

“It is of inestimable benefit to our souls to be exposed to the godly comfort and exhortation from God’s giants. In this well-selected collection we discover pastors in the trenches during Europe’s worst plagues. This volume is a treasure.”

—MICHAEL HORTON, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“*Faith in the Time of Plague: Selected Writings from the Reformation and Post-Reformation* could, I suppose, be read as a scholars’ inquiry into classic Protestant writings. But that misses the real point: this is serious theology for serious times—for our times—tightly reasoned, and balm for the soul. All the great voices of classical Reformed thought are here: Beza, Voetius, Rivet’s plea against recklessness, Ursinus on mortality, the prayers of the Reformed English Church. And there is even Luther, reminding everyone caught up in pandemics that ‘God himself shall be his attendant and his physician, too.’ Here is sane advice which, although hundreds of years old, we could wish some modern authorities had heeded. Bounty, indeed, in time of need, and a book for the bedside and chairside.”

—ALLEN C. GUELZO, Senior Research Scholar in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University, Director of the James Madison Program Initiative on Politics and Statesmanship

“When Christians face an outbreak of deadly disease, they wrestle with many questions about God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, science and the Bible, faith and fear, grief and worship, and prudence and faithfulness. What we sometimes forget is that godly people have thought through these issues centuries before us, and we can learn much from them. This collection of writings on the plague by Reformers and Reformed orthodox theologians is full of wisdom and comfort for the crises of our modern era.”

—JOEL R. BEEKE, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“What a tremendous pastoral resource this is for the trying days in which we live. Our Christian forebears of the early modern era, who lived through times as grim and fearsome as ours—some might say that grimmer days were theirs—have much to teach us about living for God in times of fear and dread. Although our technological resources for dealing with pestilence and pandemic are far greater than theirs, the deep sensibilities of the

heart are the same and it is there, within those affections, that we need to heed their voices. Most welcome and highly recommended.”

—MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN, Chair and Professor of Church History,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“We are often told that the coronavirus pandemic has thrown us into unprecedented times. *Faith in the Time of Plague* shows that such a description is historically myopic: there is nothing new about pestilence and plague. By gathering rich reflections on contagious disease from great Protestant theologians like Beza, Voetius, and Luther—Christians who wrote theology against a backdrop of plague—this volume has given us a helpful resource with which to approach the challenges of our own (thoroughly precedented) times.”

—JAMES EGLINTON, Meldrum Senior Lecturer in Reformed Theology,
University of Edinburgh

“The exercise of humility almost always leads to learning. So it is with these texts from church history. If we in the church today humble ourselves enough to ask if there is anything we can learn from the past regarding plagues and pandemics then we will be setting ourselves up to learn. We’ll learn of faith and courage in the face of death and upheaval. We’ll see examples of loving one’s neighbor. We’ll find guidance for gracious debate regarding our response. And, above all, we’ll be reminded anew and afresh to look to our King, who is good and sovereign, and to look toward Heaven, our eternal home.”

—STEPHEN J. NICHOLS, President, Reformation Bible College,
Chief Academic Officer, Ligonier Ministries

“As much as the COVID-19 pandemic feels ‘unprecedented,’ plague and pestilence are nothing new. Throughout church history Christians have faced similar circumstances and thought deeply about what it means to live faithfully amidst them. We might even speak of a ‘plague theology’ or ‘theology of pandemic’ that has developed in the church’s historical reflection. It is astonishing how much we can benefit from listening to the wisdom of prior generations and encouraging to know we are not the first to face such challenges. Todd M. Rester and Stephen M. Coleman have provided the church with a wonderful and amazingly useful resource in this collection of previously untranslated writings.”

—GAVIN ORTLUND, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Ojai

“Times of plague throughout history have always elicited honest and challenging questions. Is pestilence a result of God’s wrath and judgment? What is the Christian’s duty as it concerns care for the sick and dying during a highly contagious pandemic? Should pastors always visit infected members of the flock or are there occasions to flee and seek safety? This rich compendium of Reformation and Post-Reformation era writings serve to answer these and many other complex and important questions from a biblical perspective. This remarkable volume is brimming with ageless wisdom and truth for today’s believer.”

—JON D. PAYNE, Senior Pastor, Christ Church Presbyterian, Charleston,
Executive Coordinator, Gospel Reformation Network

“In times of epidemic disease, how should pastors care, courageously and tenderly, for the fearful hearts of Christ’s flock? I did not wrestle with that question as a seminary student, nor did I address it in the pastoral theology courses that I taught over the decades. We now know how vital that issue is. In order to navigate these perilous and—to us—uncharted waters, we need not only the divine wisdom of God’s Word and Spirit but also the sage voices of our pastoral predecessors, who tended Jesus’ lambs in times of widespread, deadly disease. In *Faith in the Time of Plague* we hear the biblical, theological, and pastoral wisdom of those whom God called, as he has called us, to minister to those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I thank God that this timely book has appeared at this particular moment.”

