



# Historic plagues and Christian responses: lessons for the church today?

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented upheaval throughout the world, especially for Christians who have had to drastically alter their practices in light of the disease. This review will examine how Christians throughout history have dealt with times of plague through several case studies, including the Cyprian Plague and the response of Geneva's pastors to several plagues in the mid-sixteenth century. It will consider some of the lessons we can draw from these examples and conclude with practical considerations for how the church can respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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**Key Words:** Plagues. Pandemics, Christian response.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life for millions around the globe. For those with religious affiliation, this disruption has extended to their gatherings and has affected those of all religions, not just Christians.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of this global crisis, many are wondering what it looks like to live out their faith under restrictions regarding close personal contact and large group gatherings. Christians especially have many activities that have had to change, from their regular Sunday morning gatherings to the practice of sacraments.

Though the global scope of the current pandemic is unprecedented in the modern world, it is helpful to remember that plagues and disease are not. Since its inception, the church has dealt with times of plague, and these examples can and should inform the ways in which we formulate our own response. In what follows, I will present a summary of some of the ways Christians have approached plagues

throughout history and conclude that while we have much to learn from their examples, many of their specific activities will need to be changed to account for modern scientific knowledge and advances. I believe that if Christians can do this, they will be able to stay true to their faith while also reaching a world that increasingly views religious belief with suspicion or disdain.

## Review

### Plagues in the Ancient World

During the early years of the Roman Empire, the way in which societies dealt with the sick was very different than it is today. There were no hospitals as we now know them. Additionally, "in the classical world there was little recognition of social responsibilities on the part of the individual. Before the advent of Christianity, moreover, there was no concept of the responsibility of public

officials to prevent disease or to treat those who suffered from it.”<sup>2</sup> This meant that when a plague struck, it was devastating. The horror of plagues in the ancient world, as well as the increased mortality caused by a lack of caregivers, was famously written about by Thucydides. Describing a plague in Athens around 430 B.C., he writes:

. . . they became infected by nursing one another and died like sheep. And this caused the heaviest mortality; for if, on the one hand, they were restrained by fear from visiting one another, the sick perished uncared for, so that many houses were left empty through lack of anyone to do the nursing; or if, on the other hand, they visited the sick, they perished . . . they perished in wild disorder. Bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead people rolled about in the streets and, in their longing for water, near all the fountains. The temples, too, in which they had quartered themselves were full of the corpses of those who had died in them.<sup>3</sup>

As Thucydides makes clear, plagues in the ancient world were nothing to be trifled with. Fear often kept people from providing any kind of care to the suffering and resulted in total neglect of the bodies of those who died.

In this context, Christian care for the sick was distinctly counter-cultural. A prime example comes from the plague of Cyprian. Cyprian was a bishop in the city of Carthage during the time of the Decian persecution of Christians. In 252 A.D., a plague hit the city, and once again the reaction of the inhabitants was much like that Thucydides has described — the sick and dying were neglected while bodies began to pile up in the streets with no one to bury them.<sup>2</sup>

Cyprian chose not to ignore the crisis and encouraged the Christians to risk their own lives to care for the sick and dying. From the rich, he asked for funds; from the poor he requested service. He

organized the Christian response and encouraged believers not to make any distinction between caring for fellow Christians and caring for pagans. All were to receive care, even those who were actively persecuting the church.<sup>2</sup>

Though the efforts of Cyprian were perhaps the most well-known, Christians elsewhere provided similar responses. Thus, Dionysius, writing from Alexandria, tells us:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ . . . Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their deaths to themselves and died in their stead.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to say that this service was provided by both church leaders and laypersons, and he connects their service to martyrdom. Though it was a revolutionary concept in the ancient world, care for the sick and the dying became characteristic of Christians.

