

## Reformation Faith in Plague Times (Part 1)

by Phil Sessa, May 5, 2020



*Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?* (Amos 3:5)

“*There is nothing new under the sun*”. These were the words repeated 29 times by the ever-wise King Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes. To say there is nothing new under the sun means there is nothing new on the earth. Human nature has remained and always will remain the same in this life, or age. Most people tend to forget the past, often repeating its mistakes as a result. Many attempt to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps, and outdo their weaker counterparts, in a “survival of the fittest” mentality, the “rat race” of life. The reaction of people to this current coronavirus pandemic proves that “**nothing new under the sun**”.

The word pandemic comes from the Greek word meaning “pertaining to all people.” Pandemics are usually caused by a new infectious agent that is capable of spreading rapidly. The death toll in a pandemic is generally higher than that in an epidemic

The coronavirus has changed how daily life looks in America and around the globe. A similar pestilence came knocking on the door of the Reformers in their day. How did the Reformers navigate by faith minister to others through these troubled waters?

### **The Black Plague: What was it?**

The Black Plague is also known as “The Bubonic Plague” was extremely severe and harmful in its effects. It was an awful disease that killed its victims quickly and painfully. It caused particularly high fevers and infected its victims with large painful boils or buboes from swollen lymph nodes (perhaps similar to Job 2:7; 19:13-27). It was highly contagious and left a path of devastation with a high mortality rate (the number of deaths in a year per thousand total population).

### **Origins and Spread of the Plague**

The Black Plague was believed to be spread by oriental rat fleas that would survive on the blood of black rats, which lived on merchant ships. These rats were transported over 3,728 miles into the heart of Europe. The very bacteria that caused Bubonic Plague were transmitted by a simple flea bite. When the outbreak occurred and many rodents died, the hungry fleas sought out other sources of blood, and therefore turned to other animals and also to people that came into contact where

these rodents lived. Some in the medical field affirm this plague can also spread from human-to-human, just as the coronavirus currently spreading.

The Black Plague's trail of carnage began in Central Asia around China in the 1320s and traveled along the Silk Road (trade routes through Asia connecting China to the Mediterranean Sea) into Europe and the greater Mediterranean region in 1347. The plague was so devastating to Europe that it took about a third (20 to 30 million) of the population. The plague receded, but then it centuries later according to wikipedia, the plague reared its ugly head to haunt Europe and the Mediterranean throughout the 14th to 17th centuries, One of those recurrences came to Wittenberg in the summer of 1527, the home of Martin Luther.

### **To Flee or not to flee for citizens**

Many citizens fled for their lives. However, the question was asked if it was permissible for Christians to flee for their lives, or should they stay and weather the plague. The world-renown reformer, Martin Luther, wrote a fascinating pamphlet entitled "*Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*," as the black plague had struck Luther's city of Wittenberg. Its wisdom proves helpful to Christians facing our 21st-century pandemic. It was full of practical wisdom on how to respond, from the building of hospitals in such a way as to protect the medical staff as they served those who are suffering from a plague.

In his tract, Luther addressed those with the strong conviction that one should never flee because the plague is God's judgment for our sins. He knew words of Amos 3:6, "Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?" Christians should humbly stand and accept God's will at all times and respond with godly sorrow and repentance. He knew that not all were equally strong in faith. He also wrote about the importance of caring for one's neighbor and taking the necessary steps to help and protect others, and emphasized the giftedness of serving.

Luther wrote toward the end, "*Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us.*" Praying for God's merciful protection of us all is where we must begin. Luther continued with practical steps by stating, "Then I shall fumigate," and he specifies his house, the yard, and the street. I'm not sure what fumigating entailed in the sixteenth century, but whatever it was, Luther was advocating for it, and I have to imagine it was some way of disinfecting the aforementioned areas. He will "help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence."

He felt that it was not necessarily wrong to flee from death (as King David had fled from both Saul and Absalom), but that one's community and family responsibilities first must be considered. In order to leave, one was required to make sure her neighbors were cared for. Love your neighbor is something Luther believed, lived by, and called for others to put into action without telling them exactly how to apply that in their lives.

