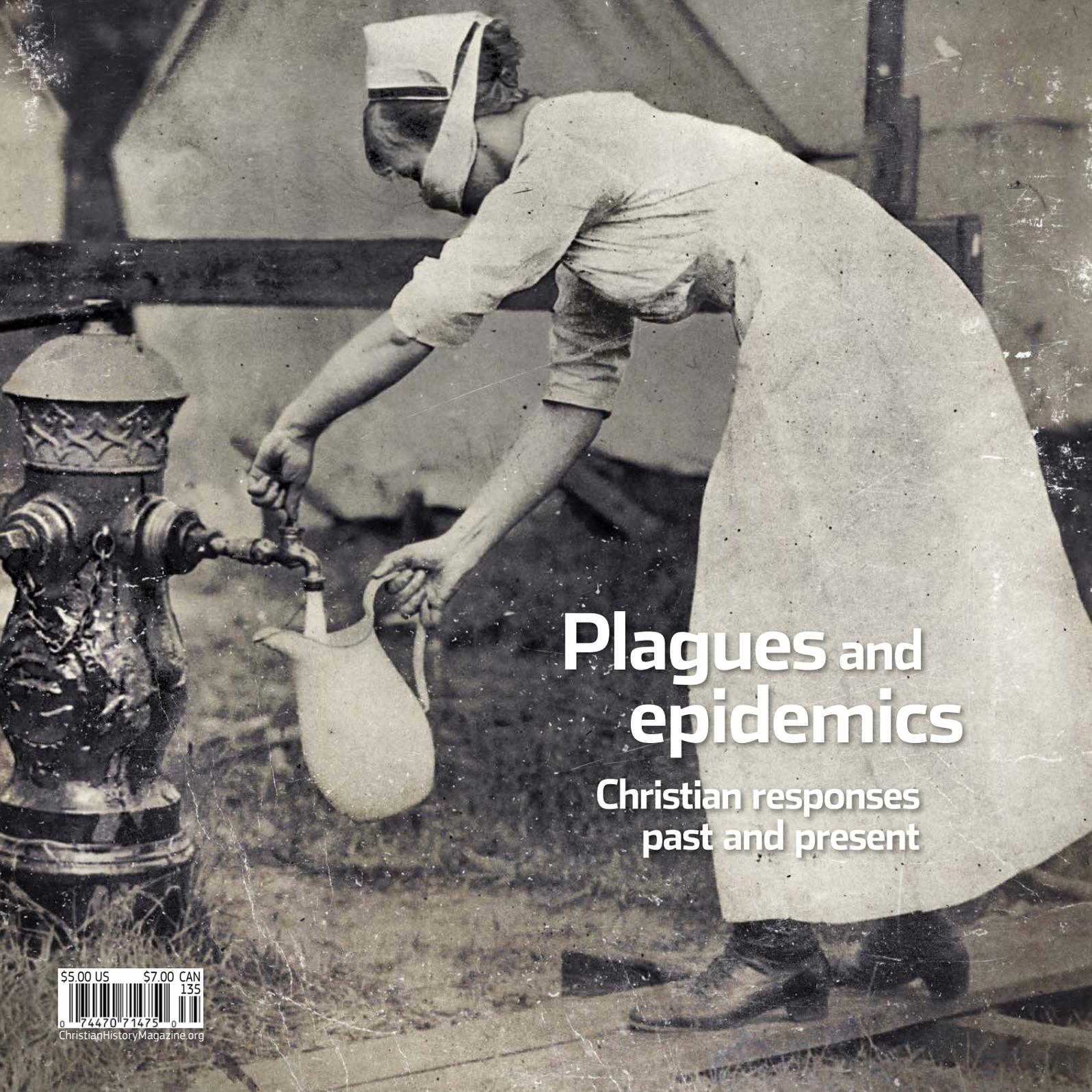


# CHRISTIAN HISTORY



Issue 135



## Plagues and epidemics

Christian responses  
past and present

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ChristianHistoryMagazine.org



**LIFE OF SUFFERING** Like other Italian cities, Siena was much troubled by plague, and Catherine of Siena (*left*) lost siblings to it as a young girl.

conflicts, was no exception. Between 1456 and 1528, it had 22 outbreaks, leading it to create a Magistrate for Health in 1485, which became one of the most powerful agencies of the Venetian state. The Magistrate supervised the food industry, barbers, physicians, waste disposal, sewage, water

management, mortuaries, and *lazaretti* (isolated stations for leprosy victims, used to quarantine plague sufferers).

# Did you know?

WHERE QUARANTINE CAME FROM, HOW EPIDEMICS ALMOST KILLED BEDE AND FINNEY, THOSE BEAKY MASKS, AND WHY IT'S NOT "SPANISH" FLU

## BEAKS FOR QUACKS

From the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century, plague victims were often treated by plague doctors, considered quacks even then. Their distinctive beaky mask (see p. 22) was developed in the seventeenth century by Frenchman Charles de L'Orme in keeping with an odor-based theory of disease. The beak held sweet-smelling flowers and perfumes thought to banish infections.

## THE "LITTLE LAD"

The remote Jarrow monastery in England was newly founded when plague hit in 686. Every monk succumbed except Abbot Ceolfrid and a "little lad," ward of the monastery. Most scholars identify the lad as the Venerable Bede. The young survivor was ordained a deacon at the uncanonical age of 19, became master of education at Jarrow, and composed his famous *Ecclesiastical History* around 731.

## 40 DAYS OF QUARANTINE

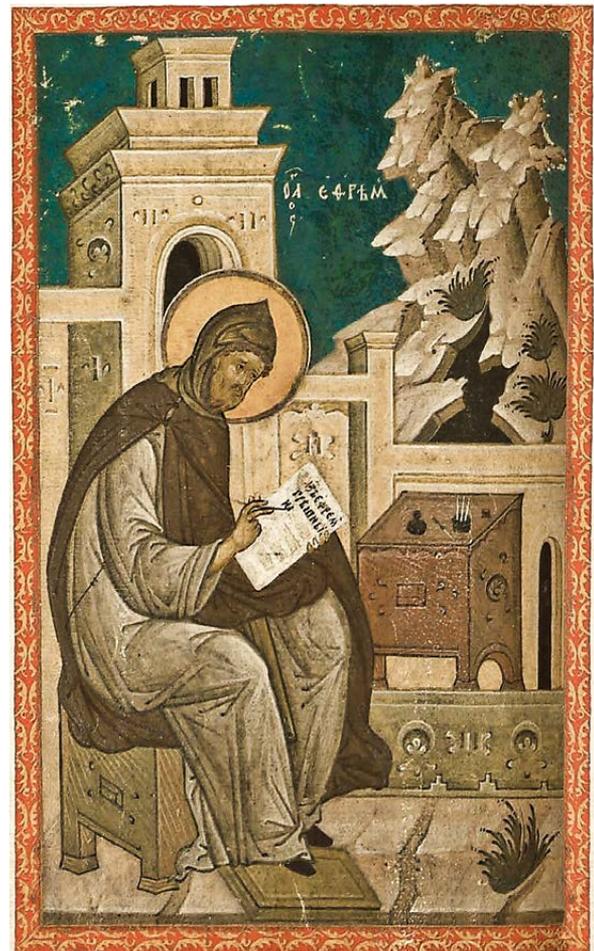
Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik, Croatia) gave us in 1377 the first relatively effective method of dealing with the Black

Death: *quarantine*—isolating ships and travelers from plague-infected areas. Derived from the Italian for "forty days," quarantine's length may have been influenced by Lent, the length of the biblical flood, or Christ's wilderness isolation.

## PLAGUED CITY

Plague outbreaks were the greatest and most persistent killers in European port cities for centuries. Venice, crossroads of Europe and the Mediterranean, and a major participant in endless disease-spreading military

**ONE DIED, ONE LIVED** Ephrem of Syria (*right*) succumbed to a plague as he ministered to sufferers; Bede (*above*) survived another plague as a boy to become famous.



SARCOPHAGUS OF SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA, BENEATH THE HIGH ALTAR, SANTA MARIA SOPRA MINERVA, ROME, ITALY (PHOTO)—PHOTO © STEFANO BALDINI / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES  
 DEPICTION OF THE VENERABLE BEDE (CL. VIII) FROM THE NUREMBERG CHRONICLE, 1493—(PUBLIC DOMAIN) WIKIMEDIA  
 JOHN CLIMACUS, PARENESIS OF EPHRAIM, THE SYRIAN, OR 304.1 NO. 162, PUBLIC DOMAIN / RUSSIAN STATE LIBRARY

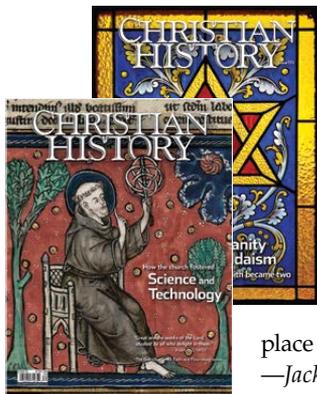


# Letters to the editor

Readers respond to *Christian History*

## SPREADING THE GOOD WORD

I absolutely enjoy every issue of *Christian History*! They are among my most treasured books. Thank you so much for the work you do to present this material in a fair and unbiased manner. —Dixie Christensen, Humansville, MO



Thank you for your diligence in providing such a great historical journal.—Laurence Goding, Sun City, AZ

I share *CH* with seven other Christian brothers and then place it in our chapel's library! Thank you! —Jack Barry, Chino, CA

*Thanks for passing the magazine on, Jack!*

## NEW IDEAS FROM THOUGHTFUL READERS

Thank you for your wonderful magazine; it is richly inspiring and factually informative—God's best on your upcoming efforts. May I suggest upcoming issues for your consideration—the church councils, the various inquisitions—also A. W. Tozer died in 1963; could the staff there produce an issue featuring this man of God for the 60th anniversary of his death?—Michael Carlascio, Sault Ste Marie, ON, Canada

*We'll add Tozer to our list! You can read some stories about church councils and inquisitions in our issues #51, 85, and 129 as well as in our Reformation series (issues #115, 118, 120, 122).*

## PRAISE FOR A CHALLENGING TOPIC

I recently finished the *Christian History* issue on Christianity and Judaism. It was one of my favorite issues. As a person of Jewish ancestry who is also a believer in Jesus Christ, as well as a PhD student whose main research interest is in the relationship to Israel and the church, I found the issue to be informative and well-written. Keep up the excellent work!—Nathan Parker, Hot Springs, AR

*Thanks, Nathan! It was a difficult issue to publish, and we appreciate your response.*

*We also received several lengthy, well-thought-out critiques of issue #133. We are excerpting from them here, with their authors' permission, as well as excerpts from our answers to them.*

## WHO ARE THE HOLY PEOPLE?

Several writers in the latest issue seem to be implying that supersessionism is either wrong or anti-Semitic or both. It seems to me that the two leading alternatives are: (1) the view that all Jews are saved by virtue of the Abrahamic covenant, so they don't need to know Jesus—which is a heresy, in my opinion; and (2) the Premillennialist view, that there will be a literal thousand-year reign of Jesus from a throne in Jerusalem, so all Jews will see Him and know Him, just as "doubting Thomas" did. The problem with that alternative is that Premillennialism, especially Dispensational Premillennialism, is not well supported by inductive exegesis. . . . Jews, like everyone else, need to know Jesus in order to be saved. All the old prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus, the final faithful Remnant. This is not anti-Semitism. It is merely orthodoxy, as orthodoxy has been understood for most of Christian history.—Robert Hellam, Seaside, CA

*From issue advisor Edwin Woodruff Tait: I myself agree with you that there's no orthodox alternative to saying that we believe Jesus fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament and came to save both Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament seems to me to teach quite clearly that Christians can lay claim to God's promises to ancient Israel, reinterpreted to mean not temporal blessings as a nation but rather a relationship with God as his holy people, called to be a blessing to the world. If that's "supersessionism" (and many people would say it is), then I agree that we can't do without it.*

*But I think there are ways to nuance this without resorting to either of the alternatives you mention. Paul also seems to say in Romans 9 through 11 that God continues to have plans for Israel as Israel. And he says very emphatically that we, the "grafted-in branches," should not "boast" over against the original branches, but rather should accept our adoption into "the true Israel" with gratitude and holy fear, recognizing that God has the sovereign power to cut us off as well.*

*Furthermore the opinions expressed by authors don't necessarily agree with the views of the editors or the issue advisor, much less the magazine as a whole. We are primarily interested in providing historical information that helps Christians understand and appreciate our heritage, including difficult and controversial parts. In this issue in particular, we sought out Jewish voices as well as Christian authors whom we knew to be particularly concerned with this subject.*

## WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE?

I must say that with this issue I was beginning to wonder if the editor went to sleep a little? The article "Faith Divided" starts out with a reinterpretation of

what appears to be the commonsense interpretation of “His blood be upon us and upon our children.” I do not know everything about history, so I am open to the idea that the author’s suggestion may be historically valid, but I will need to see some source materials before I accept it. Why tweak the meaning from the contextually obvious, “We accept the responsibility for his death”?... Are we being anti-Semitic to simply acknowledge that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus? No, we are just being honest. We begin to be unfair if we hold all Jews accountable for that death. We begin to be unfair if we become anti-Semitic. But we also begin to be dishonest and unfair to blame the pagans. Had no Jews been involved, Jesus would not have died on a cross that day.

—Mike Atnip, Bernville, PA

**From issue advisor Edwin Woodruff Tait:** *The views expressed by Dr. Rosenberg in her article are common among historians. Indeed, many secular scholars would go much farther than she did in questioning the conventional narrative most Christians find in the New Testament. Of course this trend in scholarship is influenced by the desire to avoid anti-Semitism, but solid historical reasons also exist.*

*This question is one of the major historical difficulties for those of us who believe in the authority and inspiration of Scripture. I think that we can acknowledge that the New Testament authors had every reason not to be too explicit in blaming Rome for Jesus’s death, without accusing them of dishonesty. By saying that Rome condemned an innocent man, they are actually making a powerful statement against Rome. But they’re much more interested in making the point that even the leaders of God’s people rejected Jesus. It’s a matter of emphasis, which would have gotten the right message to their original audience but was later taken by Gentile Christians as reason to blame the Jews and exonerate the Romans entirely.*

*In short, nobody “fell asleep at the wheel” here. You may disagree with our choice to recruit the scholars we did and not to censor them when they said things that might trouble some of our readers, but it was a very deliberate choice on our part.*

#### **A PASSOVER MISTAKE**

*Mr. Hellam also pointed out that the Hebrew letters are wrong in the plate on p. 33; the letters meant to represent the word Pesach (Passover) actually produce the nonexistent word pemat. Further research shows that these plates were made by DaySpring some years ago. The company later corrected the error.*

#### **MEET THE STAFF: NATHAN HILLANBRAND**

*What is your role at CHI?*

It is my privilege to join the team for a summer journalism internship as part of my undergraduate degree, being mentored in proofing copy, fact-checking, and social media outreach, while gaining an inside look at the many elements required to bring an issue of *CH* from concept to completion.



*Why did you want to join CHI for your internship?*

Culling through internship possibilities in fast-paced newsrooms and media outlets, I despaired of finding something even tangentially related to history. Then, on spring break, God intervened. While cleaning out my family’s home office, I came upon a stack of *Christian History* magazines. Now this would be a perfect internship for me, I thought as I paged through, admiring the aesthetic excellence, breadth of topics, and even-handed coverage. My excitement increased when I discovered that CHI’s office is less than 10 minutes away.

*What are you studying and what are your plans for the future?*

I am pursuing a history major and journalism minor at Patrick Henry College, where my fall directed research project will be on attempted Hitler assassin Claus von Stauffenberg, exploring the extreme complexities of a man who was both a pious Catholic and a patriotic German officer. Next steps include interning at a history museum and applying to graduate schools.

My dream job would be a writing career, producing inspiring history books for children as well as scholarly articles. However, my highest personal ambition, should it be entrusted to me, is to be a godly husband and the homeschooling father of a lively, joyful bunch of children, which will mean accepting any and all forms of employment.

*Any hobbies? What do you do in your spare time?*

I participate in karate, orchestral percussion, church/choral singing, equestrian club, and serve at a senior memory care unit. I have been fascinated by historical reenactors since childhood (starting with Williamsburg’s Patrick Henry) and secretly hope that the combination of my community theater training and a graduate degree will land me under a powdered wig someday!! ☞

# Editor's note



**BACK IN LATE FEBRUARY**, I was traveling to an international media conference in Nashville when one of our team members with numerous friends in China told me that the coronavirus was coming to America, faster than we knew. I recalled similar warnings about SARS, bird flu, and West Nile virus and didn't give it much more thought.

As the conference ended later that week and I traveled to another city, the news became more concerning. I arrived home March 11 just in time for the slow-motion crisis to unwind. Later that week a neighbor warned me of an impending "shelter-in-place" order from the governor of Pennsylvania; it arrived on March 19. All "nonessential" businesses were *asked* to close; a few days later they were *ordered* to close.

In the middle of this chaos, the editorial team for *Christian History* met via video conference to discuss future issues. I recalled an issue planning meeting years ago, when Edwin Woodruff Tait (husband of our managing editor Jennifer Woodruff Tait) suggested an issue on the Christian response to plagues. The idea got stuck in my head and would not go away. Since then, at every issue planning meeting, I would remind everyone of Edwin's idea. Every year it would get kicked down the road as other issue concepts rose in priority. Not this time!

What you hold now is that plagues issue, finally come to fruition as a bonus publication for 2020. The effort required of our small, remote editorial team to accomplish this alongside our regular printing schedule is phenomenal; I am personally thankful for their hard work. As you read through this issue, you may recognize some of the material. We feature a few new articles, but we have also repurposed exceptional content printed over our almost 40-year history, allowing us to mail this out to our readers in record time. We hope and pray that this bonus issue reminds you and encourages you that the world has seen pandemics before—and the church has responded.

Find *Christian History* on Facebook as ChristianHistoryMagazine, or visit [www.christianhistorymagazine.org](http://www.christianhistorymagazine.org). Find our daily stories at [www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/today](http://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/today). For Twitter, use @ChristiaHistory, and for Instagram, @christianhistorymagazine.

Don't miss our next issue, which will tell the story of famous Methodist evangelist and missionary E. Stanley Jones.

