
EARLY CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND RESPONSES TO EPIDEMICS

Douglas Robb Childress

Eesti Metodisti Kiriku Teoloogiline Seminar
Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary

Abstract

This paper looks at how the early Christian Church dealt with severe pandemics in its own time. Topics discussed will include a brief description of the two significant plagues they endured, how Christian beliefs were similar and different from the surrounding world, Christians' theological and practical views on health care, and possible outcomes of the response. The paper also gives some possible lessons which the modern church and the modern world could consider from their experience related to the current pandemic.

Keywords

Early Christianity and plagues · plague of Cyprian · plague of Galen · epidemics · Christianity and medicine

The past two years have been difficult for Estonia and the entire world as we have attempted to wrestle with the novel coronavirus disease, known as COVID-19, with its multiple strains, some more infectious than others (WHO 2022).¹ The spread of COVID-19 is global and has sparked an international response where not only medical workers but also government agencies as well as corporate and private sectors joined in efforts to contain the spread of the disease, caring for the sick, developing

¹ Currently, the World Health Organization lists over 525,000,000 cumulative cases, nearly 6,300,000 cumulative deaths, and approximately 535,000 new cases in the last 24 hours related to COVID.

therapeutics, and distributing vaccines. Since March 2020, we have spoken not of a local epidemic but a pandemic that sparked a global response with its global impact. The impact of the pandemic has been life-altering and goes beyond the medical implications. The pandemic has had societal, psychological, political, and economic consequences. It has changed the way we live, even the way we worship. When experiencing such unique events, it may be helpful to remember that the world has come through similar crises before. Perhaps there is something that we can learn from the way people in the past responded. This paper will look at how the early Christian Church dealt with these severe pandemics in their own time, the outcomes of their response, and draw some possible lessons that the modern world could consider from their experience related to the current pandemic.

THE PLAGUES

Several pandemics swept through the Roman Mediterranean in the second and third centuries *Anno Domini*, with the empire-wide Galen and Cyprian plagues chief among them.

The plague of Galen (AD 165–180), also known as the Antonine Plague, was named after the famous physician who described its symptoms. Galen described the symptoms in his work *Methodus Medendi*. The Antonine Plague was the first significant plague to sweep the entire Roman Empire. Current death toll estimates range from 5 to 10 million people, including co-emperors Marcus Aurelius Antonius and Marcus Annus Verus (Murphy 2005). Most scholars believe the likely culprit was smallpox based on the recorded symptoms. However, measles is also a possible candidate (Stark 1997: 73).

The Cyprian Plague (AD 249–262) was so named because the famous bishop of Carthage recorded a significant amount of what is known about this under-documented patch of human history (Stark 1997: 76). The plague lasted at least 13 years, though some believe it may have been up to 20 years in length (Horgan 2016). All extant sources agree that this pestilence defined the age (Harper 2017: 76). The symptoms reported by Cyprian led some scholars today to believe it was either a viral hemorrhagic

fever (Harper 2017) or smallpox or measles (Stark 1997: 73).

The death toll from the Cyprian plague was also catastrophically high. Plague historian William H. McNeil believes the death rate was severe. Judging by what new diseases do to populations with no previous contact with dangerous contagions, McNeil estimates that in the affected areas, „as much as a quarter to a third of the entire population died“ (McNeil 1976: 116). Albeit, McNeil adds, not every area within the Roman empire was affected, but enough of the empire was affected, including Rome, to be noticeable in the empire (McNeil 1976: 116).

EFFECT OF PLAGUES AND GENERAL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE

Before addressing the Christian response to the plague, it is necessary to address the Roman/Ancient Mediterranean response to pestilences to have context for understanding how the Christian response was different.

The Roman response during times of plague tended to be that every person had to take care of themselves. The care involved fleeing from the affected area. Deacon Pontius of Carthage, a disciple of Cyprian, wrote an account of the great bishop's life shortly after his death which reads like a funeral message entitled „The Life of Cyprian“. Therein Pontius described the horrors of the plague and how fearful people became of the pestilence. He also noted how the plague brought out the worst in people leading them to flee even from loved ones. He added, „No one regarded anything but cruel gains; no one trembled at the remembrance of a similar experience; no one did to another what he wished done to him“ (*Life* 9). Dionysius of Alexandria, whose letter is preserved in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, also reported a similar reaction on the part of non-Christians. After highlighting the selfless service of Christians to their own and others (discussed below), Dionysius recorded his thoughts regarding the non-Christian community noting that the pagan response was entirely the opposite. „They would thrust away those who were just beginning to fall sick, and they fled their dearest; they would cast them upon the roads half-dead and would treat the unburied bodies as vile

refuse...“ (*Hist. eccl.* 7:22). All this, according to Dionysius, was done to avoid the contagion, which he saw as a futile endeavor.