—DENNIS E. JOHNSON, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology,
Westminster Seminary California

Faith

in the Time of Plague

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Selected Writings from the
Reformation and Post-Reformation

Edited by Stephen M. Coleman & Todd M. Rester

Foreword by Gregory A. Poland

Introduction by Peter A. Lillback

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Preface¹

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, which comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any affliction by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation aboundeth in Christ. (2 Cor. 1:3–5, 1599 Geneva Bible)

At the beginning of 2020, not many of us were terribly interested in discussing plagues. Outside of the conclaves and conference rooms of historians, epidemiologists, and public health officials, who would have casually broached early modern mortality rates, disease transmission, plague diffusion, disease vectors, and medieval and early modern public health policy? After all, plague pandemics lay in the dark, distant corners of our corporate memory, somewhere in the gloomy umbral shade of the fourteenth century, far from the bright urgency of modern demands. Plague, and what life felt like in the midst of one, had to be imagined. But within a few short months it would be our sense of normal life that had to be imagined. As masks, social distancing, self-quarantining, and “flattening the curve” became part of our immediately foreseeable future, we no longer needed to use our imagination alone.

In times like these—times of change, uncertainty, and loss of control in a season of disease, death, and dying—it seems right to reflect on pastoral and biblical wisdom for Christian living and Christian ministry through the plague writings of pastors and theologians from a former age. Plague literature was, and is again, society’s multifaceted literary response to plague, including everything from public policy and medical treatises to poetry and plays. Given the literary responses to the plague from various disciplines and layers of society, it is no surprise that a significant number of theologians and pastors participated in the genre. Frequently composed in the global academic language of the period, Latin, to publicize the works internationally, these writings offered biblical exposition, doctrinal applications,

1. Adapted from “Reforming Christians in a Time of Plague” by Todd M. Rester in *Westminster Magazine* 1, no. 1. The publisher is grateful for permission to publish this revised version.

and practical exhortations in particular crises. The plague writings of the Reformers collected and translated in this volume give us a clear view of how they believed Christians ought to respond to a pandemic and of what theological resources they reflected on. Of especially practical value, these works—prayers, hymns, theological treatises, and Protestant “art of dying well” tracts (*ars moriendi*)—are tested examples of doctrines, practices, and scriptural insights that remain relevant in ministering to congregants in perilous times; and their times were most certainly perilous.

PLAGUE IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

In addition to the more than 330 wars, armed conflicts, and rebellions between 1500 and 1700, plague was a common event in Reformation and post-Reformation Europe. Always a frightening occurrence in early modern Europe, due to its virulence and contagiousness, the plague (or the range of diseases included under the term) had a mortality rate on average of about 25% in this period. Viewed grimly, this mortality rate represents some improvement over the fourteenth century outbreaks, which had a mortality rate of 70–90%. During the seventeenth century, the percentage of population lost to plague was still staggering, whether in Italy (30–43%), the Low Countries, Rhineland, Alsace, and Switzerland (15–25% on average), England and Wales (8–10%), Spain (18–19%) or France (11–14%). If you lived between 1560 and 1670 in southwest Germany, eastern France, or Switzerland, for example, you may have experienced any number of at least ten instances of plague that affected over 30 communities in each outbreak. In one particularly virulent outbreak over 150 communities were affected.

Plague not only affected large cities or densely populated localities, but spread throughout rural regions along trade routes, in the wake of marching armies, and along the escape routes of refugees. The frequency of the plague was about every decade or so, sometimes lasting months, even years in both urban and rural communities. In the town of St. Gallen, Switzerland—a town of about 5,000 people (sizable for this period)—there were outbreaks in 1610–1611, 1629, and 1635 that claimed at least a fifth of the population each time.

Plague varied in severity; in some years there was a relatively low mortality rate, in others it was devastating. In Spain alone, for example, the outbreak of 1599 accounted for approximately half a million deaths. In London, during the outbreaks of 1592–1593, 1603, 1625, 1636, and

1665–1666 the death rate due to plague ranged from 4% of the population in mild instances up to 21% in severe ones.

