

# How Should A Christian Act During a Deadly Epidemic?

by Martin Luther



## Introduction

In 1527 the epidemic referred to as the Black Death raged through Germany, including the city of Wittenberg. Duke John ordered the professors and students of Wittenberg University to move to the city of Jena for safety. Professor Martin Luther, who also served as a local pastor, refused to leave and remained to comfort the sick. Others wrote to Luther asking him whether a Christian could flee during the epidemic or should rather stay in his city even if it endangers his own health. After repeated appeals for his opinion, and after others began criticizing Luther's own actions, he finally wrote the following letter which he then had published.

When we face epidemics today, Luther's godly advice can still be a useful guide for Christians—pastors, government officials, caregivers, medical professionals, and laymen. God's message and his care have not changed. While Luther's letter does show us how primitive medical knowledge about diseases was in his day, his common-sense approach needs only a bit of updating for the modern world.

Note that his advice was given to Christians. Only Christians know that God is in control of all things, and that God often uses events like epidemics for his own purposes—and that they can even be a blessing to his people. Only Christians have no fear of their own earthly death, for they know that eternal happiness awaits them. And only Christians have the love of Christ as their example in serving their neighbors, even when it might be dangerous. When we are in the middle of an epidemic, our Christian faith has even more meaning and brings us even more peace than in good times. Asia Lutheran Seminary hopes this letter will encourage you in your faith.

We have shortened Luther’s letter for the sake of space, but we encourage you to read the whole letter. Our English translation was updated from that of Carl Schindler in *Luther’s Works, vol. 43: Devotional Writings II*, edited by J. Pelikan et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 119-138, and is used by permission. The translation of T. Tappert is also available in a Kindle version in *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Papamoa Press, 2018; originally published by Westminster Press, 1955). A Chinese translation of that translation was published by Oak Tree (Shanghai, 2017). We have added paragraph numbers for reference and discussion purposes.<sup>1</sup>



## **How Should a Christian Act During a Deadly Epidemic?**

To the Reverend Doctor Johann Hess, pastor at Breslau,  
and to his fellow-servants of the gospel of Jesus Christ  
from Martin Luther

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Your letter, sent to me at Wittenberg, was received some time ago. You wish to know whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague. ...
2. ... Therefore, I will now give you my opinion as far as God grants me to understand and perceive. I would humbly submit to your judgment and to that of all devout Christians for them, as is proper, to come to their own decision and conclusion. Since

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<sup>1</sup> When publishing his letter, Luther added two final sections of several pages on the subjects of preparing for death and public cemeteries. We have omitted those sections.

rumors of death are to be heard in these and many other parts also, I have permitted these instructions of mine to be printed because others might also want to make use of them.

3. To begin with, some people are of the firm opinion that one need not and should not run away from a deadly plague. Rather, since death is God's punishment, which he sends upon us for our sins, we must submit to God and with a true and firm faith patiently await our punishment. These people think that running away is clearly wrong and shows a lack of faith in God. Others take the position that one may properly flee, particularly if one holds no public office.

4. I cannot criticize the former for their excellent decision. They uphold a good cause, namely, a strong faith in God, and deserve to be commended because they desire every Christian to hold to a strong, firm faith. But it takes more than a milk faith to await a death before which most of God's people themselves have been and still are in dread. Who would not praise these serious people to whom death means so little? They willingly accept God's punishment, doing so without tempting God, as we shall hear later on.

5. However, since it is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot put the same burden on everyone. A person who has a strong faith can drink poison and suffer no harm (Mark 16:18), while one who has a weak faith would drink of it to his death. Peter could walk upon the water because he was strong in faith. But when he began to doubt and his faith weakened, he sank and almost drowned. When a strong man travels with a weak man, he must hold himself back so as not to walk as fast as his own strength allows and by doing so set a pace that harms his weaker companion. Christ does not want his weak ones to be abandoned, as St. Paul teaches in Romans 15:1 and 1 Corinthians 12:22 ff. In short, running away from death may happen in one of two ways. First, it may happen in disobedience to God's word and command. For example, in the case of a man who is imprisoned for the sake of God's word and who, to escape death, denies and repudiates God's word. In such a situation everyone has Christ's plain decree and command not to flee but rather to suffer death, as he says,

“Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven” and “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28, 33).

6. Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast when at risk of death. We have a plain command from Christ, “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees” (John 10:11). 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. Where enough preachers are available in one location, however, and they encourage the other clergy to leave so that they too are not exposing themselves needlessly to danger, I do not consider such action sinful; for everyone’s spiritual needs are being provided for, and because they would have been ready and willing to stay if it had been necessary. ... The Christians in Damascus lowered Paul in a basket over the wall to make it possible for him to escape (Acts 9:25). And in Acts 19:30 Paul allowed himself to be kept from risking danger in the marketplace because it was not essential for him to do so.

7. In the same way, all public officials such as mayors, judges, and the like have the responsibility to remain. This, too, is God’s word, which establishes earthly authority and commands that town and country be ruled, protected, and preserved, as St. Paul teaches in Romans 13:4, “The governing authorities are God’s ministers for your own good.” To abandon an entire community which one has been called to govern and to leave it without official or government, exposed to all kinds of danger such as fires, murder, riots, and every imaginable disaster is a great sin....

8. What applies to these two offices [church and state] should also apply to persons who have some sort of a relationship of service or duty toward one another. A servant should not leave his master nor a maid her mistress except with the knowledge and permission of the master or mistress. Again, a master should not desert his servant or a lady her maid unless suitable arrangements have been made in some way for their care. In all these matters it is a divine command that servants and maids should obey and likewise masters and ladies should take care of their servants. Similarly, fathers and mothers are

bound by God's law to serve and help their children, and children their fathers and mothers. Likewise, paid public servants such as city physicians, city clerks and police, or whatever their titles, should not flee unless they can provide for capable substitutes who are acceptable to their employer.

9. In the case of orphan children, guardians or close friends are under obligation either to stay with them or to arrange diligently for people to nurse and care for their sick friends. Yes, no one should dare leave his neighbor unless there are others who will take care of the sick in their place and nurse them. In such cases we must respect the word of Christ, "I was sick and you did not visit me ..." (Matt. 25:41–46). According to this passage we are tied to each other in such a way that no one may forsake the other in his need but is required to assist and help him as he himself would like to be helped.

10. But if there no such emergencies and there are enough people available for nursing and taking care of the sick, ... I judge that then they have an equal choice either to flee or to remain. If someone is sufficiently bold and strong in his faith, let him stay in God's name. That is certainly not a sin. If someone is weak and fearful, let him flee in God's name as long as he does not neglect his duty toward his neighbor but has made adequate arrangements for others to provide nursing care. To flee from death and to save one's life is a natural tendency, implanted by God and not forbidden unless it be against God and neighbor, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 5:29, "No man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it." It is even commanded that every man should as much as possible preserve is own body and life and not neglect them, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:21–26....

12. Many examples in Holy Scripture prove that to flee from death is not wrong in itself. Abraham was a great saint but he feared death and escaped it by pretending that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. Because he did so without neglecting or adversely affecting his neighbor, it was not counted as a sin against him. ... Likewise, David fled from Saul, and from Absalom. The prophet Uriah escaped from King Jehoiakim and fled into Egypt. ... Before that, Moses fled into the land of Midian when the king went looking for him in Egypt. Many others have done likewise. All of them fled from death when

they could, and in this way saved their lives, yet without depriving their neighbors of anything but fulfilling their responsibilities toward them.

13. Yes, you may reply, but these examples do not refer to dying by plague but to death under persecution. ... I hear people say, "If war or the Turks come, one should not flee from his village or town but stay and await God's punishment by the sword." That is quite true; let him who has a strong faith wait for his death, but he should not condemn those who take flight.

14. By such reasoning, when a house is on fire, no one should run outside or rush to help because such a fire is also a punishment from God. Anyone who falls into deep water should not save himself by swimming but must allow the water to take him as with a divine punishment. Very well, do so if you can but do not tempt God, and allow others to do as much as they are capable of doing. ... Hunger and thirst are also great punishments and torture. Why do you eat and drink instead of letting yourself be punished until hunger and thirst stop all by themselves? Ultimately this kind of logic will lead to the point where we shorten the Lord's Prayer and no longer pray, "deliver us from evil, Amen," since we would have to stop praying to be saved from hell and stop seeking to escape it. It, too, is God's punishment as is every kind of evil. Where would all this end?

