COVID Conditioning: A Viral Outbreak is (Re)Shaping Us and Our World

Byron Barlowe probes the underlying implications of the global reaction to COVID-19 from a worldview level, asking if we may be being conditioned to accept unbiblical views without realizing it.

You and I are being conditioned, you know that, right? It's a daily thing. Events and messages work on us, and we need to learn to shape them before they shape us. We must take in the right stuff to counter lies and well-intended overreach.

All of a sudden a universal and ubiquitous mind-and-heart-shaper has hit the world like an alien invasion. The tension and suspense feels like that in the film *Signs:* sitting in the basement, waiting for green "men" to creep into the boarded-up farmhouse, getting snatches of what's going on in the outside world through a baby monitor. We are covered over with everything COVID-19 virus: news of it, perhaps even the real effects of it as a sickness. But for most of us the newly-minted mandates by mayors and governors, and social pressures from friends and family stemming from the worldwide reaction is the main reality of our lives as we "shelter in place" and are bombarded with a constant stream of information. It's ruining investment portfolios—at least for now "on paper"—and skyrocketing the recently record-low unemployment numbers. People are scared for themselves and loved ones since so much is unknown.

How is all this change changing us? Materially, how will shifting norms transform public policy and law, along with our personal beliefs? What will the upending of our economy, civic, and personal lives mean? For folks with secure jobs and

schoolchildren, is it simply about getting through a few weeks of downtime and home-work, commonsense hygiene and personal contact avoidance? Or will we be forever stamped with new attitudes and convictions birthed by events beyond our control?

We are Responsible for Our Thoughts and Beliefs

Brain scientists confirm what good pastors, parents, and coaches teach: we can't necessarily control what we go through, but our reaction to it is up to us. Don't get "Corona'd"! We can either fall mindlessly into lockstep with what we're told, or to run this experience through a wise grid and conquer fear and foolishness. Cognitive researcher and Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf emphasizes the power of mental self-control: "As we think, we change the physical nature of our brain. As we consciously direct our thinking, we can wire out toxic patterns of thinking and replace them with healthy thoughts . . . . *It all starts in the realm of the mind, with our ability to think and choose—the most powerful thing in the universe after God, and indeed, fashioned after God.*"{1}

The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of our Creator God, acknowledged this reality when writing to the first Century Roman church and, by extension, to us today. If he were writing what became Romans 12:1-2 to contemporary folks he may have emphasized an action point first (verse 2) and expanded his words' scope to entail what early believers took for granted: God as the center of all things. Their worldview, including their view of the universe (cosmology), was hierarchical and infused with "God-ness."—Our temptation to trust in God-optional techno-science and complex government structures would be alien to our ancient Christian brethren. Yet, there were competing views of the way the seen and unseen worlds work, so Paul's admonition to develop their new Christ-inhabited mind is just as germane today.

It might have read something like, “Do not be conditioned by the world [all that is other-than-God, the cosmos, and anti-biblical realms, including your own self-created view of the world] but be reconditioned by the total upgrading of your mind in a new operating system downloaded by the entrance of the Holy Spirit when you believed. This will help you discern how to use that new mind wholeheartedly, purely serving through your body, which is only fitting and quite pleasing as your service to the Master of created reality, Himself the ‘I Am’ Reality.”

It’s Real for Me Too

I’m not immune from the scare and worry. My smartphone just dinged: my son’s second interview for his first career job set for 90 minutes from now was just cancelled. The recently thriving corporation—a very promising prospect—has frozen all hiring due to COVID-19. On the other line is a daughter who is seeking a low-income service position since her employer has no jobs in the pipeline. Our other daughter, an Intensive Care Unit nurse, feels the pressure of shortages and health risks. She posted a picture of herself in a mask and gown, disease prevention protocols called “Droplet Precautions.” Their medical equipment is inadequate and has to be washed and reused. A friend’s fiancé’s family have all been laid off: dad, mom, and siblings. It’s up to me to regulate my Corona-news intake, take my anxiety to God, and trust him. But I am determined not to be led into fear and one-sided thinking and to help others.

