

In a COVID-19 World, is Our Hope Misplaced?

If I can simplify the public debate about COVID-19, it comes down to three attitudes.

1. My trust is in God. I'm going to do it God's way!
2. We need to adhere to the CDC and government guidelines.
3. It's my life. I don't need anyone telling me what I can and can't do.

No one would deny these are unprecedented times. We're all trying to find our way along a path we've never traveled. In most of life, when we venture down a new path—getting married, a change in jobs, facing cancer—there are others we can look to for advice and encouragement, people who have already traveled down that road. But COVID-19 is a new path for all of us.

So in these uncertain times, who do you look to for guidance? Who do you trust? Where's your hope?

In *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, Andrew Delbanco gives a brief spiritual history of America. He pinpoints three ways—and three time periods—in which we organized our lives and tried to make sense of the world.

God. During the Puritan era and the years leading up to the formation of the United States, people largely looked to the providence of God. There was an assumed trust in God. Whether we faced either prosperity, hard times, joys, or death, God's hand was in it. That was not a fatalism, but an inherent trust that God was at work and God would take care of us.

Nation. From our earliest days as a nation into the years following World War II, Americans developed a national ideal. We saw God's hand in to the formation of our country, and the United States grew and prospered. We weren't righteous—just ask any native American or African-American—but our rise into a thriving country and a world power surely meant God was pleased with us.

But with our love of country and its ideals, our trust shifted from God to the nation itself. We trusted government. With two world wars in the 20th century, we were confident we would ultimately win because, well, by golly, we're the United States of America! We're the greatest nation on earth!

Self. Our blinding hope and trust in government was shaken with Vietnam, civil rights, and Watergate. We have morphed into a nation of individuals. We are all about personal rights. Our hope has shifted from a trust in government to a trust in ourselves. After all, how knows better than I do what is best for me?

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville said, "Faith is the only permanent state of mankind." I agree with that statement, but it raises the question: Faith in what? Historically, our faith has shifted from God to nation to self—and with that our hope has shifted.

Our hope is reflected in our response to COVID-19. At first glance, it seems that the three phases of American hope noted by Delbanco are reflected in the COVID-19 responses I mentioned earlier, but I'm not sure about #1. While many Christ followers are trusting in God during this crisis, the statement in #1 (a direct quote from a pastor)—"My trust is in God. I'm going to do it God's way!"—is more a statement against government than a statement about faith. Even worse, it's a statement more in line with self: "It's my life. I don't need anyone telling me what I can and can't do."

The above quote is from Stacey Shiflett, a pastor in Baltimore, who is insistent he will conduct full-blown worship services, regardless of CDC guidelines and health concerns. When he received a cease-and-desist order, he said, "So I'm tearing up this cease-and-desist order right here, and I'm telling you right now, we're gonna do it God's way! God tells us how to worship Him, nobody else gets to do that." [Source]

Pastor Shiflett, how exactly does God tell us to worship Him? "Those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). We give (1 Cor. 16:2). We encourage one another (Heb. 10:24-25). We pray. Scripture gives us several injunctions regarding what we do together, but nowhere are we told it must be done in large gatherings.

I content that if you truly trust God, you will be willing to abide by the government guidelines regarding physical distancing, masks, large groups, and concern for others. That's not just my opinion; it's God's Word.

"Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves" (Rom. 13:1-2).

The government is not keeping us from worshiping, not is the government persecuting the church! Church leaders who have been willing to adapt have actually seen Bible study attendance increase. More people are watching online services. I talked with one church leader this week who said their giving is even up.

Let's rejoice that God is at work. Our world is broken, but let's make sure our hope is not broken. Let's keep our hope fully in Him—and let's pray for those whom He has placed over us.

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