The reports of Pontius and Dionysius come from a Christian perspective of the events and probably overlook some noble attempts by non-Christians to assist their ailing family members and others. However, their accounts seem in line with the most famous account of recorded reactions to plagues in the ancient world written by Thucydides in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (431–404 BC). While it is 600 years earlier than the Cyprian plague, it is one of the few detailed, eye-witness accounts of a plague in the ancient world.

Thucydides recorded events surrounding a deadly plague that rampaged Athens in BC 431. He first chronicled medicine was ineffective in combating the plague as well as prayers (*Hist. Pelop. War* 2:47). He then recorded how people treated the sick and how people perished faster who gave into fear of having the disease. Some, Thucydides reported, died from lack of care. Others had caregivers, yet still perished. But these were not the most tragic deaths in his estimation. The most tragic deaths were those who realized they had contracted the dreaded disease and were so distraught and overwhelmed by contracting this pestilence, that they gave up and died. This utter dejection appeared to have been heightened by people refusing to visit them out of fear of the disease (*Hist. Pelop. War* 2:51). Fear of the disease and the death which is wrought affected both the ability of the afflicted to hope for healing and the willingness of others, including family, to assist those who were ill.

It also appears from Thucydides’s statement that some of the sick were left to care for themselves, while some others were assisted by neighbors. Indeed, Thucydides would himself contract the illness and survive. He would assist the sick when he realized that he was now immune, or at the very least if he were infected again, it would be weaker and not life-threatening. Like Thucydides, there would be others who survived the illness who would assist the afflicted to the praise of their fellow citizens (*Hist. Pelop. War* 2:52). Regardless, it is clear many who were infected by the plague were left to care for themselves which often led to their death.

Thucydides reported how funerary rights and respect for religious norms broke down under the weight of the plague. People would

essentially burn their bodies together instead of in a manner considered respectable (Hist. Pelop. War 2:52).

According to Thucydides, the arbitrary nature of death also brought about distrust of laws and gods. „No fear of god or law of men remained; for, on the one hand, seeing that all men were perishing alike, they judged that piety and impiety came to the same thing“ (Hist. Pelop. War 2:53). What is more, they feared no judgment in the afterlife for „... no one expected that he would live to be called to account and pay the penalty for his misdeeds“ (Hist. Pelop. War 2:53).

The accounts of Cyprian, Dionysius, and Thucydides of the public responses to plagues show a society in the grips of utter fear. People were not willing, or at the very least, far less likely to help one another, even close relatives. The prevalence of death seems to have led, in Thucydides' time, to a degree of disbelief or an abandoning of worship of the Greek deities by some. Law and order broke down. Also, it was an issue for people that both the good and bad were dying indiscriminately.

Greco-Roman religions and philosophies also lacked a strong moral ethic to assist the afflicted or distressed, even in times devoid of plague. This is highlighted in a letter written by Emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363 AD) to the high priest Arsacius which lamented how paganism failed to attract or retain adherents and allowed Christianity to flourish because of their ethics and good works and lack there-of by pagans:

The Hellenic religion does not yet prosper as I desire, and it is the fault of those who profess (it)...Why do we not observe that their (Christians') benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives have done the most to increase atheism (Christianity)? I believe that we ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues. It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us (*Letter 22*).

It is worth noting, regarding the plagues discussed in this article, that Julian was upset that care for „the graves of the dead“ is important. If benevolence to strangers was not occurring during healthy times, how much more was it not being properly conducted during the times of the plague? Julian would also lay out and fund a plan of action for Arsacius

and his priests to care for the sick, poor, and travelers in emulation of the Christians. Moreover, Julian wanted it to be taught that it had always been the case that the „Hellenic religion“ had taught the importance of doing good works (*Letter 22*). Stark hypothesizes that Julian’s program did not work, in part, because such charity had no root in pagan theology or practice, that is, it was not expected by the gods (Stark 1997: 88).

That the poor response to the plagues is highlighted at the highest level of authority (by the Emperor himself) demonstrates that the problem was widespread, and their culture and religions did not have good mechanisms or theologies for helping people to cope with times of catastrophic plague.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE AND BEHAVIOR DURING PLAGUES

The Christian response to plagues stood out from the general society as robust and all-encompassing as the reports by those who lived during the plagues, which I will now examine, indicate. Aside from Justin Martyr (whom I will quote in the next segment below), who lived during the Plague of Galen, all other sources are from the Plague of Cyprian.