Mind-Conditioning: Words Matter to Our Worldview

Harsh new realities are marked by new verbiage which is always a sign of cultural change and often a signal of improper controlling (“shelter in place,” “social distancing,” “presumptive positive,” “an abundance of caution”). Euphemisms

like these mask meanings. In order of appearance, they clearly mean "Stay home, keep apart, we presume that he/she is a carrier, and we are going into high-control mode." As philosopher Peter Kreeft writes, "Control language and you control thought; control thought and you control action; control action and you control the world." Are you and I being conditioned to become used to changes we may not want?{2}

In the chaos, those of us with downtime and a biblical view of life need to use it to reflect and speak into a frightened and confused world. In the larger pluralistic community, *how we respond collectively and personally will in no small way determine the arc of our future.* As Dr. J.P. Moreland says, "Each situation in our lives is an occasion for either positive formation or negative deformation."{3} Yet, this is not simply a personal matter. We are citizens and need to be active ones.

Basic assumptions about reality—worldview presuppositions we just take for granted—tend to sit like bedrock or sinkholes underneath the foundations of cultures, families, and individual lives. We either don't know about them or ignore them, especially in hectic times of real or perceived crisis. They're deep, unseen, and usually of no concern until events unearth them or an earthquake shakes things up. Sinkholes cause collapse. Bedrock stands.

Specific Concerns About Corona-Conditioning

Here are some concerns I have as a teacher of biblical worldview discernment as this worldwide quake rattles on:

Have we become too beholden to medical science for direction? Every human life is infinitely precious—a very biblical stance given that we are made in God's image, that He died for all people, and that He desires for none to perish (Genesis 1:27; John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Yet, how does a society weigh its

view of life-value versus the inevitability of sickness and death? Citizens demand a disease-free life without pain and engage in death-avoidance, then take “death with dignity”; the medical establishment pretends it can deliver all that. Can outbreaks like this be allowed to shut down entire economies and render personal freedoms moot? Only if we play along with such pretense. An international obsession with killing it ignores everything else. Will our COVID-19 response cause more harm than good? *How* one answers such concerns, not whether such dilemmas *should* happen, is at issue. Our personal worldviews and collective societal constructs—which we can help change—will determine controllable outcomes. We will not determine uncontrollable.

This is *not* to say that public health decrees are wrong in principle nor to necessarily question at least some of those being decreed in this situation, for example voluntary at-home work and study. *Repeating louder this time: I am not saying a massive and unusual response is bad or wrong in and of itself.* Nevertheless, history is absolute regarding the exercise of such power—it almost never regresses. 9-11 and subsequent one-off attempted terrorist acts put in place onerous rules for air passengers that look permanent. Progress, in this sense, may be regress if it unrealistic and ill-conceived.

Conditioning Reality Itself?

Is Modern mankind seeking to short-circuit reality and its consequences? This is the biggest underlying issue. There’s something new in the air: near-unanimous mass morality based in rapidly fueled public opinion further fed by transnational fear. I call it “CoronaVirus Virus.” So far, epidemiologists and medical scientists are calling the shots for a global society. Pundits pump up the hype before we can know. Public peer pressure (along with corporate acquiescence and promotion) guarantee an unquestioning going-along for most people and institutions.

We constantly hear and read the phrase, “It’s just the right thing to do.” This orientation raises the question, “*Why* is it the right thing to do? What is the moral grounding for that decision?” “The greater good” is the mantra of a *utilitarian* worldview that eventually erases the kind of individual freedom of moral agents which Scripture honors. The people in power decide what is good for all the rest. In a pluralistic society like ours, the privileging of choice was traditionally baked into the very fabric of public policy. Law allows leeway for disputable matters of conscience—at least they did before the advent of “hate crimes” which require God-like knowledge of motives. Such fundamental precepts of liberty have long been eroding. In this new Corona-driven milieu, dictates like government ordered shuttering of businesses and stay-at-home decrees means they may never be fully regained. Let’s at least realize this, even if the calculus of health-risk mitigation over civil liberty wins the day.

Then there’s the prospect of the next pandemic. Some virus is surely incubating for debut next year. Will this draconian level be the new standard of response? How will our economy or that of the world (who often follow our lead) survive under such control?

