

Historical Perspectives / Christian Responses to Plagues

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* **F. F. Bruce**, famed Church historian writes: “The Christian tradition of caring for the sick also goes back to primitive times. When Alexandria was devastated by an outbreak of plague in the middle of the third century, Dionysius, bishop of the church in that city, describes the devotion with which Christians tended the sick, often catching the plague and dying of it themselves in consequence, whereas their pagan neighbours ‘thrust from them those who showed the symptoms of plague and fled from their nearest and dearest. They would throw them into the streets half dead, or cast out their corpses without burial.’ When we try to account for the increase in the numbers of Christians in those days, in spite of official hostility, we must give due consideration to the impression that behaviour of this kind would make on the pagan population.”¹

* **During the persecution** under Gallus (AD 252), when the pestilence raged in Carthage, and the heathens threw out their dead and sick upon the streets, ran away from them for fear of the contagion, and cursed the Christians as the supposed authors of the plague, Cyprian assembled his congregation, and exhorted them to love their enemies; whereupon all went to work; the rich with their money, the poor with their hands, and rested not, till the dead were buried, the sick cared for, and the city saved from desolation. The same self-denial appeared in the Christians of Alexandria during a ravaging plague under the reign of Gallienus. These are only a few prominent manifestations of a spirit which may be traced through the whole history of martyrdom and the daily prayers of the Christians for their enemies and persecutors.²

* **Catherine of Sienna** (1347-1380): Caterina Benincasa's birth into a middle-class Sienese wool dyer's family caused scarcely a ripple; she was the twenty-third of 25 children. Another event that year, a flea full of the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* entering the Italian port of Messina, brought a tidal wave of disease called the “Black Death.” In just three years, 1348 to 1350, more than one-third of Europe died. Baby Catherine survived the onslaught and, in adulthood, saved many plague victims through her compassionate nursing. Catherine began an active ministry to the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned of Siena. When a wave of the plague struck her hometown in 1374, most people fled, but she and her followers stayed to nurse the ill and bury the dead. She was said to be tireless by day and night, healing all of whom the physicians despaired; some even claimed she raised the dead.³

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*.

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*.

³ The Editors of Christian History Magazine, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*.

* **Ulrich Zwingli:** In the same year (1519), the plague came to Zürich, and almost a third of the city's population fell victim to it. Zwingli did his best to minister to his people, until he caught the plague himself. His three-month recovery taught him life-changing lessons in dependence on God.⁴

* **In the summer of 1519 Zwingli** went to the famous bath of Pfäfers at Ragatz to gather strength for his prospectively onerous duties at Zurich, in view of the danger of the approach of the plague from Basle. As soon as he learned, in August, that the plague had broken out in Zurich, he hastened back without stopping to visit his relations on the way. For several weeks he devoted himself, like a faithful shepherd, day after day, to the care of the sick, until he fell sick himself at the end of September. His life was in great danger, as he had worn himself out. The papal legate sent his own physician to his aid. The pestilence destroyed twenty-five hundred lives; that is, more than one-third of the population of Zurich. Zwingli recovered, but felt the effects on his brain and memory, and a lassitude in all limbs till the end of the year. His friends at home and abroad, including Faber, Pirkheimer, and Dürer at Nürnberg, congratulated him on his recovery.⁵

* **Martin Luther:** "Tomorrow I will begin with the letter to the Galatians, but I fear that the presence of the plague will interfere with the continuation (of the lectures). It has cost us two or three people (altogether, not per day). The son of the smith opposite us, was healthy yesterday, was buried today, and another one is infected too. What must I say? The sickness is here, begins suddenly, and proceeds roughly, especially with the youth. Johannes Lang advised me to flee. But why? I certainly hope that the world will not implode if Brother Martinus blows out the candle. If the plague persists, I will send the brothers out into the countryside. But I have been placed here, and obedience forbids me to flee, until that obedience demands something different from me. Not that I do not fear death (I am after all, not Paul, but only his commentator!), but I hope that the Lord will deliver me from my fear."

In the summer of 1527, Wittenberg was stricken with the plague. As quickly as possible, students and teachers from the university were transferred to Jena. Elector John the Steadfast appealed to Luther to also come to Jena, but together with Bugenhagen, Luther decided to stay where he was. He downplayed the severity of the plague:

The plague has indeed appeared here, but its progress is not as bad as expected. The fear of the people is amazing: they flee! I have never yet seen such an unimaginable work of Satan. He incites such terrible fear and is pleased to incite fear in the hearts of people. Of course, his purpose is to disperse and completely destroy this excellent university which he hates, and not without reason. During the whole period of the plague, there were only eighteen people who

⁴ Curtis, Lang, and Peterson, *The 100 Most Important Events in Church History*.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*.

died, out of everyone living in the city, maids, children, and everyone else. Today we buried the spouse of the burgomaster, Tilo Denes. Yesterday, she almost died in my arms. . . . Justus Jonas with his family went back to where they used to live, but his little son died nevertheless. I am staying here, and that is necessary because the people are terribly afraid. Therefore, Bugenhagen and I are the only pastors here. But Christ is here too, and therefore, we are not alone.

“My house has been changed into a hospital.”

In July 1535, plague again struck Wittenberg. Luther thought that the people were far too quick in their panic and that they exaggerated the dangers enormously. According to him, the students were especially guilty of this, seeing an opportunity to interrupt their studies and return home to their overly concerned mothers.⁶

* **Indeed, from the death of his father** to his own, John Donne witnessed much affliction. The Black Plague was repeatedly sweeping through London—three waves during his 10-year tenure as dean of St. Paul's Cathedral—killing tens of thousands with each recurrence. For months Donne thought himself a sure victim of the disease. Throughout his life, he withstood financial ruin, the destruction of his family, religious persecution, and other plagues. Yet, he became one of England's greatest love poets, and one of the greatest preachers of the 1600s.⁷

* **Charles Spurgeon:** At Craven Chapel, it would be most appropriate to tell the story of Lord Craven, who was packing up his goods to go into the country at the time of the Great Plague of London, when his servant said to him, “My lord, does your God live only in the country?” “No,” replied Lord Craven, “He is here as well as there.” “Well, then,” said the servant, “if I were your lordship, I think I would stop here; you will be as safe in the city as in the country”; and Lord Craven did stop there, relying upon the good providence of God.⁸

⁶ Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography*.

⁷ The Editors of Christian History Magazine, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*.

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*.