This demonstration of care was not limited to the Cyprian plague. An epidemic lasting from 312–313 A.D. is described by Eusebius, who wrote:

For they alone [Christians] in the midst of such ills showed their sympathy and humanity by their deeds. Every day some continued caring for and burying the dead, for there were multitudes who had no one to care for them; others collected in one place those who were afflicted by the famine, throughout the entire city, and gave bread to them all; so that the thing became reported abroad among all men, and they glorified the God of the Christians.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, Christians were unique in caring for those struck by an epidemic, and their service was noted by those outside of the faith. It has been argued that this care became the basis for our modern



hospital system: “When the concept of a hospital began to emerge in the mid-fourth century, it owed much to the church’s long experience for caring for the ill . . . without [it] the immediate success of the hospital, I believe, would have been impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

### Plagues in Geneva

Christian care for those suffering from plagues was not limited to its early centuries. Another example comes from Geneva in the mid-sixteenth century, although this time the response was somewhat more cautious. At this time, John Calvin headed a large group of pastors in charge of the spiritual health of the city and surrounding areas, and one of their tasks was providing visitation and care to those who were sick. In 1542, Geneva was struck by a plague. One of the pastors, Pierre Blanchet, volunteered to minister to those who had been moved to the plague hospital outside the city. Though he ministered bravely, it was not long before he contracted the disease and died. Geneva’s pastors took some time in filling Blanchet’s post. Though several were appointed, all refused to go, as they were fearful of contracting the plague themselves. Finally, after a week of deliberation, Matthieu de Geneston volunteered; he too died from the plague.<sup>6</sup>

This experience set the stage for later plague responses in Geneva. When a plague hit the city a few decades later, the pastors were more prepared to follow a lottery system to choose one man out of their group to minister at the plague hospital and a second to visit those quarantined in their homes. They took new precautions, however, such as having the minister remain outside and speak with patients through a window.<sup>6</sup>

When the plague returned to Geneva a third time, between 1568 and 1571, the pastors had become further convinced of their duty. This time, they rejected the lottery system, and each pastor became responsible to providing spiritual care to plague victims within his congregation. All of the pastors, not just one, took turns visiting the plague

hospital, and this became the model followed during future epidemics.<sup>6</sup>

The experience of the Genevan pastors demonstrates several things. Though initially hesitant regarding their pastoral duty, successive plagues only strengthened these pastors’ resolve to care for the sick and dying in their congregations without regard for their own health or safety. By this point, they were not needed as much to provide basic medical care, but were instead providing spiritual care and comfort at the end of life.<sup>6</sup>

We can also see in these episodes a burgeoning awareness of the need to temper duty with wisdom and caution. Though the pastors eventually placed duty above caution, this did not hold true for laypeople. In fact, Theodore Beza (one of the most prominent of Geneva’s pastors and John Calvin’s successor) wrote that it was perfectly acceptable for Christians to flee from cities in times of plague provided they did not neglect their duties to God, family, or neighbor.<sup>7</sup> This represents something of a turn from the early church; while once all Christians, from bishops down to laypeople, were responsible for caring for plague victims, in Geneva the duty was seen as falling squarely on the shoulders of pastors.

### Discussion

How can we apply these examples from early Christianity to our experience of epidemics in the twenty-first century and to the COVID-19 outbreak specifically? One point should be abundantly clear: Christians have long held that believers have a duty to minister to the sick and vulnerable, and while the means may have changed over time, the mandate has not.

Going beyond this, however, is more difficult. Clearly, early Christians, as well as the pastors in Geneva, saw it as their duty to risk their own lives for the sake of those suffering. At the time, this was viewed with wonder and appreciation. Rodney Stark and Gary Ferngren have both demonstrated that the ancient world held little regard for those infected with plagues, making the Christian response stand



out.<sup>2,8</sup> Today, however, the situation is much more complicated. Many religious groups, including Christians, have come under fire for continuing in their standard practices despite recommendations that they cancel services, avoid large gatherings, etc.<sup>9</sup> In South Korea, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus became an epicenter for the spread of the virus and “the most vilified church in South Korea.”<sup>10</sup> Although the church is more like a cult than a branch of orthodox Christianity, the distinction is easily lost by those without religious experience, casting a negative pall on anyone associated with a church.