For a simple comparison, the estimated mortality rate of COVID-19 in the summer of 2020 (according to international, regional, and national reporting agencies such as the UN World Health Organization, the USA Center for Disease Control, and the EU European Center for Disease Prevention and Control) ranged globally from less than 1% in a few countries to 12% in others, with most countries hovering somewhere between 4–8%. Out of approximately 25 million cases reported globally at that time, approximately 850,000 had resulted in death, for a global average mortality rate between 3–4%.

Our modern society chafes under the inconvenience of intermittent shutdowns of public marketplaces and social life. Yet, if you lived for any stretch of 75 years between 1500 and 1720—a big *if*, by the way—you would probably spend one-fifth to one-third of your life under plague-related civil ordinances and restrictions, implemented in half-year and years-long stretches. Perhaps not surprisingly, these restrictions were met with varying degrees of success and were accompanied by discord, civil unrest, and economic disaster as farms and markets faltered.

On the other hand, due to either a simple lack of medical professionals or their reluctance to expose themselves, the scholarship is clear that the burden of care for plague victims largely fell to religious orders and pastors in this time period. In 1641 in London, for example, Parliament entertained a novel European proposal to appoint a corps of doctors specifically to handle the plague in London. But as a matter of frugality, only two doctors and two apothecaries were to attend plague victims in a city with an estimated 400,000 people. The proposal stalled and died in continual parliamentary debate. By comparison, London was comprised of at least 113 parishes within the city walls at the time, which coordinated pastoral and congregational outreach efforts with modest success. Further examples of pastoral care from the Reformers on this count are not difficult to come by. In 1519, the Swiss reformer of Zurich, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), was away from Zurich when the plague broke out, but he rushed back like a fireman to a fire to serve his flock, even as mortality rates in that city reached 25%. It was not long afterwards that he contracted and almost died of the plague. Zwingli's "Plague Hymn" (*Pestlied*)² is a vivid written personal response to that experience.

2. See page 187 of this volume.

We learn from a lament of John Calvin (1509–1564) in a 1551 letter to his colleague Guillaume Farel (1489–1565) that Theodore Beza (1519–1605) had contracted the plague while ministering in Lausanne. Later, in 1588, Beza's first wife of forty-four years would die of the plague. Franciscus Junius (1545–1602), a Bible translator, pastor, theology professor, and editor of the Belgic Confession, would die from plague during an outbreak in Leiden in 1602.

Plague and disease deeply shaped the ministries of pastors and the congregational life of the early modern churches. A faithful pastor in this context needed a solid theology of God's providence and the dignity of every human being, especially of the sick and the infirm; a deep love of neighbor; a strong commitment to the duties of pastoral vocation; and a robust Christian prudence to navigate the physical and spiritual needs of his family, congregation, and community.

As we can all attest, pandemics tend to reveal the seams and tensions within a society. It was no different in the sixteenth century. In one city, we have municipal and ecclesiastical records complaining that the undertakers and the cleaners were price gouging. Medical practitioners were overwhelmed, and hospitals were short staffed. People fled their homes and jobs for a season to the countryside and protested their civic obligations. Ministers, weighing their pastoral obligations to preach and care for their congregations, frequently declined municipal requests to supply chaplains to minister to the afflicted in the city's plague-house and hospital. Even doctors were not agreed on how infectious the plague was or how it was transmitted, increasing uncertainty about the actual risk of the plague. Why did it strike some and not others? How exactly does one remedy miasma (that is, "bad air," or better translated, "polluted air")? Additionally, it was exceedingly difficult to track cases of plague. Medical doctors and practitioners did not agree on which deaths were plague-related or due to some other cause. Strangers and travelers were suspect. Even the water supply was unreliable and just as likely to spread the plague as assist in its remedy. Those tasked with cleaning and disinfecting houses and public buildings did not always handle medical waste well, and infected bedding and straw was frequently dumped, out of convenience rather than regulation, on the banks of the local river—a source of the city's water supply.

What pleading by the magistrates could not accomplish, sometimes force did. Plague spreaders, who spread the disease either in gross disregard of the magistrate's plague ordinances or who intentionally contaminated

others, were prosecuted (115 cases), fined, imprisoned, sometimes tortured (flogging and amputations of the hand), and even executed (44 executions). Invoking God's sovereignty, some Christians disregarded all concern for secondary causes of the plague. Others, paralyzed by fear of secondary causes, refused to fulfill duties to their home, church, and society. Many wavered between the extremes of indifference and anxiety. Basic life was constantly strained if not totally disrupted, and if the normal bonds of human and Christian fellowship were not yet snapped, they demanded constant maintenance.

