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I declare that this essay is my own original work

A Christian response to pandemics

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that Christians have become more firmly reacquainted than ever with the unremitting question of suffering posed by the world. Thankfully now, due to scientific developments, locating the causation of these diseases is the easy task. Yet, the question of *why?* remains. Placing the reason on God's wrath is a passable conclusion in some eyes, but with certainty, Christians can agree that all disease stems from the fallen nature of this world. We understand that heaven will not be faced with such issues. This hopeful morality has been a resource from Christians to others facing looming death during pandemics and epidemics of the past; and it has ignited the spread of the faith. In this 'normal situation'¹ for the church, our main response remains the same as in our 2,000 year history, follow Jesus' commands. Of course, the ways to show love to your neighbour may change for Christians in each outbreak, yet the underlying messages remain true and are key to a Christ-centred response.

Firstly, a Christian response to a pandemic does not need to offer an answer to the *specific why?* question. Giving a fixed answer has often been a habitual reaction to epidemics and pandemics in the past. Many Christians would have argued that these outbreaks were a punishment from God or a sign of the end-times, and Christians suggesting these ideas remain. However, this rationalistic approach has never biblically been the answer. Turning to the Psalms we can see the aching questions poised by David. For example, in Psalm 10 we read him asking 'Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?' Laments such as these are also spoken by Jesus with a poignant example being 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46) These laments seek God's reassurance, not his answers that we do not hold. Furthermore, lamenting is something so powerful as emphasised by N. T. Wright: 'the mystery of the biblical story is that *God also laments.*'² So, in a pandemic situation, Christians can lament and grieve, but not need to explain.

However, Christians can give a comforting response to non-Christians who are asking the *why?* questions. The 15-year-long 'Plague of Galen' was a large epidemic that started in 165, killing 'from a quarter to a third' of the Roman Empire's population, including the emperor Marcus Aurelius.³ In such a demoralised society, people searched for hopeful answers. The Pagans did not give adequate responses and if anything they would bring more misery by explaining the carelessness of the gods on their situation, or by putting it down to the gods' hatred. The philosophers could give no other answer but human luck which did not bring any meaning to this seemingly unfair life. So, it was the Christians who had the hopeful message. Christians proclaimed that if you have faith in Christ, then there is no need to fear the disease or fear death, as this life is temporary and eternal life in heaven is a prospect. This positive vision of the future beyond death comforted and inspired so many as it 'made their life meaningful.'⁴ So, the epidemic ended up playing a key role in the rise of Christianity. Therefore, the same answer can be used today with a

¹ Jenkins, P, Ph. D. (2020, April 7). Look to History to Learn How Christians Responded (Good and Bad) to Epidemics. Retrieved 20 August 2020, from <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=218427>

² Wright, N. T. (2020, March 29). Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To. Retrieved 15 August 2020, from <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

³ Stark, R. (1996). *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Ed ed.). Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press.

⁴ McNeill, W. H. (1976). *Plagues and Peoples* (1st ed.). Garden City, New York: Anchor.

pandemic: the response Christians must give to the *why?* questions asked by non-believers, is the gospel.

Most importantly, a Christian response to the pandemic should be one of love and charity. Often Christians let the true meaning of 'love your neighbour as yourself' fade in their understandings. It is a phrase so commonly heard yet it is so easy to forget the hugely counter-cultural calling it holds. And, in a pandemic, the concept carries even more weight. The word Jesus uses for love does not just mean being kind to others, but it conveys the willingness to lay down your life for them. Rodney Stark wrote 'as God demonstrated his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another.'⁵ So, what does this sacrificial love look like during a pandemic? It actually looks very similar to how Lutherans responded to the bubonic plague in 1527. During this time, Martin Luther wrote about 'whether Christians should flee the Plague.' In summary, he argued that they should not, and that we should 'die at our posts.'⁶ He argues that one should tend to the sick as Christ did himself, and if it leads to death then so be it. However, he also warns us to be careful of not endangering others through recklessness. He 'encourages believers to obey quarantine orders, fumigate their houses, and take precautions to avoid spreading the sickness.'⁷ The same goes for today during a pandemic, we must be cautious of others and obey government guidelines so that we can protect the sanctity of the lives of around us.

The church in the second century also illustrate an important message on charity and love. Firstly, they recognised that they could not *treat* the sick, as not even doctors of the time knew how. However, they did end up cutting the mortality rate by 'two-thirds or even more.'⁸ This was done through simple nursing in their community. They provided water, food and other necessities to those who were sick. Today, this can equate to helping out the elderly by shopping for them to stop their risk of transmission. Secondly, the early church highlighted the importance of thanking community efforts. Bishop Dionysius wrote a long letter praising the 'heroic nursing effort of local Christians,' many of whom died whilst caring for others.⁹ So, a Christian response to a pandemic is one in which we continue building up and supporting others who have risked their lives for others.

Overall, the key response Christians should have to a pandemic is one of love and care for others during the crisis. It is so powerful, as shown in the past, where it has caused a time of great growth in the kingdom of God.

⁵ Stark, R. (1996). *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Ed ed.). Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Stone, L. (2020, March 13). In *Coronavirus Pandemic, Christianity Has Ancient Lessons*. Retrieved 15 August 2020, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Stark, R. (1996). *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Ed ed.). Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press.

⁹ Ibid