### **To flee or not to flee for ministers**

Luther's prince, Elector John, ordered Luther to depart immediately to spare his own life, but Luther chose to remain behind, with his pregnant wife and children. Luther was surrounded by the disease and its suffering victims, and he chose to minister to those stricken. The wife of mayor Tilo Dene virtually died in Luther's arms. Luther boldly stood in the gap, along with many others, to

minister hope by the Word of God in a desperate situation, even while trying not to contract the plague for himself and his family. He asserted that it should be obvious that especially people with leadership roles (like pastors, mayors, judges, and physicians) should remain in the community until the crisis has passed. Especially pastors must be like the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Luther strongly stated, just as it would be sinful for parents to abandon their children or someone to flee if a family member depends on them, the same applies to our neighbors. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to be certain they too are free from harm. Beyond this, however, seeking to save one's life was natural and biblically allowable, as "***he [God] has put eternity into man's heart***" (Eccl 3:11). Luther was surely not a fatalist and believed in the use of medicine.

### **Fear of Death**

Concerning one's demeanor, Luther made it plain that fear of death was the Devil's work, and that no Christian should bend to its will. Christ's glorious resurrection should equip and encourage all Christians to be fearless in the face of death and the grave. Luther realized some were stronger in this faith than others. Therefore, while some may choose to go boldly into the fire of deadly danger, expecting great reward from the Lord for their service, others may be weaker and flee in the normal way.

Luther said Christians who trust God and minister directly to the dying should not fear boils and infection, for, in the end, caring for the sick is like caring for Christ. Jesus said concerning ministering to the saints, "I was sick, and you cared for me" (Matt. 25:36). John wrote that Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for others (1 John 3:16). On the other hand, Luther warned against the overconfident who underestimated the seriousness of the plague and were frivolous toward God.

Luther urged that the Wittenberg cemetery should be moved outside the city limits, with its walls decorated with biblical scenes to minister to the grieving.

### **The Word of God**

Luther strongly urged those in the presence of the dying to speak to and pour God's Word into them, teaching them both how to live and die in faith. He had a fiercely evangelistic heart as he warned those dying in unbelief should be urgently warned to repent while there's still time, calling upon a pastor while they can still understand his words.

### **We know what Luther did not**

Unlike Luther's time, we have greatly benefited from the discovery of the late scientist and Christian, Louis Pasteur who discovered his germ theory. His discovery greatly enhanced our understanding of how diseases live and are spread, which lead to continued medical research and modern hospitals.

### **Oh, the Love of Christ**

Ultimately Luther left all personal convictions on whether to flee, to each individual in light of the Word of God. Serious times should always be looked upon and loved through the lens of God's Word. And Christ left heaven to come to earth to heal His own bride from the plague of sin!

## **Redeem the Time, Seize the Day (car·pe di·em)**

1. Are you operating in fear or operating by faith?
2. Are you using wisdom coupled with compassion?
3. How are you using this tremendous God-ordained, God decreed opportunity to display the truth and love of Christ in service to your neighbors,
4. How are you using this as a springboard to minister the gospel to those who have a much greater disease, the disease of sin, and a more fearful enemy, the wrath of God abiding upon them presently (Romans 1:18).

### **Sources:**

- <https://www.5minutesinchurchhistory.com/faith-in-times-of-plague-luther/>
- <https://rockrohr.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Luther-WHETHER-ONE-MAY-FLEE-FROM-A-DEADLY-PLAGUE.pdf>
- <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/148945>
- <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/488675-the-plague-coronavirus-and-martin-luther-why-they-all-matter-now>
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/nothing-new-under-the-sun.html>
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/when-the-deadly-outbreak-comes-counsel-from-martin-luther/>
- <https://www.kcbi.org/martin-luther-had-some-great-advice-for-dealing-with-the-coronavirus-500-years-ago/>