This was the case in Geneva, Switzerland. That renowned city of Calvin's and Beza's pastoral ministry was struck by the plague at least five times between 1542 and 1572. Beza's own brother succumbed after fleeing the plague elsewhere, only to meet his death by it in Geneva in 1570. In September of 1571, the academy that trained ministers was almost shuttered by civil authorities. But Beza's persuasion managed to keep it open, if only because he was its sole professor, with only 4 students enrolled. While endeavoring to hold regular church services in 1572, the people often absented themselves. The magistrates and ministers of Geneva encouraged and pleaded with the people to seek the Lord in corporate repentance and prayer with mixed success. Plagues, like the one that struck Geneva, tested and shaped the character and identity of Christians in hundreds of similar outbreaks. But it was trials of this sort that concretized and personalized Reformed doctrines and approaches to pastoral ministry among congregants.

PLAGUE AND THEOLOGY

Theological questions among the Reformed in this period tended toward three primary categories: First, what is God's relationship to the infliction of a temporal evil? Is God the cause of evil? At the root of this question is a moral challenge to the character and goodness of God. Can God be good and still inflict evils as they are considered in themselves? In one sense, this is not too far afield from questions regarding predestination and reprobation. But in another sense, it is a much more poignant and practical application of God's goodness to real and present suffering. Second, if temporal evils can result in spiritual goods that have value in this life and the next, should the plague be avoided? And, related to this, if the plague is God's judgment of the wicked or chastisement of the good, is it permissible to seek to avoid it? Third, can a Christian physically leave their

city and community in time of a plague outbreak? What of the duties of magistrates, ministers, and citizens? After all, how can someone love their neighbor and shun them at the same time?

Some in Beza's time in Geneva had argued that the plague was not infectious or grave, as not everyone was affected equally and to the same extent. Furthermore, some argued theologically that if the result of the plague is "to punish our sins, to test our faith, to drive us to repentance, and to drag hypocrites into the light. Who therefore can deny but that they flee a good who flee a plague, through which God causes these good things?"³ Others even argued that avoiding the plague caused people to forsake Christian duties to their neighbor; namely, whatever you would want people to do for you, so you should do for them. To the first point, Beza, in his *De peste quaestiones duae explicatae*⁴ from 1579, cites Calvin to support his affirmation of mediating causes as a means of surviving plague.

On one side of the issue, some claimed that love of neighbor would preclude avoiding plague in any circumstance, since that would leave the most vulnerable forsaken, rupturing all human, natural, civil, and Christian ties. Beza noted that the commandment "You shall not murder" means that one's own life, or the lives of any who belong or depend on them, are not to be rashly put in danger of deadly infection, and one must take all wise precaution.

Regarding the duties of love of neighbor, Beza asserted that within the duty of love, there are degrees of obligation. "Everyone must have some understanding of his station and calling. For some serve in public offices, whether civil or sacred, but the rest are private persons."⁵ Those in positions of authority and service then have a greater duty to perform their offices on behalf of others. Magistrates, especially Christian ones, have a duty, according to Beza, to remove sources of the plague as much as possible and to care for those that are sick.

Rivet, too, echoed this point, leaning on another Reformed exegete, Jerome Zanchi, for his interpretation of Philippians 2:30, in which he argued that the work of Christ was not to be abandoned out of one's own interest during pestilence. In the case where duty called pastors to minister to the sick, but none responded willingly, Rivet suggested a gathering of pastors where, after calling upon God in prayer, lots would be cast for who

3. See page 23 in this volume.

4. See *A learned treatise of the plague*, page 6 in this volume.

5. See page 27 in this volume.

would minister word and sacrament to the healthy, and who to the sick. Of course, this would only work in places like Geneva, where there was an ample number of pastors. A different tactic might be needed in a region with fewer pastors. Rivet still suggested to his Dutch friend that this Genevan custom should be considered for the Dutch in time of plague. This would protect the large majority of pastors and their families and limit the spread of infection, he argued. Furthermore, he pointed out that Zanchi's instruction should not be taken simply for the individual pastor but must be taken in coordination with other pastors in the region. "In fact, because ministers are debtors to the healthy as well as to the sick, and to their own families, and they are assigned to the commonwealth and the church, those who may be infected do not comprise either the entirety or the greatest part of the commonwealth or the church. Why then, to the detriment of others, should ministers devote themselves entirely to the one part that is suffering?"⁶ The duty and burden of the pastorate is shared in times of health, so also in times of plague. This is so that the body of Christ, though divided by plague, would be united spiritually.

