

Shall We Gather By the River? Yes... No... Maybe So...

Paul L. Anderson

Many years ago, I would look into a black and white television and watch Andy Griffith sing while he sat on the front porch with Aunt Bee, Barney, and other characters from this timeless television show. Since then, many things have drastically changed in our world. We all have digital high definition means of viewing the historic television. Most of us are streaming television shows and or other visuals through our handheld, state-of-the-art multimedia devices.

Numerous facets of our lives have changed, while other things almost remain the same. The classic example is the manner in which faith groups worship their concept of God. The three basic faith groups that consider themselves monotheistic, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are still "gathering by the river" when they come together to worship. It is that sense of gathering that is essential to their "life giving stream," or the faith that carries them through the good times and bad. It is through the practice of fellowship, or sharing our faith with one other, we believe that we are "fellowshipping with the Devine—God."

My faith tradition is based upon the concept of gathering together. I am a Christian. It is the basic Christian belief that whenever two or three people are gathered in the name of Jesus, God's presence is manifest through the Holy Spirit. It is through fellowship with other believers that true worship of God occurs. This fundamental practice would drastically be altered if a flu pandemic invades our society.

An influenza pandemic would alter the entire context of the Christian faith and most other faith groups. The concept of a gathered assembly is predominant through all of Christianity. It starts when a child is born and continues through life cycles culminating with end of life rituals.

When a child is born, the Christian community awaits the day the child is blessed or baptized, or attains the blessings of God and the community in a service of worship. The parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends all gather at the place of worship to witness this rite of entrance into the culture and receive blessings of both God and "the church," the gathered assembly. It is during this service that the child is either blessed or baptized by the priest or the pastor. This practice is essential in the belief structure of Christians. If this practice is omitted or deleted, the faith of parents and children is somewhat uncertain. This is similar for many other life cycle faith events. Would a flu pandemic eliminate the visitation of priest and laity to the hospitalized? Should the many acts of mercy such as soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and safe havens for the abused and fragile be dismissed? The religious community needs to ask itself the question of how will we justify not risking our lives for the benefit of others, which is the true essence of self sacrifice.

An influenza pandemic would interrupt the entire ritual of the gathered assembly, from birth to last rites in burial. Whenever the Christian community is not gathering, is it in willful disobedience to one of its commands by God? Most religious leaders have yet to engage in this meaning dialogue because it will completely shake the foundations of organized religious systems as we know them today.

The question is: How will the religious community manage a flu pandemic and maintain true faithfulness to the Holy Book? I am not sure how this flu pandemic will modify the view of God's requirements in acts of mercy and justice. Shall we gather at the river since our ultimate quest is to be with God? If our ultimate quest is to be God, do we continue as we have in the past and accept death as fate? This is the true essence of the real question.

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