound familiar?

If there’s another pandemic 100 years from now, those who face it will probably do so as poorly as we did a century after the 1918 Flu.

Doomsday prophets typically point to political or military actions, or the quick impact of a “natural disaster” such as an earthquake, fire, flood, drought, or tsunami to spark their timely and sensational message. Those old enough to have lived through “9/11” remember the impact and the immediate turning to God—which lasted for at least a month. The ongoing grind of the American military rooting out terrorists wherever they might be in the world, or a multi-year war, or the distress of ongoing disease can’t maintain daily headlines; so we cease to consider it or we incorporate it as the “new normal.”

POWERLESS

After denial, it seemed that little we did in response to COVID-19 improved our situation; in fact, things only seemed to get worse. Who knew where the next outbreak would occur, and how soon? Medical professionals couldn’t keep up as refrigeration trucks parked at hospitals to house the corpses funeral homes couldn’t process quickly enough. In communities where the virus hadn’t struck, it all seemed like a bad horror movie, and tuning out became a healthier response than worrying if and when it would hit home.

Politicians jumped in to provide direction in the crisis, but they knew little or nothing about pandemics, or how to respond to them. If they were a day ahead of things today, they seemed to be a week behind by tomorrow. Conflicting information and responses left the public poorly informed, misinformed, or convicted about whatever they chose to believe. While this fractured our social systems and life as we knew it, the virus continued its spread and devastation. The politicians did their best, but they seemed to add to the problem rather than the solution.

Medical professionals quickly became our gods in hope that all of the training, technology, and transformations they had tackled over the years would stop the virus in its tracks. They asked for more time—years to develop a vaccine—when we only had days. The best minds and machines simply did all they could, and we kept dying. This doesn’t diminish the work of healthcare professionals (see “New Heroes” below); it only admits that they couldn’t deliver the quick fix we sought.

Perhaps people of faith would be God’s response to the virus. Could this ignite another round of “The Last Days are Here Again” (Kyle 1998)? Instead of a militaristic Armageddon, it seemed more would die of a virus rather than a bullet or bomb. But no religious revival burst forth. Having become accustomed to doing life on our

own without God, few seemed to consider God would intervene. The primary voice from churches focused on religious persecution based on the possibility of maybe stopping in-person gatherings. Few vocalized the virus as a verdict from God, and most either hunkered down for safety or picketed in protest rather than minister to the sick or the bereaved.

In a word, we felt *powerless*. Humans, especially privileged ones, have difficulty accepting such a condition. Americans live in the most powerful nation in the world—according to many Americans and political science professor Michael Beckley (2018). The economy, military power, and democratic government place it far ahead of any potential competing nation. Even if such statements and attitudes were true, America remained powerless when it came to this virus. While COVID statistics get questioned for their validity, the United States was indeed the greatest country on earth—with more than twice as many COVID-19 cases and deaths than any other country (Worldometer 2023).

WE

Basic sociology explains the frequent human dynamic of separating “we” into “us” and “them.” Desiring to be part of a group may result in identifying markers shared in common. These can also serve to differentiate one group from another. Attacking another group can solidify one’s own group. It usually has the same impact on the group attacked—greater cohesiveness and solidarity.

One doesn’t have to look far to see this today. While humans inhabit various parts of the earth in different concentrations, national boundaries exist and change because humans in power draw lines and label them in such a way. But God did not create the world to function like this. The same could be said of racial separateness—“us” and “them.” Gender provides another example, as does socioeconomic status, and also ageism or generations.

None of this seemed to matter to the virus. It struck with fatality, or ferocity, or just a short scare, and some contracted it asymptotically. But few could say they didn’t know anyone who contracted COVID-19, and even fewer found their lives unchanged because of it.

One result of COVID-19 seems to be that “we” are all human. Regardless of differences, real or perceived, we have a commonality. And “we” can’t predict with great

certainty what will happen in the next day, week, month, or year. A virus exposed this.

BLESSED

Financially prosperous nations seemed to suffer more than others. What a role reversal! The increased mobility of traveling to and fro throughout the earth resulted in greater transmission from greater exposure. Closing borders didn’t stop the spread even if it might have slowed it some.

