

We Shall Be Changed

Questions for the
Post-Pandemic Church

Edited by
Mark D. W. Edington



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Preface

The Breath of the Spirit and the Winds of Change

ON JANUARY 23, 2020, the city of Wuhan, China was effectively closed off from the world by local authorities in an effort to arrest the exponential spread of a virus not previously identified in humans. Seven days later, on January 30, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of the virus a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern”; in the previous ten days, the number of reported cases in Wuhan had grown from 282 to 7,800.¹

On March 11, what was now identified as the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) was declared a pandemic; on that day, only four nations outside of China (Italy, Saudi Arabia, Mongolia, and Qatar) had instituted lockdowns in an effort to control the spread of the disease. By the first week of April, more than half the world’s population—3.9 billion people—were living under public orders limiting their movement, activities, and social lives, an experience arguably without precedent in all of human history.²

1. “How Bad Will It Get?” (leader article), *The Economist*, February 1–7, 2020, 9.

2. Alasdair Sandford, “Coronavirus: Half of Humanity Now on Lockdown as 90 Countries Call for Confinement,” *Euronews*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-new-deaths-in-24-hou>

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Now known as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the disease is highly transmissible between humans, largely because no virus has previously appeared among us that would have stimulated the creation of a natural immune response. As of the day I write these lines, 22,959,813 cases have been diagnosed worldwide, with 5,623,990 of those cases appearing in the United States; said in different terms, the United States has seen 24.9% of all diagnosed cases of the virus, while having 4.3% of the world's people.³

Nearly eight hundred thousand people have died of Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus; of those, 175,409 have died in the United States so far. To set that in perspective, it is as though the entire population of Salem, Oregon or Providence, Rhode Island had died.

Covid-19 is deadly to a relatively small number of those whom it infects, but the way in which it is deadly is indicated in the name of the virus itself: severe, acute, respiratory. The onset of the disease process is swift and sudden; it is very serious, even quickly catastrophic; and it centers on the respiratory system, causing its victims, in essence, to suffocate.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was arrested in the Powderhorn Park neighborhood of Minneapolis after allegedly passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a convenience store. He was approached by two police officers from the Minneapolis Police Department while sitting in a car near the store, ordered to leave his vehicle, and handcuffed.

3. Coronavirus Resource Center, Center for Systems Science and Engineering, Johns Hopkins University, "Covid-19 Dashboard," <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>; "World Population," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population

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Two other police officers then arrived at the scene. According to the criminal complaint filed against one of those officers for murder in the second and third degree, Floyd was compliant with the officers while being interviewed but resisted entering the squad car. In the ensuing struggle, the officers placed the still-handcuffed Floyd face-down on the sidewalk, and one of them “placed his left knee in the area of Mr. Floyd’s head and neck.”

“Mr. Floyd said, ‘I can’t breathe’ multiple times,” the complaint adds.⁴

The breath is being taken away from us. That is both the physical and the spiritual implication of this year of pandemics. It is not just a virus that attacks our lungs’ ability to supply oxygen to our bodies; it is not just a uniformed knee that saps the breath from the lungs of a Black man. It is what has been revealed about our society and our culture by the catalyzing force of two simultaneous pandemics linked by the deprivation of breath.

Covid-19 attacks its victims by degrading the capacity of their lungs to do the essential work of oxygenating blood. But in responding to the disease, in dealing with—or denying the significance of—the pleas of qualified, scientifically trained public health professionals to adopt simple measures in order to protect the health of others, Covid has dramatically revealed our society as one already suffocating. For decades,

4. State of Minnesota, County of Hennepin, Criminal Complaint against Derek Michael Chauvin, Court File 27-CR-20-12646, May 29, 2020, <https://www.hennepinattorney.org/-/media/Attorney/Derek-Chauvin-Criminal-Complaint.pdf>

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it has been gradually, chronically deprived of the necessary oxygen of common purpose, a sense of shared destiny, a feeling of responsibility toward the neighbor and the other. The refusal to wear masks or to abide by social distancing is not so much a political statement as a refusal to accept a basic minimum of responsibility for the well-being of others. It is the morality of solipsism. Nothing could be less Christian.

For four hundred years, American society and culture has been in some fundamental way premised on controlling the breath of those whose skin appears not to be white. It has insisted on the ability to control bodies of color—often using the subtle tools of controlling and calibrating access to institutions of education or structures of economic and political power, but when somehow thought necessary by strangling the breath of life, either by the knee or the noose. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin proposed a link between race, death, and state power in the United States:

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. . . . But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them.⁵

5. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 91–92; emphasis original. Quoted in James Martel, *Unburied Bodies: Subversive Corpses and the Authority of the Dead* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 2018), 99.

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Baldwin's perceptive claim is that the power insisted upon by white Americans over communities of color is linked to an imagined power over death; and this is why, in his analysis, lives of color are somehow seen as legitimately controlled, expended, abused, enslaved, or ended by the power of the state. And it is why the idea of giving up that power causes a reaction of such desperation; for to do so would require the white community to confront the unyielding power of death on its own terms. Communities of color have had no choice in the matter; a full and unflinching confrontation with death has never been thought a choice, and has therefore been embraced in cultural expression. It is not coincidental that in describing the enduring significance of the "Sorrow Songs" in the cultural development of enslaved Americans, W. E. B. Dubois called one such song "the cradle song of death which all men know."⁶

Here is where, for the church and the claims of the gospel, our two pandemics converge. The pandemic of white supremacy has been revealed in these months as the long-nurtured and ill-founded desire of the white community to use state power as a way of casting the shadow of death entirely on another community—in this case, one defined by race. Simultaneously, the public health crisis of Covid-19 has shattered in a single moment the idea that such a defense, however subconsciously supported and legally enacted, could ever achieve its end. If our original sin is the creation of unjust systems of power, if our motive in doing so is to seek somehow to blunt the sting of death by shifting it onto a community kept powerless for the purpose, this

6. Du Bois speaks here of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), 158.

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single moment has torn back the veil on both the injustice and the impossibility of our feeble effort to control what is beyond our power.

