

TRANSCRIPT:

John Stemberger Interviews Sen Marco Rubio A Briefing for Pastors and Ministry Leaders on COVID-19 Virus

John Stemberger: ...Senator, let me go ahead and ask you the first question. So, a lot of people think that this is an overblown and exaggerated crisis and has unnecessary panic. In contrast, other people act like it's the end of the world in terms of their panic and hoarding behavior. How bad is it? What's the truth about how bad it is?

Marco Rubio: Well, I mean, that's a great question. I mean, let's have some perspective. The perspective is, it's not the bubonic plague, so it's not going to wipe up two-thirds or a third of humanity. It's not the flood – biblical flood so, I mean, obviously, it's not that. But it is a very significant global event. And I think to the extent that we believe that the U.S. media – or, somebody may believe the U.S. media's overblowing it, that doesn't explain why virtually every other country in the world is also taking extraordinary measures.

And the reason is this. First of all, I think this is a moment that calls for extraordinary humility at the personal level, but also at the collective level. It's a reminder that we are advanced creatures because we're created in the image of God, but we're not God. And there are still things, despite all the tools that we've invented and all the advanced we've made in science, there are still things in the world that we can't control.

And one of them is nature and this is a product of biological nature. And viruses have inflicted mankind pandemics for 5,000 years. So, it's just – it is what it is. All you got to do is open up Scripture and you can't get very many pages, especially in the New Testament or the gospel without hearing about leprosy and a leper and so we know this. And this is something that's been a factor forever.

Now, why this one is significant is, it calls for humility because there are things about it we still do not know. So, for example, we go around telling people it doesn't impact younger people. But what we are seeing now both in the U.S. and in Europe is that a substantial number of younger people at higher percentages than was the case in China are winding up in hospitals. Now, whether that's because of awareness or because the virus has mutated, we don't know yet.

But the real consequence here is, if we do nothing – if this virus spreads and impacts the entire population, which it would eventually do unless a vaccine is invented – it will kill a percentage of our population equivalent to about 2 million people. That's if we do absolutely nothing, which, of course, we're going to do something. But if it even impacts a fraction of that population, at a minimum, what it would do is overwhelm our hospital system.

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So, as an example, just as a worse-case scenario, if we have two retirement communities in Broward County or, God forbid, let's say The Villages, have a very significant outbreak, we're going to have a substantial number of people show up at hospitals in need of an ICU bed and in need of a ventilator, and a hospital will not be able to provide it. It will run out of them. We may have extra ones available in Pensacola, but we won't have them available in Sumter County or in Broward County.

And so, how do you prevent yourself from getting there? Well, the only way to prevent it is to slow down the rate of infection until we can do three things: Number one, we've got to build up capacity; more beds, more ventilators. Number two is we have to develop antivirals – there's advances being made as we speak – so that you can give that to someone and the viral load will come down and they won't be as sick for as long – or, sick as long as they would normally be. And, eventually, you build a vaccine.

Those are the three steps. The key here is not to eradicate it in the short term, but to slow the rate of infection so we don't have a bunch of people show up at emergency rooms all at once and overwhelms the system, which ends up impacting all of us because that emergency room will now not be able to accommodate the heart attack victims, the stroke victims, the car accidents, and all sorts of other things.

So, that's the challenge here. And the only way to do it is to keep people away from each other, which has led to this extraordinary economic disruption and that's the situation that we're facing. And one last point. When you look at the numbers that you're seeing, remember, to-date, we are still primarily only testing people that are symptomatic. So, the best estimates are that the rate is 10 to 1. That for every person we know about, there's 10 cases we don't know about because they're asymptomatic or otherwise or because they don't have access to tests, so the numbers are larger.

And the second is, we are lagging – so, what you're seeing reflected today in hospitals is the infections that happened two to three weeks ago. So, it will take about three weeks before these measures that are being undertaken will start to be felt in terms of the pace and growth of this. And the last point I would make is, we're in uncharted territory. I mean, there is real – there really is no modern-day equivalent to this. Probably the closest thing to it would be the pandemic, the flu, in the early 1900s and then World War II in terms of mobilizing the society.

So, it's an enormous challenge and I think the church has a very important role to play because, right now, people are scared and I think people are dealing with some realization that – of the humility we need to have. And one more point I would make is I think people also being reminded of how trivial

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so much that we focus on is. There's a lot of things that suddenly appear very trivial and when you see sort of the threat before us economically and from a healthcare perspective.

John Stemberger: So, Senator, a lot of people are downplaying the seriousness of COVID-19 by saying, look at the common flu. More people feel more – why is it more serious than an ordinary flu?

