

Martin Luther and The Pandemic Fourth Wave

Quotes from a pamphlet Martin Luther wrote in 1527 have been circulating on the internet throughout the pandemic. Snopes verified that the quotes are correctly attributed to Luther, but they are being used to support positions that Luther's comments would not support (August 24, 2021)--namely, Luther would not support reckless behaviour that spreads the pandemic based on personal freedom because he counselled following the best science of the time. Fortunately, Augsburg Publishing has given permission to The Christian Century to republish the pamphlet, "Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague," so we can read it and follow Luther's advice to decide for ourselves based on our own degree of faith.

It is worth bearing in mind that by 1527 Luther had been married for almost two years to Katarina Von Bora, their first born Hans was already a toddler and Katarina was pregnant with Elizabeth, Luther was engaged in visiting the local churches, writing new liturgies for baptism, marriage, and communion, suffering from angina and chronic headaches, and preparing the early drafts of the Small Catechism. When the plague struck Luther's hometown Wittenberg in August 1527, it came with a 30-90% mortality rate. The entire university where Luther worked moved in five days. The government ordered Luther to leave, but he refused and with his fellow pastor Bugenhagen stayed to minister to the sick and frightened people. They tended to 18 dying people in two weeks. Luther established a hospital in his own home, and wrote this pamphlet in between "battles without and terrors within, and really grim ones: Christ is punishing us. It is a comfort that we can confront Satan's fury with the word of God, which we have and which saves souls even if that one should devour our bodies" (p. 116 Luther's Works volume 43).

So what does Luther really say? As always, he speaks from faith to faith, commending those with a strong faith who do not flee, as long as they are not tempting God to protect them. Then he reminds us that God is gracious toward people of weaker faith and so it is OK to leave in the face of the pandemic. But there are two ways to run away from death. One way is in disobedience to God's command to stay. Luther puts pastors and preachers in this category. "For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death." But Luther knows not all pastors have strong faith. "However, where enough preachers are available in one locality and they agree to encourage the other clergy to leave in order not to expose themselves needlessly to danger, I do not consider such conduct sinful because spiritual services are provided for and because they would have been willing and ready to stay if it had been necessary." The same applies to public officials, mayors, judges, and so on. What applies to them applies to all people "who stand in a relationship of service or duty toward another." Scripture is full of examples of people who fled from death "but without depriving their neighbours of anything but first meeting their obligations toward them" (p. 124). Luther states the principle: "Let those who have a strong faith wait for their death, but they should not condemn those who take flight." As Snopes correctly said, Luther goes on to commend giving medicines, setting up hospitals, fumigating the air, keeping social distance, and many other measures to combat the pandemic. But he also tries to give strength to people who are overwhelmed with caring for the sick, provides spiritual guidance for people terrified by the evils of the pandemic, and recommends that everyone be prepared for death by

confessing their sins and taking the sacrament once every week or two--and that at the "public altar and pulpit to which God has summoned and called them"--and by becoming reconciled with their neighbour and writing their will! He even gives advice about cemeteries and burials: "A cemetery... ought to be a fine, quiet place...to which one can go and reverently meditate upon death, the Last Judgment, the resurrection, and say one's prayers" (p. 137). Over all this Luther holds God's promise: "Whoever serves the sick for the sake of God's gracious promise, though they may accept a suitable reward to which they are entitled...whoever does so has the great assurance that they shall in turn be cared for. God himself shall be their attendant and their physician too. What an attendant God is! What a physician!" The foundation for Luther is always faith in God and grace through Jesus Christ. "We can be sure that God's punishment has come upon us [in this pandemic], 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 neighbour."

Three things are clear from Luther's counsel in 1527. 1) In faith and love we are to take every precaution to prevent the spread of the pandemic. 2) In faith and love we are to fulfill our obligations toward one another despite the dangers the pandemic poses to our personal health and safety. 3) In faith and love we are to try to avoid becoming infected with the pandemic by leaving the area of immediate danger if we are free to do so.

But the most important thing is to pray. "If you feel bound to remain where death rages in order to serve your neighbour," Luther writes, "commend yourself to God and say, 'Lord, I am in your hands; you have kept me here; I am your lowly creature, do with me as you wish. Your will be done.' If you are free, however, and can escape, then commend yourself to God and say, 'Lord God, I am weak and fearful. Therefore I am running away from evil and am doing what I can to protect myself against it. I am nevertheless in your hands in this danger as in any other which might overtake me. My flight alone will not succeed of itself because calamity and harm are everywhere. Your will be done...'

Both of these prayers apply to many of us, and so with all God's people we can say: Amen!