

Pastors And Pestilence: Martin Luther's Views on the Church, Christians and the Black Death

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In the late twentieth century, it is difficult or impossible to comprehend fully the intense horror and consuming fear that must have accompanied outbreaks of the bubonic plague in Europe. Nothing in today's world compares with the threat this contagion posed in the Middle Ages and the early modern era. With no particular warning or explanation, the black death swept in successive waves across the continent from the mid-fourteenth century until well into the 1700s. Most historians agree the plague came to Europe from East Asia aboard trading ships. But no matter its origin, the plague left behind ghastly destruction. Entire cities were paralyzed by epidemics. Some villages disappeared altogether. In the end, between one-third and one-half of Europe's population died from this relentless killer.

The very worst of the plague's many outbreaks occurred in the 1340s, but the disease continued to resurface in the sixteenth century, while Martin Luther and the Reformation sought to change many of the Christian church's fundamental teachings. Certainly few events in this period would so likely provoke religious questions as a bout with the plague. The plague touched Luther's life most closely when it struck Wittenberg in August 1527. He mentioned the disease regularly in his sermons and other writings, particularly in discussions of *Genesis*.

The traumatic experience of an eruption of plague took a deep emotional toll on the lives of believers, shaping—and no doubt shaking—their moral and religious outlooks, as well as their

superstitions. Appearance of the plague confronted Europeans with sudden, inexplicable death. The mere suggestion of a plague infection, not surprisingly, could send a village into near hysteria.

This study will argue, through Luther's own words, that he believed one's response to the plague was an important demonstration of Christian compassion. An outbreak of plague marked a time of heightened responsibilities for community and church leaders. Luther knew the black death called on Christians to show their love and faith as few other events could.

There is a wealth of academic literature on the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages, exploring in-depth the disease and its history. Medical details are of little importance to this paper, but we should first briefly place the plague's significance in historical perspective. To most Europeans, the plague represented more than an occasional natural disaster. The disease was a part of Europe's late medieval and early Renaissance culture, as reflected in the period's art, literature, worship and folk customs. An ubiquitous threat when the plague struck, it touched every part of one's life.¹

Mortality rates for plague outbreaks ranged from 30 to 90 percent or even higher.² At least as frightening as the disease's sheer deadliness was its unpredictability. The plague could sweep into a city or village overnight and kill its first round of victims in less than a day. It might remain for months or vanish as quickly as it appeared. The plague could spread by the briefest touch, and yet some people who cared for victims were constantly exposed but never infected. Furthermore, infection with the plague was not always a death sentence. Some strains of infection could be beaten.

But most who were unfortunate enough to catch the black death died from it. Theories abounded as to what brought the plague and how to defend oneself against its deadly work. Some were pseudo-scientific, others pure superstition by modern-day

¹Gustav K. Wieneke and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *The Collected Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1955), vol. 43, 115-8. Cited hereafter as *Luther's Works*.

²Ibid. See also Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York, 1969), 25-8; Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1983), 7-8.

standards. But the best way to escape the plague was to flee from it by leaving the afflicted area quickly.

Luther knew this, and his fullest commentaries on the disease are found in the essay "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," written in 1527.³ The fourteen-page pamphlet was reprinted in nineteen subsequent editions and enjoyed wide readership, especially when plague threatened. Luther's composition of the booklet served a dual purpose: to comfort followers who lived with the pestilence and to discuss Christians' moral obligations if their communities should become infested.

The black death struck Wittenberg on August 2, 1527. Concerned for the safety of faculty and students, Elector John ordered professors and others to leave for Jena. Luther was not persuaded by the Elector's request or the appeals of his friends. He decided to stay to minister to the sick and those who could not leave. Luther also helped the city council and lectured to a small group of students who, for unknown reasons, remained. By August 19, eighteen people had died, including several who were close to Luther's family. The wife of the mayor died nearly in Luther's arms. Many of Luther's friends lost loved ones, and others moved far away to escape the plague. Luther's son John, then a toddler, likely suffered from the plague in September and recovered. Luther's daughter Elizabeth, born in December, died in less than eight months, probably weakened by her mother's exposure to the black death while pregnant.⁴

Luther's behavior during these months of plague, along with his thoughtful treatise on fleeing the disease, offer compelling evidence of his dedication to God and his understanding of a Christian's responsibilities to his brethren. Some scholars note that in this period, which marked the tenth anniversary of the posting of the *Niney-Five Theses*, Luther composed the now-famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." The song may have been based on Luther's own experience in Wittenberg.⁵

"Whether one may flee" was a response to questions raised by Johann Hess, a Reformation leader in Silesia, where the plague

also appeared in August 1527. Hess had asked Luther whether Christians could flee from the plague with a clear conscience. Luther was further prompted to write after hearing how a Dominican in Leipzig had mocked the way residents of Wittenberg ran from the peril. The pamphlet blended Christian charity and common sense.