As executive editor I also want to update you on some important news. My dad, Ken Curtis, started Christian History Institute (CHI) in 1983 to help the church grow in understanding its long and complex history. This was the third ministry he founded, following Gateway Films to distribute *The Cross and the Switchblade* and to produce new Christian films in 1972, and Vision Video to distribute Christian films in 1982. Later Gateway Films and Vision Video merged. About five years ago, I felt God leading me to donate Vision Video to CHI. Initially the "professionals" talked me out of it, but I continued to feel the same nudging. In August 2019 Vision Video became part of CHI. This providential move allowed us to cut costs and helps with longer-term sustainability of our combined ministries.

## REDEEMING THE TIME

Our other major announcement is our decision to start a new video-on-demand platform: [RedeemTV](http://RedeemTV). When the COVID-19 crisis hit, we rushed to launch the service months before we planned so folks could easily enjoy quality Christian programming in their homes. This was a huge undertaking for our little staff, and we are thrilled with the response. Vision Video has produced or sublicensed to distribute more than a thousand film titles over the years. Now we can bring them to you and your family and friends with no fees or ads, based on the same model that we use to publish this magazine—with donations from our supporters. We've had over 16,000 subscribers since we released the service in March.

We hope that all these resources remain a blessing to you during these challenging times. What is happening today is not new from a historical perspective, and God is still on the throne. ☩



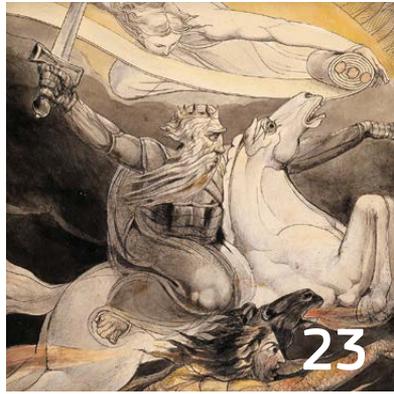
*Bill Curtis*  
Executive editor, Christian History

We thank the many readers who support this ministry, making it possible for us to provide *Christian History* in print. Please visit [www.ChristianHistoryMagazine.org](http://www.ChristianHistoryMagazine.org) to renew or begin a subscription to *Christian History*.

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# The plagues that destroyed

A SURVEY OF EPIDEMICS AND SOME CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

**Darrel W. Amundsen and Gary B. Ferngren**

*You will not fear the terror of night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,  
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,  
nor the plague that destroys at midday.  
(Psalm 91:5-6)*

**AS FAR BACK AS HUMAN** history extends, we find accounts of communities afflicted by widespread diseases that eventually subsided, or became long-term, but not especially alarming, features of life. Today we call them epidemics: frequent terms such as “plague” and “pestilence” are imprecise synonyms.

## BLESSINGS AND CURSINGS

Christian theology has typically accepted the natural causality of disease, while at the same time asserting God’s ultimate sovereignty and inscrutable providence in all spheres of nature and history. Because epidemics cause widespread and extensive human suffering, Christians have traditionally viewed them either as

**BLOOD, FIRE, LOCUSTS** “Plague” for many recalls the 10 plagues of Egypt, pictured here by a 20th-c. Israeli painter.

evidence of God’s wrath or as portending the end times. In the Old Testament, God not only inflicted plagues on the Egyptians and later on various enemies of the children of Israel, but, when the Hebrews left Egypt, God promised them blessings if they were faithful to him and sufferings if they spurned his love.

This was repeated throughout the Old Testament. Prominent threats included the triad of sword, famine, and pestilence (mentioned 14 times in Jeremiah alone). Apocalyptic passages also warned of end-times plagues and pestilences: “The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them” (Isaiah 19:22) or “This is the plague with which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths” (Zechariah 14:12).



This theme became important in New Testament apocalyptic writing as well, such as the seven angels with their seven plagues of Revelation 15.

During the early centuries of the Christian era, natural disasters (plagues included) evoked persecution of Christians on the grounds that toleration of these “atheists,” who denied the Roman pantheon, had provoked the wrath of the gods. Pontius of Carthage, who wrote a famous biography of Cyprian (see pp. 12–15), described one plague in the 250s:

Excessive destruction . . . invaded every house in succession of the trembling populace, carrying off day by day with abrupt attack numberless people, every one from his own house. All were shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion, impiously exposing their own friends, as if with the exclusion of the person who was sure to die of the plague, one could exclude death itself also.

### THE END OF THE WORLD

No fewer than 16 waves of plague afflicted Europe from 541 through 767. As a result, many Christians initially relapsed into pagan practices. But long-term, these plagues stimulated repentance and renewed attention to religious observances. Then, after a lull of several centuries, Europe was smitten by the devastating Black Death of 1348–1349, carried by rats and called by some the “Great Mortality.” A survivor from Italy later described it:

Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices . . . and they died by the hundreds both day and night. . . . I, Agnolo di Tura, the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands. And there were also those who were so sparsely

**FIRE AND PAIN** The four horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation (pestilence, war, famine, and death) figure in much art; *above* is a 14th-c. image of death. The man in the 15th-c. Dürer woodcut at *right* suffers from syphilis.



covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city. There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

Attempts to explain the Black Death’s causes were varied, imaginative, and widely accepted, but they were therapeutically ineffective. Efforts by the church to diagnose and treat supposed moral or spiritual causes sometimes conflicted with medical advice and civic containment efforts. Communities sought scapegoats in various groups, especially Jews, in a combination of terror, helplessness, and popular prejudice.

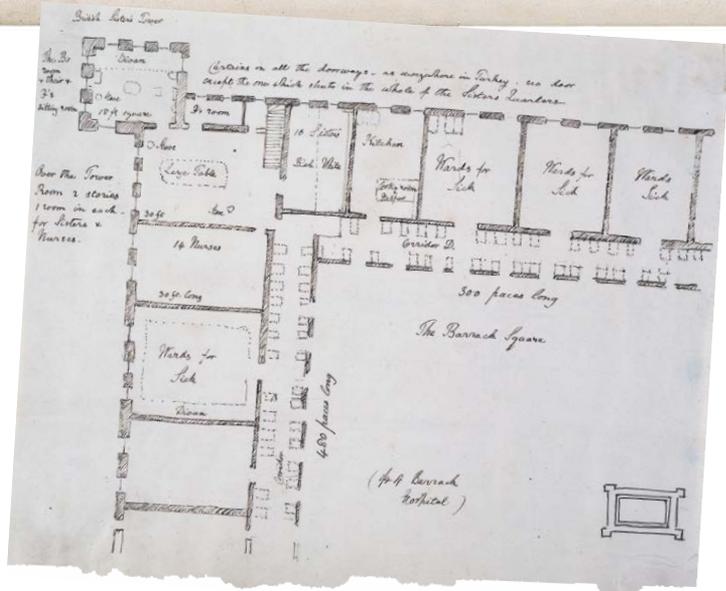
Periodic episodes of plague swept Europe until the 1660s. Popular reactions to the Black Death and these subsequent scourges ranged from calls to repentance to a sometimes cavalier and sometimes despairing licentiousness; real causes continued to elude medical understanding. Clergy stressed repentance as the best medicine and treatment; physicians, a healthy regimen; and governmental officials, restrictive containment.

What all three groups typically shared was a conviction that epidemics were visitations of the wrath of God upon humanity for sin in general or for prevailing sins in particular. When the “epidemic” of what was later called syphilis arose in 1494, even though the venereal (sexual) nature of its transmission soon



FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE IN THE MILITARY HOSPITAL AT SCUTARI.

*Room - Night, when that excellent & benevolent young lady is going her round among the poor wounded & sick soldiers, to see that their wounds have been properly administered to.*



became evident, clerics, physicians, and magistrates once again described syphilis as God's wrath being visited upon society because of a variety of terrible sins.

The seventeenth century witnessed the beginning of widespread epidemics of smallpox, which reached their peak in the eighteenth century. Then, in the nineteenth century, a number of pandemics of cholera occurred. These two diseases are benchmarks in the relationship of epidemiology to religion.

Although smallpox was initially subject to theological explanation, this connection soon faded with the development of effective means of prevention (see pp. 31-34). The fight against smallpox was led in North America by Puritan minister Cotton Mather (1663-1728), who promoted inoculation by variolation.

He was opposed primarily by some members of the medical profession, and by James Franklin (Benjamin's older brother), a famous newspaper publisher. They argued that the procedure was unsafe and interfered

**LADY WITH THE LAMP** Florence Nightingale nurses soldiers at left; many suffered from epidemic illnesses like cholera and dysentery. Her plan for the Barrack Hospital at Scutari is below.

with God's will. As the safer, more effective technique of vaccination replaced variolation, both clergy and medical professionals accepted the practice. Even William Douglass, Mather's chief critic, endorsed inoculation.

**THE JUDGMENT OF GOD**

Pandemic outbreaks of cholera in the first half of the nineteenth century provoked another call for repentance and moral reformation. One Presbyterian paper wrote in 1835:

We regard cholera as the judgment of God upon a sinful nation, an intemperate, ungrateful Sabbath-breaking nation, a nation which has robbed and spoiled the Indian and withheld that which is just and right from the enslaved African. Cholera will go where it is sent. Best advice: Be ready for death. Death stands at your door. Repent of your sins.

But by the 1860s, cholera's cause had been convincingly traced to contaminated water supplies. Improved sanitation proved its only truly effective preventative. During the next decade, the germ theory of disease stimulated bacteriologists to search for microbial causes of most diseases, including epidemics.

As our focus shifted to inoculation, sanitation, and germ theory, theological explanations for disease receded for many. But, as the apparent medical security of the modern age recedes in the face of HIV/AIDS and new viral scourges such as COVID-19, concerns about the meaning of epidemics have sent some back to religious traditions for explanations. Within Christian tradition the explanation of disease in terms of natural causes does not preclude belief in terms of God's action in the world, even if his specific purposes remain hidden from human understanding by the mystery of divine providence. ■

*Darrel W. Amundsen is professor emeritus of classics at Western Washington University, the author of Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds, and coeditor of Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions. Gary B. Ferngren is professor of history at Oregon State University and the author of Science and Religion; Medicine and Religion; and Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity. This article is adapted with permission from The History of Science and Religion in the Western Tradition.*

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE CHECKING ON HER PATIENTS AND ADMINISTERING MEDICINE AT SCUTARI HOSPITAL. COLOURED LITHOGRAPH BY J.A. BENNELL—WELLCOME IMAGES / (CC BY-SA 4.0) WIKIMEDIA  
WESTERN MS 5484 FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (1820-1910) PLAN OF THE BARRACK HOSPITAL, c. 1855, F. 13R—WELLCOME IMAGES / (CC BY-SA 4.0) WIKIMEDIA

# Suffering and sovereignty

*Plague, epidemic, and illness concerned the biblical writers—and perhaps nowhere more so than in the book of Job. Here are a few excerpts from that story.*

**T**hen the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.”

“Skin for skin!” Satan replied. “A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.”

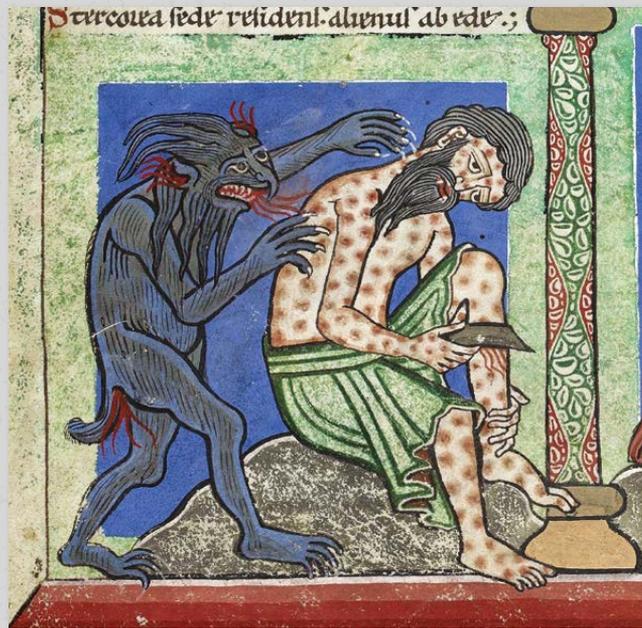
So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was. (Job 2:3–13)

*After seven days of silence, Job’s friends spend many chapters telling him that his suffering is a result of sin. This is one of his responses:*

I am nothing but skin and bones;  
I have escaped only by the skin of my teeth.  
Have pity on me, my friends, have pity,  
for the hand of God has struck me.  
Why do you pursue me as God does?  
Will you never get enough of my flesh?  
Oh, that my words were recorded,  
that they were written on a scroll,  
that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,  
or engraved in rock forever!  
I know that my redeemer lives,  
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.



**“HOW MY HEART YEARNS”** Afflicted with sores, Job asked questions about God’s goodness that have troubled many plague sufferers since.

And after my skin has been destroyed,  
Yet in my flesh I will see God;  
I myself will see him  
with my own eyes—I, and not another.  
How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:20–27)

*Another man, Elihu, interrupts and suggests other reasons people suffer. Then God himself answers Job:*

Who is this that obscures my plans  
with words without knowledge?  
Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.  
Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:1b–7)

*Finally Job replies to God:*

I know that you can do all things;  
no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . .  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know. (Job 42:2, 3b)



# Seeking renewal

REFLECTIONS FROM A *CH* STAFF MEMBER ON CHRISTIAN LIFE DURING EPIDEMICS  
—IN THE PAST AND AT THIS MOMENT

**Dan Graves**

**THIS YEAR, FOR THE FIRST TIME**, I was planning to attend the Evangelical Press Association's Annual Conference. Not only was I looking forward to meeting other writers and engaging with the publishing professionals, but the trip was going to serve double duty. My wife has never been to Colorado—and I haven't been there since I rode through as a child—so it would have been a real treat to visit that beautiful state.

And then a disconcerting coronavirus became the monster in the news.

We waited as long as we could to decide whether or not to make travel arrangements, but in the end, the decision was made for us: the conference was canceled. Needless to say we were disappointed to lose this opportunity. But on reflection, our loss is dwarfed into insignificance compared to the losses some are

**THE LORD GIVETH AND THE LORD TAKETH AWAY** In the high Middle Ages, after Jan Žižka (*above left*) died of the bubonic plague, the military efforts of the Hussites failed without him; yet losing her family to the Black Death also prompted the spiritual awareness of Julian of Norwich (*above*).

now enduring, and it reminds me of how Christians of the past experienced and responded to plagues.

## VISIONS FROM A BRUSH WITH DEATH

When Julian of Norwich (see p. 21) was about eight years old in the fourteenth century, plague carried off almost everyone of importance in her immediate circle. The experience made her spiritually attuned and unusually conscious of death. She soon prayed to experience as close a brush with death as one can have and

ZIŽKA LEADS HUSSITES. THE JENA CODEX (ANTHESIS, CHRISTI ET ANTICHRISTI), 1400–1510. COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, NATIONAL MUSEUM LIBRARY, IV B 24, FOL. 76R. PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC. THE SECOND NORTH AISLE WINDOW OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S CHURCH, SCAYNES HILL, WEST SUSSEX. IT WAS PRODUCED BY ROSALIND GRIMSHAW IN 2002, AND DEPICTS JULIAN OF NORWICH—ANTIGUARY / IGNU 1.2 / WIKIMEDIA

still survive. Perhaps her famous visions would never have happened without that childhood experience and her earnest prayer.

The results of her experience were unique, but prolonged exposure to death all around was not. During the Middle Ages, about one-third of all Europeans died of the Black Plague (see p. 17–19). Suffering loss, terrified flagellants gathered for large processions, carrying crosses and whipping themselves as public acts of penance. The church frowned on these acts, but desperate people saw the hand of God in their troubles and ignored religious authorities as they sought relief.

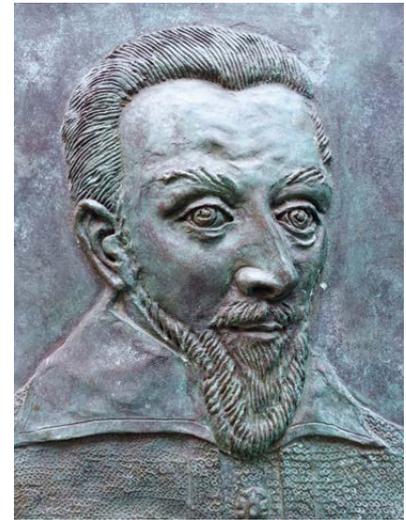
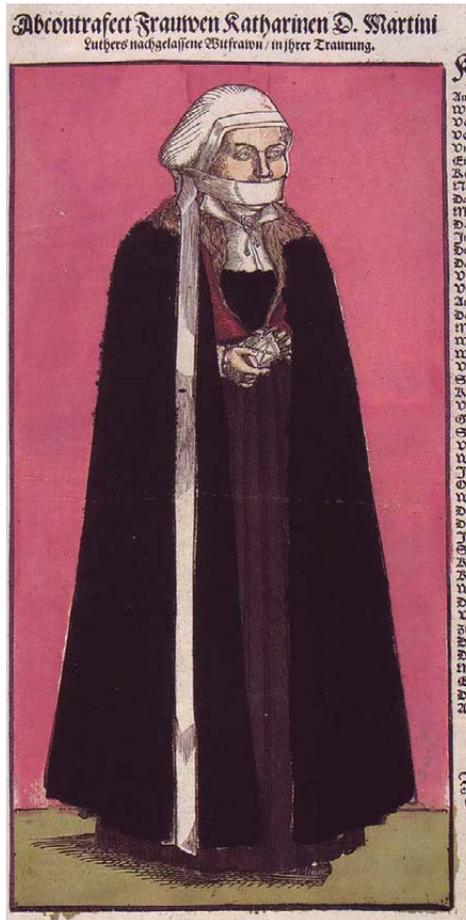
Sometimes plague reset the world order. The Hussites of Bohemia (followers of noted Bohemian reformer Jan Hus) lost their greatest general when Jan Žižka (c. 1360–1424) died of bubonic plague. After many victories against great armies, his name had become sufficient to strike terror in his enemies. That terror was never again evident, and in time, the Hussites lost all that they had gained.

In other cases such societal upset had a domino effect. When an epidemic came to Wittenberg, Germany, in 1552, the university moved temporarily to Torgau. Because feeding and housing students was her livelihood, Martin Luther's impoverished widow, Katharina (1499–1552), decided to follow them. Near the gates of Torgau, her horses bolted, forcing her to leap into a lake. Severely injured, Katharina never recovered and died later that year. Her reported last words were "I will stick to Christ as a burr to cloth."

A few years earlier, epidemic had brought embarrassment to the Reformed clergy of Geneva. After one of their number died from disease acquired while visiting the sick in 1543, the rest (including John Calvin) refused to attend the dying. Calvin said, "It would not do to weaken the whole Church in order to help a part of it," and the other clergy declared that God had not given them the courage to undertake the task.