How then should the church respond during times of pandemic? For many, this question has been centered in the realm of church practices. Should we continue to hold worship services? What about smaller groups? What does worship look like, or sacraments like baptism or communion, when the church cannot gather in person? As important as these questions are for the life of the church, however, they are all inward focused. Part of the reason people have viewed the church with disdain at this time is that its activities appear mostly selfish. While gathering for worship or engaging in communion make perfect sense to the believer, they do nothing for a watching world that is fearful and looking to contain the virus by any means necessary.

If we truly wish to engage the world by following the example of the Christians who have come before us, we must not look solely at what they did, but also *why* they did it. Though this may seem counterintuitive, part of ministering to the world today is contextualization; it is foolish to think that we can take examples from 2,000 years ago and uncritically apply them to today’s problems.

In treating those stricken with the plague, early Christians were attempting to live out Jesus’ commands to love their neighbor, to care for the sick and vulnerable, and to follow the “golden rule” of doing to others as you would have done to you. This means that we must determine what “loving our neighbor” looks like today. Though there is disagreement among Christians,<sup>11</sup> I have argued

elsewhere that during this time of pandemic, the most loving thing that the church can do is suspend services for the sake of the most vulnerable among us.<sup>12</sup> By following physical distancing guidelines, we can show that we wish to put others before our own religious interests.

While a good first step, however, this is not exactly the radical, self-sacrificial love shown by early Christians in times of plague. For them, that meant going and physically being with and caring for those stricken by plague. How does that part of their response apply to us? Today, care may look very different depending on where we are. In places where medical care is not adequate, this may still be the best way to show the love of Christ to the world. However, in many other parts of the world, due in large part to the influence of Christianity, there is a robust medical system in place for ministering to those who have contracted COVID-19. No longer are Christian laypeople necessary for making sure these victims receive care and attempting to provide it could, in many cases, cause more harm than good, either through substandard care or through unintentionally spreading the virus. In these places, Christian care is going to have to look different.

The same is also true of spiritual care. The Genevan pastors were not wrong in thinking that they had a duty to minister spiritually to the sick and especially those at the end of life. Now, however, the means by which this is done have evolved. In my own church, it has grieved the pastors and elders that we cannot be present with those in our congregation who have tested positive for the virus; it was heart wrenching to stand by as one of our members worsened and succumbed without being able to be physically present. However, we were (and continue to be) bound by the rules of the government and the hospital. Thus, alternatives to in-person care must be found.

We are fortunate to live in an age of technology, and while screens are a poor substitute for embodied presence, they do serve as a temporary solution, a prudent compromise in extraordinary

times. Through phone calls, texts, and video messaging, we can do our best to continue the work of the church even during times when physical presence is not allowed.

Demonstrating Christian care is not limited to the clergy. Christian laypersons can show their care in a variety of ways while adhering to physical distancing guidelines. Many of these can be simple and relatively safe, such as going shopping for others so they can remain safe at home or offering to pray over the phone or by video call with friends, family, and neighbors. Christians can make themselves available to provide help, comfort, prayer, or just a listening ear through forums such as a community Facebook group. They can lead through example by following guidelines regarding distancing, physical contact, and wearing masks. They can also provide positive examples by refusing to hoard resources or give in to fear or hysteria. And, Christians can contribute financially to individuals and organizations who are hurting during this time.

These are all good things, but it can also be argued that they are also the things everyone should be doing, not things that set Christians apart. Thus, I wish to conclude with a few thoughts on what radical Christian love could look like in our present circumstances. What are the things that could make the world sit up and take notice? One that comes to mind is the need for volunteers. From food banks to elder care facilities to homeless shelters, there is a desperate need for people to provide services for the vulnerable in society who are the most easily overlooked in times of crisis. What kind of example would it set if Christians were to volunteer for these opportunities *en masse*? If churches were to fill food banks and individuals were to open their homes to the homeless? If the elderly never had to worry about isolation because there were constantly those who would check in with them?

These activities may seem simple — far too simple to be considered “radical Christian love” or not risky enough to live up to the example set by our predecessors. And yet, one could also say that

feeding someone broth, digging a grave, or reading someone a passage from Scripture were also simple. It was not the risk that made the ancients take note of the Christians, but the care that they provided, and this care is something that we can still offer today.

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