Beza noted that even private citizens have a duty to be good citizens in the promotion of the public good, which includes supporting the magistrates in their efforts for the common good and supporting the efforts themselves. Then there are the bonds of families: Husbands are not free to abandon their wives, nor wives their husbands; nor parents their children, nor children their aged parents; so the citizen is not free to abandon a plague victim devoid of any and all support. Beza even included the relations of masters of households and their servants in this paradigm. It is times of trial and challenge that not only elicit from the Christian the maintenance of all their ties and duties, but demand intentionality, even while exercising all good and godly measure. "But I do not see how any serving in a public civil office may flee their charge in a time of plague. And for faithful pastors to forsake even one sheep through their withdrawal at a time when that sheep needs heavenly comfort most of all is too shameful, indeed too wicked, to even consider."⁷ Whatever measure one takes in time of plague, it must be done out of diligent love of God and neighbor, in consideration of one's duty and one's dependents, with a clear conscience.

Plague victims and those who care for the sick have a duty of love of

6. See page 45 in this volume.

7. See page 28 in this volume.

neighbor as well, Beza observed. “The sick must take heed that they do not abuse the love of their relatives and friends at a time when they desire to have themselves provided for. And those who continue to do their duties must not cast themselves heedlessly into the risk of infection. For this would happen from recklessness, rather than right and Christian judgment. . .”⁸ Beza even gives a glimpse of his own experience of the plague when he recounts that, out of love for them, he forbade his friends to visit him—friends who were eager to show love and kindness—because he refused to be the cause of their death.

For pastors and ministers, Beza offered this counsel in a time when there was great debate about the plague, its causes, its treatment, its infectiousness, and all manner of other questions: “But this especially must be agreed upon, that as our sins are the chief and true cause of the plague, so this is the only proper remedy against the same: that if the ministers would not dispute about infectiousness (which belongs to physicians) but, by their life and doctrine stir up the people to earnest repentance, love, and charity one towards another, then the sheep themselves would hear clearly and heed the voice of their pastors.”⁹

CONCLUSION

On the heels of a devastating time of plague between 1567 to 1572, Geneva held out open hands of hospitality to religious refugees in the weeks following Sunday, August 24, 1572—when the Catholic League, aided by royal consent and the mobs of Paris, butchered about 2,000 French Protestants in the city during the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre irrespective of age, sex, or station. The religio-political violence spread to roughly fifteen other major cities and towns in France, bringing the number of the slain up to about 10,000. French Huguenot refugees streamed into Geneva and the surrounding area. So generous were private citizens that it was a full month before the city councilors needed to assist with the public purse.

Where did the city of Geneva and its people learn such hospitality? Was it precisely through the time of plague after the ties of family, church, and state were tested almost to the breaking point? How else can one comfort, except with the comfort with which they have been comforted (2 Cor. 1:3–5)?

8. See page 28 in this volume.

9. See page 29 in this volume.

Will Christians today respond in a similar way through this global pandemic and beyond? Will this time of testing prepare us for more intentional and faithful service, or will we slow in the things of God? Will we ponder and perform our duties or neglect and ignore them? Will we reflect on God's sovereignty and arrive at a greater sense of God's faithfulness and care? Will Christ's cause advance, by God's grace, in us and through us?

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The body of extant plague writings is vast and much of it remains unavailable in English. The selections in this book were determined to a great extent by the treasures that came to light in translating the 1655 pamphlet *Variorum tractatus theologici de peste*, which makes up Part I of the book. This collection of tracts is an unparalleled Post-Reformation treatment of the plague, from pastoral and scholarly points of view. Part II consists of those Reformation and Post-Reformation works that Beza, Rivet, Voetius, and Hoornbeeck engaged with frequently (Zanchi, Abbot, and Ursinus). Alongside those pieces are additional contemporary works that we felt would be especially useful for pastors, scholars, and interested readers to have available in book form (Zwingli, Luther, Lavater, and Rawlet), and which give the reader a more complete picture of the Reformed tradition's branch of plague writings. Each of these eleven authors addresses the unique questions posited by the plague in distinct ways, yet each does so by definitively Reformed methods—grounded in Scripture, historically informed, and always with the issue of faith in Christ at the forefront.

Although predating the scope of the book significantly, Cyprian of Carthage's *On Mortality* is included in the appendix, both for its quality and because of that work's deep importance for the chapters that precede it. Also included are the relevant prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), offered here as excellent samples of a faithful liturgical response in a time of plague.

It is our hope and prayer that the works presented once again in this volume will serve the kingdom of God by sharing with pastors, scholars, and laypersons the unique opportunities and responsibilities of Christ's church in times of crisis and peril.

