



THE SACRIFICE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

Alliance pastor and former CDC medical officer Stephen Ko offers Christ-centered insights on social distancing.

Intro

If you want to follow Jesus, embrace the sacrifice of social distancing. It is costly and difficult. As a pastor, this runs counter to what I work so hard to achieve: gather Christians and non-Christians together to hear the Word, to worship, and to respond to Christ. It runs counter to the exhortation in Hebrews 10:23. It runs counter to my deepest training as a pastor to be a shepherd among the sheep. But as a former medical officer with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, I know that social distancing is the best way to minister to our community and congregation during the novel Coronavirus pandemic. It is what it means to love my neighbor as myself.

Why Social Distancing Matters

Social distancing is the CDC's core strategy to mitigate community transmission of COVID-19. Public health officials use "social distancing" to describe conscious efforts to reduce close contact between individuals. The CDC defines it as "remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining a distance of approximately six feet from others when possible." [1] This distance

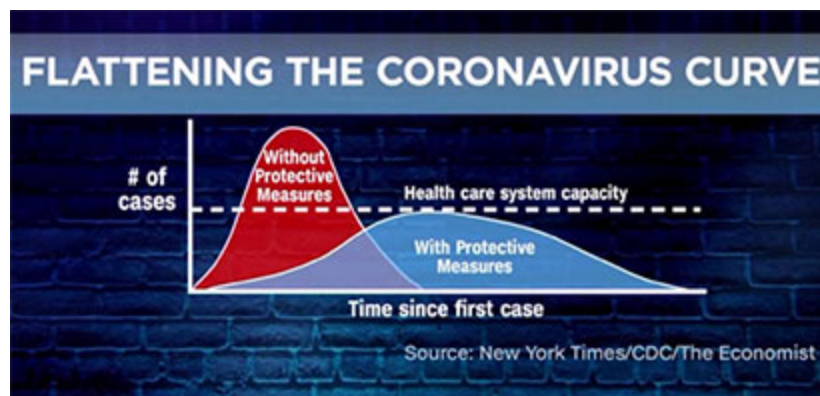
implies that individuals refrain from intimate greetings—such as handshakes, kisses, and hugs. Keeping a safe distance becomes increasingly essential for those that are symptomatic with coughing, sneezing, and active fever.

Why is it effective? Social distancing removes the critical ingredient in transmission—human reservoirs. By scaling back the number of times we meet and congregate, we withhold opportunities for COVID-19 to infect others. This is essential because COVID-19 is a new virus (which is why it is also called “the novel Coronavirus”). When new viruses enter human communities for the first time, our bodies do not have immunity against these organisms. Researchers have not had time to create vaccines. The medical community does not know the best way to treat the disease.

Social distancing is also essential because COVID-19 is highly transmissible. With a R_0 of 2–3, scientists estimate that every infected person will likely spread the virus to two to three other individuals [2]. As a result, COVID-19 proliferates with brutal effectiveness. In Italy, a few initial cases rapidly developed into thousands within a few weeks. In Louisiana, positive diagnoses increased from 91 to 1,172 in eight days [3]. Such exponential growth can quickly overwhelm healthcare systems. Italian doctors have had to choose which patients receive ventilators and which will not. It means other patients—people who experience accidents, strokes, heart attacks—cannot be placed in intensive care units. It has meant more deaths there—and will mean more deaths here in the United States.

Ultimately, the goal of social distancing is to flatten the curve of COVID-19 infection [4]. Put simply: Social distancing slows the spread of the disease. Fewer individuals who succumb to COVID-19 translates to a reduced number of deaths and less stress on the medical system. While the pandemic may last longer, it will result in less damage.

Does it work? So far, the cities/countries that enacted aggressive social distancing—Hong Kong, Singapore, and Guangzhou—have experienced significantly fewer hospitalizations and deaths. Social distancing saves lives ([Figure 1](#) [5]).



Reconciling Theology

Social distancing may be pragmatic; is it theologically suspect? The author of Hebrews exhorts us not to give up gathering together (Heb. 10:23). Luke points out the centrality of meeting together in his account of the early Church. In Acts 2:42, he gives witness to the actions of this church who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

How can we reconcile the need for social distancing with our need for fellowship? In moments of suffering, crisis, and panic, we need communion with fellow saints the most. These are the times where believers should draw near to each other, rather than intentionally moving away.

