



Fight or Flight? Christians' Dilemma in a deadly plague

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In the summer of 1527, a deadly plague that struck northern Germany arrived in Wittenberg and claimed many lives. As a result the university which the reformer Martin Luther was teaching in moved to Jena. The university ordered Martin Luther and his family to leave for Jena immediately. However, Luther refused to leave. He and the pastor of the city church and the city chaplains chose to stay to minister to the sick and the dying. Like what we are facing today, the question "whether one may flee from a deadly plague" became a controversial issue. Martin Luther's answer to this question was collected in the book "Martin Luther as a Comforter: Writings on Death" (chapter six) Here is a summary of Luther's teaching extracted from Reformedbeginner.net. It represents the teaching of our church well.

from Rev Zheng

Martin Luther told us that plagues are God's tools to test how much we trust in Him and how much we love our neighbours.

Luther pointed out two views. One view is that Christians should not flee when there is a plague. The other view is that with a good reason, Christians should be allowed to leave. He commended the courage and faith of the people holding the former view while he also agreed with the latter view. He said that not all Christians have same amount of faith. Most are weak. When necessary, Christians should avoid danger as long as in doing so he does not hurt his neighbor. He also rebuked those who thought of themselves as men of strong faith and who

aggressively blamed the weak. Luther believed that running away from death is a natural instinct that God gave to man. This instinct is not a sin. He quoted how David hid from the pursuit of king Saul and Elijah from that of Jezebel to illustrate how Christians ought to protect the life that God gave them and avoid uncalled for death. However, he thinks that pastors and government officials should not flee. Pastors are to stay on to serve and give spiritual comfort to the sufferers, which includes praying and administering the Lord's Supper. The government officials ought to stay on to maintain order.

To fight or to flee? Luther gave a biblical principle: Love your neighbor as yourself. Everyone has a duty towards one another, and no one should abandon one that is suffering. Everyone ought to do their best to help others. Servants are not to abandon their masters and vice versa. Parents are not to forsake their children and vice versa. No one should only care for himself. Any decision to leave should base on the premise that one has given his best to help. It is like when your neighbour's house is on fire, you should try your best to help put out the fire before the firemen arrive. When the firemen are here you may leave the task to them. He said sternly that those who had the power to help but chose to leave should be rebuked.

This is the spirit of the Law at all times. But in time of suffering, the selfishness in our fallen humanity is further exposed. He mentioned that where there is no hospital or

hospital facilities run short, houses can be used as substitutes. He and his pregnant wife offered their home to house the sick and ministered to them, and God took care of them. He and his family were not infected despite the exposure.

Some refused to render help out of fear. For them, Luther quoted Psalm 41: "Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the Lord delivers them in times of trouble. The Lord protects and preserves them— they are counted among the blessed in the land— The Lord sustains them on their sickbed and restores them from their bed of illness." (vv.1-3) He also quoted Christ's words, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (mat 25:40) He asked, "Do you want to serve Christ? If you do, go help your sick neighbor; you will find Christ in them. If you are not willing to serve your neighbor, then even if you see Christ lying there you would not serve him."

Luther mentioned another group of people. They claimed to depend on God alone and refused to use medicine and be quarantined. Luther rebuked them for they were not trusting God but testing God! They are adding oil to the burning city and claim that God would send rain to put out the fire if He wants to save them. Luther insisted that those who are truly God-fearing would pray for God's deliverance, take medicine, purify the air and refrain from going out to endanger others. The vicious ones are those who out of superstition passed on their illness to others on purpose and hoped that the illness would depart from them. He called these people evil murderers.

What can we learn from Luther's writings to deal with the current plague? Here are my points.

Let us not blame one another. Some have asked whether the church should continue gathering. Some said we should. Some said we should avoid large crowd and turn to other forms of gathering. I do not intend to give a concrete answer here. But I would like to stress: **if you have strong faith and insist on continuing gathering, please do not blame or condemn the weak brethren around you. This is an extraordinary time, all the more we ought to manifest the unity and love we have in Christ.**

We ought to demonstrate Christ's love by loving our neighbor. If you see someone in need of help, whether he is a brother-in-Christ or not, do your best to help him. Comply with the government's instructions and when necessary, offer your house as a temporary aid station. Do not forsake those who are suffering, comfort one another with the gospel of resurrection instead.

In our affliction, trust in God's promises. The plague has been permitted by God. However, in Christ our enemy Death has been overcome. Death is no longer a destruction to us but a gate to eternal life. We can face all kinds of suffering and not fear. Neither plagues, war nor death can separate us from the love of Christ. All these will be over and God will wipe away our tears, "that He will make whatever evils he sends upon me, in this valley of tears turn out to my advantage; for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing, being a faithful Father." (Heidelberg Catechism Q.26)

So, let us intercede for those who are living in the infected areas. May the grace, peace and joy from God and our Lord Jesus Christ be with you in this affliction. Amen.