

Editorial: Personal responsibility doesn't negate social responsibility

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Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, I encouraged grace and patience with each other. In spring 2020, we still had much to learn about SARS-COV-2. We knew little more than a lot of people were getting sick, many were being hospitalized, and many were dying.

In the intervening year, we've learned enough to know simple measures can slow or prevent the spread of the coronavirus. We've also learned how divisive those simple measures are. That Christians are divided over things like face masks and physical distancing suggests the politicization of simple measures carries more sway than the teachings of Christ.

Let's consider the matter from two angles—elementary-aged children and health care workers.

Personal responsibility and children

According to Gov. Greg Abbott's [Executive Order GA 38](#), individuals have mastered safe practices and, therefore, "no person may be required by any jurisdiction to wear or to mandate the wearing of a face covering." Abbott's confidence in the public makes one wonder how infection rates are climbing again.

In GA 38, Abbott reiterated his [May 18 executive order](#) prohibiting "a county, city, **school district**, and public health authority" from requiring "any person to wear a face covering or to mandate that another person

wear a face covering” (emphasis added).

Abbott defended his latest executive order on Twitter, stating: “We must rely on [personal responsibility](#), not gov’t mandates. Texans will decide for themselves whether they’ll wear masks & open businesses.”

I’m all for personal responsibility. I am grateful for the freedom to exercise personal responsibility for where I live, where I send my children to school, where I shop, who I vote for. The trouble comes at the overlap between my personal responsibility and another person’s dependence on my personal responsibility.

Elementary-aged children, while able to exert some responsibility, don’t get to choose where they go to school. Many will begin the 2021-22 school year as COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations are spiking again. And if they attend public schools, they most likely will be in person, because [remote learning](#) did not receive further funding.

Children can be infected with COVID-19, they can become seriously ill, and they can transmit the virus to others—even if rates are much lower in each case. But in the interest of personal responsibility and liberty, we are going to require them to attend public school in person—no vaccines, no masks, probably no physical distancing.

Let me put a finer point on this: If I behave in a socially irresponsible way and put your elementary son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter or other loved one at risk of COVID-19 infection, not only has corporate responsibility failed, so has personal responsibility. But hey, at least I’m free to infect others.

I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, in King James English, “Suffer little children ... to come unto me” (Matthew 19:14).

We may not care about ourselves, but we do have a responsibility to look

out for our children—*all* of our children. One way we can look out for our children is to require masks be worn while they are at school. Another way—speaking of exercising responsibility—is to allow local school districts to decide for themselves whether to mandate masks.

A third way is for vaccines to be approved for children younger than 12. Abbott is right in encouraging people to be vaccinated, but his endorsement falls flat for those under 12 years old.

Personal liberty and health care expectations

While plenty of parents, educators and children are concerned about the upcoming school year, health care workers are beyond concerned. As those who take the brunt of our medical care, they also are beyond exhausted.

Many of those who have attended the bedsides of COVID-19 patients over the last 18 months carry profound trauma from the intensive and prolonged care those patients require. Far too many health care workers have experienced the death of far too many patients they fought to save.

The *Texas Tribune* [quotes John Henderson](#), president and CEO of the Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals, saying: “Not all of [the] nursing staff is fully vaccinated, but the ones who are literally are in tears, knowing that they’re about to go through, again, what they’ve been through [twice] before, and how terrible it’s going to be.”

The same article reports more than 95 percent of current COVID-19 hospitalizations are unvaccinated people. Bryan Alsip, executive vice president and chief medical officer of University Health System in San Antonio, remarked: “Nearly every COVID patient admission is completely preventable. Staff witness this every day, and it’s very, very frustrating.”

We may be willing to take our chances with a virus we might catch, might make us sick, might send us to the hospital—that might even kill us. And if we do get sick and have to go to the hospital, we expect a bed, a doctor and nurse, and a ventilator for each of us. How easily we slip from personal responsibility to personal liberty to entitlement.

Who cares that the suffering we may endure takes a toll on those we expect to care for us? Here again, I think we may have Paul's words mixed up: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

Balancing personal and social responsibility

I have tried to be gracious and patient with those who see mask wearing, social distancing and vaccinations differently than me. But it's hard to be patient when we knowingly put children—for whom we are personally *and* corporately responsible—at risk of life-long health complications. It's also hard to be gracious with those who knowingly choose to make someone else responsible for keeping them alive.

Given what we have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, my patience is wearing thin. There comes a point when patience no longer is warranted, however boundless grace may be.

Not everyone is able to receive the vaccine, for various reasons, which makes the simple measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19 even more important.

Those who refuse to wear a face mask, to maintain the recommended 6-foot distance from others or to avoid crowded places for no other reason than

their insistence on personal liberties are sending a clear message to our elementary-aged children, health care workers and medically vulnerable individuals. They are saying their personal liberties matter more than someone else's health and well-being.

Christians who send such a message will have a very hard time finding scriptural justification for personal liberty trumping the welfare of others.

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