Stephen M. Coleman & Todd M. Rester

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We are delighted to dedicate this volume to our parents, Mike and Barbara Coleman and Les and Shirley Rester. Thank you for exemplifying that deep faith in Christ and that unwavering hope in the world to come that strengthens Christians at all times, and especially in times of suffering.

PART I

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*Variorum tractatus
theologici de peste*

A Learned Treatise on the Plague

INTRODUCTION

When he succeeded John Calvin as head of the Genevan church in 1564, Theodore Beza (b. 1519) was already established as a leader within the broader reformation movement in Europe. He had, by this time, published numerous theological treatises, including his widely translated and circulated *Confession de la foi chrétienne* (“Confession of the Christian Faith”); served as a professor of Greek, first at Academy of Lausanne and then at the Academy of Geneva; played a prominent role at the Colloquy of Poissy; and completed a Latin translation of the New Testament and a French Psalter (begun by C. Marot). Though he was immensely accomplished as a scholar, author, and theologian, Beza, like Calvin before him, was first and foremost a pastor; and, also like Calvin before him, he pastored the Genevan church through incredibly tumultuous times—not the least of which were numerous seasons of plague which ravaged the city.¹

Responding to widespread confusion about the cause of plagues as well as the proper Christian response, Beza composed his *Learned Treatise on the Plague* in 1579 (published in 1580).² In it he addresses two questions clearly stated in the title and which may be summarized as follows: 1) Is the plague infectious? and 2) May Christians flee from it? The answer to the

1. Major outbreaks of the plague in Geneva occurred in 1542–1544, 1564, 1568–1571, 1578, 1585, 1596.

2. “Beza’s *Questions Regarding the Plague* was written in part to address local concerns and in part to refute a treatise written by a reformed pastor in Aarberg named Christophe Lüthard, which had argued that plagues are deadly, not because they are contagious, but because they are an expression of God’s punishment against sinners. From this, Lüthard had concluded that it was inadmissible for Christians to take precautions or flee from the plague.” Scott Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 288.

first question may seem obvious to modern readers and therefore reflective of an earlier age of medical understanding, so that Beza's discussion of the matter would be of little interest to us today. However, Beza demonstrates that underlying the scientific question of the nature and spread of diseases is the theological question of causality. What is the relation of primary causes to secondary causes? Did God cause the plague or did my neighbor? If God wills that I should contract the plague, and his will is certain, what good does fleeing do? And how should this relation between primary causes and secondary causes inform how Christians think about God and respond to the hard providences that he, at times, is pleased to bring into their lives?

Beza unequivocally affirms the divine origin of the plague, and the fact that it is in some way an expression of God's wrath against sin for which all mankind is guilty. It does not follow, however, that because God is the primary cause that secondary causes are non-existent or should be ignored, whether they are the secondary causes by which the plague is spread or the secondary causes by which the plague may be avoided. In fact, it is with reference to these secondary causes that Christians must discern their responsibilities toward God and their fellow man. In the words of Beza, "But leaving those things secret which God has willed to keep secret from us, we must use those things which, with God himself going before us, nature tells us God has ordained to prolong our life so long as it shall please him. And if we do not do so, we will rightly be deemed to tempt and most grievously offend God."

For Beza, the simple answer to his second question of whether flight in times of plague is licit is an unequivocal "it depends." It depends upon one's station and circumstances. It depends upon one's office and relations. It depends upon so many factors that it is impossible to offer a one-size-fits-all answer. Since Scripture does not speak explicitly on the matter, Beza is content to commend "general precepts that are agreeable to the Word of God," exhorting believers to a careful consideration of what the law of love and one's duty toward God and man requires. Once this is discerned, Christians may move forward with freedom. There is freedom to stay and care for those in need, knowing that not a hair will fall from their head apart from the will of their loving Father in heaven; and there is freedom to go and preserve their life for the good of their family, their church, and their neighbor in the future. Beza's reflections challenge Christians both in his day and in our day to avoid easy answers to complex questions. What

is licit for one may not be licit for others. What is wise and good for one may not be wise and good for others. Christians must refrain from placing themselves in judgment of their neighbors on matters about which the Bible is silent.

Though Beza's treatise is theological in content and polemical in tone, it is ultimately pastoral in purpose. The many profound and, at points, mysterious doctrines of the faith addressed here are not theoretical, abstract, and speculative exercises for Beza, but rather they are deeply personal realities of immense practical and doxological value in the daily life of every believer. Beza's pastoral heart is evident throughout the treatise, but it is perhaps most clearly seen in the prayers of the reformer which have been preserved and in which he weaves together these glorious themes of divine sovereignty, mystery, grace, calling, predestination, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification in beautiful expressions of faith and worship.