First, Christians responded by pronouncing that the plague had a divine purpose that could be fulfilled through the plague. In a written sermon believed to have been delivered to his flock in his diocese of Carthage, Bishop Cyprian declared it all a part of the divine plan. If a person’s hope was in the things of God, then they should not have been troubled by things such as a plague causing massive carnage. Indeed, Christ had proclaimed that not only pestilences would come but also earthquakes and famines and that all these things would worsen before the kingdom of God would arrive. With all these things occurring, the kingdom’s coming was closer than ever; it had to offer life, joy, eternal salvation, and everlasting happiness. Hence, there was no room for worry even in the face of a catastrophic plague (*Mort. 2*).

Cyprian’s words were pastoral and helpful. Cyprian assisted Christians in coping with this great catastrophe by giving the events deeper meaning. It was part of a larger plan, not just some random

occurrence. God had ordained these events as he said he would. Those who were undergoing these events were not suffering needlessly. They were part of a larger unfolding drama that pointed the way toward the full coming of the kingdom of God.

Second, Christians responded to the plague by teaching that it should not be feared because it was a time of testing one's faith in and loyalty to God. According to Cyprian, most Christians were not disturbed by the mortality, but showed their faith to be strong, while some needed growth (*Mort.* 1).

Cyprian believed that it was a Christian virtue not to be disturbed by the deadly plague that had consumed many and could ultimately ensnare them. Indeed, to be disturbed and in fear was equated with giving into evil worldly temptations. Most had been tested by the plague and stood strong. Some in his churches, however, had not stood up to the test and received criticism. Cyprian would equate such with, among other things, wandering from the truth, a weakness of faith, and possessing „a luxury-loving mind“ (*Mort.* 1). All these things, he admonished, must be overcome.

Once again, great meaning was given to the suffering people were undergoing by showing the plague to have a greater purpose than present fear and random death. There was purpose to be had amid this suffering. It was a time people had to prove whether they were aligned with God or aligned with the world or other priorities. Christians were taught by Cyprian to act selflessly and according to the values of their faith.

Third, Christians responded to the plague by teaching that death was not to be feared because it brought about release from the pains of this world and offered the joys and opportunities of paradise. Cyprian declared:

As to the fact that meanwhile we die, we pass by death to immortality, nor an eternal life succeeds unless it has befallen us to depart from here. This is not an end, but a passage and, the journey of time being traversed, a crossing over to eternity. We would not hasten to better things. Who would not pray to be more quickly hanged and reformed to the image of Christ and to the dignity of heavenly grace... (*Mort.* 22).

The concept of eternal life is a comfort to many Christians, also in contemporary times. It assists people to have a certain level of calm in

the face of death, whether their own impending demise or the passing of a friend or relative. Cyprian was addressing that spiritual need. It also would have had the effect of at least mitigating fear of death and giving it further meaning and purpose. This could have given needed encouragement for Christians to care for others at risk to themselves, which was lacking in other segments of society.

Cyprian was adamant that Christians should not lament the passing of loved ones who had succumbed to the plague; they were now freed from this life and had entered a blissful afterlife that was better than the one they previously possessed.

Our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way; that as travelers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longed for and not lamented; and that dark clothing should not be worn here, since they have already assumed white garments there... (*Mort.* 1).

In my opinion, Cyprian was here speaking in hyperbole. It was more than likely that Christians during this plague did mourn the loss of their loved ones. Even if they felt certain in their understanding that their loved ones were now living in bliss in eternal life, it is hard to imagine they would not have lamented their loss. Moreover, Cyprian also said that those who pass away are „longed for“. Regardless, Cyprian may have used hyperbole to assist people in their grief to feel more comforted knowing their kin or friend was now somewhere so grand they did not need to despair.

Fourth, Christians responded by teaching that while there was meaning and purpose in their sufferings, there was no meaning in suffering apart from Christ. Cyprian contrasted Christian's purpose in suffering with Jews, pagans, and others who (in his opinion) genuinely have no meaning in this suffering and have reason to fear judgment upon death because they have no relationship with the Christian God.

Many of us are dying of this mortality. That is, many of us are being freed from the world. This mortality is a bane to the Jews and pagans and enemies of Christ; to the servants of God, a salutary departure. As to the fact that, without any discrimination in the human race, the just also are dying with the unjust, it is not for you to think that the destruction

is a common one for both the evil and the good. The just are called to refreshment; the unjust are carried off to torture; protection is more quickly given to the faithful; punishment to the faithless (*Mort. 1*).

Just as Thucydides 600 years earlier had pondered from his religious viewpoint that both the pious and impious randomly dying together raised theological questions. Christians also noted the same issue that the people, noted by Thucydides, had put differently. Why are both Christians and non-Christians dying together? If God is God of the Christians only, how can they have the same fate as non-believers? It was an important question because Thucydides noted that randomness caused people to lose faith in their gods.

