

Religion in a time of pestilence

21 short prescriptions during the Covid-19 pandemic



By Dr Krab

Part 5

The originally obscure, marginal, Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in just a few centuries thanks to a number of key factors—one of which is plagues. Here are four pandemics and how the church has responded.

Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria

The Plague of Cyprian (249–262 AD) was a lethal pandemic that, at its height, caused upwards of 5,000 deaths a day in Rome. While the plague severely weakened the Roman empire, the Christian response to it won admiration and a greater following. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, reported:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.

But with the heathen everything was quite otherwise. They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death; which yet, with all their precautions, it was not easy for them to escape.

A similar dynamic was at play a century later:

This plague was different, but the mortality rates were just as high as those a century earlier. Towns in Italy were abandoned, some of them forever. The military and Roman infrastructure were massively weakened. Once again, though, Christians shone in the midst of the trial.

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, put it like this:

How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the mind of the human race; whether the [healthy] care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love kinsmen as they should . . . whether physicians do not desert the afflicted.

Martin Luther, Wittenberg

From the 14th century onward, the Black Death haunted Europe. In just five years it wiped out as much as half the population, with urban areas particularly affected. Outbreaks continued recurring in the following centuries, including the plague that struck Wittenberg in 1527. Many fled, yet Luther and his pregnant wife, Katharina, remained to care for the sick, citing Matthew 25:41–46 as their guide:

We must respect the word of Christ, "I was sick and you did not visit me." Luther wrote of his own commitment:

We are here alone with the deacons, but Christ is present too, that we may not be alone, and he will triumph in us over that old serpent, murderer, and author of sin, however much he may bruise Christ's heel. Pray for us, and farewell. (Letter dated August 19, 1527)

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