15. From what we have said, we conclude with this advice: We must pray against every form of evil and guard against it to the best of our ability in order not to act contrary to God, as was previously explained. If it be God's will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us. Everybody must take this to heart: first of all, if he feels bound to remain where death rages in order to serve his neighbor, let him put himself in God's hands and say, "Lord, I am in your hands; you have kept me here; your will be done. I am your humble creature. You can kill me or save me in this plague in the same way as if I were threatened by fire, water, drought, or any other danger." If a man is free, however, and can escape, let him put himself in God's hands 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. Still I am in your hands in this danger as in any other

that might come to me. Your will be done. Fleeing will not succeed by itself because harm and danger are everywhere....”

16. We must act in the same way toward our neighbor, for we also owe him the same treatment in other troubles and perils. If his house is on fire, love compels me to run to help him put out the flames. If there are enough other people around to put the fire out, I may either go home or remain to help.... If I see that he is hungry or thirsty, I cannot ignore him but must offer him food and drink, not thinking about whether I would risk making myself poor by doing so. A man who will not help or support others unless he can do so without risking his own safety or property will never help his neighbor. He will always decide that there is a possibility that by doing so he will bring some harm and damage, danger and loss to himself....

17. Anyone who does not help his neighbor, but forsakes him and leaves him to his misfortune, becomes a murderer in the sight of God, as St. John states in his epistles, “Whoever does not love his brother is a murderer,” and again, “If anyone has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need [but closes his heart against him], how could God’s love be abiding in him?” (1 John 3:15, 17). ... Christ, therefore, will condemn them as murderers on the Last Day when he will say, “I was sick, and you did not visit me,” Matt. 25:43. If that will be the judgment on those who failed to visit the sick and needy or to offer them help, what will become of those who abandoned them and let them lie there by themselves like dogs and pigs? ...

18. It would be well, where there is such an efficient government in cities and states, to maintain public 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 situation or we will risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God. Thus it is written in God’s word and command, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and in Matthew 7:12, “Whatever you wish that men should do to you, do that to them.”

19. Now when 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 might not 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. ... Nevertheless, this is God’s decree and punishment to which we must patiently submit and serve our neighbor, risking our lives in this manner as St. John teaches, “If Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16).

20. When anyone is stunned with horror and disgust in the presence of a sick person he should take courage and strength in the firm assurance that it is the devil who stirs up such disgust, fear, and dislike in his heart. He is such a bitter, wicked devil that he not only never stops trying to kill and destroy, but also takes pleasure in making us deathly afraid, worried, and nervous, making us think of dying as horrible and giving us no peace or rest through our entire lives. And so the devil would expel us from this life as he tries to make us despair of God, become unwilling and unprepared to die, and, under the stormy and dark sky of fear and anxiety, make us forget and lose Christ, our light and life, and desert our neighbor in his troubles. By doing so, we would sin against God and man. And we should arm ourselves with this answer to the devil:

21. “Get away, you devil, with your terrors! Just because you hate it, I will defy you by going and even more quickly helping my sick neighbor. I will pay no attention to you. I can defeat you with two strong attacks: First of all, I know that helping my neighbor is something that is very pleasing to God and all the angels; by doing so, I am doing God’s will and offering true service and obedience to him. ... No, you’ll not have the last word! If Christ shed his blood for me and died for me, why should I not expose myself to some small dangers for his sake and disregard this weak plague? If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs,

Christ has far greater medicine.... Here is Christ and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail! Amen.”

22. My second attack against the devil is God’s mighty promise by which he encourages those who minister to the needy. He says in Psalm 41:1–3, “Blessed is he who looks after the poor. The Lord will bring him through the day of trouble. The Lord will protect him and keep him alive; the Lord will bless him on earth and not give him up to the will of his enemies. The Lord will support him on his sickbed. In his illness he will heal all his weaknesses.” Are not these glorious and mighty promises of God heaped up upon those who minister to the needy? What should terrorize us or frighten us away from such great and divine comfort? ...

23. But whoever serves the sick for the sake of God’s gracious promise, though he may accept a suitable reward to which he is entitled, inasmuch as every laborer is worthy of his hire—whoever does so has the great assurance that he shall in turn be cared for. God himself shall be his nurse and his physician, too. And what a nurse he is! What a physician! Friend, what are all the physicians, pharmacists, and nurses in comparison to God? ... Again, what harm could overtake you if the whole world were to desert you and no physician would remain beside you, but God would remain with you with his assurance? Do you not know that you are surrounded by thousands of angels who watch over you in such a way that you can indeed crush the plague, as it is written in Psalm 91:11–13, “He will order his angels to protect you and guard you wherever you go; they will hold you up with their hands so that you will not even hurt your foot on a stone. You will walk over lions and poisonous snakes and trample young lions and snakes beneath your feet.”