Cyprian's answer was that both dying together was not what was important. In a sense, it is an illusion to think that both Christians and non-Christians have shared the same fate. The true nature of things was that Christians had a bright future after death while non-believers had torment. In Cyprian's view, evil and good will be judged entirely differently (*Mort. 16*).

Placing God's judgment in the mix means Christians would have had some theological grounds for understanding the plague not to be quite as random. This assisted Christians in holding on to their faith and thus making the plague slightly less frightening.

Fifth, Christians viewed the plague as a time to put their beliefs into action and grow. Cyprian even calls the plague necessary for these purposes:

How necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and everyone and examines the minds of the human race: whether the good care for the sick, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted begging for help, whether the violent repress their violence, whether the greedy, even through fear of death, quench the ever insatiable fire of their raging avarice, whether the proud bend their necks, whether the shameless soften their affrontery, whether the rich, even when their dear ones are perishing and they are about to die without heirs, bestow and give something!... These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death, they prepare for a crown (*Mort. 16*).

It was important for Christians to put service above fear and to elevate the welfare of others to at least the same level as welfare for oneself. Turning aside out of fear of the plague or not doing all within one's power to help the afflicted was not an option. All must be done to assist those who were sick.

Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria and leader of the city's famed catechetical school, in his second letter mentioning the plague, also noted the Christian response to the plague.

... most of our brethren, through their surpassing love and brotherly kindness being unsparing of themselves and clinging to one another, fearlessly visiting the sick and continually ministering to them, serving them in Christ, most cheerfully departed this life with them, becoming infected with the affliction of others, and drawing the sickness from their neighbors upon themselves, and willingly taking over their pains. And many, after they had cared for the sickness of others and restored them to health, themselves, died, transferring their death to themselves... The best, ... among us departed from life in this manner, some presbyters and deacons and some of the laity who were praised exceedingly, so that this form of death, which had its origin in much piety and strong faith, seemed to be a little short of martyrdom. And taking up the bodies of the saints with open hands at the bosom, and closing their eyes, and shutting their mouths, and bearing them away on their shoulders, and laying them out, clinging to them, embracing them, adorning them by washings and garments, after a little they obtained like services, those who were left behind always falling upon those who went before (*Hist eccl.* 7:22).

Dionysius showed an ethic where Christians would seek out the infected and sick, giving them the care they needed, even in their own homes and at risk to their own lives. As discussed below, some think this may have had a significant impact on survival rates. The service was valued highly; indeed, it was equated with martyrdom. It is also interesting to note that there was no expectation that God would somehow divinely protect the caregiver from harm. It was readily acknowledged that many caregivers would perish in their service.

This care for the sick, according to Pontius, included care for those who were both Christian and non-Christian. After commenting on how the general public and worshippers of Greco-Roman gods were passing

over those afflicted with the plague, he recorded the following regarding Cyprian's actions and words:

It would be a crime to pass over the actions of Christ and God's high priest in these circumstances, one who had surpassed the world's high priests in piety and the truth of religion. First of all, he instructed the assembled people on the blessings of mercy; by examples from Holy Writ, he taught them how much the offices of charity avail to merit God. He added that it was not all remarkable if we cherish only our brethren with the proper observance of charity. Indeed, a man would only become perfect if he did more than the publican or heathen by overcoming evil with good, exercising divine-like clemency, loving even his enemies, and further praying for the salvation of his persecutors, as the Lord advises and encourages. He continually makes His sun rise and imparts sudden rain to nourish the seeds, showing all these kindnesses not merely to His friends. Should not one who professes to be a son of God imitate the example of the Father? It is proper for us to correspond to our birth, and it does not become those who are reborn in God to be degenerate, but as a son, the descendant of a good father should instead prove the imitation of his goodness (*Life* 9).

Christians were not merely to care for their own during the plague. It was to be extended even to those beyond the church. This also will have ramifications which will be discussed below.

THE ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN ETHIC OF CARING FOR THE SICK

Many researchers agree that the Christian ethic to care for the sick was not new to times of plague but had roots in earlier Christian teachings. The Christian ethic of caring for the sick started well before the plagues discussed in this article afflicted the world.

Medical historian Gary B. Ferngren, in his book, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity*, notes that „From the very beginning, Christianity displayed a marked philanthropic imperative that manifested itself in both personal and corporate concern for those in physical need“ (2009: 114). Christian charity, which included care for both the poor and sick, was rooted in church theology and praxis:

Christianity regarded charity as motivated by *agape*, a self-giving love of one's fellow human beings that reflected God's incarnational and redemptive love in Jesus Christ. At the same time, ordinary Christians were encouraged privately to visit the sick and aid the poor (2009: 114).