Marco Rubio: Well, I would start by saying, with the ordinary flu, we have an answer. The ordinary flu, yeah, it kills a lot of people because it's – it changes every year. But we have two things we can do with the ordinary flu. Most years, we have a vaccine that works pretty well, which either prevents you from getting it or, if you get it, really diminishes the impact it has. And the second thing we have with the flu is we have antiviral treatment, like Tamiflu. But every time – I think that's a good point of comparison. We still have the flu. So, the people that have the flu that are in hospitals are there now. So, but if we – when we have bad flu outbreaks, it stresses the healthcare system.

I think the difference is there isn't a single American today – or, there isn't a single person on earth today that is immune to this virus, I mean, except the people potentially that already have it. We believe that if it behaves like every other virus, the experts say you should build immunity once you have it. But the overwhelming percentage, majority of people on the planet and in our country have not had this virus. So, unlike the flu, where you have people that have a vaccine, our immunity rate to it right now is basically zero. So, that makes it – everyone is eligible for infection.

And for those who do get infected, when – the mortality rate among people over 80 is substantially higher – and even of people over 70 is substantially higher than it is for the flu. So, you're looking at raw numbers, the flu has been – the seasonal flu started hitting around late September, so this thing didn't even get to this country until January. So, the flu got a three-month head start. I think we're not comparing the same things. We got – in about three or four months, I would predict that the numbers for this are going to be substantially higher than what the flu would do.

John Stemberger: Right. So, the President seems fairly confident that the crisis is not going to disrupt the supply chain from the production of goods and services. Do you have the same confidence? And if so, why, given the severity of the circumstances?

Marco Rubio: Well, I think the White House is actually aware that there are going to be some supply chain disruption. Some of them, for example, because factories are shut down in Germany and Japan. I mean, they haven't been operating, so eventually you're going to burn through inventory. So, if you have a German-

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made car and the brakes are made in Germany, that plant is not operating right now, and neither are the cargo ships. And so, eventually, the inventory goes down, there'll be a supply chain disruption. I mean, the only intervening factor is the body shops have shut down in a lot of places, too, and the mechanics, so we're not burning through inventory as fast as we normally would be.

On the pharmaceutical side, it's the active ingredients that are used to make medicines – you know, these medicines are an amalgamation of 5, 10, 15 different ingredients. Those ingredients are manufactured overseas not just in China – a lot in China – but Japan and India. That's been disrupted by two things. Number one is the factories are shut down and, number two – for a period of time. So, there's a lag time, but there'll be a supply chain issue eventually.

And number two is, some of these countries are hoarding. So, right now, India's saying, we need these medicines and these active ingredients for here, so we're not allowing you to ship this stuff out. So, we are going to see some supply chain disruptions and they're going to lag. I think the biggest supply chain disruption we should be concerned about is – in the short term is the medicines and that you need to ventilate a patient, intubate a patient, and the ventilators themselves, and the protective equipment.

And so, that's why you saw the President yesterday sort of authorize the Department of Defense to begin – to get into this field of helping mobilize manufacturing, and the automakers who have shut down operations have talked about repurposing some of their plants for purposes of making ventilators in the short term. And so, I think the American private sector, if deputized, can help and go a long way in this regard.

John Stemberger: So, there are several churches, even large mega churches, that met last week and are continuing to meet this week. What would you say to the pastors of those churches? Is there any way that's appropriate or is that really a lot of risk?

Marco Rubio: Well, I would say, obviously, that – we are blessed in the 21st century to be able to bring people together online and many churches are able to do that. And I think that was – I think that's a very positive thing because there are a lot of people that typically don't go to church that I think may be tuning in. A lot of the distractions of everyday life have been removed and there's a lot of fear and uncertainty. And people have a tendency in times of trouble to turn to faith and so I think it's good that we're doing that part.

In terms of gatherings, I would never advise against listening to the – I will tell you this. Your political leaders do not like shutting things down. And if

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there's a criticism in the future when we look back, it may be that we waited too long to do that in some places. So, if they tell you to shut down, it's because they're seeing something that's concerning. And so, the only caveat I would make is, I think every church has the – if there is no such local order, every church has the right to make the decision it chooses to make.

And the only thing I would be concerned about is, if an infection emerges from such a gathering, sort of the, you know – what would happen as a result of that. How your congregates would feel, how the – everyone else would feel about it. But again, I mean, I think everyone's going to have to make a decision on the basis of what works for their community and what works best.

