



Why Christians should welcome face masks

by Isaac Ottoni Wilhelm

Jesus Christ—and through him, God—has given us tools to make it through this coronavirus pandemic. Prayer, faith, and community are familiar tools. We have been using them for months now to get by.

But I want to talk about another Christian tool: face masks.

One might be surprised to see face masks described as Christian. At first, I thought face masks were instruments of medical science only: non-religious items that doctors tell us to wear. In fact, I doubted whether something that partially hid my face could be Christian at all. Covering up a face feels like covering up a flame, and the Gospels warn against that: “No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar” (Luke 11:33).

As a philosopher and a teacher, however, I believe it is important to question our assumptions. So I did some research. I began scanning through the Bible, looking for anything that might support—or contradict—my thinking.

The Bible had a lesson for me. As I quickly discovered, it contains many stories of people wearing protective clothes. Fabric, strips of cloth, and other garments are divine items, used throughout the Bible to cover, heal, and express sorrow in times of tragedy. And when viewed in the light of these stories, face masks appear to be strikingly biblical garb:

- Take sackcloth, for example. It was used by Jacob when he mourned the passing of Joseph (Genesis 37:34). And it was used by Ahab to express fear and despair when he heard Elijah’s prophetic condemnation (1 Kings 21:27).

Face masks play a similar role. Like sackcloth, they express sorrow and fear. They mark our grief in times of mourning.

- Or consider Moses’ veil. When Moses returned from Mount Sinai, his face shone with the light of God. It shone more brightly, in fact, than others could take. In order to shield the Israelites from the overwhelming divinity that radiated from his face, Moses wore a veil (Exodus 34:33-35).

Again, face masks serve a similar function. Like Moses’ veil, face masks serve to protect. We wear them to protect one another.

- Similarly, Jesus’ garment was a conduit for healing. Remember the suffering woman who dared to touch his tunic (Mark 5:25-34)? After doing so, she was immediately cured of her illness. Jesus’ divine power flowed through his clothing, making believers well.

So, too, with face masks. Of course, face masks do not directly heal people in the way Jesus did. Face masks do not dispense medicine, for instance. But by preventing the spread of coronavirus, face masks have the power to make

ourselves and our communities healthy. Like Jesus and his tunic, face masks instill wellness.

- Clothing features prominently in many other biblical passages. For instance, according to the Gospels, Jesus’ life—from birth to crucifixion—begins and ends with clothing. As soon as Jesus was born, the Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary “wrapped him in bands of cloth” (2:7). And as soon as Jesus died, the Gospel of Matthew reports that Joseph of Arimathea took his body and “wrapped it in a clean linen cloth” (27:59). Clothing—in particular, strips of fabric and clean linen—was a vessel for Jesus, welcoming him into the world and bearing him out of it.

Even here, there is something to learn about face masks. For just as clothing bookends the story of Jesus’ life, face masks will bookend the story of this pandemic. We put on face masks at the start of it, and we will remove them at the end.

So face masks are not un-Christian. By expressing sorrow, protecting each other, keeping us well, and framing this pandemic’s story, face masks embody the divine significance of sackcloth, veil, tunic, and wrapping. And Christians, therefore, should welcome them. 

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