Scripture consistently pronounces the poor as a distinct class, worthy of justice and care (Wilken 2012). Examples abound in the Old Testament. For example, Leviticus admonishes the ancient Israelites not to glean the edges of their field or pick up fallen grapes but rather „leave them for the poor and foreigner“ (19:9–10). The prophet Ezekiel informed that judgment came to Sodom because „they did not help the poor and needy“ (16:49). Proverb 19:17 instructs, „Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD“.

This ethic is also highlighted in the New Testament, where Jesus frequently ties eternal reward not to one's hospitality to friends but the down-and-out: „when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors: if you do, they may invite you back, and so you will be repaid. However, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous“ (Luke 14:12–14). John admonishes, „If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions in truth“ (1 John 3:17–18). Paul pronounces, „Share with the Lord's people who are in need“ (Romans 12:13). The book of Acts shows the early church already establishing internal structures for the distribution of food to widows (Acts 6:1–7).

This Biblical ethic to care for the needy, sick, and poor would continue in the centuries which followed and is reflected in early Christian sermons, literature, and recorded actions. Many Christian sermons challenged Christian communities to care for the less fortunate. Augustine, in the concluding paragraph of a sermon entitled *On Almsgiving* (one of three on the topic), proclaimed from the pulpit: „Therefore, give to the poor. I beg you, I admonish you, I charge you, I command you to give“ (61:13). Also, Justin Martyr records collections for the needy and sick as a regular part of Christian worship in the mid-second century:

If they wish, the wealthy contribute whatever they desire, and the collection is placed in the president's custody. (With it) he helps the orphans and widows, those who are needy because of sickness or any other reason, and the captives and strangers in our midst; in short, he takes care of all those in need (*1 Apol.* 67).

The church, through a combination of its beliefs, discipline, and effective leadership, was able to create „an organization, unique in the classical world, that effectively and systematically cared for its sick“ as well as others in need (Ferngren 2009: 114). Ferngren notes that the same sort of concern and care was absent in the classical world, „which had no religious impulse for the charity that took the form of personal concern for those in distress...“ (2009: 114). So, there were vast differences between the Christian response and much of the rest of the Mediterranean world to issues of care of people in general and during times of plague in particular.

One similarity between how general society and Christians would have gone about combating a plague was that they possessed approximately the same level of acceptance of what today would be considered medical science. It is important to realize when discussing plagues when considering response to the corona virus today since today, a small but vocal minority does reject vaccines and other medical initiatives believing it to be a violation of their religious beliefs to use them.

Medical historian Gary B. Ferngren, in his book, *Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity* notes:

Christians of the first five centuries held views regarding the use of medicine and the healing of disease that did not differ appreciably from those that were widely taken for granted in the Graeco-Roman world in which they lived. They did not attribute most diseases to demons, they did not ordinarily seek miraculous or religious cures, and they employed natural means of healing, whether these means involved physicians or home or traditional remedies (2009: 2).

Confusion has existed in the past over how much Christians relied on the miraculous and science due to several factors which Ferngren notes. One is that we have no medical texts from early Christians, so it is necessary to rely on what is seen through their actions and commenting

on medicine indirectly. Secondly, the Bible, by nature, does not directly or unambiguously discuss the role of medicine in a believer's life. For instance, the healing narratives of Jesus are not meant to be understood strictly as how all diseases are to be healed (Ferngren 2009: 2).

Nowhere does the Bible discuss the role of medicine. However, this is not surprising. Ferngren states, „The New Testament does not yield unambiguous answers to the questions we ask about sickness and healing because its authors' intention was not to provide information about them but to place them within the context of their intended purpose“ (2009: 2).

Ancients did not have the strong divisions which exist today between religion and what the modern world would term science. Christians and followers of other religions would use the medical scientific arts they knew at approximately the same rate and not shun or replace them with religious techniques.

Ferngren notes that one reason for the similarity in practices is that many Christians in the early church, „accepted a naturalistic view of disease causation and rejected the belief that demons caused ordinary disease and that healing was effected by exorcism“, adding, „... miraculous and religious healing played a minor role in the early church...“ (2009: 2). Most Christian caregiving and healing focused on what the modern world would term „scientific“ means. By scientific, I mean using their day's accepted medical practices and treatments devoid of supernatural remedies.

References in Christian literature to miraculous healings by Christians are few in extant Christian sources (Ferngren 2009: 3). This is seen in some of the works cited above. It is clear, for instance, that both Cyprian and Dionysius of Alexandria were convinced Christians may die even at the same rate as non-Christians. There was no mention of expectation or experience of miraculous healing or protection from the plagues in either work.

This is not to say that all Christians were positive toward the use of medicine. Some did have ambivalence towards physicians. Some felt Christians should only rely on God for healing. Church historian Robert Wilken summarizes their view: „Turning to a physician for the cure was a sign of lack of faith in God's power. Medicine was an art practiced by pagans, and Christians should shun their herbs and unguents“ (Wilken

2012). While Wilken records that some opposed the use of physicians and medicine, he cites no sources. Regardless, it is likely that in ancient times, as today, some opposed the use of medicine.