Sebastian Castiello (1515–1563) alone was willing to make the visits, and city authorities prepared to enroll him among the clergy. But Calvin barred the appointment on two doctrinal grounds, and Castiello left Geneva, sometimes having to beg for provisions.

Yet sometimes plague has brought unexpected hope on its wings. Clergyman John Harvard (1607–1638) inherited wealth when relatives died during an



**MORE THAN ONE WAY OF BEING DEADLY** Plague, a constant danger in the early modern era, had an indirect effect on the lives of Protestant reformers Katharina Luther (*left*) and Sebastian Castiello (*above*).

epidemic. He moved to New England where he soon succumbed to tuberculosis, but not before willing half his estate and all of his books to support a recently established college in New Towne (today Cambridge), Massachusetts. In honor of its benefactor, the school changed its name to Harvard College—today's Harvard University.

### AS GOD HAS GIFTED EACH OF US

No one yet knows what lasting impact the current pandemic will leave or how history will record our response. Whatever the personal, national, or international shakeout, the lesson of church history is that those who remain must move forward. How should we do so? As God has gifted each of us.

For some it will be in mysticism. For others in grief. Still others may find duty requires them to brave danger. Others may find themselves with inheritances they can use for God's work. For now, secure in our sovereign God, we can all fall to our knees in prayer, asking that no matter how the current pestilence develops, the world might experience a renewal of repentance and faith. **✠**

*Dan Graves is layout editor at Christian History. This article originally appeared as a blog post on our website.*



# Demonstrating the love of Christ

AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH, CHRISTIANS WERE KNOWN FOR THEIR COMPASSION IN TIMES OF ILLNESS

*Gary B. Ferngren*

ROMAN ROADS, public baths and gymnasiums, Hellenistic high culture, the beginnings of democracy, the military muscle to ensure peace—the Roman Empire in the second century after Christ looked like a golden age. For the healthy, perhaps it was. But woe unto you if you got sick. Then the shining Roman city showed its dark underbelly. Mercy was discouraged as it only helped those too weak to contribute to society.

In the cramped, unsanitary streets, under the miserable cycle of plagues and famines, the sick found no public institutions dedicated to their care and little in the way of sympathy or help. Perhaps a family member would come to their aid, but sometimes even close relatives would leave their own to die.

## **BREAD AND CIRCUSES**

Many people began moving from the countryside to the city in search of jobs and amenities. Once in the cities,

**WHAT'S THE PRESCRIPTION?** Ancient Greeks and later Romans sought healing at temples like this one to Apollo.

however, migrants found themselves living in tenement buildings lacking basic sanitary facilities. Support of family and village now gone, they eked out an often-lonely urban existence. In the face of daily alienation or times of trouble, they could expect no social support beyond occasional free grain and entertainment such as gladiatorial games (“bread and circuses”).

Worse still, should they sicken, no clinics or hospitals existed to provide healing or even basic nursing care. True, one could find physicians. But their fees were too steep for most. Some towns did hire a public physician, but institutional health care was unheard of. Commoners were left to rely on folk healers and sellers of herbs, amulets, and quack remedies.

The classical world possessed no religious or philosophical basis for the concept of the divine dignity of human persons; without such support, the right to live was granted or withheld by family or society almost at a whim. As a result the chronically ill could be seen everywhere in streets, baths, and forums—many of them homeless and begging.

Some turned to the temples of gods, such as Isis and Serapis, who were believed to heal supernaturally. Most famous of these gods was Asclepius, worshiped in hundreds of temples and shrines throughout the Roman Empire. The sick would come as pilgrims to the temples; those who came most often were either suffering from chronic or hopeless diseases or were very poor. Some were healed, according to temple inscriptions. By the second century AD, physicians were available at some temples to offer advice on medical regimens. But long-term medical care was not provided. In fact the dying were not allowed in the temple precincts, because their death would pollute the sanctuary.

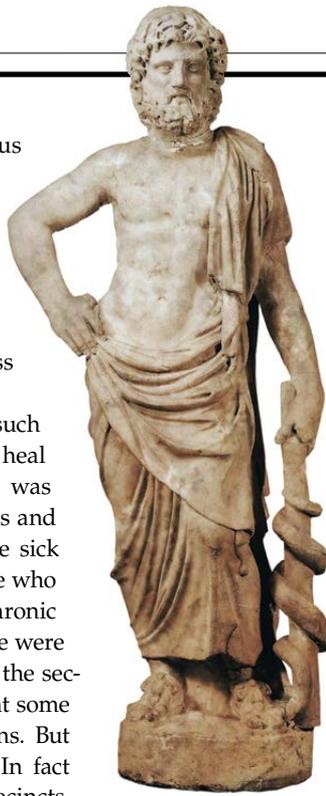
### A NEW MORAL CULTURE

During the first century AD, a new culture began penetrating the classical Roman world: that of the Christians. Palestine couldn't hold the new faith long, and within a century, it was spreading rapidly across the empire even while targeted by national persecution. During this time, in spite of great danger to themselves, churches carried on an active ministry of philanthropy that included the care of the sick.

Christian medical philanthropy found its basis in the biblical concept of the *imago Dei*, the belief that human beings are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27), and thus that human life is precious and must be protected. The *imago Dei* provided the foundation for the Hebrew concept of human personhood, and the Torah forbade certain practices common among other ancient Near Eastern societies: child sacrifice, exposure of infants, infanticide, and castration.

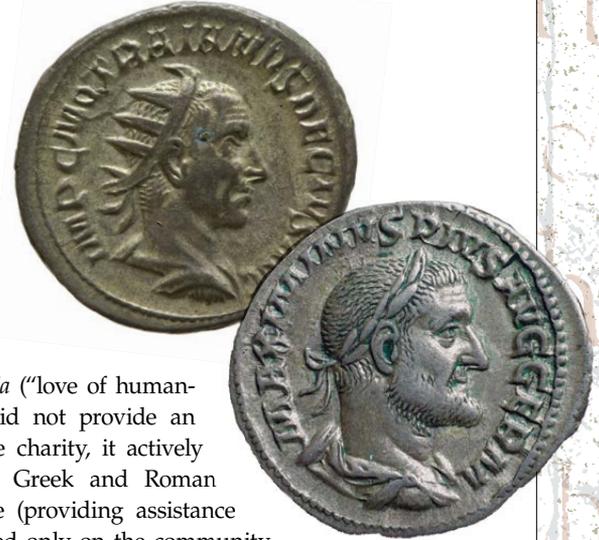
In the New Testament, the doctrine of the Incarnation (John 1:14) extended and deepened these implications. Early Christians believed that the motivation for charity should be God's self-giving love (*agape*), which reflected his nature (1 John 4:8). God loved the human race enough to send Christ in human flesh to die on a cross for our sins (John 3:16). Christians responded by demonstrating Christ's love to their brothers and sisters, who bore God's image (John 13:34–35). The weaker and more helpless the neighbors, the greater the need to show them the compassion of Christ; hence they had special concern for unborn and newborn life.

This sort of practical morality departed radically from the social ethics of classical paganism. The pagan



**SNAKE SKIN** Asclepius, god of healing (left), was considered to be the son of Apollo. In this statue he holds his snake-encircled rod, which is still used as a medical symbol.

**TROUBLED TIMES** Plague ravaged the empire during the reigns of many emperors, including Decius (below left) and Maximinus Thrax (below right).



ideal of *philanthropia* ("love of humankind") not only did not provide an impulse for private charity, it actively discouraged it. In Greek and Roman society, beneficence (providing assistance to the needy) existed only on the community level as civic philanthropy exercised by rulers and the wealthy on behalf of the entire community, rich and poor alike. The Roman worldview provided no motivation to found charitable institutions. By contrast, God's love demanded that Christians demonstrate his love to others, especially the unlovely.

Christian theology birthed personal and corporate charity surpassing any previously known. Church leaders encouraged all Christians to visit the sick and help the poor, and each congregation also established an organized ministry of mercy. Presbyters (priests) and deacons added benevolent ministry to their sacramental roles. Priests collected alms each Sunday; deacons distributed them. Widows and deaconesses provided a ministry of mercy to women.

By the third century, the number of those receiving aid from the hands of the church had grown considerably, especially in large cities. Congregations created additional minor clerical orders, such as subdeacons and acolytes, to assist in liturgy and benevolence.

In 251 Cornelius, bishop of Rome, wrote to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, reporting that the church in Rome in that year supported 46 priests, 7 deacons, 7 subdeacons, 42 acolytes, and 52 exorcists, readers, and doorkeepers! Altogether the church in Rome ministered to 1,500 widows and others in need. Each year it spent an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 *sesterces* (a *sesterce* was worth perhaps one of today's US dollars)—on benevolent

work. This program of benevolent care soon expanded, owing to an unfortunate cause.

### GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

One devastating epidemic began in 250 and spread from Ethiopia across North Africa, then to Italy and the western empire. It lasted 15 to 20 years, and at one point in Rome, 5,000 people died in one day. Beyond offering supplications to the gods for relief, public officials did nothing to prevent the spread of the disease, treat the sick, or even bury the dead. Romans believed that nothing effective could be done in a time of plague other than appeasing the gods.

By 251 the plague had swept into Carthage in North Africa. Piles of dead bodies rotted in the streets, abandoned by their families. Leaders casting about for causes scapegoated Christians, and a severe empire wide persecution erupted. Emperor Decius ordered all Christians to sacrifice to the gods on pain of death.

Carthage's bishop, Cyprian, enjoined the city's Christians to give aid to their persecutors and to care for the sick. He urged the rich to donate funds and the poor to volunteer for relief efforts, making no distinction between believers and pagans. Under Cyprian's direction Christians buried the dead left in the streets and cared for the sick and dying. For five years he stood in the breach, organizing relief efforts, until he was forced into exile.

The plague of Cyprian, as it has come to be called, marked a new chapter in early Christian medical charity. For the first time, Christians extended their medical care to pagans as well as fellow Christians. To provide even basic care for large numbers of the sick, Cyprian probably hired unemployed men to carry out work that had grown beyond the resources of Christian volunteers. These may have included grave diggers and perhaps an ambulance corps.

Much later, in Alexandria, Egypt, in about 416, the Christian patriarch of that city organized a corps of men recruited from the poor classes to transport and nurse the sick. They were called the *parabalani*, the "reckless ones," because they risked their lives by exposing themselves to contagion while assisting the sick. We know that in 312, during a widespread plague, Christians in many Eastern cities were performing similar tasks.

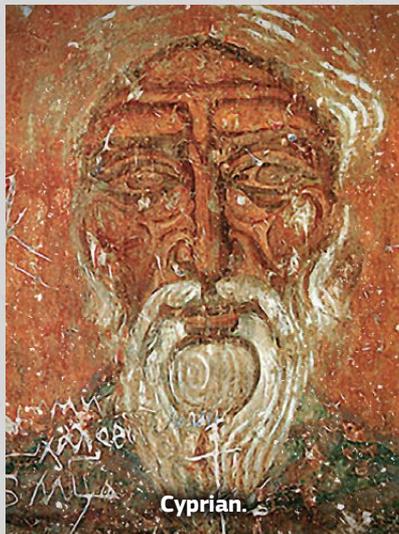
Such large-scale organized emergency efforts did not emerge from nowhere; they came from the existing infrastructure in Christian churches to help the sick. The deacon-led care that the churches offered the sick was usually palliative, because it was administered for the most part by people with little or no medical training or experience. But we know today that in the absence of professional expertise and even medications, a basic regimen of nursing care can cut mortality during epidemics by two-thirds or even more.

Christianity did not promise the miraculous healing that the cult of Asclepius did (though healings in

## "We learn not to fear death"

*The plague of 250 roused the Christians of Carthage to action under the leadership of their bishop, Cyprian (right). Pagan authorities blamed the Christians for triggering the displeasure of the gods, and Emperor Decius pronounced the death penalty on those who would not bow before the imperial gods. But Cyprian implored his flock to minister to the physical needs of their oppressors, regardless of the dangers to themselves posed by both persecution and contagion.*

But nevertheless it disturbs some that the power of this disease attacks our people equally with the heathen, as if the Christian[s] believed for this purpose, that [they] might have the enjoyment of the world and this life free from the contact of ills; and not as [those] who undergo all adverse things here and [are] reserved for future joy.



[F]urther, beloved brethren, what a great thing is it, how pertinent, how necessary, that a pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness

of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether they who are in health tend the sick; whether relations affectionately love their kindred; whether masters pity their languishing servants; whether physicians do not forsake the beseeching patients; whether the fierce suppress their violence; whether the rapacious can quench the ever insatiable ardor of their raging avarice even by the fear of death; whether the haughty bend their neck; whether the wicked soften their boldness; whether, when their dear ones perish, the rich, even then bestow anything, and give, when they are to die without heirs.

Even though this mortality conferred nothing else, it has granted this benefit to Christians and to God's servants, that we begin gladly to desire martyrdom as we learn not to fear death. These are trainings for us, not deaths: they give the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown. —From CH issue #101 (2011)

**RISE UP AND WALK** Christians were inspired by biblical events like the raising of Tabitha (sketched at right by Guercino, c. 1618) and Christ's healing of the lame man (painted below by Raphael, c. 1515).

Jesus's name were reported throughout the ancient period). But the church regularly provided something less spectacular and more predictable: compassionate care of the sick and dying.

In the early fourth century, lay Christian orders began to appear in the large cities of the eastern empire: the *spoudaioi* ("the zealous ones") and (in Egypt) the *philoponoi* ("lovers of labor"). The mission of these groups, drawn mostly from the lower classes, was to reach out to the indigent sick in cities such as Alexandria and Antioch. These cities had large populations of homeless people who were sick and dying on the streets.

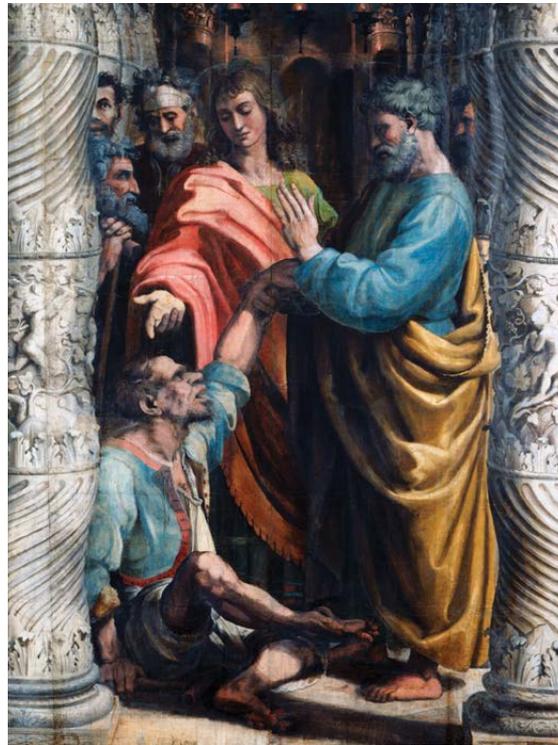
The *philoponoi* distributed food and money to them and took them to the public baths, where their basic hygienic needs could be met and they could find warmth in winter. None had medical training, but they were motivated by compassion. Over time they became an intermediate order between clerics and lay people. In the sixth and seventh centuries, they became attached to large churches and continued the long tradition of church-centered, deacon-led care of the sick.

**BEARING FRUIT**

Many movements in the history of Christian philanthropy have drawn on this legacy. Roman Catholics have excelled in organizing and institutionalizing medical charities, including hospitals, most maintained by female religious orders such as the Sisters of Charity, founded by St. Vincent de Paul (1580–1660).

In the nineteenth century in Holland, a Mennonite deaconess movement cared for the ill, and in England, the Quaker Elizabeth Fry revolutionized care for prisoners and the sick. Taking cues from both, pastors Theodore Fliedner and Wilhelm Loehe pioneered in their native Germany a Lutheran deaconess movement that spread throughout Europe. Among trainees at the movement's base in Kaiserswerth was the famous Florence Nightingale, who took what she learned there to England, where she founded a school of nursing.

Prominent historian of medicine Henry Sigerist wrote that Christianity introduced the "most revolutionary and decisive change in the attitude of society toward the sick," giving sick people a "preferential position" in society that they retain to this day. Christians saw the suffering of others as an opportunity to provide compassionate care in the name of Christ. This



was Christianity's novel contribution to health care, providing the foundation for the whole tradition of Western medical philanthropy. By the fourth century, it led to the creation of the hospital as a uniquely Christian institution. But the hospital would never have succeeded without the medical philanthropy integral to the ministry of the early church. ☒

*Gary B. Ferngren is professor of history at Oregon State University. A longer version of this article appeared in CH 101 (2011) under the title "A new era in Roman healthcare."*



# “Away with the Christians”

**T**he Roman world in the early Christian era was frequently troubled by plagues; the most famous and destructive broke out in AD 249 and lasted 21 years. Epidemics of plague are reported in a number of cities in the second through fourth centuries. In at least some cases, Roman troops brought back diseases when returning from far-flung military campaigns. Some may have been versions of smallpox or measles.

Frequently Romans consulted the shrines and oracles of their gods in efforts to learn what would stop the plagues. Some shrines, like the one to Apollo at Didyma [in modern-day Turkey], were established to thank a god for saving a city from plague. Things that terrified the populace, says historian Robin Lane Fox, made “excellent business for Apollo.”

## REFUSING TO APPEASE THE GODS

Many in the empire cast blame upon Christians for causing epidemics because they refused to do pious acts appeasing the gods. Tertullian famously wrote (around 196) in his *Apology*: “If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the

**LIONS AND PLAGUES** From church historian Eusebius (*above*), we have the stories of how many Christians died in plagues as well as in persecutions (*above left*).

cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lion!’” Around 250 Porphyry blamed a plague in Rome on citizens having abandoned the temple of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, to seek healing in Christian churches.

Eusebius reported on a plague during the reign of Emperor Maximinius II (305–313):

A great rural population [was] almost entirely wiped out; nearly all being speedily destroyed by famine and pestilence . . . Some, chewing wisps of hay and recklessly eating noxious herbs, undermined and ruined their constitutions. And some of the high-born women in the cities, driven by want to shameful extremities, went forth into the market-places to beg.

But in the crisis, the Christians knew what to do. Eusebius proudly told of his fellow believers’ response:

Then did the evidences of the universal zeal and piety of the Christians become manifest to all the heathen. For they alone 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.

—Chris Armstrong, senior editor at Christian History. Published under the title “Who you gonna call?” in CH #101 (2011).