How can we reconcile the missional opportunity of physically meeting needs? Sociologist Rodney Stark suggests in *The Rise of Christianity* that the early Church’s rejection of social distancing may

have led to it becoming the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. Because the church took in abandoned infants and plague-infected non-Christians, it became the majority religion—a religion that even non-Christian observers had to concede cared for the ill and the abandoned far better than any pagan one.

How do we reconcile it? We do so by loving our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31). The way we can demonstrate love to people now is to stay away from them. This applies to all people—but in particular to those who are most vulnerable.

The risk of COVID-19 transmission increases based on the size of the group gathered. Quantitative biologist Joshua Weitz developed the “COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planner.” [6] If 20,000 cases of infection are actively circulating the U.S., and you host an event for 10 people, there’s a 0.06 percent chance that someone will be infected. However, if you attend an NBA game with 10,000 spectators, the risk of infection increases to 45 percent. That’s why the NBA, NHL season, and Major League Baseball are currently suspended.

This is even more true for those who are most vulnerable. For most diseases, there is a U-shaped curve with the young and the elderly typically suffering significant illness and death. Yet, COVID-19 is unique in sparing most infants and children [7]. While the impact of COVID-19 infection among individuals below 60 is relatively mild, the rate of significant complications and mortality for the elderly are substantially higher. For those above 80, the death rate is around 15 percent [8].

By heeding recommendations for social distancing, we are caring for our parents and elders well. The decision to forego participation in life-giving fellowship leads directly to the preservation of their physical life. The discipline of isolation increases the odds of their well-being. Choosing to meet together in “Christ’s name” while endangering their health and security may place us in the same position as the people Jesus condemns in Mark 7:11 for dedicating property to God that our parents needed for their support.

Isolation comes at a cost for seniors, of course. Over time, as their health deteriorates and memories fade, isolation, loneliness, and boredom become common issues. As friends pass away, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for community. The elderly must balance between isolation and socialization; a calculus must be made between distance and intimacy.

What could the Church do in this situation? Congregations could organize daily calls to the elderly saints among them. Single Christians and empty-nesting Christians might choose to invite an elder member of the congregation to shelter-in-place with them so that their physical and emotional needs are being met. Children could be asked to write cards of encouragement that could be mailed to seniors.

Embracing the Sacrifice

How do we embrace the sacrifice of social distancing? It comes at a great cost. As markets crash, schools shutter, stores empty, restaurants close, and churches move online—we are watching our economy bend and our social networks strain. We must do so with fidelity of love instead of the fear of contagion. Fear can drive us to act in extraordinary ways. It can force us to take risks that we have never conceived. These acts can yield significant benefits to ourselves and society. Yet, they are not necessarily sustainable over the long haul. Only acts of love are. We will do for others what we may not do for ourselves.

Anti-smoking commercials featuring graphic photos of the side effects of smoking are alarming, yet they rarely result in long-term cessation from smoking. In contrast, Thailand’s Smoking Kid campaign is often cited as the best anti-smoking campaign ever [9]. It centers on two young children with cigarettes in hand, asking adult smokers for a light. Surprised and disheartened, the smokers proceed to give a litany of reasons why smoking is bad. After the well-intentioned lecture comes to a close, the children hand over a note asking, “You worry about me, why not about yourself?”

Why has the campaign been so successful? It does not focus on fear mongering or shame. Instead, the emphases are on behaviors that impact future generations. Love for others and sacrifice in the face of future generations is what motivates long-standing change.

Within the sacrifice of social distancing, we too must act in love instead of fear. Adherence to social distancing guidelines can result from apprehension. However, the motivation of love changes our outlook from selfishness to selflessness. Our priority is no longer protecting ourselves. Instead, it is the health and well-being of others.

As we embrace sacrifice, we begin to see the depths of God's love. Psalm 103:11–12 gives us a glimpse of this: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love . . . as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." It is a love that leaves the 99 to seek and save a single lost one.

Rarely does a normal person have the opportunity to save the lives of others through routine sacrifices in daily life. Yet, right now, each of us has that opportunity. By embracing social distancing measures in our lives—whether canceling social events, staying away from mass gatherings, or changing the way we interact with people, we can save the lives of the vulnerable—by staying away.

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