While there were probably some mixed feelings in the Christian community over whether one should seek medical care, those who recorded their thoughts believed in its importance and that it was part of God's plan. The Apocryphal book of *Sirach*, written in the first quarter of the 2nd century BC, and accepted as scripture today by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, reflects positive view towards physicians:

Honor the physician with the honor due him;
according to your need of him;
for the Lord created him;
for healing comes from the Most High,
and he will receive a gift from the king.
The skill of the physician lifts up his head,
and in the presence of great men he is admired (Sirach 38:1–3).

And the doctor is even considered to be a divine instrument of healing:

And he gave skill to men
that he might be glorified in his marvelous works.
By them he heals and takes away pain (Sirach 38:6–7).

What is more, it is favorable towards pharmacists and medicine also:

The Lord created medicines from the earth,
and a sensible man will not despise them (Sirach 38:4).

The pharmacist makes of them a compound.
His works will never be finished;
and from him health is upon the face of the earth (Sirach 38:8).

Hence, the Christian church had beliefs, systems, and practices already in place, which assisted them in offering a strong response to the plague epidemics and a similar understanding of scientific medicine as was extant in the society in which they lived.

OUTCOMES OF CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE EPIDEMICS

Leading up to the Plague of Galen, Rome had experienced a golden age filled with optimism. Edward Gibbon, in his famous *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* would refer to this era as the „happiest and most prosperous“ in human history (Gibbon 73). While this is certainly overstated, it would be defensible to say that the Roman Empire was doing rather well. The two plagues discussed above had a significant effect on the future of the Roman Empire. William H. McNeill argues that the plague of Galen began the decline of the Roman Empire, albeit amongst other factors, noting that from that period onwards, the population surrounding the Mediterranean would continue to decline for centuries (1976: 118). McNeill is not alone in his assessment of the plagues denigrating effect of the plague on the Roman Empire. Kyle Harper also argues in his book *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, & The End Of An Empire* how Rome was eventually brought to ruin, in part, by these plagues as the title implies (2017).

The argument that these great plagues were a significant, if not indeed the primary reason for the fall of the Roman Empire has gained some momentum since it was first introduced by American bacteriologist and author Hans Zinsser in 1934 in his book *Rats, Lice and History*. Therein Zinsser argues that epidemics were, at the very least, one of the most significant reasons, if not the primary reason, for the fall of Rome. „Again, and again,“ Zinsser declares, „the forward march of Roman power and world organization was interrupted by the only force against which political genius and military valor were utterly helpless-epidemic disease“ (1934: 133).

Whether one agrees with this argument or not, the historians listed above, and others now believe that many in the past had underestimated the importance of plagues on the overall health of Roman civilization. Religious historian and sociologist Rodney Stark also agrees with Zinsser and the others who believe the plagues had a significant effect on the Roman Empire (1997: 74).

Stark adds his opinion that these plagues were two of the more damaging blows to Greco-Roman classical religions and assisted greatly

in their demise while also assisting the growth of Christianity into the dominant religion (1997: 94).

The early Christian response to the pandemics is believed to have made a significant difference in the survival to those they served. While they did not possess superior scientifically based medical knowledge, the mere fact they were willing to do basic palliative care, such as provide food and water to the sick, would have vastly improved the survival of the afflicted. Stark notes, „Modern medical experts believe that conscientious nursing *without any medications* could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or even more“ (1997: 88).

Stark believes it is likely that the percentage of the Christian church compared to the rest of society grew dramatically during this time due to survival rates, likelihood of conversion after receiving care which saved a non-Christian's life, witness of a Christian dying due to caring for the sick, and society breakdown affecting allegiance to a different worldview or religion. Further, because Christians had higher survival rates due to being nursed through their illness, a larger percentage of Christians would have had natural *immunity* to the disease which would have further increased survival rates and been possibly viewed by society as „miraculous“ in nature (Stark 1997: 89–90). This natural immunity due to exposure and the resulting drop in sickness and mortality may have led to the appearance of supernatural protection, which also would have had a strong effect both for Christian affirmation of their faith and pagans. It could be understood as being miraculous.

Using these various factors, Stark concludes that the Christian percentage of the population could have gone from 0.4% to 25% by the year AD 260 (1997: 89).

I find Stark's numbers highly optimistic regarding growth for a number of reasons. First, it does not factor in the possibility that the Christian accounts downplay non-Christian attempts to care for the sick and overstate their level of fear. Thucydides (see above) mentions that some did attempt to help when a terrible pestilence struck Athens. It is likely that some pagans at least did help, even at risk to themselves. Second, Stark takes McNeil's high number of 30% dying from both plagues and applies it to the entire Roman empire (above). However, McNeil did not

say it affected the entire Roman Empire; he said that some areas may have had up to a 30% mortality rate.

