

Reformation Faith in Plague Times (Part 2)
by Phil Sessa, May 16, 2020



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

“Pestilence, disease, epidemics, and plagues were ever-present dangers in sixteenth-century Europe. Cunningham and Grell have observed, “that in every year between 1494 and 1649 plague was killing its thousands and tens of thousands suddenly and horribly somewhere in Europe.”

In part one of “*Reformation Faith in Plague Times*,” we looked at how Luther and the company of pastors in the city Wittenberg ministered in the threat and midst of the plague and specifically looked at Luther’s practical faith pamphlet entitled “*Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*”. Like Luther, John Calvin, also faced the terrorizing plague in 1541 AD on five occasions in his city of Geneva, which would wipe out a third of Geneva’s population.

Ministry: Problem or Opportunity?

The magistrates took aggressive steps to contain the pandemic, even exterminating cats, and dogs, which were believed to carry the disease. The courthouses were closed until after the harvest; the sick was confined at home or sent to the plague hospital (located outside the wall of the city).

The reason the plague hospital was to be kept entirely separate, was to keep the obviously sick apart from the apparently well. Throughout Scripture, every law of God is a law of love, including the quarantine laws, which separated sick people from healthy people. There is an assortment of plagues and mitigation procedures contained in these laws. (See Lev.13-15, Num. 5:1-4, Num. 31:11-20, 19-20, Num. 5:2-3, Deut. 23:10-14, 2 Kings 7:3-4, 2 Chron. 26:16-21, 2 Kings 15:5).

Scott Brown wrote, “I interpret these laws using the threefold division of the law (there are three types of law in the Old Testament: moral, ceremonial and judicial) inferring that the judicial and ceremonial laws, while abrogated, are of use in their “general equity.” In other words, their moral content is applicable while the exact Old Testament situation may not be. There is a general principle of the righteousness of God in every law, and this is the case concerning quarantine laws. They contain general principles, and while we are not obligated to follow every judicial or ceremonial detail of the laws of Israel, there are principles which are applicable for today”.

But the plaguing question remained for Geneva churches—how would pastoral care through hospital visitation be accomplished, at the potential risk of a pastor’s life? Calvin personally spearheaded visits into plague-infected, disease-ridden homes at the risk of his own life. He modeled pastoral care, doing so with wisdom, and his example in displaying the love of Christ could not be missed.

Under Calvin’s leadership

The city fathers looked heavily toward Calvin’s leadership as indispensable. Therefore, they intervened to direct him to stop him as they were convinced of the danger to his own life. Calvin organized a group of ministers known as “the Company of Pastors” which met every Friday morning to examine ministry candidates and discuss the theological and practical business of the church, both locally and internationally. Under Calvin’s leadership, this became the face of the Genevan church and fuel of the international Calvinist movement. Even in the midst of plague, Calvin was instrumental in raising up younger ministers that would carry the Gospel torch to the next generation. Does his heart for discipleship resonate in your own life?

Calvin Fearful?

The French clergyman and theologian caricatured as a doctrinal machine possessing an ironclad will which drove his theology, was, in fact, a man that could still battle with fear. Like Jonah on the run from God on the ship (Jonah 1), or Elijah running from Jezebel (1 Kings 19) there are times when our spoken theology battles with our functional (practical theology). Calvin, like the Apostle Paul, knew “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:10).”

For a man, that emphasized God’s sovereignty and His hand of provision, it was a sobering reality for Calvin to battle with fear. Calvin knew theology backward and forwards, but he had come face to face with the reality of the plague dangers in his life.

There is a fine line it seems, at times, between faith and foolishness. Calvin continued to rely on God’s protection amid danger to his own life. He was willing to risk and perhaps even give his own life, as the plague carried a death sentence, that he might gain Christ. Although he made pastoral visits to the homes of his church members, the hospital was a cesspool for the plague, and it was agreed the risk was too high. Isn’t it a sobering reality that those we consider theological giants, such as Calvin, struggled with some of the same things we struggle with?

