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Some Ancient Advice from Luther on Plagues

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On December 31, 2019, health officials from China alerted the World Health Organization of a new pattern of pneumonia in the city of Wuhan which they had never seen previously. By January 7 of this year, health officials announced they had identified a new virus in the coronavirus family which they designated 2019-nCoV. Coronaviruses include the common cold and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). They spread by being in proximity to an infected person and inhaling droplets when they cough or sneeze, or by touching surfaces where these droplets land and then touching one's face or nose. Since January 7, this new coronavirus has spread to almost every nation on earth with the WHO reporting 118,000 cases and over 4200 deaths. Stock markets have crashed and global travel and commerce have been radically affected.

Christians are facing this health crisis with a variety of feelings and serious questions, and as always it is essential to seek our ultimate guidance from the Scripture alone. Yet it is also helpful to look back in time to see how Christians in the past have faced similar crises. And it isn't hard to find lessons in the dreadful circumstances connected with the bubonic plague (Black Death) which devastated Europe in the 14th through 16th centuries. The Black Death came out of China from 1347-1350 and killed

one fourth of Europe's population at that time. Later outbreaks occurred in the 15th century as well, leaving deep emotional scars and terror in the memories of many Europeans. When this disease was in epidemic levels, the mortality rate ranged from 30 to 90 percent.

This is the historical backdrop for a fascinating pamphlet written in 1527 by Martin Luther, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*. In August of 1527, the plague had struck Luther's city of Wittenberg, and many of Luther's fellow citizens ran for their lives. Luther's prince, Elector John, ordered Luther to leave immediately to save his own life, but Luther chose to stay to minister to those stricken. Luther himself was surrounded by the disease and its suffering victims. The mayor Tilo Dene's wife virtually died in Luther's arms. So Luther boldly stood in the gap along with many others to minister hope and the Word of God in a desperate situation.

Many Germans from other cities and towns mocked the Wittenbergers for fleeing. One German pastor named Johann Hess wrote Luther asking how a pastor should behave when facing such a plague. The pamphlet was Luther's response, and its wisdom may prove helpful to many Christians even in our 21st century crisis.

In this tract, Luther began by addressing those with the strong conviction that one should never flee because the plague is God's judgment for our sins, and Christians should stand humbly and accept his will in repentance. While Luther considered such views praiseworthy, he acknowledged that not everyone is equally strong in the faith. Luther also asserted that it should be obvious that people with leadership roles (like pastors, mayors, judges, and physicians) should remain in the community until the crisis

has passed. Especially pastors must be like the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11). Just as strongly, Luther said it would be sinful for parents to abandon their children, or for any person to flee if a family member is depending on them. The same applies to our neighbors, for loving our neighbor as ourselves includes being certain they are free from harm. Beyond this, however, seeking to save one's life was natural and biblically allowable, as was using medicine. Luther was no fatalist.

Concerning one's demeanor, Luther made it plain that fear of death was the devil's work, and that no Christian should yield to it. Christ's resurrection should make all Christians fearless in the face of the grave. Yet Luther allowed that some are stronger in this faith than others, and may choose to go boldly into the fire of deadly danger, expecting great reward from the Lord for their service, while others are weaker and flee in the normal way. Luther clearly said Christians who trust God and minister directly to the dying should not fear boils and infection, for in the end, caring for the sick is like caring for Christ. Jesus said plainly, "I was sick, and you cared for me" (Mt. 25:36). John wrote that Christ laid down our lives for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for others (1 Jn. 3:16). On the other hand, Luther warned against the over-confident who underestimated the seriousness of the plague and were frivolous toward God.

Luther strongly urged those in the presence of the dying to pour into them the Word of God, teaching them both how to live and how to die in faith. Anyone who is dying in unbelief should be urgently warned to repent while there's still time, but they should call for a pastor while they can still understand his words. Anyone who is aware

of outstanding sins should do everything they can to make restitution and receive the Lord's Supper if they are able. So also the dying should write a will as soon as possible.

Beyond that, Luther advocated some practical steps to contain the spread of the disease. We who live after Louis Pasteur discovered his germ theory, and who benefit from the scientific development of medical research and modern hospitals can hardly imagine how different conditions would have been in Wittenberg in Luther's day. Luther had to advocate for certain public buildings to be set aside as hospitals for the sick rather than allowing the sick to be in hundreds of private homes. He also urged Christians to fumigate their homes, yards, and streets to stop the spread of the plague. And Luther urged that the Wittenberg cemetery should be moved outside the city limits, with its walls decorated with biblical scenes to minister to the grieving.

Ultimately Luther leaves all personal decisions on whether to flee to each individual in light of the Word of God. Times like these are intense and serious, and everything we do should be in light of God's Word and the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our journey with the coronavirus has just begun, and it may soon fizzle out into the dim memories of the medical history books. But it is also a God-ordained opportunity for many Christians to display the love of Christ in service to their neighbors, and to live out the fearlessness of death that Christ has won for all his children.