In places where people lived in simplicity by necessity, little changed. Rural areas had little impact, although those crowded into city tenements were at the mercy of the virus. In contrast, those quite busy with work and play in multiple locations were more at risk of contracting COVID-19. At the same time, their identity and daily practice went from overdrive to stillness. Busy families either found themselves bonding in new ways because of increased time together, or became frustrated by the new task of having to live together.

POLARIZING POLITICS

Whenever and wherever a group of people forms, you have politics—from the Greek word *polis* (city) (Case 2020). This occurs in nations and churches, in families and even among friends, at work and at play. Because the pandemic affected large groups of people, and because it varied from one location to another, the politics fluctuated as well. Sometimes opposite political priorities could be found because of the place or the person espousing the politics due to their political power at the moment.

The first political crisis seemed to focus on whether or not COVID-19 was real, or if it was a real threat. The next political crisis tried to address how to respond to it. Testing quickly became “something we can do” as well as providing some type of answer to, “Do I have COVID?” While some willingly lined up for their turn, others refused to have a stranger push a long stick way up their nose to swab what seemed like their brain rather than their nasal cavity. Next came shut-downs and closures—of many businesses and schools, places of entertainment, churches, and practically any indoor gathering place or group.

As businesses went bankrupt or seemed headed in that direction, the tension mounted between death by the virus or death by the economy. Obviously, those who died could no longer work. But would stopping work shut down the

economy and thereby make it impossible to survive this pandemic? Were those the only options? Was the government to bail out everyone? If so, with whose money? Even though a few businesses like Zoom and Door Dash flourished because of the pandemic, most didn't. But politicians continued to be politicians, and the result seemed to be hope or hatred—depending on the extent to which you agreed or disagreed with their statements and actions.

PEOPLE DIED; PEOPLE LIVED

Denying the pandemic didn't shield people from death. While comorbidity increased the likelihood of dying from COVID-19, some survived even after they were given up as gone. For those who died, was it the virus or something else? Regardless, there was a tremendous loss of life.

In a pamphlet quickly published at the start of the pandemic, New Testament scholar N. T. Wright pointed out, "Roughly one-third of the Psalms are lamenting that things are not as they should be. The words they use are words of complaint: of questions, sorrow, anger and frustration and, often enough, bitterness" (2020, 52). When we expect a quick fix and a return to normal, we short-circuit the realities of our sojourn on earth. One entire book of the Bible bears the name "Lamentations." In our feel-good expectations of everyone being happy due to our God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, pandemics can't be tolerated or endured. But Scripture reveals plenty of pain, even joining our crucified Savior in death. Only then do we truly live (Gal 2:20).

NEW HEROES

For many in America, the heroes—the ones we admire, spend time and money for temporary access either virtually or in large, impersonal gatherings—are typically the "stars" and "superstars" of music, sports, and the silver screen. Christians have the same heroes, plus a few Christian singers and megachurch preachers.

But COVID-19 changed that. With the cessation of group gatherings, no one could worship the hero throughout a concert tour that suddenly ended. Sports came to a standstill and then had to be played without adoring fans in empty stadiums or arenas. Movie production halted even though the demand for releases on Netflix increased to remedy our stay-at-home boredom. Other heroes like financial tycoons, the military, and even lawyers and CPAs seemed useless when it came to facing a virus.

But new heroes took their place. Healthcare professionals became hope and help in ways we had never imagined previously. Long shifts in an environment that others were forbidden to enter became the only human contact for many as loved ones remained excluded by policy for their own safety. Nurses became the most heroic healthcare professionals, serving the sick and dying personally, professionally, and profoundly. The physician's limited contact and limited professional expertise in these matters still left the nurse by the bedside. Likely without training, nurses also simultaneously became chaplains as patient after patient breathed their last. Perhaps it compares to a first-aid tent on the battlefield of a horrible war, day after day after day.

Grocery store workers also became heroes. They had to deal with hyper-frightened customers scooping up as many hand sanitizer bottles as possible, ready to hoard toilet paper and fight if needed to secure it. As supply lines evaporated, grocery stores in America looked like the photos in similar stores after the breakup of the USSR. But they kept working, even with hostile customers, and they added store cart disinfecting to their workload. They also shopped for others and delivered groceries to the front door of petrified homebodies who followed recommendations not to shop in person, even though some person at the store did the shopping and delivery. Services like Grubhub, DoorDash, and Uber Eats became commonplace. We had new heroes and our previous heroes disappeared—at least for a time.