Above all, Luther appealed to pastors not to abandon their flocks. All good Christians should resist giving into panic, but pastors carry a higher obligation. The pastor, Luther wrote, is not merely a hired teacher but a committed shepherd whose help is essential when the plague infects a region:

Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees." [John 10:11]. For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death.⁶

Still, Luther recognized that if enough religious leaders stayed to take care of sick Christians, additional preachers need not expose themselves to danger. "I do not consider such conduct sinful because spiritual services are provided for and because they would have been ready and willing to stay if it had been necessary."⁷

A similar moral code bound civic officials. Secular authorities must stay to see that law and order are preserved in prevention of "fires, murders, riots and every imaginable disaster.... On the other hand, if in great weakness they flee but provide capable substitutes...all that would be proper." Servants should not leave their masters, and parents may not abandon their children. No one should leave without first checking on the well-being of those who cannot move.

³Luther's Works, vol. 43, 115-38.

⁴Ibid; Luther's Works vol. 48, 173; Luther's Works vol. 49, 203.

⁵Luther's Works, vol. 35, 281. See also note number 26 in Luther's Works vol. 48, 175.

⁶Luther's Works, vol. 43, 121.

⁷Ibid.

Luther recognized that the human instinct for self-preservation overrides most other concerns in crises such as the plague.

If someone is weak and fearful, let him flee in God's name as long as he does not neglect his duty toward his neighbor but has made adequate provision for others to provide nursing care. To flee from death and save one's life is a natural tendency, implanted by God.⁸

But, he wrote, an outbreak of the black death is no different from any other threat. According to Scripture, God sent four scourges: famine, sword, wild beasts, and pestilence. The Bible teaches that in each of the first three cases, devoted believers may save themselves only after they have seen to the care of others, just as Abraham, Jacob and David did themselves. Luther expected that some Christians would doubt whether the plague could be compared to scourges described in the Bible. Biblical figures, after all, never faced the black death. "Death is death, no matter how it occurs," Luther insisted. Regardless of whether the threat is persecution or plague, Christians are bound by God's law first to meet obligations to their fellow men. Only afterwards may they think of their own escape. Those who panic and ignore this holy directive will be judged harshly in the eyes of God "Christ, therefore, will condemn them as murderers on the Last Day when he will say, 'I was sick and you did not visit me [Matt. 25:43].'"⁹

Luther thought that God sent the plague, either as a punishment, a demonstration of his power or as an exercise to test man's faith and love. Or perhaps the illness could have represented all three simultaneously. God sent the plague as "a fatherly game," Luther said, "for the purpose of melting and purging." Although God appears to be angry, he is not. The anger is "simulated." Natural disasters are sent "that you may be led to a knowledge of your sin.... Indeed, we must fall most horribly, in order that we may recognize our wretchedness and weakness."¹⁰

⁸Ibid., 122-3.

⁹Ibid., 126.

¹⁰Ibid., vol. 7, 231, 254, 228.

The devil entered the picture because his evil sought to create panic and selfishness among people in communities afflicted with the plague. Luther told pious Christians to defy the Prince of Darkness in times of plague by showing more compassion, more courage, not less.¹¹ Interestingly, Luther years later suggested fear as a main cause of the plague. In October 1539, more than a decade after the Wittenberg outbreak, Luther helped bury several friends who died of plague in Nuremberg. In a lecture he told listeners that the panic-stricken should flee without shame from the threat of plague because "fear itself is the chief cause of this calamity," although he did not elaborate.¹²

Luther shared the opinion of his contemporaries who believed that the black death "spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or exhale a pestifential breath which puts a deadly poison into the flesh."¹³ However, he seemed to believe that God would impart a measure of divine immunity to those Christians who nursed plague victims. "It is proved by experience that those who nurse the sick with love, devotion, and sincerity are generally protected. Though they are poisoned, they are not harmed." Luther added a warning that "a person who attends a patient because of greed, or with the expectation of an inheritance or some personal advantage in such services, should not be surprised if eventually he is infected, disfigured, or even dies."¹⁴

Luther advised against going too far the other direction, disregarding minor precautions that might prevent one from becoming ill. Apparently, some Europeans tried to demonstrate superior faith by rejecting medicines and making no effort to avoid places and persons infected with plague. They were "much too rash and reckless," Luther said. "This is not trusting God but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health." In the same way, anyone who carelessly acquired the plague and infected others was considered a murderer, as was the person who, having apparently recovered

¹¹Ibid., 127.

¹²Ibid., vol. 4, 91, note 1.

¹³*Luther's Works*, vol. 43, 127. See also vol. 42, 91.

¹⁴*Luther's Works*, vol. 43, 129.

from plague, passed the disease to others before he was completely free of the germs.¹⁵

Luther saved his harshest condemnation for people with the black death who kept their infection secret either in the belief that they would rid themselves of the sickness by contaminating others or were simply "incredibly vicious." He suggested that such "deliberate murderers" promptly be sent to the hangman.

