

## "Should a Christian flee the plague?" Martin Luther Was Asked

For larger churches this is the last Sunday gathering until the coronavirus ban is lifted. The Reformer has some advice.

John Sandeman | March 13th, 2020 05:20 PM

It was not coronavirus. It was bubonic plague, a much more deadly disease. And it was years before anyone knew what caused it.

It was 1527, and a case of the bubonic plague was found in Wittenberg, the small town where Luther was based. And where the reformer had nailed his 95 theses to the Castle Church.

With the Australian government stopping gatherings of 500 or more, church meetings for larger churches will be affected from Monday with our modern pandemic, coronavirus. And while the question for us is not whether we flee from our town or suburb – because there is no point – there will be similar questions for us about how much we retreat from interacting with other people. For example should we cancel all our church gatherings rather than only those bigger than 500? And how do we support the vulnerable which will mean being in contact? – which is the sort of thing Luther was most concerned about.

The Wittenberg University was closed (familiar?). Luther was urged to leave, even by his greatest supporter the Elector (prince) who was in charge of the town. After being besieged by pastors wanting him to make a statement, Luther sent out an open letter. Its title is translated often as “Whether one may flee a deadly plague” or as the printer had it “Whether one may flee death”. The death rate for the Bubonic Plague has been calculated as between 30 to 60 per cent of the population – so the printer might have had the better title.

Luther does not answer “What would Jesus do?” rather he addresses “What would you do if it was Jesus?” In a key quote, directly relevant to our coronavirus era he says: “This I well know, that if it were Christ or his mother who were laid low by illness everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running... If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbour close at hand. Go to him and serve him, and you will surely find Christ in him...”

But Luther begins by looking at how Christians were responding to the plague. Some had strong faith in the face of death, others not.

“To begin with some people are of the firm opinion that one need not and should not run away from a deadly plague. Rather since death is God’s punishment, which he sends upon us for our sins, we must submit to God and with a true and firm faith patiently await our punishment. ...Others take the position that one may properly flee, particularly if one hold no public office.”

Luther commends those of strong faith but notes “Since it is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot place the same burden upon everyone.”

But some should stay. In our case, that will mean engaged with others, even at personal risk.

“Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry and pastors must remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, ‘A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.’”

Luther adds “Likewise, fathers and mothers are bound by God’s law to serve and help their children, and children their fathers and mothers. Likewise, paid public servants such as city physicians, city clerks, and constables, or whatever their titles, should not flee unless they provide capable substitutes who are acceptable to their employer.” He goes on to add those looking after children, or with sick neighbours.

Christians should be ‘good samaritans’, following the law of love as well as civic laws. This surely applies to plague and coronavirus alike.

But some could flee. Where there was no need for additional helpers of where the sick did not want them, to flee was fine, Luther wrote. He quotes St Paul “No-one ever hates his own flesh but loves and cherishes it” and gives the examples of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fleeing death.

“Service to God is indeed service to neighbour.” – Martin Luther

Luther’s advice for those who stay is flawed because he believed God would necessarily protect those who sacrificially served others. That was untrue. But these words ring true. “The service we can render to the needy is indeed such a small thing in comparison with God’s promises and rewards that St Paul says to Timothy, ‘Godliness is of value in every way and it holds promise for the present life and the life to come.’ (1 Tim 4:8). Godliness is nothing else but service to God. Service to God is indeed service to neighbour.”

Finally Luther gives the most practical advice of all. People should prepare for their own death – by listening to the sermon and attending the sacraments. That’s still good advice.