Custodians also rose as heroes. Their cleaning and sanitizing may have done more than highly skilled surgeons when it came to saving lives. Regardless of the risks they faced, they worked for the cleanliness and safety of others by simply doing their job. Their increased necessity revealed the values these people placed on others.

There are many others who became heroes because of the pandemic. These illustrate the quick fruit-basket-upset type of placement to determine who matters the most during a crisis like a pandemic.

USE YOUR MIND (TO RATIONALIZE YOUR EMOTIONS)

Why do you do what you do? We could ask it in the negative as well: Why don't you do what you don't do?

Most of us have reasons. But, according to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012), our intuitions and reflexes

spark our actions, and we use our rational powers to then justify what we did (or didn't do). It's not that we don't use our mind, it's just that we use it to explain what we've already decided or even done. We may quote the Bible, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt 7:1 KJV), but our decision to do so comes from an internal judgment we already made—often because we don't want someone to judge us and we hope that throwing Scripture at them will prevent further exposure.

This also explains the frequent futility of attempting to reason with people. It's not that we aren't reasoning; it's just that we're reasoning about what we already decided intuitively to do. Consider mask-wearing during the pandemic. Were you in favor of wearing a mask or not wearing a mask? What was your gut instinct? How much time did you spend pursuing evidence to back up your internal sense rather than exploring the question with a truly open mind? And once you made up your mind, what were the chances of you changing your mind regardless of what additional evidence came your way? Whatever you decided about mask-wearing probably matched how you related to vaccination. The same probably happened with the decision of whether or not to gather in groups. Political liberals generally acted conservatively by wearing masks, refraining from gathering in large groups, and getting vaccinated. Political conservatives generally acted liberally by freely moving about unmasked, joining large group gatherings, and eschewing vaccination.

If your gut reaction is to disagree with these statements, note how you use your mind to come up with reasons that your reflex already sparked.

PLAYING THE GOD CARD

The early Christians played an active role in caring for those suffering plagues and pandemics in the first few centuries of the Christian era, and it was Christians who began the hospice movement to care for those terminally ill (Wright 2020). But that's not what Christians were known for in the recent pandemic. While Walter Brueggemann pulled together previous articles for a pandemic pamphlet, *Virus as a Summons to Faith* (2020), Thom Rainer quickly published helpful advice to implement in anticipation of the pandemic ending—*The Post-Quarantine Church* (2020).

But perhaps what Christians were best known for during the pandemic was playing the God card of faithful

commitment to attending church in the face of religious persecution as a clear right stemming from religious liberty. This first amendment right would be protected by the second amendment if needed. Even those with infrequent church attendance suddenly joined the call to arms so they could worship together. Perhaps these were the ones needing prohibition in order to awaken dormant practices. Or maybe it's just another example of a gut reflex in search of a rationale for doing what you already decided to do (see "Use Your Mind" above). Such zealots missed the explanation that prohibited all meetings for large indoor groups, whether that was a church, a basketball game, a pop music concert, or even a bar or restaurant. Playing the God card missed the point, but showed how humans get what they want, even if that takes playing the God card to accomplish their personal wants, which doesn't seem to indicate godliness.

Some pastors of large churches, fearful they would be unable to maintain the financial support needed for their ministry without strong or growing attendance, positioned themselves as martyrs, challenging the government to take them to jail because of their commitment to follow Jesus, and enable their flock to stay true as well. Some of these successfully avoided arrest and prosecution, but that didn't protect them from getting the virus. Why did God save them from the government, but not the virus?

The early church in Acts, in many ways, looked more like the small gatherings that occurred during the pandemic than the "bigger is better" expectation for churches prior to COVID-19 (Roennfeldt 2021).

HUMANS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

On a completely different topic, environmental concerns illustrate another political and practical division (see "Polarizing Politics" and "Use Your Mind" above). Some claim that human activity impacts the environment, while others claim humans have little or no impact on the environment. Perhaps an unscheduled check-in of the tidiness of college dormitory rooms could settle the debate, but we're looking at a much larger area than one building.