# When a third of the world died

DURING THE CATASTROPHIC BLACK PLAGUE, HOW DID CHRISTIANS RESPOND?

*Mark Galli*

IN OCTOBER 1347, when a Genoese trading ship fresh from Crimea docked at a harbor in Sicily, dead and dying men lay at the oars. The sailors had black swellings the size of eggs in their armpits and groins, oozing blood and pus, and spreading boils and black blotches on the skin. They endured severe pain and died within five days of their first symptoms. A variant soon appeared with continuous fever and spitting of blood. Its victims coughed, sweated heavily, and died in three days or less—sometimes in 24 hours. Some went to bed well and died before morning; some doctors caught the illness at a patient's bedside and died before the patient.

## WREAKING HAVOC

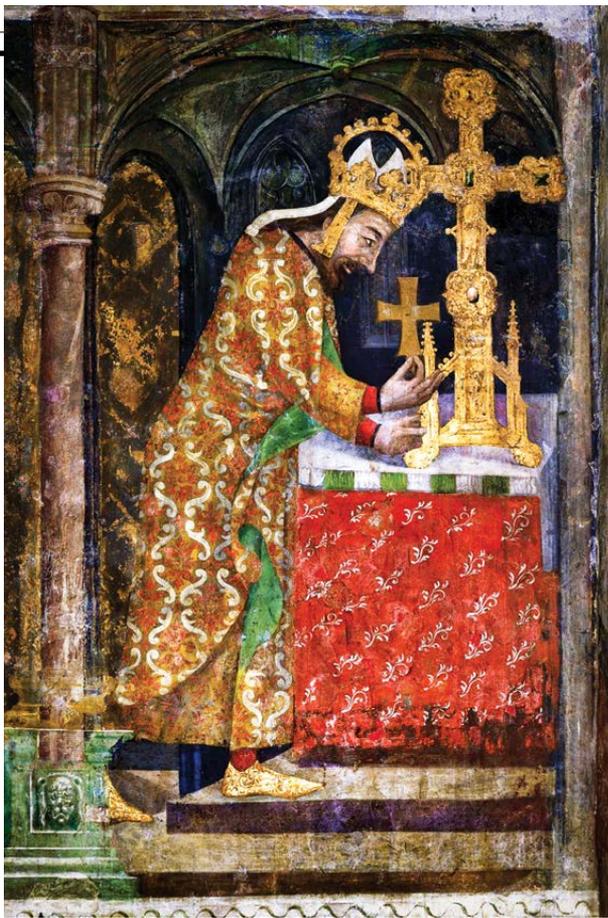
Borne by ships traveling the coasts and rivers, by early 1348, the bubonic plague had penetrated Italy, North Africa, and France, and crossed the English Channel. At the same time, it moved across the Alps into Switzerland and reached eastward to Hungary. In any given area, the plague wreaked havoc for four to six months and then faded—except in larger cities, where

**APOCALYPSE NOW** Bruegel's 16th-c. painting *The Triumph of Death* includes bubonic plague among its killers.

it slowed in winter only to reappear in spring to rage for another six months. In 1349 it hit Paris again and began spreading through England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Prussia, and Iceland, sometimes in chilling fashion. Off the coast of Norway, a ship drifted aimlessly, finally grounding itself in Bergen. On board people discovered a load of wool and a dead crew.

By mid-1350 the plague had passed through most of Europe. The mortality rate ranged from 20 percent in some places to 90 percent in others. Overall the estimate of one medieval observer matches that of modern demographers: "A third of the world died."

In the beginning awed witnesses tended to exaggerate their reports. In Avignon chroniclers put the death toll between 62,000 and 120,000, although the city's population was probably less than 50,000. But it did devastate cities, and grand projects came to a standstill: in Siena, as the Black Death took more than half



**SAVE US, LORD** From kings (such as Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV in the painting at *right*) to peasants, everyone throughout Europe sought relief from the plague that had originally arrived in Italian ports (*below*).



the inhabitants, work was abandoned on a great cathedral planned to be the largest in the world.

The primary concern at first was burying all the bodies. When graveyards filled up, bodies at Avignon were thrown into the Rhone until mass burial pits were dug. In London corpses piled up until they overflowed out of the pits; they were left in front of doorways, and the light of each morning revealed new piles of bodies.

### SHUNNING THE DYING

Rather than encourage mutual aid, the plague's deadliness drove people from one another. One Sicilian friar reported, "Magistrates and notaries refused to come and make the wills of the dying . . . even the priests did not come to hear their confessions." In one account called the *Decameron*, the author said, "Kinsfolk held aloof, brother was forsaken by brother, oftentimes husband by wife . . . fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children to their fate."

Yet there were also pockets of extraordinary Christian charity. According to a French chronicler, nuns at one city hospital, "having no fear of death, tended the sick with all sweetness and humility." New nuns replaced those who died, until most had died: "Many times renewed by death [they] now rest in peace with Christ as we may piously believe."

To most people there was but one explanation: the wrath of God. A scourge so sweeping had to be divine punishment for sin. Efforts to appease God's wrath

took many forms, but the most common were processions, authorized at first by the pope. Some lasted as long as three days and were attended by as many as 2,000. Penitents went barefoot and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled themselves with ashes, wept, prayed, tore their hair, and carried candles and relics. They wound through city streets, begging for mercy from Jesus, Mary, and the saints.

When the plague refused to abate, the processions turned to self-flagellation. The flagellants believed they were society's redeemers, reenacting Christ's scourging on their own bodies to atone for human sin. Stripped to the waists, beating themselves with leather whips tipped with iron spikes until blood flowed, begging Christ and Mary for pity, groups of 200 to 1,000 marched from city to city. They performed three times a day, twice publicly and once in private. Organized under a lay master for 33½ days to represent Christ's years on earth, they pledged self-support and obedience to the master and were not allowed to bathe, shave, change clothes, sleep in beds, talk, or have intercourse without the master's permission.

The movement quickly spread from Germany through the Low Countries to France. Hundreds of bands roamed the land, exciting already overwrought emotions in city after city. Inhabitants greeted them with church bells and offered them hospitality. Children were brought to be healed; people dipped cloths in their blood, pressed the cloths to their eyes, and preserved them as relics.

Soon the flagellants grew arrogant and began overtly attacking the church: masters heard confessions, granted absolution, and imposed penance. They took over churches, disrupted services, ridiculed the Eucharist, looted altars, and claimed the power to cast out demons and raise the dead. Priests who tried to stop them were stoned. But when Pope Clement VI called

**WORLD-DISRUPTING** Franciscan monks treat plague sufferers (*right*); in many rural villages like the one *below*, the last survivors moved away, and the villages sank back into the wilderness.

for their arrest, the flagellants disbanded and fled, “vanishing as suddenly as they had come,” wrote one witness, “like night phantoms or mocking ghosts.”

### MURDEROUS ATONEMENT

Christians turned their anxiety upon another group: the Jews. Jews were suspected of poisoning city wells, intending “to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over all the world.” Lynchings began in 1348 following the first plague deaths. In France Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires.

Clement said Christians who imputed the pestilence to the Jews had been “seduced by that liar, the Devil,” and that the charges and massacres were a “horrible thing.” He urged priests to take Jews under their protection as he himself offered to do, but his voice was hardly heard. In one town an entire community of several hundred Jews was burned in a wooden house constructed for the purpose. The 2,000 Jews of Strasbourg, France, were taken to the cemetery; those who didn’t convert to Christianity were burned.

The plague broke out about once a decade over the next 60 years. Yet for all the excess of sorrow and death, there seemed at first to be few profound lasting effects. Some noted the sad effect on morals. Peasants took unclaimed tools and livestock. The poor moved into deserted houses, slept on beds, and ate off silver. Lawsuits to gain deserted lands proliferated. Others noted an improvement, saying that people living together got married, and swearing and gambling had so diminished that manufacturers of dice were now making beads for saying prayers.

Higher education benefited. Emperor Charles IV felt deeply for “precious knowledge which the mad rage of pestilential death has stifled throughout the wide realms of the world.” He founded the University of Prague in the plague year of 1348. By 1353 three new colleges had been founded at Cambridge, one funded by the income derived from masses for the dead.

The church was enriched by the offerings of pilgrims seeking absolution from their sins and making



a flood of bequests to religious institutions. In October 1348 the Council of Siena temporarily suspended annual taxes for religious charities because these were “indeed fattened” by bequests.

But the church also garnered criticism. Most clergy had turned out to be as frightened and self-serving as the Christian populace, some gouging people for their services during the crisis. This was severely condemned by Clement and violently resented. One contemporary wrote, “When those who have the title of shepherd play the part of wolves, heresy grows in the garden of the church.” Most people plodded on as before, but dissatisfaction accelerated the reform movements, which were to break out uncontrolled a century and a half later. ☞

*Mark Galli is former editor of Christian History and editor emeritus of Christianity Today. This article was adapted from one in issue #49 (1996).*



**STEADFAST IN PRAYER AND PLAGUE** In this c. 1500 image, an anonymous painter imagines Catherine of Siena being tortured by demons.

## Catherine's plague

**C**atherine of Siena (1347–1380) was born at a momentous time. In 1347, according to writer Charles L. Mee Jr., “in all likelihood, a flea riding on the hide of a black rat entered the Italian port of Messina. . . . The flea had a gut full of the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*.” With that rat, flea, and bacillus came the most feared plague on record. In just three years, 1348–1350, the Black Death killed more than one-third of the entire population between Iceland and India. Remarkably the young Catherine survived the onslaught.

### SOCIETY UNRAVELING

“It is hard to grasp the strain that the plague put on the physical and spiritual fabric of society,” Mee concluded. “People went to bed perfectly healthy and were found dead in the morning. Priests and doctors who came to minister to the sick, so the wild stories ran, would contract the plague with a single touch and die sooner than the person they had come to help.”

People barred themselves in their houses or fled to the country. A fourteenth-century writer, Jean le Bel,

wrote that “one caught it from another, which is why few people dared to help or visit the sick.”

Yet when another wave of the plague struck Catherine’s hometown of Siena in 1374, the 27-year-old determined to stay. Following the example of the early Franciscans and Dominicans, she and her followers stayed to nurse the ill and bury the dead. Respected nineteenth-century historian Philip Schaff wrote that during the plague Catherine “was indefatigable by day and night, healed those of whom the physicians despaired, and she even raised the dead. The lepers outside the city walls she did not neglect.”

We have no way of knowing the accuracy of this story by her biographer, Raymond of Capua, but it certainly seems to capture the spirit of her letters:

In the meantime the holy virgin had heard that Matteo [a patient at the Misericordia, or hospital] had been struck down by the plague. As she was very fond of him because of his virtues, she hastened to see him, fired by charity and as though angry with the plague itself, and even before she reached him she started shouting from a distance, “Get up, Messer Matteo, get up, this is no time for lying in a soft bed!”

At the words of this command the fever and the swelling in the groin and all the pain immediately disappeared, and Matteo felt as well as if he had never been ill at all. . . . [He] got up as cheerful as a cricket, convinced that the power of God dwelt in the virgin, and went away rejoicing.

After the miracle, the virgin, to avoid being praised, hurried away; but as she was coming out of the house I came in, still very upset, and, not knowing what had happened, and imagining that Matteo was still in the throes of the plague fever, I was so aggrieved when I saw her that I said, rather heatedly, “Mother, are you going to allow this man who is so dear and useful to us to die?”

Whereupon, although she knew quite well what had happened, she answered most humbly, almost as though she was offended by what I had said, “What is this you are saying? Do you think I am God, to be able to deliver mortal human beings from death?” At this, being so unhappy, I said shortly, “You can say that to anyone else, but not to me, for I know your secrets, and I know that anything you ask the Lord for is always granted.” Lowering her head, she gave a little smile, then, looking up at me with happiness written all over her face, she said, “Cheer up, he won’t die this time.”

—Adapted from CH issue #30 (1991)

# “I shall make all thing well”

Dan Graves

Julian (1374–c. 1416), a notable mystic, was born in Norwich shortly before the Black Death ravaged England. She was about six when the plague swept through Norwich with all its terrors. The frightful cries of misery, the haunting scenes of despair and death, the panic of the populace, and the perplexing mystery of God’s dealings seemed to have turned her thoughts to God’s purposes and her own spiritual inadequacy to face death.

At any rate, sometime in her early years, she felt a lack within herself and asked God for three gifts. The first was the “mind” of Christ’s passion. The second was “bodily sickness in youth at thirty years of age,” by which she meant going through all that a dying person experiences—short of death itself.

The third was to receive three wounds: true contrition, heartfelt compassion, and purposeful love for God. However, she later admitted she had forgotten about the first two requests.

Despite her forgetfulness she considered that God remembered what she had asked because on May 8, 1373, when she was 30, her petitions were granted. She became seriously ill. Everyone thought she was dying. On May 12 she received the last rites, and she continued to decline. Three days later those attending her thought she actually had died. She herself reported difficulty breathing and numbness from the waist down.

A priest came to be with Julian in her final moments. The boy with him held a crucifix before her eyes, then set it at the foot of the bed. The priest commanded her to look at the cross. She did not want to, because it meant she had to change the position of her upper body, which was painful for her. However she obeyed. Soon the numbness spread to her chest and arms, and she could no longer lift her hands. She gasped for air and her heart beat erratically.

## ALL PAIN WAS GONE

Suddenly, as she stared at the cross, all her pain was gone, and her body was completely whole, especially the upper half. It occurred to her to ask to have Christ’s wounds (the *stigmata*). In this state of mind, she experienced a vision. She saw blood flow down from under the crown of thorns on the crucifix.

Christ seemed alive on that cross. The Trinity filled her heart with joy. She saw Mary and understood her obedience and reverence for God. And Julian heard Christ speak. He showed her a little thing about the

**CENTERED ON CHRIST** Out of her suffering, Julian wrote, “Me liked none other heaven than Jesus, which shall be my bliss when I come there.”

size of a hazelnut and, in answer to her questions, told her it was everything he had made; it would last forever because of his love.

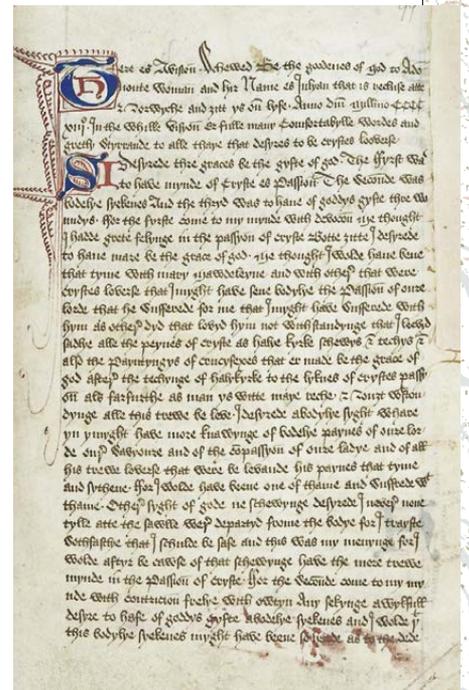
Thus began the first of 15 “shewings,” or revelations, granted her that day, with a sixteenth the following morning. After her recovery she wrote or dictated these visions in short form. For the next 20 years, she mulled them over and teased out their meaning. Finally she wrote a longer text, amplifying the insights she had gained in those years of meditation.

These books are the first known writings of an English woman. Some scholars consider the longer version of the *Showings* (to use the modern spelling) a work of systematic theology. It is not rigorous scholastic theology with propositions and proofs, but an attempt at eliciting self-consistent answers to theological questions based on what she had seen. She dealt with the origin and nature of sin, God’s love, human predestination, the problem of pain, and other difficulties.

Central to her revelations was the love that drove Christ to suffer for us. She saw this as the whole explanation for history and the great expectation of heaven. When she wondered why God allowed for sin, she merely heard that it was “behovable,” that is, *necessary* but hinging on other events. Her visionary Christ also promised her that all would be well.

When she wondered how such wellness is possible when the church (based on Scripture) teaches that many souls will be lost, she heard Christ reply, “I shall save my word in all things, and I shall make all thing well.” ☒

Dan Graves is layout editor at Christian History. This is adapted from “This Day in Christian History: May 8 — Julian of Norwich and Her Showings”



# PLAGUE AND EPIDEMIC

throughout history

## Plague of Cyprian

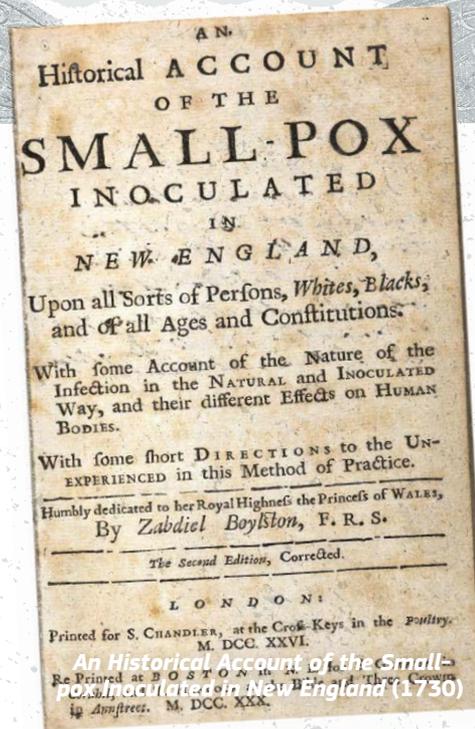
**Where:** Roman Empire  
**When:** c. 250–270  
**Cause:** Unknown—possibly Ebola or smallpox  
**How many died (estimate):** 1 million

## Plague of Justinian

**Where:** Eastern Roman Empire  
**When:** 541–542, with later waves until 750  
**Cause:** *Yersinia pestis* bacterium  
**How many died (estimate):** 30 to 50 million

## Black Death

**Where:** Europe, Asia, Africa  
**When:** 1347–1351, with later waves especially through 1671 (including the Great Plague of London); as late as 1925 in some places  
**Cause:** *Yersinia pestis* bacterium  
**How many died (estimate):** 200 million



## Smallpox

**Where:** Worldwide; origins unclear  
**When:** Emerged around 1600 (possibly much earlier) with recurrences up through the twentieth century  
**Cause:** *Variola major* and *Variola minor*, two strains of virus  
**How many died (estimate):** 56 million

## Cholera

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in India  
**When:** Seven pandemics between 1817 and 1961; still exists in some places  
**Cause:** *Vibrio cholerae* bacterium  
**How many died (estimate):** 1 million

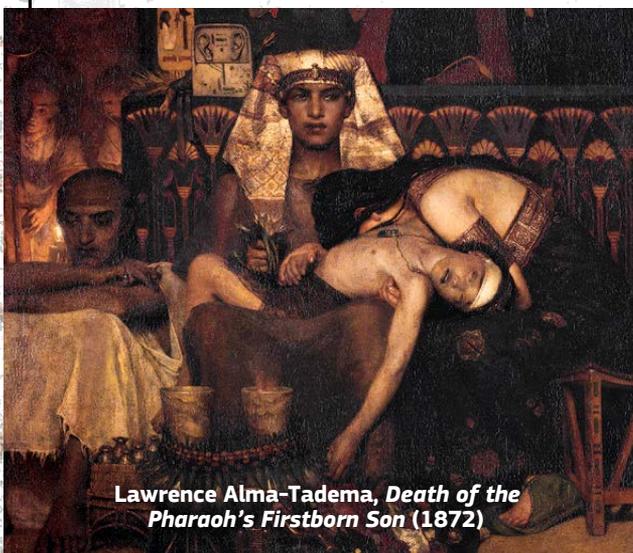
## Yellow fever

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in Africa  
**When:** 1647 through the early twentieth century, including famed US epidemic in 1793

**Cause:** Virus spread through mosquito bites  
**How many died (estimate):** 150,000

## Scarlet fever

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in Africa or the Middle East  
**When:** Periodic outbreaks from sixteenth through nineteenth centuries; worst ones from 1820 through 1880  
**Cause:** Group A streptococcus bacterium  
**How many died (estimate):** Tens of thousands



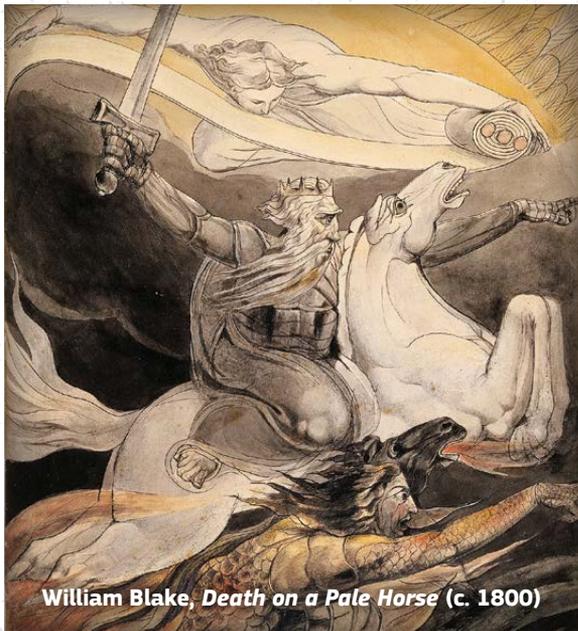
Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Death of the Pharaoh's Firstborn Son* (1872)



Plague doctor, late 17th c.