I mean, it's a tough decision because people do need their faith and that, you know, we're getting close to Easter here. So, I mean, that's an important time a year where a lot of people, at least for a brief period of time – I mean, for a lot of people, it's the one time a year they even go to church. So, I think the one blessing we have been given is we have the ability to minister to people in ways that did not exist 2,000 years ago or even 100 years ago.

John Stemberger: So, how long do you think it'll be before we return to normal and churches can meet again? That kind of thing. I mean, some people say it's two or three weeks, others say two or three months, and then some estimates are saying a year, so.

Marco Rubio: Well, I wouldn't. I think a year is not a sustainable thing. I think two or three weeks is very optimistic. I would say that the way that's based on is when the – my personal opinion of how this is going to have to be handled – and China's an interesting case because they have now been able to limit local infection because of the month-and-a-half long shutdown of their country. But what's going to be interesting to watch – and the reason why they haven't massively re-opened is because they know that, because there is no vaccine or built-in immunity yet for humans, the minute they go back to normal, the infection rate will start to climb again.

So, it's going to be very tricky here about sort of – I think – this is my personal view now. But I think the way this is going to have to be played, and there's no playbook for this, is they're going to have to be periods in which the restrictions are lifted. And then, once the infection rate begins to climb a little bit, re-impose. So, I think there's going to be some stop and starts and some seasonal aspects to it. And there are some intervening factors that we still don't know.

So, for example, when the viruses – there are viruses that are seasonal, which means they don't survive as long in warmer temperatures. So, the warmer the

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temperatures become, the less the virus is able to live in the air or on a doorknob or what have you, so that helps with a lot of the seasonal contagions. And the other is, if they can put in place an effective antiviral course of treatment, it's still – people are still going to get it, but at least there's some medicine you can give them that prevents it from becoming and event requiring hospitalization, ventilation, or mortality from this particular condition. So, there are some intervening factors that could help in that regard.

John Stemberger: So, in Gainesville – the city commission in Gainesville actually just issued an order that there should be no gathering of 50 people or more. And so, one of the pastors, a friend of mine, was approached by a police officer two days ago and told that they'll be driving by on Sunday. And if there are more than 50 people in the building that they would literally consider arrests and criminal penalty, which is in the order. Can the Government really do that? And is that really constitutional?

Marco Rubio: Well, that's an interesting question because it's one we've never confronted before. I will tell you that governments have extraordinary powers when it comes to declared emergencies. And I think the bigger question is whether that's the best use of our law enforcement tools and so forth. And so, I think that that's a separate question from the one you asked about its legality. You know, I would imagine that if the courts were open in some places, someone would litigate that question.

But my sense of it is that as, you know – we are called to obey civil authorities as long as what they're asking us to do doesn't violate the Gospel and God's law. We're asked to follow the law as long as it doesn't violate God's law. And I would say in an instance like this, the intentions behind enforcing – or, putting in place a law is not to restrict the exercise of our faith. It is to protect the public from a disease.

And I would say that responsible leadership, in my view, is in line with what the Gospel teaches us to do to the extent we're not – so, if we were being asked not to meet because what we're teaching is bad, I would say that that's an order we can't obey. But if we're being asked not to teach because of a, to meet because it could hurt people, that's a different kind of deal.

And I would make one more point. And that is, it's interesting to go back and look at the early church. The Roman Empire suffered from multiple pandemics that lasted several years. And the one thing I've always said – Christianity conquered the Roman Empire and ultimately spread throughout the world. It wasn't because they had an army or because it forced anybody. One of the reasons why the Christian church grew so rapidly is the example of a Christian.

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So, at a time when the individual Roman/Pagan society – everyone was looking out for themselves and hiding and, you know, sort of every man for himself, it was the Christians that were out there ministering to the sick, sometimes at risk to themselves. And I think that's a really important example for us in terms of, you know, the role the church can play now in ministering to people. And we're blessed that you can do it without having to do it directly and face-to-face. You can actually reach a lot of people today online who are stuck at home and are looking for some comfort and some meaning behind the challenges that we're facing.

John Stemberger: So, one of the – we're going to take a couple questions now. We have some time to take questions from the pastors themselves. The most significant question that we hear over and over again is, there's lots of stimulus packages and aid for small businesses. Many churches are like small cities and small communities. Is there any way possible that the government can provide some help to major churches or major nonprofits?

I know there might be some constitutional issues but, Marco, is there anything that can be done maybe to create tax credits for contributions for nonprofits or something like that? Something creative that would not have constitutional issues that could help churches and nonprofits?