But your children, O heavenly Father, instructed by your doctrine through the light of your Spirit, will in their hearts humbly reverence your decrees, which are always just, even in the first condemnation of all mankind, and will be content to magnify your goodness, for the grace that it has pleased you to bestow upon them in Jesus Christ, adopting them by him of your free mercy into your family. For they have learned in your school that the inaccessible brightness of your judgments dazzle the best sighted minds and spirits, yes wastes and consumes them when they presume to approach to enquire the secret causes. This do I know, neither will I know any more, that all things do work for the best of your elect, because that having known them before all ages, you have also predestined them to be made conformable to the image of your Son, called and justified them to be glorified.³



Beza, Theodore, *De peste ubi quaestiones explicatae una sitne contagiosa, altera an et quatenus sit Christianis per secessionem vitanda* (Geneva:

3. T. Beza, "Upon eternal death" in *Household Prayers*, as quoted in Shawn D. Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 134.

Eustathius Vignon, 1580); idem, “De peste . . .” in *Variorum tractus theologici de peste* (Leiden: Johannes Elsevir, 1655), 1–60. Cf. idem, *A shorte learned and pithie treatize of the Plague*, trans. John Stockwood, (London: Thomas Dawson, 1580).

A Learned Treatise on the Plague

In Which Two Questions are Solved: Whether or not
the Plague is Infectious? And Whether, and how Far
Christians may Shun it by Withdrawing?⁴

Theodore Beza

I confess that I have not been so acquainted with this question, “whether the plague should be considered among infectious diseases?” Until within these past few years, I believe it was never doubted that this sickness should be judged among all other diseases as especially contagious. As witness to this fact, I refer any uncontentious person to the judgment of writers from all countries who have addressed these topics. But now in our times people have begun to debate this question on the premise that many people so greatly fear this disease, and death which commonly follows it, that they forsake all duties—not only Christian ones, but even those of humanity—and they have greatly increased the very wrath of God, which is the chief cause of this sickness. Because of them, there is almost no place that this calamity has not touched; the bonds of human society being once ruptured, now the whole human race is being destroyed. And when asked to defend such ungodly behavior, these people frequently bring nothing else for their excuse than their fear of infection. As a result, those who think they have greater constancy than these others believe they cannot remedy the evil behavior more certainly than to teach that this sickness is falsely supposed to be infectious.

But because this unbelievable opinion can no more be proved by good reason than if someone should maintain with Anaxagoras that snow is black, or should labor to prove from the hypothesis of Copernicus that the

4. Initially, we thought to reprint the 1580 Stockwood translation into English. But upon comparison with the Latin, there were significant additions, omissions, and corrections needed throughout; what we offer here is a thoroughly corrected (if not new) translation that differs from Stockwood but was composed in constant comparison with that translation and the Latin. The level of revision the Stockwood translation required meant that it would be unprofitable for readers, whether popular or scholarly, to critically document all the differences.

earth really does move and the sun stand still as the center of the world,⁵ I think that this dread, which brings with it a forgetfulness of all duty, ought to be and also must be abolished. Yet nor will I believe this disease is not infectious until someone shall teach me, either from the Word of God or by evident and good reasons to the contrary. For in the order of nature there are certain and most sure proofs of this, as long as the order of necessary causes agree among themselves.

For even were it established that the plague is the most infectious of all other diseases, indeed, even if death in the majority of cases inevitably results from it, I deny that therefore each person must abandon the station where God has placed them. I said I deny it because abandoning one's station is not to be preferred to the very life we owe to God and our country, and which human beings owe to each other, either for some public or private respect. And I would greatly prefer that the disputants would put their efforts of persuasion toward keeping people from fleeing due to their fear of the plague than striving to prove their odd opinion that the plague is not contagious. Indeed, I would rather have the consequent (as they say in the schools) in that same enthymeme denied, than the antecedent. For in this way not only by probable arguments, but also by necessary ones, they might actually accomplish what they want; namely, it is an exceedingly great sin when people, out of any fear of danger, sin against God or their neighbor. For what Christian has dared to call that into controversy? Or, if he should dare to do so, would he not be rebuked by the witness of his own conscience, even if everyone else were silent? For I do not think that there are any who hold with a good conscience that the plague must be fled in every instance, that is, without exception. Nevertheless, I still see that this point is disputed against by some, as if it were maintained by others. Yet, if anyone does hold that opinion (of flight in all circumstances of plague), I no more favor their error than that of those who, of the exact opposite opinion, think one must never flee the plague. But surely it is the part of a wise man to follow the golden mean, so that he does not flee when he should remain, nor make a heedless