TITLE PAGE OF ZABDIEL BOYLSTON'S AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE SMALL-POX INOCULATED IN NEW ENGLAND—[PUBLIC DOMAIN] WIKIMEDIA  
 LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA (1836–1912), DEATH OF THE PHAROAH'S FIRSTBORN SON—[PUBLIC DOMAIN] WIKIMEDIA  
 COPPER ENGRAVING OF DOCTOR SCHNABEL (I.E. DR. BEAK), A PLAGUE DOCTOR IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ROME, WITH A SATIRICAL MACARONIC POEM—[PUBLIC DOMAIN] WIKIMEDIA

Here are some of the most famous EPIDEMICS *and* PANDEMICS that we discuss CHRISTIAN responses to in this issue.



William Blake, *Death on a Pale Horse* (c. 1800)

### Leprosy (Hansen's disease)

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in Africa or the Middle East  
**When:** Periodic outbreaks from ancient times; identified officially in the 1800s  
**Cause:** *M. leprae* bacterium  
**How many died (estimate):** Unknown

### 1918 "Spanish" flu

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in Europe and the United States  
**When:** 1918 through 1920 in four waves  
**Cause:** H1N1 influenza A virus  
**How many died (estimate):** 40 to 50 million

### Polio

**Where:** Worldwide, especially Europe and the United States  
**When:** Existed from ancient times; outbreaks especially bad from 1900 through 1950  
**Cause:** Poliovirus  
**How many died (estimate):** 50,000



### HIV/AIDS

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in Africa  
**When:** 1980s–present (probably existed as early as 1920)  
**Cause:** Human immunodeficiency virus  
**How many died (estimate):** 32 million



John Dunstall, detail from *The Great Plague 1665* (17th c.)

### Swine flu

**Where:** Worldwide  
**When:** 2009–2010  
**Cause:** H1N1 influenza A virus  
**How many died (estimate):** 200,000

### COVID-19

**Where:** Worldwide, beginning in China  
**When:** Present  
**Cause:** SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus  
**How many died (estimate):** 502,700 as of June 30, 2020



Police officers in Seattle, 1918

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827), *DEATH ON A PALE HORSE*—PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKIMEDIA  
 JOHN DUNSTALL, *NINE IMAGES OF THE PLAGUE IN LONDON, 17TH CENTURY*—WELLCOME IMAGES / (CC-BY-4.0) WIKIMEDIA  
 POLICEMEN IN SEATTLE WEARING MASKS MADE BY THE RED CROSS, DURING THE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC, DECEMBER 1918.—[PUBLIC DOMAIN] WIKIMEDIA



**HERE THEY COME** Albrecht Dürer gives his version of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, c. 1498.

advising the city council, and ministering to the sick.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, many Christians have shared quotations from the letter Luther wrote in 1527, *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague* (see p. 27). While we need historical and theological context to understand why Luther was writing—and what it cost him to stay—his advice is still relevant today.

### SIGNIFICANT DEATH

On average Europe saw a significant outbreak of the plague every nine years from the end of the fifteenth century through the middle of the seventeenth. Luther was no stranger to the disease; it had struck the university town of Erfurt in 1505, in the middle of his famous transition from rising law student to troubled Augustinian monk.

The plague intersected often with the history of the Reformation. Eight years before it came to Wittenberg, it killed 1,500 people in the Swiss canton of Zurich, including 22-year-old Andreas Zwingli. His older brother Huldrych (1484–1531), newly called as preacher of the city’s largest church, nearly succumbed himself. Some historians believe the older Zwingli’s brush with death in 1519 helped convince him to bring reform to Switzerland. (It certainly inspired his hymn writing; see p. 29.)

One of Zwingli’s followers in Zurich, Conrad Grebel (c. 1498–1526), had fled an outbreak of the plague in Paris. Over time, however, he broke with his mentor and began to rebaptize adults. With the support of Zwingli, the city council persecuted

these early Anabaptists. Grebel managed to escape jail in 1526 and flee to Maienfeld, where *another* outbreak of plague dealt a final blow to his weakened health.

A year later the same disease took the life of another Anabaptist leader, Hans Denck (c. 1495–1527), who had taken refuge in Basel. In 1541 that same Swiss city would become the final resting place of radical theologian Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541). His estranged

# Courage and pestilence

LUTHER’S WORDS AMID 16TH-CENTURY PLAGUES SPEAK TO OUR OWN TIME IN COMPLEX WAYS

**Chris Gehrz**

ON AUGUST 2, 1527, the bubonic plague returned to the German city of Wittenberg. It had been nearly two centuries since the Black Death, but that dreaded disease had continued to flare up, killing 30 percent or more of the population in each of its periodic outbreaks. Though the students and faculty of Wittenberg were told to leave the city, Martin Luther (1483–1546) stayed put: teaching, preaching,

**WHEN IN ROME** Plague troubled Rome during the pontificate of Adrian VI (*below*) as well as his successor, Clement VII, who had to deal with the city being sacked as well (*right*).

friend Luther would find the cause of death by plague ironic, as he had called Karlstadt “the plague himself of the Basel church.”

Not just Protestants were affected. In 1522 Pope Adrian VI (1459–1523) was inaugurated in the middle of a plague outbreak killing nearly three dozen Romans a day. While all but one of his cardinals fled, Adrian stayed, hoping to bring about a moral and intellectual reformation of the church. He died a year later (not from plague) at age 64; but plague returned during the time of his successor, Clement VII (1478–1534)—even as German soldiers sacked the city and the papal court sheltered in the Castel Sant’Angelo.

That was just a few months before plague hit Wittenberg. When Lutherans fled the disease, a Dominican polemicist used such stories as ammunition in the war of words raging between Catholics and Protestants. So when a fellow Protestant pastor asked for his advice, Luther seized the opportunity to write on “whether one may flee from a deadly plague.”

### A TEST OF FAITH?

Luther acknowledged that how one responded to plague could be viewed as a test of faith in God. He could not “censure” those who stayed in a plague-stricken city, believing that “death is God’s punishment, which he sends upon us for our sins.” Such a view was hardly unusual among Catholics or Protestants of the time. Ten years after Luther’s letter from Wittenberg, plague threatened the city of Nuremberg. That city’s leading Lutheran pastor, Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), preached that “this horrible plague of pestilence cometh out of God’s wrath, because of the despising and transgressing of his godly commandments.”

In 1527 Luther did not doubt the reality of God’s judgments, but he refused to condemn those who tried to escape death. Otherwise, he argued, no one should try to escape a burning house or save themselves from drowning. “Why do you eat and drink,” he continued, “instead of letting yourself be punished until hunger and thirst stop of themselves?” Would such Christians no longer join Jesus in praying that God would “deliver us from evil”?

Even someone so highly educated as Luther did not understand the causes of bubonic plague. But while Osiander warned against attributing epidemics to “natural” causes rather than God’s mysterious judgments,



Luther rebuked Christians who make “no use of intelligence or medicine.” Our own medicine is far beyond that of Luther’s day, yet some Christians continue to be wary of the advice of doctors, scientists, and public health officials.

But just as importantly, we should recognize in Luther’s response to the plague his doctrine of Christian vocation. Rather than applying “vocation” primarily to the work of the clergy, Luther argued that God calls all members of the “common priesthood” to specific



roles in this world, as particular ways of serving our neighbors in love. Being called to service ran through the whole letter. While it was “natural . . . and not forbidden” to save one’s own life, there was a higher calling to love God and one’s neighbor. It was only “as long as he does not neglect his duty toward his neighbor” that a given person could choose to flee the plague.

Particular callings might require particular courage. Not surprisingly Luther expected health-care workers to continue to care for the body, but he also believed that those called to public office had a high responsibility in the midst of an epidemic:

...all those in public office such as mayors, judges, and the like are under obligation to remain. This, too, is God’s word, which institutes secular authority and commands that town and country be ruled, protected, and preserved, as St. Paul teaches in Romans 13, “The governing authorities are God’s ministers for your own good.”

Though his chief concern here was maintaining social order, Luther also dreamed of a government so efficient that it would maintain places to care for the sick.

### MULTIPLE CALLINGS

What about pastors? If there were enough clergy to minister to those who remained in the city, others could flee. But Luther stayed. “Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry,” he reasoned, “must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death.” But at this point we must recognize a significant tension in Luther’s thought, for he believed that Christian vocation was both particular and plural.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I too have felt the pull of multiple callings. As a teacher, I’ve moved my classes online. As a historian, I’ve tried to use everything from writing to podcasting to help the public draw on the past to meet the demands of the

**STRICKEN BUT RECOVERED** This etching pictures a happier Wittenberg c. 1580, long after the plague that had troubled Luther.

present. But I’m also a father and a husband, a son and a brother. I’m in a position to serve many, but none need me as much as the members of my family.

So was Martin Luther being faithful to his calling when he continued to teach, preach, and minister in 1527, and wrote this letter that Christians read to this day? Certainly, as a professor, pastor, and preacher. But what about his calling as father and husband?

As much as we can appreciate the wisdom of Luther’s letter, we read it knowing that his decision to stay in Wittenberg exposed his family to plague. While Luther’s year-old son, Hans, recovered from illness and his wife, Katie, survived to deliver their first daughter, young Elisabeth Luther died less than eight months into her life. That tension between multiple vocations runs through the ambivalent judgment of Luther’s recent biographer Lyndal Roper:

Luther’s decision to remain in Wittenberg was bold, but also revealed a reckless disregard for his own safety and that of his family. It may have been a residue of his wish for martyrdom, or, perhaps, another example of the remarkable courage that enabled him not to shirk what he felt to be his responsibility to his flock.

As in Luther’s day, so in ours: we are called in multiple directions as we decide how to respond to COVID-19. Courage may lie down any of the paths we might choose. 

*Christopher Gehrz is professor of history at Bethel University and coauthor of The Pietist Option. He blogs at [PietistSchoolman.com](http://PietistSchoolman.com) and at the Patheos blog [Anxious Bench](http://Anxious Bench), where an earlier version of this article appeared.*

# Plague advice from Martin Luther

**I**t would be well, where there is such an efficient government in cities and states, to maintain municipal homes and hospitals staffed with people to take care of the sick so that patients from private homes can be sent there. . . . That would indeed be a fine, commendable, and Christian arrangement to which everyone should offer generous help and contributions, particularly the government. Where there are no such institutions—and they exist in only a few places—we must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in any extremity or risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God. . . .

Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together (as previously indicated) so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another.

First, we can be sure that God's punishment has come upon us, not only to chastise us for our sins but also to test our faith and love—our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor. I am of the opinion that all the epidemics, like any plague, are spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or exhale a pestilential breath which puts a deadly poison into the flesh. . . .

## “USE MEDICINE, TAKE POTIONS”

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but light-heartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting him.

God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health. If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God's eyes. . . .

Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your



**LIFE, DEATH, AND LEGEND** A 19th-c. artist imagined Luther healing the sick (*above*); a 16th-c. one pictured him on his own deathbed (*right*).

presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire, which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body?

You ought to think this way: “Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above.”

—Martin Luther, *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague* (1527). Translation from Luther's Works, Vol. 43, reprinted with the kind permission of 1517 Media.





# “Christ is the master”

*Edwin Woodruff Tait*

**THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION'S** destruction of monastic institutions largely closed off the major alternative to marriage for sixteenth-century women (though a few convents limped along for the aristocracy to park surplus daughters). Reformers put forth married housewives, not celibate ascetics, as the model of female godliness. Margaret Blaurer's life, though, demonstrates how reform reluctantly made room for female celibate ministry. In her case this ministry culminated in her service during a time of plague.

Blaurer (c. 1493–1541) came from a wealthy family of linen merchants, prominent in the southern German city of Constance and the neighboring Swiss canton of St. Gall since the thirteenth century. Her brothers, Ambrose (1492–1564) and Thomas (1499–1567), sustained the family's high profile; Ambrose joined a Benedictine monastery, and Thomas became mayor of Constance.

While studying law at the University of Wittenberg, Thomas fell under Luther's influence and embraced evangelical ideas. He won over Ambrose, who left the monastery to become the leading Protestant pastor in Constance. Margaret, like her brothers, had received a Christian humanist education and knew Erasmus personally. The Blaurers also became friends with Martin Bucer in Strasbourg.

**HAVE MERCY** In this 16th-c. carving, Christ and the Virgin Mary intercede at the last judgment for plague victims.

The reality of sixteenth-century marriage was that bereavement (often by plague) was common, the life of clerical spouses hard, and relatively few respectable women were willing to marry former priests or monks. Bucer kept trying to find spouses for his friends and colleagues, including Ambrose Blaurer. He also sought to marry off Margaret herself, first suggesting Wolfgang Capito (c. 1478–1541), whom he wished to keep out of the clutches of an Anabaptist widow. Later he tried to arrange a marriage between Blaurer and a theologically unstable Italian evangelical refugee 10 years younger. Bucer even suggested that should his wife, Elizabeth, die, he could marry Blaurer.

## **THE MATCHMAKER**

That Bucer twice sought to marry Blaurer to people he considered in danger of heresy speaks to his high opinion of her own theological soundness. But Blaurer resisted. At one point Bucer called her “masterless,” but immediately added: “But you say, that where Christ is the master, a person is not masterless.”



## “Now, Christ, prevail”

**H**uldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) was on a mineral-springs vacation in August 1519 when the Black Death broke out in Zurich. Though weak already from exhausting work, he hurried back to his city to minister to victims. Before long he himself caught the disease and seemed likely to perish. Zwingli recovered slowly, though he suffered ongoing effects to his memory and in his limbs throughout that year. Zwingli’s famous “plague hymn” recounts his sense of trust and then his joy at regaining health. Stanzas 1–4 were written as the disease first struck, stanzas 5–8 as his health deteriorated. Upon his recovery he finished the final four quatrains.

Help me, O Lord,  
My strength and rock;  
Lo, at the door  
I hear death’s knock.

Uplift thine arm,  
Once pierced for me,  
That conquered death  
And set me free.

Yet, if thy voice,  
In life’s midday  
Recalls my soul,  
Then I obey.

In faith and hope  
Earth I resign.  
Secure of heaven  
For I am Thine.

My pains increase;  
Haste to console;  
For fear and woe  
Seize body and soul.

Death is at hand.  
My senses fail.  
My tongue is dumb;  
Now, Christ, prevail.

Lo! Satan strains  
To snatch his prey;  
I feel his grasp;  
Must I give way?

He harms me not,  
I fear no loss,  
For here I lie  
Beneath thy cross.

My God! My Lord!  
Healed by the hand  
Upon the earth  
Once more I stand.

Let sin no more  
Rule over me;  
My mouth shall sing  
Alone to thee.

Though now delayed,  
My hour will come.  
Involved, perchance.  
In deeper gloom.

But, let it come;  
With joy I’ll rise,  
And bear my yoke  
Straight to the skies.

—From *Christian History* #4 (1984); translated by Schaff  
in his *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (1891)

After her mother died, Blaurer managed her family’s household as did Protestant housewives like Katie Luther. But her singleness and her brothers’ backing allowed her to devote herself to Constance’s poor and to establish an organization of women to assist her. She acquired the unofficial label “deaconess of the church,” a biblical term Protestants applied to women engaged in active ministry.

Blaurer’s ministry culminated with the plague outbreak of 1541. Transforming a former convent into a hospital for plague victims, she cared for them personally, even visiting from house to house to attend to the stricken and taking a young girl into her own house. Her brother Ambrose wrote to Heinrich Bullinger, “Pray, I beseech you, to the Lord, that he does not permit her who is our only comfort to be torn away from us.” But Blaurer sickened and died, aged only 47.

In the sixteenth century, the plague was the acid test of ministry. Clergy who abandoned cities were discredited; those who stayed and ministered were regarded as heroes. In giving her life to plague victims, Blaurer gave ultimate proof that Christ was indeed the only master she needed to carry out a true and godly vocation as a single woman. **¶**

*Edwin Woodruff Tait, contributing editor of Christian History. A longer version of this article appeared in CH #131 (2019).*

**SINGING PROTESTANTS** Zwingli (above left) was not as prolific a hymnwriter as Luther (one of whose earliest hymns is above right), but these stanzas have endured.