Luther suggested that communities seek ways to isolate victims of plague, just as God in the Old Testament ordered lepers to be banished from the city. Isolation is better for everyone. The ill may still be cared for, and the infection will not spread. "Our plague here in Wittenberg has been caused by nothing but filth. The air, thank God, is still clean and pure, but some few have been contaminated because of the laziness or recklessness of some."¹⁶

Luther thought moving cemeteries outside the city might stem the spread of the black death. Many popular beliefs about the dead held that poison vapors and mists rise out of graves. Luther suggested graveyards be moved for the common health of cities and because burial grounds should be sacred, hallowed places, not small plots in alleys or outside marketplaces. "A cemetery rightfully ought to be a fine quiet place, removed from all localities, to which one can go and reverently meditate upon death, the Last Judgement, the resurrection, and say one's prayers."¹⁷

Luther added a few words on how to prepare for death to the end of his essay "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague." He reminded readers that the best way to prepare for the end of life was through regular worship and taking the sacrament. But when the plague struck a family, Christians should call for a pastor before the victim became delirious or unconscious. If a pastor arrived too late, he could not counsel the sick person or administer communion because the patient would not understand. Chaplains would not "teach them the gospel at the last minute and administer the sacrament to them as they were accustomed to it under the papacy when nobody asked whether they believed or

¹⁵Ibid, 131-2.

¹⁶Ibid, 132-4.

¹⁷Ibid, 136-7.

understood the gospel but just stuffed the sacrament down their throats as if into a bread bag."¹⁸

Philip Ziegler, a scholar of the black death in the late medieval period, argues that the plague helped create doubt and skepticism about Catholic authorities. Christians were struck by several phenomena. First, they saw the Church treated the plague as a punishment sent from God. Yet village priests died at least as often as commoners when the disease surfaced. This graphically demonstrated that the clergy's supposedly close relationship with God did not provide escape from his pestilence. Second, evidence suggests that some priests would not serve in plague-stricken areas without exceptionally high salaries. Such behavior raised obvious questions about the Church's commitment to its flock and the priests' materialism. Add to this a few notorious stories of priests abandoning their infected communities and one sees why the Church's credibility was so damaged.¹⁹

Ironically, ample data indicates that the Church suffered greater human losses from the black death than almost any other social institution. High mortality rates among the clergy may have cut the number of priests almost in half. The plague took a disproportionately high number of the most dedicated men of God. Rushing to fill the gap, the Church ignored its own standards and appointed many unsuitable candidates to the priesthood. Thus, Ziegler writes, in the years after the worst of the plague, when European society should have pulled back together, the church was miserably unprepared to deal with protest movements or revolts. Ziegler and G.G. Coulton both argue that the plague, though it did not lead inexorably to the Reformation, contributed to the weakening of the Catholic church.²⁰ Thus it seems reasonable to believe that the plague, even before Luther's time, had already played a significant role in laying the groundwork for the Reformation.

And yet, throughout the early sixteenth century, reformers such as Luther and Zwingli (himself almost killed by the plague) had to respond to the same problems with the persistent disease.

¹⁸Ibid, 136-7.

¹⁹Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 260-1.

²⁰G.G. Coulton, *The Black Death* (New York, 1930), 74.

Their battles with the black death shaped their religious outlooks and personal life-and-death experiences. Luther's writings on the black death suggest that he understood the plague to be both a spiritual and a personal test of character. Although the source or purpose of the disease remained a mystery, committed Christians had several clear directives: preserve order, tend to the sick and avoid spreading the contagion. Amid the terror of a plague outbreak, Luther urged his followers to display courage, common sense, and compassion.

Darwinian Racism

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In 1856, Charles Darwin revolutionized the biological sciences with his monumental *Origin of Species*, in which he described the evolution of species as a product of natural selection. He argued convincingly that various species engage in a vast struggle for existence in the battlefield of Nature. As species contested over scarce resources, Darwin insisted, the stronger species survived and the weaker perished. In essence, Nature selects certain varieties as *unfit* to carry on, while allowing others to survive. These latter varieties would then adapt to their ever-changing surroundings and the competition would continue. By this process, animals *progress*, or evolve, from inferior to superior species.

Through his later work, specifically *The Descent of Man*, he applied his theory of Natural Selection to humans. Thenceforth, a struggle raged in public circles after his theory became widely known. Some accepted his new interpretation of old data, while others rejected it. In the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and the beginning decades of the twentieth, many politicians in industrialized nations came to accept Darwin's theory, and began formulating laws to apply this scientific theory to society in general. This extrapolation of scientific thought to social thought was nothing new: the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution applied Enlightenment thought of the eighteenth century (some of which derived from the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth) to the American public domain. However, applying Darwin's new scientific thought to social policy had drastic consequences. These *Social Darwinists*, overwhelmingly white Europeans, believed their own race was the superior of any race among humanity. Dinesh D'Souza has rightly argued that this line of thought culminated with the idea of "might makes