“What, again, is government’s role?”

Who is pausing even for a moment to ask about various requirements, “Is this a bridge too far?” That leads to the other great concern: the directives from medical science’s mass diagnosis-for-the-world are, of course, implemented by government. But the biblical view of the role of government is pretty much limited to policing and making war. Admittedly, society and hence, government has multiplied in complexity—an unbiblical situation given the limits mentioned—therefore public health and economic interventions are somewhat necessary. Absolutely, there are critical emergency situations and this is one of them. It would be unconscionable to allow

an epidemic to spread willy-nilly on its own.

However, again, is anyone hitting Pause to ask how far is too far? One hopes that in retrospect, this crisis engenders a throttling back and overturning of policies that helped us get in this pickle (e.g., Federal Reserve-mandated interventions and supposed fixes which are being implemented again; also, allowing a Communist foreign nation a choke hold on pharmaceutical and medical supply chains to gain the "common good" of cheap goods while caregivers do without). Government solutions for all of life. Did we vote this in? Will we do it again in November?

Government Tyranny in Sight?

Most worrisome is a move toward what appears more like a police state. In Jordan, missionaries report that 400 people have been arrested for leaving their apartments. Refugee relief workers cobble together care in an impossible situation. A Kentucky man was kept in his home somehow after he refused to *self-isolate* (another new term in the popular vernacular)—I don't know the details. That spooked me. I wish he cared enough to stay away from people, but when it comes down to it, he could be shot in his own neighborhood—presumably on his own property—for leaving. Explain that to your six-year-old. A *shelter in place* order for all counties surrounding Kansas City is to be enforced by police. Cops deciding to fine or arrest you for leaving your home for other than trips to the doctor, grocery story, or cleaners? Politicians telling us what's essential may be necessary but seems arbitrary at best. Talk of state borders closing for a sickness? This is a novel consideration, far as I know! Does the Coronavirus rise to the level of a nuclear fallout situation? Is this our shared future? As author and apologist Dr. Ken Boa asks (in a personal email), "Given the nature of interconnectivity in a digital world, we now live within plausible sight of a fear-induced technological plague

that could lead to a totalitarian outcome."

Choices, Not Conditioned Responses

Again, all I am asking is, "Does the necessity of this drastic a world-changing meta-response go without saying? Could a relatively restrained response now be wise—despite the public relations suicide of facing a sometimes mad mob morality?" On the other hand, "Is freedom—economic and cultural—worth more lives? Whose feet would that be laid at? Politicians? The medical establishment (they are simply doing their calling)? Fate's? God's?"

If the choice is between saving every possible life and forever changing life itself for earth's entire population, where is the middle ground and how does a society find it? That boat has sailed, I fear. Relativistic, ever-changing ideals and their progressive promotion have won the day. The mindset of "We are going to win this thing, no matter the cost!" reigns triumphant in headlines.

There's a worldview at work—learn to notice it: note the irony of a Postmodern relativism entwined with a Modernist certainty regarding mankind's ability to control what used to be called an "act of God." That's what the highly moralistic and humanistic John Mauldin is unabashedly promoting, I believe. One more mass-mediated call to controlling an out of control universe. As if we could.

Be At Peace, Christian, And Spread That Peace

For individual believers, a biblically realistic and optimistic response is to shelter in place ("abide in Me"). Rest in the peace and assurance of a loving, sovereignly overseeing Creator who will make all things right someday, whose agenda is being met. The best outward response toward unbelievers is to share not only the certainty of that hope,

but the gospel that leads to hope in a disease-free, worry-free, perfectly functional and loving society of brother and sisters in Christ. Eternal perspective is the conditioning we must seek. Because we're all being conditioned. It is truly a daily thing.

Meanwhile, pray for the individuals in charge and their decision-making to be sound. As a new normal reconditions minds and hearts around the globe at the speed of Internet connections, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed" by the mind of Christ (Romans 12:2).

Notes

1. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health*, p. 20, emphasis mine.
2. www.azquotes.com/quote/1333869, accessed 3/23/2020.
3. J.P. Moreland, *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices That Brought Peace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).