

The privilege of opting out

And the Christian calling to opt back in

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue



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I have begun a new spiritual discipline in my life. It's an effort to notice how often in a given day I take advantage of personal luxuries that allow me to opt out of certain situations. The more closely I observe other people who lack the resources, connections, or affluence to be able to opt out of undesired circumstances, the clearer my faith bearings become. We talk a lot these days about stubborn realities like White privilege and male privilege. What about the privilege of being able to opt out—that perk that, while often related to race, gender, or class, can also transcend them?

Decades ago, as a young adult, I first recognized my ability to seriously opt out. Through the simple purchase of evacuation insurance, which was quite affordable at that time, I was essentially able to opt out of the rural health-care system in Africa during my year and a half stay. Since then, of course, I've noticed thousands of ways that people like and unlike me are able to opt out of unwelcome circumstances without any dire consequences. Attention to these ways is what now gives shape to this recent spiritual discipline.

If you own a car, you can opt out of public transportation. If you enjoy a certain level of comfort, security, and means, you can opt out of the local public school system and go private or move to an upscale community where the public schools are in better shape. If you fly and want to opt out of arriving with pain from insufficient legroom, you can become an airline club member. The Vietnam War ended in part because draft deferments ended, deferments that clearly favored the wealthy and more privileged. On the expressways of major American cities today, motorists can pay extra for the privilege of opting out of rush-hour traffic and driving unimpeded in the express lane.

We're all familiar with the inequities of the justice system, in which minor offenders can opt out of jail by posting bail or, in my community, having the police call a known relative with a connection. As we also know, people who live in relative safety and comfort regularly exercise the privilege of opting out of conversations about racism or even developing an elemental awareness of the cruel consequences of systemic injustice.

Among the most remarkable features of the Gospel narratives, I've long felt, is the resoluteness of Jesus in walking toward the cross. Despite numerous opportunities to opt out of the way of suffering, despite the consistent efforts of his disciples to try to talk him out of such an end, he stays the course. Even near the end, surrounded by a hostile group of people holding clubs and swords, Jesus can say, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than 12 legions of angels?" His decision to opt in to his greater calling of love remains both instructive and saving.

The privilege that so many of us enjoy of being able to opt out of less-than-desirable circumstances should induce neither pride nor guilt. Our greater responsibility is to identify and choose opportunities to opt in, where we can come to the table and share in the work of strengthening the common good.

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