However, I do think Stark is correct that the Christian response, based on the evidence available from the time (the Christian sources mentioned above) that the Christian response was better than that of the surrounding world, and it would have made a difference regarding the ability of people to survive, retain and/or accept the Christian faith, and to prosper going into the future as a religious movement compared to the likely detrimental effect it had on paganism and the classical philosophies.

Hence, how a religion or society understands, explains, and reacts to a plague/epidemic matters concerning its ability to thrive and prosper after the event. It may lead either to growth or demise.

CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRENT TIME

As I look over the research reported in this paper, I am struck by certain lessons which could be drawn from the early church's beliefs and response to pandemics which may correlate with the present world's struggle with COVID-19.

First, epidemics, by nature, may be long-term problems. There seems to have been hope among many, though not all (CBS News 2020), that once a vaccine was produced for the novel corona virus, it would disappear. However, the most hopeful, even shortly after the vaccine's implementation, acknowledged that the virus's future demise would require a form of herd immunity to be attained, meaning significant amounts of people would need to receive vaccination before things got significantly better (Powell 2021). Yet, for several months after the introduction of the vaccination and large amounts of the population of Estonia receiving two and even three doses, various levels of lockdowns, mask-wearing, and other policies and protocols, the virus is still extant, and many are getting sick whether they have received all three vaccinations. What is more, new variants keep popping up. Currently, there are no fewer than 15 known variants varying in intensity (the World Health Organization names variants by letters in the Greek alphabet, and the last major name given was Omicron) (Katella

2022). While government policy has changed, claiming that the severity has been mitigated due to vaccinations, which well may be the case, the virus is still a potent force, leading some countries to implement strict measures. It is not surprising that a major epidemic would not easily go away. The Galen and Cyprian plagues lasted for at least 13 and 15 years, respectively. Some, as noted by the titles of one of my sources, even alludes to the fact that the Cyprian plague may have lasted for as much as 20 years. This means we should anticipate that this problem is not a short-term but a long-term issue despite the advances in medicine.

Secondly, herd immunity seems to have been the model which was most effective in combating the plagues during these two ancient pandemics. According to the Mayo Clinic, „Herd immunity occurs when a large portion of a community (the herd) becomes immune to a disease. The spread of disease from person to person becomes unlikely when herd immunity is achieved. As a result, the whole community becomes protected – not just those who are immune“ (2022). Obviously, this occurs more quickly when lockdowns are not in place. The closest equivalent to lockdowns which the ancients incorporated, was to flee the city once the plague affected their area. However, if Stark’s numbers are to be taken seriously, death rates among Christians would be much lower than others if they stayed in place and cared for those who were sick. It seems to imply that there was a better survival rate for those who undertook the natural immunity route. It appears that, at least to some extent, herd immunity, even with modern medicine and the availability of vaccinations, is an essential element in eventually weakening the effect of an epidemic on society.

Third, the world will never be the same. Due to the pandemic, the Roman empire was at the very least weakened and may even have fallen due to the plagues. The church, on the other hand, grew significantly because it had the best available explanations and assistance for the plagues. The Greco-Roman religions declined because their understandings were deficient for this crisis. We can expect on many fronts, our world will be significantly different than it was before the plague, and we must adapt to those changes or face significant consequences.

Fourth, the early church used the available medical knowledge available to them and did not shun what we would today term medical science.

There were dissenters to the idea that the equivalent of medical science should be used, and rely only on miracles, but most (at least judging by Cyprian's and other Christian leader's advice) believed in the importance of using all available „scientific“ remedies to heal illness, even if it was merely meeting the physical needs of the afflicted. This means Christians today should be open to using all medical means, such as vaccinations, to purge the world of this pandemic. The early church was willing to risk their lives for one another and the world by ministering to those who were ill, and this was even equated with martyrdom if they perished. At the very least, Christians should „risk“ getting the vaccination, if not for their own welfare, then the welfare of others. Like in the ancient church, most Christians have followed this model. In a Pew Research poll in the United States conducted in January 2022, it was found 80% of Roman Catholics, 80% Unaffiliated, 77% White non-evangelical Protestants, and 62% of White evangelical protestants had received at least one vaccination (Pew Research Center 2022).

Fifth, fear of the virus may cause more issues than the virus itself. Faith offers a counterbalance to fear. Christian theology diminishes the fear of death. Ancient Christians reminded each other that there is hope even beyond death. A strong mind is important to withstand a crisis and act meaningfully.

