

## VIRAL MARKETING

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Luke 24:13-35

Over the past six weeks, we all have become armchair experts in the field of epidemiology as we struggle to comprehend the spread of COVID-19 in our world. As epidemiologists, one of the scientific terms we have learned is **R-naught**. That is a capital R with the subscript zero—it is pronounced R-naught.  $R_0$  stands for the reproduction ratio that scientists use to describe the intensity of an infectious disease outbreak.  $R_0$  is the number of cases, on average, that each infected person will cause. It represents a worst-case scenario describing what will happen when an infected person enters an unprotected population. For example, imagine that I were infected with COVID-19 and I entered a town where no one had immunity or vaccination. Interacting with the residents in a normal manner, I would infect people and they would infect others, and so on. The average rate of infection is the  $R_0$ . If an infection has a  $R_0$  of less than one, the disease will die out naturally. Over 1, the disease will spread exponentially.

Measles, for example, is highly infectious. Measles has a  $R_0$  of 12 to 18. Fortunately, we have an effective measles vaccine. However, we witness explosive outbreaks of measles when people in a location stop taking that vaccine.

The influenza virus is less infectious than measles. It has an  $R_0$  ranging from 2 to 3. The influenza virus, however, mutates and can evade vaccines and immunity which makes it difficult to eradicate.<sup>1</sup>

COVID-19 is new, so we don't have enough data to determine its infection rate. Early on, researchers in Wuhan, China, estimated the COVID infection ratio to be between 2.2 and 2.7. However, a report from the CDC just two weeks ago suggests that the infection ratio is double that at around 5.7.<sup>2</sup>

It is crucial to note that the  $R_0$  of a disease is not wholly dependent on the disease itself. Measles will always be infectious, but the  $R_0$  is influenced by vaccines, immunity, and human activity. In the case of COVID-19 we don't have vaccines or immunity yet. So, that is why it is important that we practice social distancing. We must hinder the virus' spreading from person to person. Human interaction feeds the virus. We are trying to starve it. Testing would help immensely because then we could determine definitively if someone has the virus and isolate them. We need contact tracing to backtrack who the infected person has

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<sup>1</sup> <https://labblog.uofmhealth.org/rounds/how-scientists-quantify-intensity-of-an-outbreak-like-covid-19>  
<https://www.healthline.com/health/r-nought-reproduction-number>  
[https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/25/1/17-1901\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/25/1/17-1901_article)

<sup>2</sup> [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0282\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0282_article)

had contact with and test them as well. That is what they did so successfully in South Korea.

Epidemiology and public health are crucial for our safety, especially given our current state of affairs. But in the matter of our faith, the question I want to put before you today is this: What is the  $R_0$  for Christianity? What is the infection ratio for the Christian faith? If you are a Christian, are you contagious to others?

Our reading for today is one of our scriptures' post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, we can find the story of Easter morning when some women who were followers of Jesus went to the tomb and found it empty. They reported this fact to the disciples who did not believe them.

Luke then jumps to telling us of two men who are traveling away from Jerusalem. It is the same Easter Sunday. These two had heard the report of the women about the empty tomb but now they are headed home. There is no reason to remain in Jerusalem. Jesus is dead. His corpse has been pilfered. The party is over. It's time to call it quits. One of the men is named Cleopas; we aren't given the name of the other. They are followers of Jesus. They are not part of the inner twelve, but they know them.

These two men are traveling the road toward a village called Emmaus. This was not their home; it was just the first stop on their journey. Today, we don't know the location of Emmaus. Scripture tells us it was *60 stadia* from Jerusalem (about seven miles).

These two men are walking toward Emmaus and they are deep in conversation. A third man approaches them and inquires as to what they are discussing so intently. The man asking this question is Jesus, but the two don't know it. As the gospel explains, *their eyes were kept from recognizing him*.

Cleopas responds to the man and says, *Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?* The man asks, *what things?* And Cleopas recites the events of the life of Jesus.