24. Therefore, dear friends, let us not become so desperate as to desert our own people whom we are duty-bound to help and instead flee in such a cowardly way from the terror of the devil, or allow him the joy of mocking us and vexing and distressing God and all his angels. For the Christian who despises such great promises and commands of God and leaves his own people in need, is truly violating all of God’s laws and is guilty of

the murder of his neighbor whom he abandons. I fear that in such a case God's promise will be reversed and changed into horrible threats....

25. This I well know, that if it were Christ or his mother who fell sick, everybody would be so caring and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running. And yet they don't hear what Christ himself says, "When you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you were doing it to me" (Matt. 25:40). When he speaks of the greatest commandment he says, "The other commandment is like the first, you are to love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). There you hear that the command to love your neighbor is equal to the greatest commandment to love God; and that what you do or fail to do for your neighbor means doing it or failing to do it for God. If you wish to serve Christ and to help him, very well, you have your sick neighbor close by. Go to him and serve him, and you will surely find Christ in him, not outwardly but in his word. If you do not wish or care to serve your neighbor you can be sure that if it were Christ laying there instead you would not help him either and would just let him lie there. ... If we did that, we would be disregarding God's command in how we treat our neighbor and, in doing so, we would fall off "the narrow way" on the left side (Matthew 7:14).<sup>2</sup>

26. There are other sins we can fall into on the right side. These would be acting much too rashly and recklessly, tempting God and disregarding everything which might prevent death and the plague. This would mean not using medicines; not avoiding places and persons infected by the disease; joking about it and wishing to show that one is not afraid of it. They also say that it is God's punishment; if God wants to protect people, he can do it 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 our bodies so that we can live in good health.

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<sup>2</sup> Here and in the next paragraph, Luther speaks of falling off on the left side and the right side. He is obviously thinking of Jesus's picture in Matthew 7:14 about "the narrow road that leads to life."

27. If one makes no use of his intelligence or medicine when he could do so without harming his neighbor, such a person is harming his own body and must be careful that he does not commit suicide in God's eyes. By the same reasoning a person might stop eating and drinking, using clothing and shelter, and boldly proclaim his faith that if God wanted to save him from starvation and cold, he could do so without food and clothing. Actually, that would be suicide. It is even more shameful for a person not to take care of his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison other people who could have remained alive if he had taken care of his own body as he should have. In this way he would be responsible before God for his neighbor's death and would have committed multiple murders. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody was trying to put the fire out. Instead they allow the flames to spread until the whole city burns down, saying that if God wanted to, he could save the city and put out the flames without water.

28. No, my dear friends, that is not good. Use medicine; take treatments which can help you; fumigate your house, yard, and street; keep away from persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your 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 garbage. Therefore, I will ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I will fumigate,<sup>3</sup> help purify the air, give out medicine, and take it yourself. I will avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perhaps infect and transmit it to 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 any place or person but will go freely, as stated

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<sup>3</sup> In Luther's day, before knowledge of airborne diseases, burning herbs and shrubs was thought to be the best one could do to purify the air.

above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither rash nor reckless and does not tempt God. ...

31. If in the Old Testament God himself ordered lepers to be isolated from the community and forced to live outside the city to prevent spreading it to others (Leviticus 13–14), we must do the same with this dangerous epidemic so that anyone who becomes infected will stay away from other persons, or allow himself to be taken away and given speedy help with medicine. Under such circumstances it is our duty to assist such a person and not forsake him in his need, as I have repeatedly pointed out before. Then the poison can be stopped in time, which benefits not only the individual but also the whole community, which might become contaminated if one person is permitted to infect others. Our epidemic here in Wittenberg has been caused by nothing but filth. The air, thank God, is still clean and pure, but some few have been contaminated because of the laziness or carelessness of some. As a result, the devil is enjoying himself as he sees the terror and flight which he is causing among us. May God prevent him! Amen. This is what we think and conclude on this subject of fleeing from death by the plague. If you are of a different opinion, may God enlighten you. Amen.



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