Marco Rubio: Yes. So, the packets that I've been tasked with establishing for the Senate and that we've been working with a team on and – is open to nonprofits and, basically, churches but – and other nonprofit groups. And how it basically works is it's not SBA, so it's not going to Small Business Administration and getting a loan. It is – although we are going to use the existing banks that participate in small business lending, because they have the infrastructure to handle this sort of transaction, we're not going to just use them. We're going to open it up to any bank that is licensed and wants to participate.

And the gist of it – and it's an extraordinary measure. This is something I would never vote for under virtually any other circumstance. Is the Government is going to basically step forward and tell small business and not-for-profits, whatever your overhead operating – normal operating costs are, primarily, you know, rent and lease or, you know, cost of real estate and your payroll that existed before this crisis, you know, there's a couple different metrics. One of them is, what was it on March 1st?

Whatever that is, we're going to lend you four times that – or, we're going to give you four times that. And a year from now, we're going to look at – you're going to show your books. And if you spent that money that you took out from this program through your bank for purposes of maintaining payroll and paying your overhead, so your lights didn't go out and that sort of thing,

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it's going to be forgiven. If you used a portion of it for any other reason, then that portion of it – or, that would become a loan that you would begin to service a year from now.

So, what that will allow the people on this call to do is go, theoretically – this is the ideal outcome if their bank agrees. Is be able to go to your banking institution through a form that already exists that will have to be tinkered with simply because it's not a loan. It's sort of a hybrid grant. And apply on – practically online in many cases. And, generally, within 36 hours, especially if it's your own bank, have a cash infusion that will allow you to meet payroll for about four to five more weeks. I got a – you know, we don't know how long it's going to last but, at a minimum, we don't want to see people laid off.

John Stemberger: So, one last question here. How can churches best help the elderly and those getting corona? If you know somebody who has contracted it, how can we help them within congregations without getting infected ourselves or getting others infected?

Marco Rubio: Well, I think – yeah. And I think that depends where they are. Obviously, I think if you're elderly to begin with, whether you're infected or not, these are the people we don't want to see going out to Publix or Winn-Dixie and shopping. But they need to eat, and they need to be fed. So, I think, first and foremost, making sure that – especially those who are isolated because they live alone or what have you and can't get around or shouldn't be getting around.

Having people check in on them, even if it's a knock on the door or through the window. Delivering meals, picking up the groceries for them, you know, that sort of thing is a really big deal. You know, if someone's 85 years old and lives on their own, and shouldn't be going out, maybe can't go out because they use public transportation, to have a local church identify who they are and have someone that's responsible for calling them every day or checking in on them and being a resource for them.

You know, they may have a prescription they need picked up from somewhere. They may need some groceries because they ran out of milk or whatever it might be – would be an extraordinary ministry and is something the government can't possibly do, and can be done safely, you know, without putting them at risk. I would say that's obviously the first – and I think just – we are – because we're created in the image of the Creator, you know, we're created for relationships. And so, when you isolate people from other people, it's very traumatic.

And so, being able to interface and interact with people, whether it's families that are shuttered away or individually, seniors, is an extraordinary mission.

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These are folks that might be isolated to begin with and very lonely. And so, to have someone that's there looking out for them, I think, is extraordinary comfort, not to mention very useful in a time like this.

John Stemberger: Can we do one more question?

Marco Rubio: Yeah. Go ahead.

John Stemberger: Yeah. One more question. So, what is a Christian ethical response to the issue of whether or not we refer to this virus as associated with China or not? Is that an appropriate thing to call this the China Virus? And how would you respond in terms of a Christian perspective?

Marco Rubio: Well, let me tell you why – I don't think anyone's been tougher on China than I have. I think they are, in some ways, very responsible for the outbreak of this at this level. Not because the virus came from there because the virus could've come from anywhere. The gist of this virus is coronaviruses are generally animal viruses that generally don't infect humans. But from time to time one of these strains will cross over from an animal to a human because you consume it – a product from the animal or what have you and you have these outbreaks. That was MERS, that was SARS-1, that was all these other ones.

That's not China's fault that it happened to one person in China in mid-December and it's now spread to the world. What is China's fault is they largely covered it up for about a month and a half and didn't share enough information with the world. So, if they had shared the original viral sample, as an example, it would've given researchers all over the planet a head start on developing a vaccine and an antiviral treatment. Only now have they been more transparent about some of the treatments they've used that have worked, so I do blame them for that sort of thing.

Now, that said, I just share one story with you. I have a friend who is a teacher at a Christian school in North Carolina and they have 50 children from China who are their students who study abroad. Their parents are workers. They save a lot of money. In China, those kids can't get a Christian education. In fact, the church is – the churches are supervised by the government. But these parents are Christians and they want their kids to get a Christian education.