Finally, there is much to be learned from the ancient Christian response to the pandemic, which affirms every life by caring even for the sick and the poor. Christian leaders like Cyprian taught people that there is more to life than preserving one's own existence. The practical love of the neighbor through nurturing them through illness may at times put one's own life in danger but is instrumental in preserving the society at large. Such values are often based in faith and scripture. Some of these values are also exhibited today in the medical profession. However, for the values to be impactful on a larger scale, they need to be shared by a group (e.g., church or government) and also taught regularly during peaceful times. With firm shared values, it is easier for society to face difficult challenges such as the global pandemic.

Bibliography

- Augustine. 1951. „On Almsgiving (Sermon 61)“. *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 11, ed. and trans. Roy J. Deferrari and Denis Kavanagh: 275–286. New York: Fathers of the Church Inc.
- CBS News. 2020. „WHO Chief Warns that Vaccine Alone Wouldn't End COVID Pandemic“, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-chief-warns-that-vaccine-alone-wouldnt-end-covid-pandemic/> (28.05.2022).
- Cyprian. 1958. „Mortality“. *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 36, ed. and trans. Roy J. Deferrari and Mary Hannan Mahoney: 195–224. New York: Fathers of the Church Inc.
- Eusebius Pamphili. 1953. „Ecclesiastical History“. *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 29, ed. and trans. Roy J. Deferrari: 91–162. New York: Fathers of the Church Inc.
- Ferngren, Gary B. 2009. *Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gibbon, Edward. 1872. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I. London: Frederick Warne and Co.
- Harper, Kyle. 2017. *The Fate of Roman: Climate, Disease, and The End Of An Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Harper, Kyle. 2017. „Solving the Mystery of an Ancient Roman Plague“. *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/11/solving-the-mystery-of-an-ancient-roman-plague/5435>. (02.1.2021).
- Horgan, John. 2016. „Plague of Cyprian, 250–270 CE“. *World History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/992/plague-of-cyprian-250-270-ce/>. (11.03.2021).
- Julian. 1923. „Letter 22: To Arsacius, High Priest of Galatia. The Works of the Emperor Julian“ *The Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. W. C. Wright: 67–73. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Justin Martyr. 1969. „The First Apology“. *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 6, ed. and trans. Roy J. Deferrari and Thomas B. Falls: 23–114. New York: Christian Heritage Inc.

- Katella, Kathy. 2022. „Omicron, Delta, Alpha, and More: What To Know About the Coronavirus Variants“. *Yale Medicine*, <https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/covid-19-variants-of-concern-omicron> (28.05.2022).
- McNeil, William H. 1976. *Plagues and Peoples*. Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Murphy, Verity. 2005. „Past Pandemics that Ravaged Europe“. *BBC News*, <https://news.bbc.o.uk/2/hi/health/4381924.stm> (02.11.2021).
- Pontius. 1952. „Life of St. Cyprian“. *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 15, ed. and trans. Roy J. Deferrari and Mary Magdalene Muller: 3–26. New York: Fathers of the Church Inc.
- Powell, Alvin. 2021. „Vaccines Can Get us to Herd Immunity, Despite the Variants: Consortium Experts Note that Higher Inoculations Will be Needed.“ *The Harvard Gazette*, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/vaccines-should-end-the-pandemic-despite-the-variants-say-experts/> (28.05.2022).
- Stark, Rodney. 1997. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Thucydides. 1958. „*The History of The Peloponnesian War*“. *The Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Charles Foster Smith. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tyson, Alec; Funk, Carl. 2022. „Increasing Public Criticism, Confusion Over COVID-19 Response in U.S.“ *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/09/increasing-public-criticism-confusion-over-covid-19-response-in-u-s/> (28.05.2022).
- Wilken, Robert Louis. 2012. *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- World Health Organization. 2022. „WHO Corona Virus (COVID-19) Dashboard“, <https://covid19who.int>. (27.05.2022).
- Zinsser, Hans. 1935. *Rats, Lice, and History*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

Eestikeelne kokkuvõte

Varakristlikud uskumused ja vastused epideemiatele

Käesolev töö vaatab, kuidas varakirik toimis raskete epideemiate ajal. Arutluse alla tulevad teemad hõlmavad kahe suurema epideemia lühikirjeldust, analüüsi, mille poolest kristlikud arusaamad sarnanesid või erinesid ümbritseva ühiskonna omadest, kristlaste teoloogilised ja praktilised vaated tervishoiule ja kiriku käitumise võimalik mõju tollasele ühiskonnale. Viimaks antakse mõningad viited, mida kasulikku tänapäeva kirik ja ühiskond võiksid varakiriku kogemustest õppida praeguse koroonapandeemia kontekstis.

Märksõnad

Varakristlik õpetus ja praktika epideemiate kontekstis · hoolekanne haigete eest toleaeagses ühiskonnas