HANS ASPER (1489–1571), PORTRAIT OF HULDRICH ZWINGLI AFTER HIS DEATH (1549)—WIKIMEDIA  
PHILIP OF HARTIN (1418–1483), ONE WHO BELIEVES IN ONE GOD FROM A SPIRITUAL SONG BOOKLET (1524)—BAVARIAN STATE LIBRARY / UNIVERSITY AND STATE  
LIBRARY OF SAXONY ANHALT IN HALLE (ISALE)



# Christ's passion and ours

In times of plague or epidemic, Christians have often turned to Christ's passion to make sense of their suffering. Johann Heermann did so in his hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus," later popularized through inclusion in Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) settings of the Passion story. Martin Luther had built a strong tradition of congregational hymn singing for his followers—

characterized, in his hands, by songs like the triumphant "A Mighty Fortress."

But violent theological controversy in the sixteenth century, the devastation of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), and periodic outbreaks of plague prompted later Lutheran hymn writers like Heermann and Paul Gerhardt to focus more deeply on the believer's inner spiritual life.

Born in Silesia (in modern Poland), Heermann (1585–1647) was the only surviving child of five and in poor health

throughout his life. After an eye infection ended his brief teaching career, in 1611 he became deacon, then pastor of the Lutheran church in Köben near his hometown. The Thirty Years' War was hard on Köben; the city was burned, plundered, and ravaged by plague over the next several decades. Heermann lost all his possessions more than once and was nearly killed or forced to flee several times. A throat problem brought an end to his preaching, and he retired from the ministry in 1638.

Heermann published three collections of hymns. "Ah, Holy Jesus" was loosely based on a Latin poem then attributed to St. Augustine but now thought to

**PLEASURE AND JOY?** Heermann (*top left*) wrote his hymn (*above*) out of the tragedy of personal illness, the Thirty Years' War (pictured *top right* in a drawing from 1643), and plague.

have been the work of medieval monk-theologian Jean de Fécamp.

Composer Johann Crüger soon united the hymn to a tune inspired by the Genevan Psalter.

## LOVE WITHOUT MEASURE

Like many of the popular hymns Bach used in his Passions, Heermann's lyrics paint a vivid picture of the Crucifixion and make the experience intensely personal. Our modern translation of "Ah, Holy Jesus" omits the fact that Heermann addressed Jesus not objectively as "holy" but personally as "beloved of my heart." He emphasized how our sinfulness led Jesus to be crucified: "O great love, O love without any measure, / Which has brought you to this road of torture! / I lived with the world in pleasure and joy, / And you must suffer."

Unable to think of any act he can offer, he finally exclaimed, "No human heart can invent anything to give you back in return. . . . How then can I repay / Your deeds of love?" Our most used modern translation's last stanza leaves us at the foot of the cross, but Heermann actually went a step further to contemplate the resurrected and glorified Christ: "When, O Lord Jesus, there before your throne, / The crown of honor sits upon my head, / Then, when all around rings out beautifully, / I will sing praise and thanks to you."

Bach used "Ah, Holy Jesus" in both the *St. John Passion* and the *St. Matthew Passion*. Stanzas appear when Jesus predicts his Crucifixion, when the soldiers come to arrest him in the garden, and when he proclaims before Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. We do not know whether Bach knew the details of Heermann's life. But he shared his faith in the face of tragedy—a faith devoted to Christ who suffered yet was triumphant, who was crucified by human sin yet forgave his betrayers.—Jennifer Woodruff Tait, managing editor of *Christian History*; adapted from "What language shall I borrow?" in CH #95 (2007)





# Remedies from danger

LESSONS FROM CHRISTIAN ATTEMPTS TO COPE WITH MODERN EPIDEMICS

*Jeffrey B. Webb*

**IN THE SUMMER** and fall of 1721, smallpox ravaged Boston. It continued into the following year, handing town leaders a major public health crisis with high infection and mortality rates. Yet its most lasting significance came from the role played by two figures: Rev. Cotton Mather (1663–1728) and his African slave Onesimus, whom he had been given 15 years earlier.

## PRAYING FOR MERCY

The epidemic began when the British naval vessel *HMS Seahorse* arrived on April 22 with a number of infected crew. Word of the sailors' illness prompted officials to quarantine the crew and order Boston's streets swept of dirt. These initial measures failed to contain the virus; over the next two months, it worked its way through the population, prompting the flight of hundreds of town residents into the countryside and the cancellation of public activities.

Massachusetts Bay governor Samuel Shute proclaimed a day of humiliation in late June for the colonists to fast and pray for God's mercy and protection. At the end of the summer, the General Court moved to Cambridge to prevent delegates from carrying the disease from Boston back to their towns. By October Boston's ministers reduced Sunday worship to one

**MEDICAL PASTOR** A 20th-c. artist pictures Mather's involvement in smallpox inoculations.

sermon to reduce frequency of contact among churchgoers. By then nearly a quarter of the town's residents had contracted the disease. Young and old alike died, some 400 in the month of October alone.

Boston had experienced smallpox outbreaks before; the 1702–1703 event had killed over 300, and six other outbreaks had occurred in the 1600s. This had led the colony to prepare itself for future events. In 1701 Massachusetts enacted the first smallpox prevention measure, giving the government authority to requisition houses for patient isolation.

In addition colony officials built a quarantine house on Spectacle Island for crews of inbound ships, and, just prior to the 1721 outbreak, the town of Boston had constructed a quarantine hospital. Yet Boston's preventative measures and its policies of public hygiene and social isolation seem to have failed to stop the 1721 event from infecting half the population and killing over 800 before ending the following year.

However, the 1721–1722 outbreak proved to be different in one important respect: Mather's public campaign in support of inoculation. Mather



had contracted smallpox in 1678, and three of his children were infected in the 1702 outbreak. His household included an African slave, Onesimus, referred to as a member of the “Garamantee” tribe in Mather’s writings. (This archaic term was used to describe Saharan people from present-day Libya and Sudan.)

#### YES AND NO

In 1707 Mather asked Onesimus if he ever had smallpox and his answer was “Both, Yes, and No.” Onesimus gave Mather an account of having “undergone an Operation which had given him something of the Small-Pox, & would forever praeserve him from it.” In a letter in September 1721, Mather wrote:

There has been a wonderful practice lately used in several parts of the world, which indeed is not yet become common in our nation. I was first

**AID AND COMFORT** The Free African Society, led by Richard Allen (*left*), founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Absalom Jones (*right*), the country’s first black Episcopal priest, helped greatly during Philadelphia’s 1793 yellow fever epidemic (*below*).

informed of it by a Garamantee servant of my own, long before I knew that any Europeans or Asiaticks had the last acquaintance with it. . . . My servant . . . shewed me the Scar of the Wound made for the operation; and said, That no person ever died of the small-pox, in their country, that had the courage to use it.

He added (in words that would later be criticized):

## “The Lord brought all this dying”

**B**etween 1793 and 1795 a wave of yellow fever outbreaks along the Atlantic seaboard struck Philadelphia, New Haven, Connecticut, Baltimore, and New York City. The first wave in Philadelphia was particularly gruesome; 4,000 to 5,000 died out of 50,000. Roughly 20,000 fled the city between August and October during the peak of the crisis. The death toll was greatest in Lutheran and Quaker congregations.

When Methodist Francis Asbury (1745–1816) arrived in the city on September 6, he remarked “I judge the people die from fifty to one hundred in a day: some of our friends are dying, others flying.” Lutheran minister John H. C. Helmuth’s diary gave

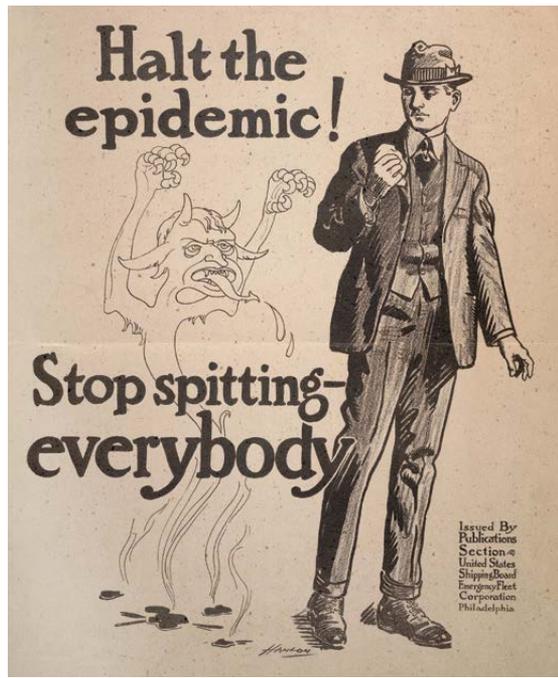
frequent updates on the dead and a weekly report of the funerals that he conducted. In the peak week, he buried 130. His housemaid wanted to quit her job for fear of contracting the virus from him.

Churches continued to meet throughout the crisis. The city prohibited the tolling of church bells and advised that funerals be private. But no prohibition was placed on congregational gatherings, and Helmuth’s churches were full in mid-September.

The pervasiveness of death caused a grim fatalism. On November 3, Helmuth wrote in his diary: “The Lord brought all this dying to our town. He makes no differences in his punishment.” He later recounted that

the crisis was God’s judgment on the city for Sabbath breaking and the introduction of more theaters. The Philadelphia Society of Friends issued a letter to the legislature of Pennsylvania to ask for the “total abolition of Theatrical Exhibitions.”

Yet the crisis also provided ministry opportunities. The Free African Society—a nondenominational religious organization devoted to helping African Americans gain their freedom—assisted with voluntary medical aid as well as burying the dead. Congregations who gave educational assistance to orphans ultimately birthed Sunday schools in America.—*Barton Price, lecturer at Purdue University-Fort Wayne*



**MODERN TRAUMA** The 19th and 20th centuries were beset with numerous cholera epidemics (left); the early 20th c. saw the 1918–1919 flu pandemic (above).

I have since met with a considerable Number of these Africans, who all agree in one story; That in their country grandy-many dy of the small-pox: But now they learn this way: people take juice of small-pox and cutty-skin and put in a Drop: then by 'nd by a little sicky sicky: then very few little things like small-pox; and nobody dy of it; and nobody have small-pox any more. . . . A merciful God has taught them an Infallible preservative. 'Tis a common practice, and is attended with a constant success.

These accounts agreed with articles Mather had been reading in the *Philosophical Transactions* since 1714—which described the success of Dr. Emanuel Timonius’s inoculation procedures among European expatriates in Constantinople.

**INTENTIONAL INFECTION**

Bouyed by these testimonies, in the summer of 1721, Mather encouraged Boston’s physicians to take up inoculation. They declined, but Zabdiel Boylston (1679–1766), a local surgeon and apothecary, successfully inoculated his son and two members of an enslaved African family in his household. These were the first three known inoculations in the New World; the public’s reaction was swift and almost entirely hostile.

Critics assailed Boylston for intentionally infecting patients with no known immunity—essentially, they felt, attempting murder. Rumors circulated that Boylston was the target of a lynch mob. Mather became

implicated and in November, an unidentified assailant threw a bomb into his house with an attached note that read: “cotton mather, You Dog, Dam you; I’ll inoculate you with this, with a pox to you.” Providentially, Mather noted, the bomb didn’t explode.

Learned critics like William Douglass, a physician educated in Edinburgh, Leyden, Paris, and Utrecht, believed the procedure to be unproven. He expressed racist contempt: “The more blundering and Negroish they tell their Story, it is the more credible says C[otton] M[ather]; a paradox in Nature; for all they say true or false is after the same manner.”

Through the fall and winter, Mather and Boylston grew confident in the experiment, though, and eventually inoculated hundreds of Boston’s residents. Only 6 of the 287 people (2 percent) who developed smallpox via inoculation died. This compares with 844 deaths among the 5,700-plus (15 percent) who contracted the disease the natural way. These results, coupled with his escape from assassination, encouraged Mather to go on the offensive against inoculation’s critics.

But many, if not most, Christians believed that God had allowed smallpox to spread among the people as a punishment for their sins. As such, they argued, inoculation constituted direct human interference with the will of God. In pamphlets and letters, Mather flatly rejected this view of God’s providential design. He believed advances in knowledge were divine gifts and reason must play a role in crafting human responses to natural perils. To Mather, God may have sent Indians to

attack the Puritan settlements as a rod of chastisement, but God also gave the settlers muskets, gunpowder, and lead to protect themselves. He wrote, "Almighty God, in his great Mercy to Mankind, has taught us a Remedy to be used, when the Dangers of the Small Pox distress us."

### A STRANGE POSSESSION

The Boston smallpox epidemic of 1721–1722 confirmed to Mather that science and medicine were given by God to benefit humankind, and that reason, logic, and yes, faith—the kind demonstrated by Dr. Boylston when he inoculated his household—were necessary to grasp God's intentions amid widespread infectious disease.

Furthermore Mather was convinced that Satan had taken a "Strange Possession of the People" who stood in opposition, or why else would they reject a procedure he thought was so clearly intended by God for our

benefit? To his way of thinking, even the Bible testified to the wisdom and goodness of proven medicines and medical procedures. He indicated in a letter to James Jurin in 1723, "Certainly our sacred Bible will not be a dispensatory that shall determine anything in the matter of the medicine to be unlawful."

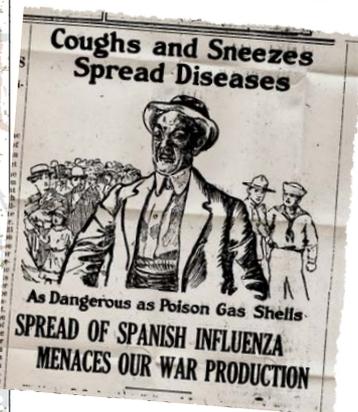
Mather believed that Scripture, reason, and experience testified to God's intention that inoculation be widely adopted. This paved the way for an entirely new approach to public health. Rather than merely react to outbreaks with quarantines and increased vigilance, inoculation



**AVOIDING DANGER** Measures to combat the flu pandemic included masks (*above*, on train conductors in New York City) and public education about germs (*left*).

provided a means of prevention, perhaps even complete eradication. Over time inoculation and vaccination became one of the key pillars of modern public health systems; required by law, upheld by rulings like *Jacobsen v. Massachusetts* (1905), and embraced by the overwhelming majority of citizens. 📖

*Jeffrey B. Webb is professor of American history at Huntington University.*



## "The sickness of others"

In the early twentieth century, crowded neighborhoods brimmed with contagious disease. Tenements often had one or two bathrooms for four or five families to share. Iceboxes were a luxury. Garbage heaps piled up in alleys where children played, and human excrement attracted flies. Heating food and cleaning dishes was essential to kill disease, but coal-fired stoves were expensive.

The 1918–1919 flu struck hard in these cities, especially in the most crowded neighborhoods, filled with immigrants and African Americans. White American church leaders, many of whom had already begun moving to the suburbs, addressed the flu as a part of attempts to remediate poverty,

unemployment, poor sanitation, and poor literacy rates. It was relatively easy to move Anglo, middle-class parishioners to care about "the hungry" and "the children"; but leaders encountered resistance when they suggested that the church had a responsibility to care about public health.

This frustration animated Harry Ward's Sunday school manual *Poverty and Wealth from the Viewpoint of the Kingdom of God* (1915). Ward, a British immigrant and Methodist Social Gospel minister, spent years working among the poor and challenged American Christians to consider their reluctance to invest in public health. "The missionary fervor of the doctor meets no kindred response" among those who call

themselves Home Missionaries, he said, adding, "A spendthrift people are penurious in their health appropriations." In the midst of worldwide pandemic and the mass quarantining of the poor, Ward encouraged Sunday school classes to ask themselves: "What obligation does my health place upon me with reference to the sickness of others?"

During the New Deal, Ward successfully championed legislation for workmen's compensation, unemployment assistance, and old age pensions, but never sold Americans on the idea of health care as a public good.—*Janine Giordano Drake, clinical assistant professor, department of history, Indiana University*

THE BISMARCK TRIBUNE (VOLUME 1, BISMARCK, N.D.), 12 OCT. 1918. CHRONICLING AMERICA: HISTORIC AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS, LIB. OF CONGRESS, MEDICAL DEPARTMENT, INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC 1918—MASKS FOR PROTECTION AGAINST INFLUENZA, NEW YORK CITY CONDUCTORRETTES WEARING MASKS—WIKIMEDIA

# “Buried alive”

*Father Damien chose to serve lepers for Christ*

Wailing rose from the ship *Kilauea* as 50 lepers, forever separated from their families, were transported to the isolated peninsula of Molokai. Though the Hawaiian archipelago was blessed in many ways, leprosy (Hansen’s disease, which differs from biblical leprosy) cursed its inhabitants. By 1873, of its 40,000 islanders, 2,000 suffered from the disease and lived apart. Those aboard the ship would join the ranks of the infected, resigned to exile on Molokai’s lonely peninsula.

Aboard this same ship, however, was 33-year-old Catholic priest and missionary Father Damien De Veuster (1840–1889). Insisting, “I am ready to be buried alive with those poor wretches,” he had volunteered to confine himself in Hawaii’s leper colony for the remainder of his life, though he did not himself at that point have leprosy.

On May 4, 1873, the bishop of the Honolulu diocese, Monseigneur Louis Désiré Maigret, accompanied Fr. Damien (as he would come to be commonly called) onto the beach. Damien had never seen individuals in the late stages of the disease and turned white at the sight of swollen and rotted features. Bishop Maigret offered him a final chance to back out, but Damien declined. He would stick to his word.

## “THERE IS NO LAW”

Conditions were deplorable. Old residents said, “In this place there is no law.” Damien set out to change that. As he later described it:

Under the primitive roofs were living pell-mell, without distinction of age or sex, old or new cases, all more or less strangers one to another, those unfortunate outcasts of society. They passed their time with playing cards, hula (native dances), drinking fermented ki-root beer, home-made alcohol, and with the sequels of all this. Their clothes were far from being clean and decent, on account of the scarcity of water, which had to be brought at that time from a great distance. Many a time in fulfilling my priestly duty at their domiciles I have been compelled to run outside to breathe fresh air.