Jesus responds to the men saying, *Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?* Jesus isn't being critical when he calls the men foolish. It's softer than that. He's just pointing out that they have missed the point. And then, as they walk along, Jesus offers an extended Bible study explaining and interpreting how the Messiah has been foretold throughout scripture.

When they reach Emmaus, Jesus walks ahead, but the others urge him to stay. At the inn, they gather at the dinner table and Jesus takes the bread that was on the table, he *blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*. When he does this, the eyes of

the two men are opened *and* (finally) *they recognized Jesus*. Then, Jesus vanishes. Realizing what has taken place, the two recall that as Jesus was explaining the scriptures to them on the road, their *hearts burned*. Immediately, they rush back to Jerusalem and locate the others. The disciples tell these two, *The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon*. The two then report of their experience with Jesus in Emmaus.

When I read this story, what I want to know is, Why didn't the two recognize Jesus on the road? What is it that kept their eyes from seeing him? Maybe it is as simple as that they weren't expecting him. After all, they thought he was dead. How could a dead man be walking with them? Or maybe, as I like to imagine these days, they didn't recognize him because Jesus was wearing his coronavirus mask. I wouldn't recognize my own sister if she walked by wearing one of these.

But the real answer, I believe, is that they didn't recognize Jesus because they weren't infected. They weren't infected with the Christian virus. They knew the story—that is obvious. When Jesus asks what they are discussing, they are able to recite to him the details of Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet before God, mighty in Word and deed. They tell how the chief priests and leaders of their people had handed Jesus over to be tried and crucified. Jesus was the one that for so long they had hoped would bring redemption to all Israel. But he was executed, and that was three days ago. They go on to report how just that morning some women from their group had gone to the tomb and found it empty. Jesus' body was gone. The women had seen angels who informed them that Jesus was alive. Some others with the group went to the tomb to confirm this, but did not see Jesus. Cleopas and the other man are able to recite this chain of events because they know it. They know about Jesus. If they were given a quiz on this subject they would receive an A+. But despite all they know, they still can't recognize the risen Jesus standing before them. They can't recognize Jesus because they lack something. Remember, on the road, Jesus interpreted the scripture for them. Then, at the table, when he broke bread, it all came together and their eyes were opened. Although they knew the story, they still were not infected with the spirit of Jesus. It wasn't until Jesus spoke to them that their *hearts burned*. That was the infection; that was the fever.

Last Sunday, we looked at the account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul was struck blind and heard Jesus speaking to him. Three days later, Jesus sent Ananias to Paul. Ananias laid his hands on Paul and said, *The Lord Jesus has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit* (Acts 9:17). Cleopas and his friend possess the knowledge, but they lack the Spirit.

I, myself, have not been sick with COVID-19. I can tell you a lot about it—its progression, how it attacks the body. But then I read the first-person accounts by those people who have endured this disease and I realize that I don't comprehend the suffering, the pain, the fear that accompanies this disease. The only way that I

could wholly comprehend COVID would be to become infected. I'm content to remain ignorant.

Christianity is the same way. Christians are not those people who know about Jesus. Christians are those who have been infected. Christianity is not book learning. Christianity is something passed from person to person. Who in your life infected you with the understanding of Christ? Who made your heart burn? And more importantly, are you, in turn, sharing Christ with others? Are you infecting them with the same spirit that attacked you? Are you making sure that the  $R_0$  number is far above 1 so that the Christian faith doesn't just fade away?

For most of us, our ability to recognize Christ is not something that just switched on one day. It was more likely a slow build, a gradual infection by different people that we trust—family, friends, church. Your faith is probably the product of being around believers who modeled Christian compassion, who witnessed to the power of God's love, who taught of God's salvation.

In this time of distancing and isolation, I would encourage you to reflect on how you might engage in some viral marketing of our faith, and commit yourself to infecting our world with the spirit of Christ.

Amen.