Early in the pandemic, when countries and communities implemented and practiced lockdowns, pollution significantly decreased (Chemical & Engineering News 2020). Pollution from autos and trucks, and even airplanes, has been a concern in developed and developing nations for

decades. With the unprecedented drop in vehicle use during the initial lockdowns, visual differences in scenery sparked photographs for comparisons. People on the street in Los Angeles, New Delhi, and Beijing noted stark contrasts. Air quality varied from one part of the globe to another when reduced vehicular traffic dropped dramatically due to the lockdowns—more so than volunteer testing could have accomplished. But in some places, such as India, air pollution in rural areas due to wood and coal burning for heating and cooking, and burning garbage also impact air pollutants throughout the country. Human activity, whether by vehicle or through burning, does make a difference in our environment.

THIS WAS BIG, BUT IT COULD BE EVEN WORSE

Let's not deny the tragedies from this recent pandemic labeled COVID-19. Most people alive today haven't experienced something like this in their lifetime to date. For young people, such as those in the category labeled Gen Z (today's teens and young adults, born between 1995-2010), youth and young adult authority Tim Elmore (2020) expressed optimism that young people, the "Pandemic Population," will respond to this pandemic with hope and vitality.

This horrific pandemic, in some respects, seemed like a repeat of the 1918 pandemic, although this one lasted

longer. But both of those pale in comparison to the bubonic plague, also known as The Black Death in Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s, killing approximately one-third of Europe's population at that time (Black Death 2021).

What would have happened if the countries on earth entered another world war in addition to a pandemic? What if several "natural disasters" also occurred simultaneously? If a virus too small to be seen by the naked eye wreaked this much havoc, how much worse could it get? The answer isn't one most people would want to consider. Many expect the world as we know it to end with Christ's return. This could be some type of fulfillment of the sixth seal (Rev 6:12-17) and the sixth trumpet (Rev 9:13-21) after the four angels at the four corners of the earth no longer hold back the four winds (Rev 7:1). But what then? Descriptions of the undoing of creation hint of the preparation of a new creation—a new heaven and a new earth.

Our response to the recent pandemic seemed no better, and possibly worse, than our predecessors a hundred years ago. Our gracious God who remains sovereign while both good and evil clash in conflict on this earth, remains our solace, strength, and hope as we cling to him in worship, praise, and trust. It seems certain we will get more opportunities to nurture and test our faith in him, no matter what comes our way.

REFERENCES

Andrews, Evan. March 27, 2020. "Why Was It Called the 'Spanish Flu?'" Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://www.history.com/news/why-was-it-called-the-spanish-flu>.

Beckley, Michael. 2018. *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

"Black Death." November 23, 2021. Accessed March 6, 2023. <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages/black-death>.

Brueggemann, Walter. 2020. *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Case, Steve. 2020. "Talking About Religion and Politics." In *Real, Deal, Heal: Gen Z and Social Issues*, edited by Steve Case. Lincoln, NE: AdventSource.

CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). n.d. "History of the 1918 Flu Pandemic" Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>.

Chemical & Engineering News. September 25, 2020. "COVID-19 Lockdowns Had Strange Effects On Air Pollution Across the Globe." Accessed March 6, 2023. <https://cen.acs.org/environment/atmospheric-chemistry/COVID-19-lockdowns-had-strange-effects-on-air-pollution-across-the-globe/98/i37>.

Elmore, Tim. 2020. *The Pandemic Population: Eight Strategies to Help Generation Z Rediscover Hope After Coronavirus*. Atlanta: Poet Gardener Publishing.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books.

Kyle, Richard. 1998. *The Last Days are Here Again: A History of the End Times*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Rainer, Thom. S. 2020. *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges + Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House.

Roennfeldt, Peter. 2021. *Your Church Has Changed: Rebuilding Church and Mission Post-COVID-19*. Warburton, Victoria, Australia: Signs Publishing.

Worldometer. March 6, 2023. "Countries Where COVID-19 Has Spread." Accessed March 6, 2023. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/countries-where-coronavirus-has-spread/>.

Wright, N. T. 2020. *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.