Damien started smoking to mask the bad odors with the smell of tobacco. He also organized a bucket brigade to bring water to the settlement. Later he piped water from a perpetual pool to the settlement’s doorsteps. The son of a Belgian farmer, he was



**GIVING HIS LIFE** Father Damien (above, on his deathbed in 1889) died in the service of the leper colony and was later made a saint by the Catholic Church (right, in a church stained glass window in Ohio).



strong, energetic, and practical. He burned the filthiest houses, scrubbed out the rest, and built new ones. He laid out farms and a cemetery, opened a dump, and stopped the production of alcohol.

Most important of all, he taught the people about Christ. Men who had stolen from the dying or flung others into ditches now repented and sought baptism. Eventually Damien would be honored by Hawaiian king David Kalākaua, an act that brought him worldwide fame and also brought a growth in donations of money and supplies for the colony.

Twelve years after Damien came to Molokai, he discovered that his feet had become leprous. Four years later, not yet 50, he died. During his life accusations were leveled at him for associating too closely with the outcasts. In his death, however, the whole world came to acknowledge the nobility of his character, which had forsaken liberty and risked infection to bring hope to a hopeless people.—*Dan Graves, layout editor at Christian History; adapted from “This Day in Christian History: May 4—Damien Joins Hawaii’s Leper Outcasts”*



**WORN IN LOVE** Mother Teresa's iconic sari (*far left*) so marked out the Missionaries of Charity that artist Maqbool Fida Husain did not even need to show her face in his portrait (*left*).

## Belonging to the heart of Jesus

**O**n Christmas Eve in 1985, a petite, elderly Albanian nun stood in front of microphones and cameras at St. Veronica's Church in New York City's Greenwich Village and spoke: "We want that nobody dies unloved and uncared for. We are hoping that they will be able to live and die in peace by getting tender love and care." She added, "Because Jesus was also born, so I wanted to help them to be born in joy and love and peace." The nun, Mother Teresa, was at the opening of "Gift of Love," a hospice home for those dying of AIDS during the height of that epidemic and just one of many such houses Mother Teresa established throughout her life.

Born Anjezë (Agnes) Gonxha Bojaxhiu (1910–1997), Mother Teresa grew up in the present-day Macedonian capital of Skopje. When she was young, her father Nikola died, leaving her mother Drana alone with Agnes and two other siblings. Their strong Catholic faith carried them through the tragedy; even with little to spare, Drana impressed a deep sense of generosity on her children, inviting the city's destitute to dine with the family.

At 12 the young Agnes already felt a call to religious life. She left six years later in 1928 to join the Sisters of Loreto in Dublin, Ireland, where she took the name Sister Mary Teresa. During her novitiate period, she went to Darjeeling, India, and after her first profession of vows, to Calcutta. There she learned Bengali and Hindi, and taught in a convent-run girls' school for the city's poorest. But her service to God transformed when she experienced her "call within a call" at age 36.

On a train ride out of Calcutta, she heard Christ speaking to her, commanding her to exchange her work at the school for the neediest in the slums. After the convent's approval and six months of medical training, she replaced her habit with the blue-and-white sari she would wear for the rest of her life and got to work among the forgotten, sick, and dying poor.

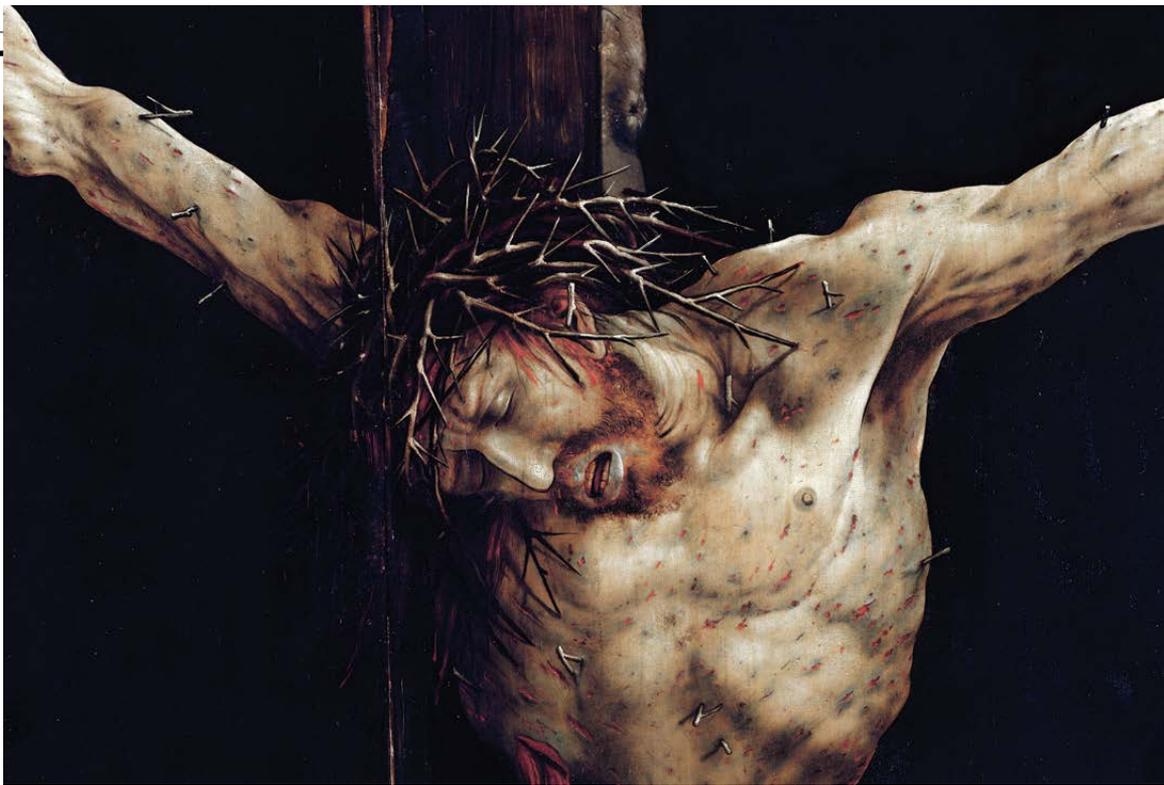
Soon Mother Teresa established the Missionaries of Charity, which received canonical recognition in 1950, and founded various homes and health clinics for Calcutta's poor, including a leprosy colony where she maintained close contact with those suffering from the disfiguring, infectious disease. She might have continued in relative obscurity, but in 1969, BBC journalist Malcolm Muggeridge catapulted her to fame with his TV documentary about her ministry, *Something Beautiful for God*.

### "I BELONG TO THE WORLD"

In the years that followed, Mother Teresa received global recognition for her charitable work, including the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize. Donations poured in to the Missionaries of Charity order and expanded its reach, allowing her to establish homes in other parts of the world. By the time of her death in 1997, over a hundred countries and thousands of missionaries and lay volunteers had joined the Missionaries of Charity, caring for the homeless, the disabled, refugees, lepers, and victims of HIV/AIDS, among other vulnerable populations.

Despite this, controversy about Mother Teresa's methods and beliefs surrounded her later in life. Her traditional Catholic opposition to abortion and contraception drew the ire of secular critics; her interest in conversion provoked prominent Hindus; and some conservative Christians saw her as a universalist. In his scathing book, *The Missionary Position*, anti-theist Christopher Hitchens claimed she had exacerbated institutionalized poverty, accepted the money of dictators to further her religion, and provided subpar medical care to the sick and dying.

Ultimately the See of Rome began the process of beatification shortly after she died at age 87, culminating in her canonization as a saint in 2016. For her part Mother Teresa struggled with doubt in her work and faith. In the end she reconciled her legacy in this way: "By blood, I am Albanian. By citizenship, an Indian. By faith, I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the Heart of Jesus." —*Kaylena Radcliff, editorial coordinator at Christian History and author of Corrie ten Boom in the Torchlighters biography series.*



# Isolation, blessings, and questions

READERS DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES OF BEING FAITHFUL TO CHRIST IN THE TIME OF COVID-19. THESE REFLECTIONS WERE WRITTEN IN MARCH AND APRIL 2020.

**BEING AT HOME FEELS SAFE.** I have not been to a store for seven weeks. I have seen a pair of ladder-backed woodpeckers hollow out a limb and bring food to the nest hole, from which I hear crickets peeping. I have groomed the rainbow of pansies in the tub. Working at home feels comfortable but lonely, free but disoriented, sustaining but irrelevant. The house is silent except for the dog licking her bowl. Sometimes I put her in the car, and we drive to a pond nearby to sniff the air. Sometimes I think to turn on music. I bake bread. When a Zoom meeting suddenly ends, I'm shocked, and sometimes I cry. At night I write in my journal, listing flowers, birds, texts, zooms, Facebook chats. On TV I watch music, natural science, and home renovations. At first I watched the news, but now I mostly read it. I want to read poetry and field guides, and pray, and puzzle over what work God has for me to do next. —*Carisse Berryhill, professor of library science and special collections librarian, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas*

Being able to build relationships, disciple, and outreach have been big struggles during this time. I'm a firm believer in the church being a community,

**WORD BECOME FLESH** 16th-c. artist Matthias Grünewald painted Christ himself suffering from plague on the famed Isenheim Altarpiece.

and that is difficult to live out right now. Digital communication can help maintain those relationships, but nothing can replace face-to-face interactions and living life together. However, I am appreciative of how the saying "The church is not a building" has been forced into reality. —*Robert Keith, software engineer, Richmond, Kentucky*

One of the most awkward questions for me has been not "Why?" but "Why not?" I can't help looking at history's darkest moments—the Holocaust, the Great Depression, or the devastating famines in North Korea, to name a few recent examples—and asking if those people were really worse people than we are. Christ himself, in Luke 13:1-5, suggests this isn't where our thoughts should be going. "I am telling you your story, not hers," Aslan says in *The Horse and His Boy*. We help others, yes. But the only heart we can truly change is our own.—*John Stanifer, tutor and librarian, Kokomo, Indiana*



I am an ordained minister leading a nonprofit that advocates for those affected by mental illness. The COVID-19 crisis has impacted both worlds and, for me, brought them together. The pandemic has taught us in practice what we always knew theologically: the church is not a building. We can worship and fellowship virtually; we can tithe electronically. But how do we fulfill our mission to defend the vulnerable, such as those affected by mental illness? Coronavirus brings worry to us all; to those already dealing with anxiety, it can be excruciating. Social distancing can become social isolation, worsening depression. For Christians there can be the added pressure of feeling that mental illness is lack of faith. The church must reject stigmas surrounding mental illness and minister to sufferers as it would to those with any illness. Advocacy for those affected by mental illness is an ethical imperative deeply rooted in our historical struggle for social justice. —Garry Crites, executive director, *The National Alliance on Mental Illness AMI North Carolina*

Pandemics are a time of change, uncertainty, fear, and scarcity. My first instinct is to hide and “wait for it to be over,” even as more rational parts of me realize life may be permanently different than before. My faith has been a cocoon, a haven from the outside chaos where I’ve been gently held. But as things continue, I’m realizing this slowed-down, liminal time might also create unexpected spaces for growth, healing, and transformation. I know God sits with me in the darkness, but my prayer now is that perhaps some new seeds have been planted and may come to fruition when I can

**PROBLEM OF EVIL** From a 14th-c. fresco depicting plague as death personified (*above*) to 19th-c. realistic engravings (*top* and *top left*), epidemic sufferers have tried to express their trauma through art.

once again find the light. Oh, how I hope so! —Tracey Herzer Huston, writer and educator, London, Kentucky

God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” I am longing for that day more than ever. I long for the day when God’s children will be restored and God’s Creation made new. I long to be able to worship my Creator face-to-face. I long for the restlessness in my soul to be soothed by the promise that God’s timing is perfect. I am learning the value and significance of so many things I took for granted: shaking the hand of a new acquaintance, embracing an old friend, a family meal at a restaurant. May the “little” things never again be insignificant. —Matthew Woodcock, elementary educator, Illinois

Nature is capricious. For all our words about its spiritual magnificence, nature, of which this virus is a part, is not concerned with the merit system, with

A WOMAN SEATED ON THE GROUND, TORCHBEARER TO LEFT, BELOW HEADS OF PLAGUE VICTIMS, CHALK DRAWING BY E.M. WARD, 1848—WELLCOME IMAGES / CC-BY-SA-4.0; WIKIMEDIA  
A MAN WITH A TORCH WALKING ALONGSIDE A CART OF PLAGUE VICTIMS; A WOMAN IS HOLDING A DEAD CHILD, CHALK DRAWING BY E.M. WARD, 1848—WELLCOME IMAGES / CC-BY-SA-4.0; WIKIMEDIA  
LA MORT NOIRE / LAVAUDIEU, ABBATIALE ST-ANDRÉ, NEF FRESQUE / AKG-IMAGES



Fig. VII From section of liver of Rabbit dying 16 hrs. after intravenous inoculation of 0.5 cc. of a 48 hr. broth culture of bacillus gained from spleen of case of progressive portia endrosis. Drawing made by Zilio Camera Lucida - 1/2 in. Inoculation Box (Winkler) Dec. 4. Section from liver of Rabbit inoculated intravenously with like dose of B. Coli shows identical appearance.



Fig. X. From section of Mesenteric Gland from case of Portal Cirrhosis, stained Carlod. Jovanis drawn under Camera Lucida. This is the mesenteric gland (Kaidant) Dec. 4. The section shows portion of a lymph sinus with color bacilli which have apparently undergone proliferation post mortem in one of the large lymph cells. At a. Before the staining is portia or the bacilli already show signs of degeneration.



Fig. XI Another portion of the same section, drawn under the same magnification. Here in a lymph sinus, some of the cells show in their protoplasm small clear spaces containing two, or more rarely three or four, fine deep brown spherules, - shadows of color bacilli. At a. is shown the shadow (sometimes) of some other form. At b. is a large cell filled with fine, irregular particles surrounded by halos. Drawings in this section were large accumulations of bacilli near Portal.

how things “should” be. In the midst of this pandemic, I reflect on Jesus’s preaching in Matthew where he tells us the sun rises on the evil and on the good, and rain falls on the righteous and on the unrighteous. He says this after he commands us to love. As our ideas, rules, and sense of how the world should work have been upended, I’ve become more aware of our call, as the church, to respond—to needs, to fear, to capriciousness, and even to death—with love. I’m reminded of just how hard Jesus’s command to love is when there’s not a clear way forward into how things used to be. Maybe the way forward is simply by asking, “How can I help?” to ourselves, to others, and to God. —*Laurie Brock, rector, St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church, Lexington, Kentucky*

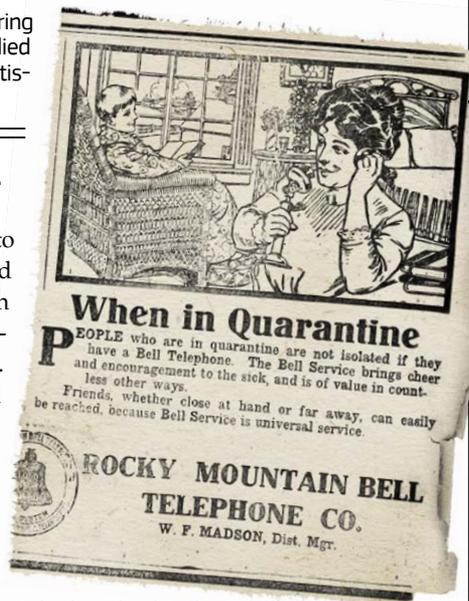
The rock-solid faith I thought surrounded and directed my days seems to ebb and flow with the tides of news telling me to hurry up and slow down. Medical opinions about the coronavirus bouncing around the Internet influence my confidence and moods. The pandemic forces me to look at myself through the mirrors of my mind and is the fountainhead of regular identity check-ups. Am I a child of God resting under God’s wings, or merely a Jesus-follower stretched to her limits by zooming relationships and group email discussions, or just a woman in need of a lot more grace—self grace, the grace of others, the grace of God? My solace and blessing in these fast-slow times, what lights up my heart and soul, is when I appreciate this time to enter, dwell, and embrace the promise of abundant life reflected in nature as it heals and we wait. —*Rebecca A. Giselbrecht, research associate at Vancouver School of Theology and minister in the United Church of Canada*

**CHEERING THE SICK?** During the 1918 flu, scientists studied the virus (above) and advertisers capitalized on it (right).

**UNACCOUNTABLE APRIL (4.30.2020)**

A sad goodbye to our God-blessed isolation / surely not the cruellest month, whatever T. S. Eliot’s spleen said. / All these unexpected gifts. The million birds and five deer and the turtles on the logs / and the geese who took over the park and the fresh green buds and what they promise(d), / the hundred miles, walking after work, / freezing through three layers in the snow and dripping with sweat in the pale sun, / each step completely new from any ever before.

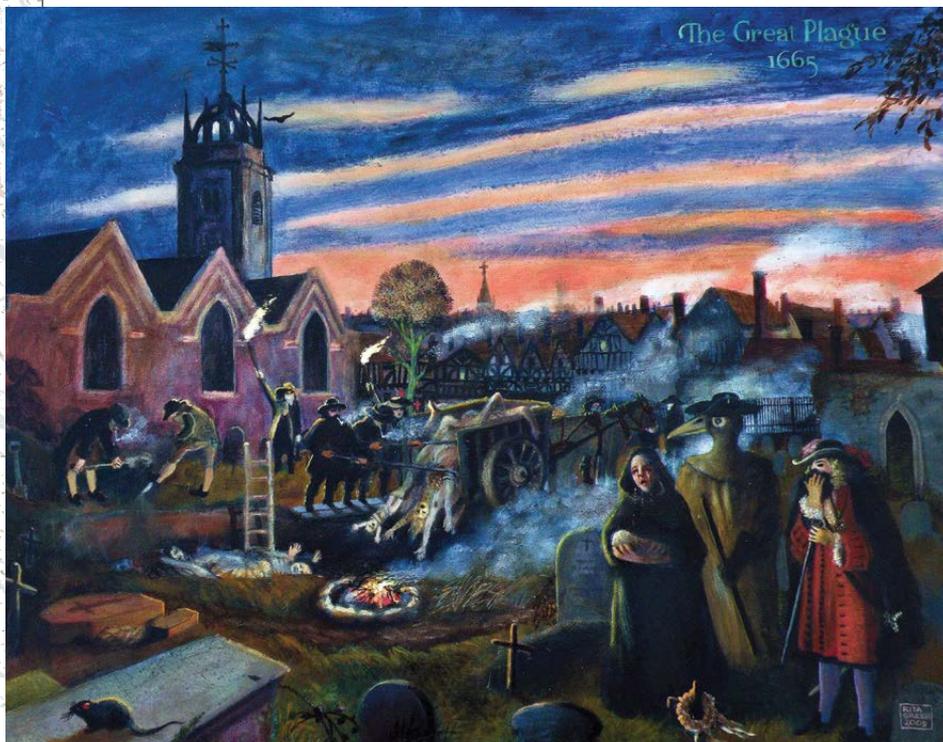
Stopped by police on a snowy evening for walking too late too near the woods, / lying down in thick monastery grass chanting thanks for Venus, the moon, and the Milky Way, / finding a way to be still enough for the deer to come close / and the mother robin finally to let me watch. / Cardinals! / No way to calculate and say  $x$  is worth  $y$ , because / suffering is everywhere and in everything. / Only this, I will always remember you April. / Welcome Lady May. —*Joe Ricke, professor of English, Taylor University, Upland, Indiana*



# Our scattered leaves

WE END WITH ANOTHER REFLECTION FROM A MEMBER OF OUR STAFF ABOUT HOW OUR CURRENT MOMENT COMPARES TO CHRISTIAN HISTORY

*Edwin Woodruff Tait*



**DEATH IN LONDON** Plagues were a regular occurrence in the early modern era; this 21st-c. painting depicts one from 1665.

them the next year as *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. The most famous is “Meditation 17,” which contains two phrases that have become clichés: “No man is an island” and “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” “Meditation 17” is one of the most eloquent and concise examples of a very old Christian genre: writing inspired by the threat of death, specifically death from infectious disease.