So, they send them half a world away, about 50 of them, to study in North Carolina. And these kids are facing a couple things. Number one is their parents have lost everything. I mean, the jobs they had have been shut down. I mean, they can't go home right now because the flights aren't allowed out or in. But when they do go home, they're going home to a family that's

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devastated and can no longer afford to send them to study abroad for Christian purposes.

And, number two, the kids have been tough on some of them. I mean, they've been mocked, they've been made fun of, they've been told that they're responsible for this and so forth. So, I think it's important to keep that in mind because there are – these kids are not to blame for the actions of their leaders.

Now, it is not inaccurate – and I think when you see the President using that term, he's pushing back on a fact that China's out there making up this ridiculous story that this came from U.S. soldiers that went over there for the military games. This is ridiculous. It's absurd. It's them trying to deflect blame. And so, it's him fighting back against that.

And somehow, we have to have a – figure out a way to be accurate about where the virus came from and then push back against that narrative. But also recognize that there are millions of people in that country that – and some of them here that are just kids, for example, that – you know, that stigma that it creates, you know, it can spread to them. And that certainly – it's not their fault, right? And not only that but they're victims of this on multiple levels.

So, I don't know if that answers your question, but it kind of tells you why – how I've balanced it in my mind, which is to be very transparent about what China's government has done wrong here but also recognize that there are millions of Christians in China, many of them worshiping underground, and we should also think about them because they are not to blame for what the response of the government there was and they're not to blame – and they're victims of it themselves.

And we certainly don't want to see the blame ascribed to them. And as Christians, we don't want to do anything that makes them less open to the Gospel, especially those of the – I think we want to be an example. Again, I go back to the point I made originally and that is, one of the things that really fueled the growth of Christianity was the Christian example. They were the total opposite of the Pagan world that valued power, wealth, status, comfort. And these Christians were denying themselves all of that and were out there serving the poor.

And people used to look at them and say, you know – first they used to say, what's wrong with these people? And then they used to say, I want what those people have. I want the peace that those people have in troubled times. Where do they get that peace from? That's what I want. And that really is what allowed a Pagan empire to become sort of a – what allowed Christianity to spread throughout the western world. It was just the fact that people were

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open to the Gospel because of the example of the Christians. So, I think we should remember that always.

John Stemberger: Well, listen. Thank you for being on this call. Before you leave, we just want to pray for you. We're aware that your wife, Jeanette, and two of your four children are still at home. This is enormous strain upon your family, and we appreciate your service. And, pastors, we are grateful to have a man of this character and caliber representing us in the United States Senate. A man of deep faith and committed to his family. So, I'm going to ask Kevin Baird to just pray for you, Senator, if you would. And then we'll let you go.

Marco Rubio: Thank you.

Kevin Baird: Father, we just lift up our friend and senator, Marco Rubio. Lord, we ask that you would send wisdom from above to not only him but to all of our leaders, both federally and state and our communities. We pray now for their strength, for their families, as was mentioned. That you would give them protection. Give them unusual understanding and guidance. We know they'll even have to make some, perhaps, courageous decisions, so we ask for that kind of strength and courage as well.

We pray you bless them. Help us as a nation, I pray. May we navigate through this. And when we come out, may we be a better people. May we be more responsive to you. And somehow, someway, in the midst of it all, may your name be made great. I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Marco Rubio: Amen. Thank you so much for that. And I ask you to continue to pray for all of our leaders and our country as a whole. And, you know, God has an amazing way of – He uses adversity sometimes and oftentimes to not just teach us lessons but to prepare us for greater things. And with so much disunity in this country, maybe, if there is a silver lining here it is that, because we're being forced to all confront a common threat, we'll find some common ground.

And from it – one last point. I don't want to monopolize, but I think it's really important and I want to say this. There are a lot of people out there that are negative towards Christianity. They view it as a judgmental movement that looks down on people to tell people what to do. I think we have an extraordinary opportunity to model Christianity as a way of exhibiting compassion and caring for our fellow man and really impacting – and it's not about popularity. We're not trying to be popular. In fact, the church will never be popular.

It's about – if there's people out there who have been closed to the Gospel who are now open to it because a Christian took care of them and asked

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nothing in return, that is our mission. That is the mission of the church. And I think that that mission is there right before us right now. So, I encourage all of you and all of us who are Christians to sort of remember that every day because we're ambassadors of the faith.

John Stemberger: Senator, thank you very much.

Marco Rubio: Thank you. Thanks so much.