What has been revealed about our society by the nation's feckless response to the Covid-19 pandemic is the broader social disease that results from such a phantasm. If it had seemed possible somehow to liberate ourselves from the shadow of death by employing state power to control the bodies of others, then surely it is not surprising that we refuse to accept the authority of that same power to control ourselves in ways that might protect others from the potential death of infection. The refusal to wear a mask is the last protest of a culture of state power that insists upon its ability to set its own terms in contending with mortality. We have lost our sense of obligation to each other; we seek only our own dignity, our own truth, our own life, our own salvation.

It might be observed that if we were truly people of faith—if we genuinely believed in the promise of redemption and resurrection in Christ—we could then summon the courage to let go all of the pretense of a power wrongly constructed to shift death's burden onto a scapegoat category of humanity. If we truly believed that death no longer held power over us, then we would no longer feel the depth of urgency to create systems of power and control that would cast all its collective weight onto the necks of a single category of fellow-humans.

Perhaps this is the mission call of the Christian church today. If the church, wherever it exists, has itself aided and abetted the idea of the supremacy of one race over another, if it has too easily sought the embrace of state power out of a lapse of belief and a longing for more tangible protection against the power of death, then it has failed to live by what it proclaims—that the victory over death has already

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been won. Yet it is exactly that victory that both demands and enables the gospel's central moral claim for the conduct of life in human community—the insistence that we all stand equal before the throne of a loving God, equal in capacity for error, equal in need for redemption, and equal in dignity and possibility. As soon as we start imagining the state's power can somehow offer us a protection against death in the here and now, we have given up our faith in God's promises—here and hereafter.

This moment of pandemic has therefore made our moment one of unparalleled urgency for the Christian message; for it is only the victory of the Cross over death and the grave that can finally liberate us from constructing inequalities and supremacies that seek the false promise of protection from fears already defeated. And this means that the church is being confronted as never before with a decisive question: Will we, or will we not, proclaim that message not just in words but in actions, not just in declarations but in decisions?

The answer to this question is not immediately evident. Beyond any question, the long months of closure and isolation, of shuttered churches and virtual communities, set before us the certainty of change. We shall be changed. But that is the only thing that is certain.

We do not yet have answers to the question of how the church shall be changed by this pandemic year. We are not yet able to say with certainty what the implications will be of a moment in which the people to whom the angels declare “do not be afraid” have been conditioned to be fearful of each other. We cannot say what a long practice of “attending from home” will mean to churches that try to gather their flocks. There is much we cannot yet discern.

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But we can begin now to glimpse the outlines of the questions that will guide our efforts to follow God's call in mission toward a more just society and a deeper sense of God's presence in our lives. Opportunities have been set before us to shake loose the systems and structures that cannot get us to where God invites us now to go, that answered a different set of needs for a different time.

In early May of 2020, as the extent of the Covid-19 impact on the life of the church became inescapable, I began to ask colleagues and friends wiser than me what questions they were grappling with as they thought about how the pandemic would shape us. The more of these conversations I pursued, the more I sensed that the questions were sorting themselves into a set of fairly clear categories:

- *Distancing and Deepening.* How might we turn this time of distancing into a time of deeper spirituality—and how might we keep that deeper conversation with God in the regathered church? How might the virtual inform—or be—the actual future of the church?
- *Liturgy and Longing.* What have we learned about the worship we have been offering from having to create new ways of worship? Are there ideas or themes we should be careful not to lose?
- *Hard Choices and Helping Hands.* What questions about financial structures and sustainability will emerge from this time of isolation to confront parishes and judicatories? Is self-help the only option?
- *Inequality, Marginalization—and Renewal.* How can we address constructively the inequality in access to resources within the church laid bare by the variety of responses to the

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Covid pandemic? What responsibility do well-resourced communities and institutions have in helping poor and marginalized churches keep their communities tended and gathered?

- *Leadership—Challenge and Change*. What has the Covid pandemic taught us about the leaders and structures we have—and the leaders and structures we need?

The more I spoke with smart people about these things, the more I wanted to speak with others and the greater became my eagerness to share with a wider audience what had been shared with me. I am grateful to Nancy Bryan of Church Publishing for so eagerly embracing the idea of collecting the thoughts of these wise people into a small collection, gathered with the simple hope of guiding thought, prayer, and action as we emerge blinking from the darkness of pandemic into the light of a world God has prepared for us to remake.

But my deepest gratitude goes to the many colleagues who willingly took time in the middle of the unyielding demands of an ongoing crisis to share, without compensation, their thoughts with me—and with you. As the pattern of questions began to emerge, I sent to each of them a question that I hoped especially to draw them out on; you now have in your hands a series of five conversations engaging small groups of writers gathered around those questions. They have taken the time to write under the worst conditions and in the most demanding hours. I give thanks to God that such people have been called to exercise leadership in a moment of such difficulty.

The epigram with which this book opens states in inversion its purpose, and of the conversations it hopes to spark. Too often in its history the church has erred by insisting on its answers. We shall meet

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the moment of uncertainty before us only by correctly discerning the questions. These wise and prayerful people have made the best beginning of that I know.

—Mark D. W. Edington
Paris, France

The Feast of Jonathan Myrick Daniels, Seminarian and Martyr