Plagues of various kinds were a common feature of life for most of human history before the development of vaccines and antibiotics. Particularly in times of population growth and urban development, the crowded and unsanitary conditions in which most people lived fostered frequent and devastating epidemics. In traditional Christian societies, these epidemics were typically seen

as expressions of God’s wrath against human sinfulness.

Care for plague victims had been an important part of Christian discipleship from the very beginning. Early Christians gained moral authority in the ancient world because they cared for their own sick and even for victims outside the Christian community. Basil the Great pioneered hospitals, and the medieval church developed these institutions further—though often they were what we would now call “hospices,” where the dying were made comfortable, rather than institutions that could actually cure diseases.

Catholics and Protestants alike in the early modern period called for fasting and prayer in response to plagues. Clergy were often judged by their response: while fleeing plague might be justifiable under some circumstances, people in positions of spiritual authority who fled too readily and failed to care for the sick were criticized, while those who remained and risked their lives were seen as heroes.

At the same time, what we are now calling “social distancing” was also a reality. Charles Borromeo

**ON MARCH 12, 2020**, our local theater was preparing for the second weekend of our production of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Person* (often known as *The Good Woman of Szechuan*). Attendance the first weekend had been sparse, and we were hoping for better results this time around. But it became clear in the course of the evening that at least half the cast had serious misgivings about going forward in light of the unfolding coronavirus pandemic. We canceled the play. Soon the governor of Kentucky would close schools and theaters as well as other places where large groups gather. Ironically, love of neighbor cut us off from our neighbors.

## **NO ONE IS AN ISLAND**

In 1623 a disease that contemporaries called the “spotted fever” or “relapsing fever” swept through London. Some modern scholars believe that it was typhus. Among the sufferers was dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral John Donne (1572–1631), then in his early forties. While recovering he wrote a series of meditations, one for each of the 23 days he had been sick, and published

(1538–1584), bishop of Milan in the late sixteenth century, closed churches but organized open-air celebrations of the Mass which people could watch from their windows, because for Catholics simply seeing the consecrated host was believed to be of great spiritual value.

He sent priests from door to door to give communion and hear confessions, putting the clergy at risk while attempting to minimize the danger of transmitting the disease. As a result, even though normal public worship was interrupted, the city was, in the words of one Catholic author, transformed into something like a monastery.

### BINDING UP SCATTERED LEAVES

As contemporary commentators have pointed out, the present crisis calls us to think about the common good and find ways to practice solidarity while physically distancing ourselves. Donne is 400 years ahead of us. His famous remark about the bell tolling for everyone is not just a reminder that we are all mortal. It affirms our solidarity as members of the human race and, for Christians, as members of the church:

The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that head, which is my head too, and [engraved] into that body, whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me; all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

"No man is an island"—not just because we are all interconnected in our existence on this planet, but because we as Christians have been "grafted" into the body of which Christ is the head. In baptism we have already died and risen with Christ. And thus the death, and the hope of resurrection, of every other Christian—and indeed of every other human being created and redeemed by the divine Logos—is ours too.

Donne plays on the still-current sense of translating from one language to another as well as the now archaic sense of the word as a euphemism for death. (The King James Version uses the term for Enoch's deathless transition from this life to the life to come.) Now we speak different languages, not just in the literal sense but in far



**GOD'S HAND IN ALL** Donne (*right*), famed in his own day for his post at St. Paul's (*above*), explored the suffering of Christians for his own age—and ours.

more painful and divisive senses. But God's ultimate purpose is to "translate" us into the language of his kingdom, in which we will all be intelligible to each other.

One of the ironies of the pandemic is that we must express our solidarity with one another by limiting our physical interaction. But the related paradox is that the Internet, which so many of us have long deplored as a cold substitute for real human interaction, has become a vital means to express that solidarity. It is not the same as seeing and touching one another, and God help us if we forget that. But it does, at its best, foreshadow the heavenly intertextuality to which Donne points us.

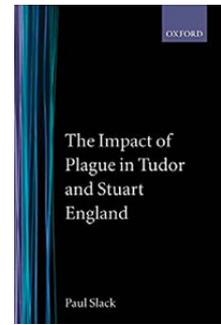
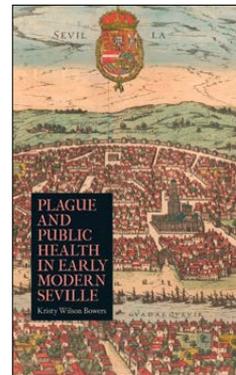
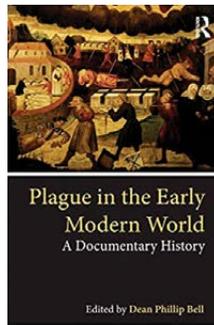
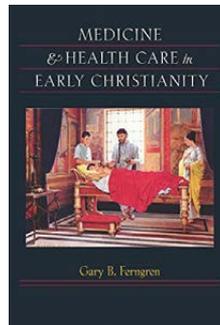
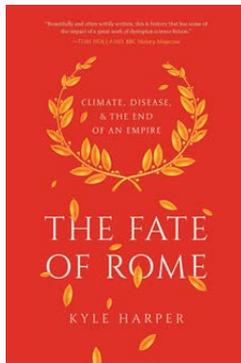
I can hear and empathize with the anguish of people who are being touched by this virus in ways that my family and I have not yet been touched. And people who are living closer to the front lines can warn the rest of us. Yes these warnings can cause anxiety and fear, and the Internet can become a toxic, demonic force. But it can also be a means of grace, a means of affirming our solidarity as peninsulas of that great continent centered on the point where heaven touches earth in the Incarnate Word. ☩

*Edwin Woodruff Tait is contributing editor at Christian History. This originally appeared as a blog post on our website.*



# Recommended resources

WE SEARCHED THROUGH PAST *CH* ISSUES AND CURRENT ACADEMIC BIBLIOGRAPHIES TO BRING YOU THIS LIST OF NEW AND CLASSIC BOOKS FOR UNDERSTANDING PLAGUE AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSES



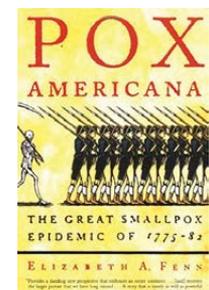
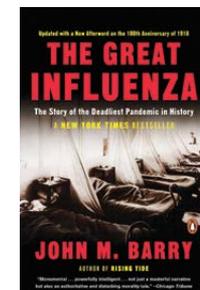
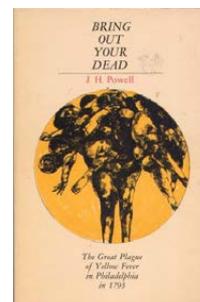
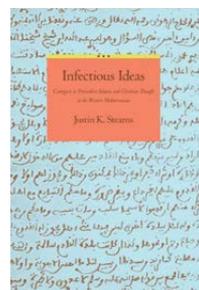
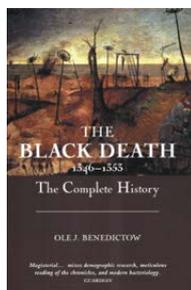
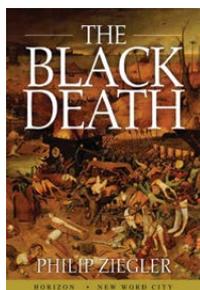
## BOOKS

To better understand **plague during the time of the early church**, look at Darrel Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (1996); Andrew Dauntou-Fear, *Healing in the Early Church* (2009); Susan Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying* (2001); Lester Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity* (2006); William Rosen, *Justinian's Flea* (2008); Gary Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (2009); and Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome* (2017).

To learn more about **medieval plagues** and the changes they wrought in society, read Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (1969); William Bowsky, ed., *The Black Death* (1971); Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (1978); David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (1997); Norman Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague* (2001); Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Black Death, 1346–1353* (2004); Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (2006); and Justin Stearns, *Infectious Ideas* (2011).

For **plague in the Reformation era**, see Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (1991); A. Lynn Martin, *Jesuit Accounts of Epidemic Disease in the Sixteenth Century* (1996); Samuel Cohn, *Cultures of Plague* (2009); Jane Stevens Crashaw, *Plague Hospitals* (2012); Kristy Wilson Bowers, *Plague and Public Health in Early Modern Seville* (2013); and Dean Phillip Bell, ed., *Plague in the Early Modern World* (2019).

To explore **plague in the modern era**, look at John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (1953); Carlo Cipolla, *Faith, Reason, and the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Tuscany* (1979); William Coleman, *Death Is a Social Disease* (1982); Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (1987); J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead* (1993); Elizabeth Fenn, *Pox Americana* (2001); John Barry, *The Great Influenza* (2004); David Oshinsky, *Polio* (2005); Tony Williams, *The Pox and the Covenant* (2010); Michael Willrich, *Pox: An American History* (2011); and Stephen Coss, *The Fever of 1721* (2016).

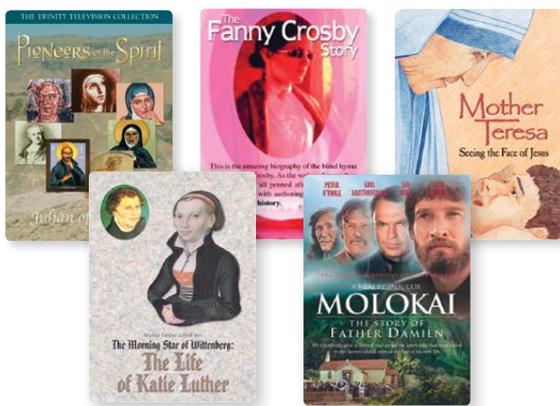




### CHRISTIAN HISTORY ISSUES

Read these related issues of *Christian History* on our website [www.christianhistorymagazine.org](http://www.christianhistorymagazine.org). Some are still available for purchase.

- 4: *Zwingli*
- 20: *Charles Finney*
- 30: *Women in the Medieval Church*
- 49: *Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*
- 95: *J. S. Bach*
- 101: *Healthcare and Hospitals*
- 115: *Luther*
- 116: *25 Writings*
- 127 *Medieval Lay Mystics*
- 131: *Women of the Reformation*
- 134: *Science and Technology*

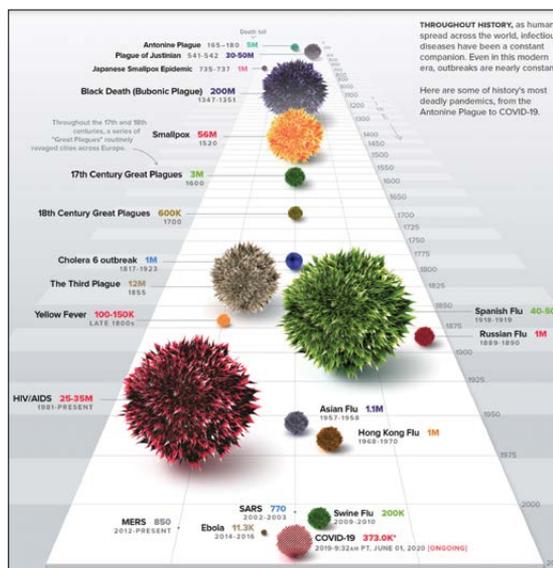


### VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO

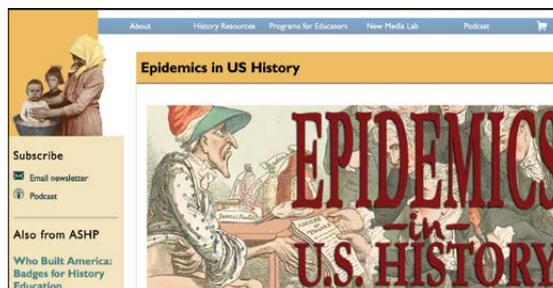
Videos on the theme of this issue include: *The Fanny Crosby Story*; *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien*; *Morning Star of Wittenberg: The Life of Katie Luther*; *Mother Teresa*; and *Pioneers of the Spirit: Julian of Norwich*.

### WEBSITES

A number of websites discuss epidemics generally throughout history or explore specific epidemics. Visual Capitalist has a timeline of history's deadliest pandemics, and Healthline lists some of the worst epidemics specifically in US history. There is some information on epidemics in colonial America at the Tully Historical Society and a full documentary on the 1918 flu at PBS.



The American Social History Project links to online exhibits and primary sources about many US epidemics. A very lengthy and comprehensive bibliography about the science and history of pandemics is hosted by Ouachita Baptist University with a similar one on public health at the University of Amsterdam.



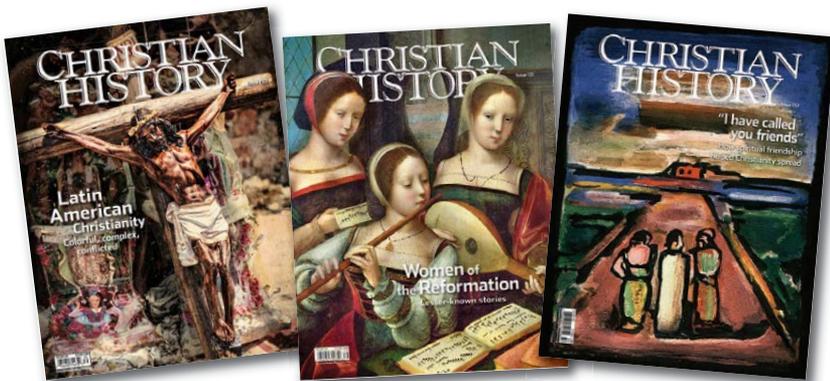
Find many of the primary sources from church history we've discussed at usual sources online such as the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Project Gutenberg, the Internet History Sourcebooks, and the Post-Reformation Digital Library. You may appreciate reading Luther's complete *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* at the news website of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. 



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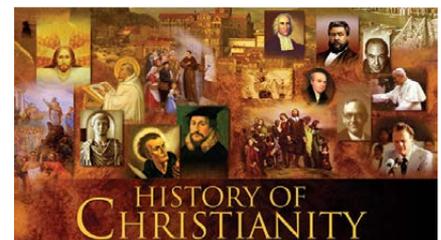
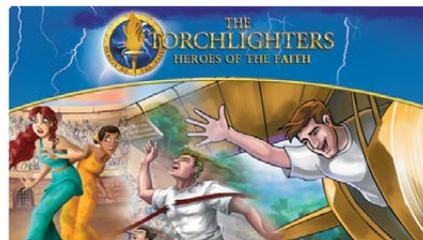
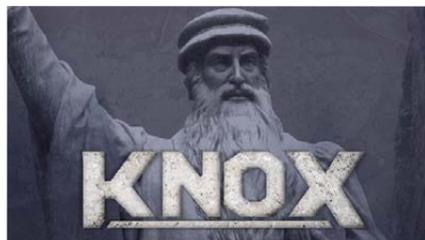
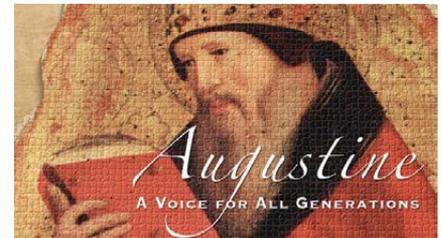
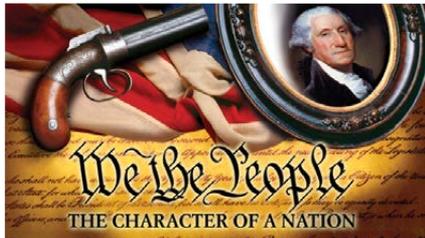
## Announcing a new donor-supported streaming service!

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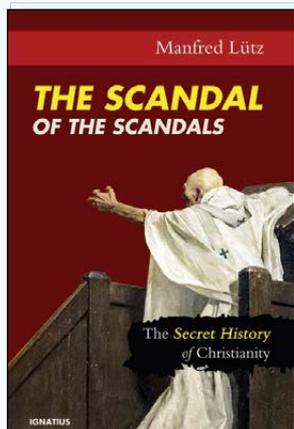
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# THE SECRETS OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND BECOMING A SAINT

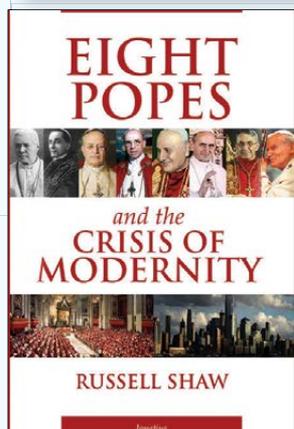


## ◆ SCANDAL OF THE SCANDALS: The Secret History of Christianity

**Manfred Lütz** — After holy wars and witch-hunts, persecutions and political machinations, there is a broad sense today that the Church is on the wrong side of history. But do we really know our history? Best-selling German author Lütz dares to show us what contemporary historians actually say about Christianity's track record. Separating myth from fact, he gives us a candid portrait of Christendom. You'll be amazed at how little you really knew about Christianity.

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## ◆ EIGHT POPES AND THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

**Russell Shaw** — A searching look at the cause of the modern crisis of assaults on the dignity of the human person and the various approaches to it by eight popes who led the Church in the 20th century. A very fascinating story that presents an illuminating interpretation of recent world events, viewed through the lens of an ancient institution, the papacy, a key champion of human rights under attack in modern times.

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