God must have settled Calvin’s heart as he applied the words of the Apostle Paul, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”. (Phil 4:6–7)

A Pastoral Heart and Conversions

Many pastors continued this heroic effort to bring the gospel to many, under Calvin’s guidance, and they recounted the joy of multiple conversions to Christ. Pastors such as Pierre Blanchet, willingly lost their lives in this cause. Unbeknownst to many, Calvin continued privately to give pastoral care throughout Geneva and other cities where the plague raged. God’s provision in Calvin’s life led him to make provision for hospitals caring for citizens and immigrants. He collected the necessary

resources to establish a separate hospital for plague victims. When believers died, he preached the Word of God at their funerals, and he did so with passion, fervency, and pastoral concern.

Reporting Sickness

“The Ecclesiastical Ordinances required every family to report to the church through the pastors and elders anyone who was sick within three days. Calvin’s three reasons for this requirement were distinctly pastoral. First, the sick needed personal and pastoral comfort. Second, the family of the sick needed encouragement and pastoral guidance. Third, if the sickness resulted in death, the believer needed to be shepherded into glory. However, if the one dying was not a believer, then every effort had to be made to lead him or her to salvation.”¹

Calvin’s Pastoral Writings

Calvin had the heart of The Apostle John (1 John 2:12-14), who also wrote to the saints under his pastoral care. The depth of Calvin’s pastoral heart is revealed through his numerous letters. He penned countless letters of comfort and consolation to suffering believers in Geneva and Europe.

“An excerpt from one letter to a pastor whose family had been ravaged by the plague shows the profundity of his pastoral concerns: “Your messenger came to me bearing your letter. I was hit with a fresh fear and at the same time overwhelmed with a feeling of deep sorrow. Actually, yesterday someone told me that he had been stricken with the plague. So I was not simply worried about the grave danger he was in, I was staggered, I was already weeping for him as if he were already dead. I love him so much yet my grief did not arise as much from my love for him as for my general concern for the church.” (Excerpt From John Calvin a Heart for Devotion Doctrine & Doxology, Page 104)

Calvin labored tirelessly and this should sharpen us in our resolve and ministry labor, as “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17),” even if he has done so from his late example alone. This should spur us on toward love and good deeds (Heb 10:24-25). “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. 10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:9-1).” Calvin did much good toward those of the household of faith, among both the shepherds and the sheep. Like Jesus, he lives “...not to be served but to serve...” (Mk 10:45).

We would do well to prepare ourselves, like Calvin and the other Geneva pastors, to serve, to pray, to write, and to make provisions for others as we are able. Similar trials are upon us and will come upon us in our neighborhoods, towns, cities, and nations.

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

1. How do you apply Phil 4:6-7 when fear comes upon you?
2. In what practical ways are you serving your non-Christian neighbors, and connecting with and serving the household of faith?
3. How do you minister to the sick that are in your life?
4. How do you keep your church leaders informed about your medical and spiritual health?
5. In what ways do you disciple younger believers to carry the Gospel torch?

¹ Excerpt From, John Calvin a Heart for Devotion Doctrine & Doxology, John Calvin

Sources:

- <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=141316>
- <https://www.contagionlive.com/news/black-death-may-have-spread-via-human-fleas-and-lice-not-rats>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/plague/transmission/index.html>
- <https://www.presbyteriansofthepast.com/2020/03/16/john-calvin-plagues/>
- John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Discipleship, ed. Burk Parsons [Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2008]. Page 108
- <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/serving-christ-in-a-time-of-plague/>
- <http://protestantreformationcs.weebly.com/the-black-death.html>
- Manetsch, Scott M.. Calvin's Company of Pastors (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology) (p. 1). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Timeline - <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/calvintimeline/>
- <https://ncfic.org/resources/216601>