5. Beza is hinting here that the most valid empirical challenge from astronomy to the Copernican theory of 1543 (for at this time it was merely a theory) was the need to demonstrate stellar parallax. Stellar parallax, the aberration of starlight due to the earth's change in position relative to the sun, was first demonstrated in 1728 by the astronomer James Bradley (1693–1762), providing direct evidence for the velocity of light and that the earth revolved around the sun. Cf. Nicolaus Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium libri VI* (Petreius, 1543).

stand⁶ when he should withdraw (for the term “fleeing” in this argument seems to me to be very improper), by which he offends against the very same charity which seemed to counsel him to stay. Moreover, before I come to the substance of the issue, I thought it fitting to preface these points for this purpose: that at the very start everyone would understand what I endeavor to defend and what to disprove. Then, since there are very many who think that this discourse on whether one ought to flee the plague depends upon the first question of whether or not the plague is infectious, let us examine the reasons and arguments with which they so confidently deny that the plague is infectious. That is a point that until now, by the way, everyone believed was not controversial; but they are infected with its denial.

These disputants want this question adjudicated with a consideration of what the plague is: its origin, its cause, by what means it is inflicted on us, its nature, and its purpose. I accept this condition as it is most appropriate and fair. But how shall we know these things? “By no means from any medical accounts (*physicae rationes*)” they say, “but only from the Word of God.”⁷ Then by all means let everything debated among physicians be obliterated, and instead of the books of Hippocrates, Galen, and other medical doctors, let physicians only read the Bible. In fact, let there be no difference between them and theologians, between the medicine of the body and that of the soul. “No, God forbid!” they will say, “for we do not condemn any medical account other than such as are contrary to the Word of God.” Well said! So then, inasmuch as contagion originates from physical causes, and hence proceeds from them, let us inquire whether there is anything taught in the determinations of medical doctors regarding these physical causes that is repugnant to the Word of the Lord.

FIRST ARGUMENT

They assert that the Hebrews call plague *דִבְרַת* from *דָּבַר*, which also means to destroy with a sentence imposed by God. And the Greeks render

6. The word choice here (*consisto*) conveys more than simply remaining, but rather the idea of a soldier taking up a post. In military terms it means to hold one’s ground and establish a position rather than to flee in the face of the enemy. E.g. Caesar, *Gallic Wars* 1.13

7. The Latin word *physica* is translated in the earlier English translation as variously *Physick*, *physical*, and *natural*. It does have a somewhat broader range than simply physical or natural and does encompass the idea of what we would deem medical as well. For the purposes of this reading, *physica* frequently carries the weight of the words physical and medical simultaneously.

it *θάνατον*, that is, death. I respond: Even so, so what? What relevance is that for this issue? For it does not follow from this point that because the plague is inflicted by God it does not proceed from intervening natural causes, unless on that account we want to remove all the natural causes of disease. After all, no one dies any kind of death unless ultimately God has decreed it.

SECOND ARGUMENT

“Indeed,” they say, “but it is foolish to call the sentence of God, whereby he allots to every person not only their death but also the kind of death and its second causes, infectious.” I respond: And who, I ask you, was ever so silly as to call the very sentence of God infectious? But what we assert is far different, namely, that contagion itself must be counted among second causes. For who can deny that many diseases are contracted by contact and touch? Who can deny some of these diseases are deadly, but others less dangerous, unless they want to contend that the sun does not shine at noonday? Certainly sin, with which we are all born infected, and from which all this mortality originated, is derived from a kind of spiritual infection not apart from the decree of God and has spread to all of Adam’s posterity. Therefore, there is absolutely no force to this argument.

THIRD ARGUMENT

But after this, they also ask, “If contagion is counted among second causes appointed by God, how could we flee what has been ordained by God?” Doubtless they ask so that they may conclude from this that “even if it is granted that the plague is infectious, it is useless to seek a remedy against it by flight.” I respond: But this too is a lead-headed reason. For if this conclusion is true, will it not be permissible to affirm the same of all second causes of death? If so, don’t eat, don’t drink, don’t seek any remedy against any diseases. Send soldiers to the frontline unarmed, since the death ordained by God cannot be avoided. On the contrary, the state of the case is this: Certainly neither the death, its time, nor any kind of death appointed by God can be avoided. But we do not eat, use remedies against diseases, or arm ourselves against our enemies as if we thought to withstand God. Instead, leaving those things secret which God has willed to keep secret from us, we must use those things which, with God himself going before

us, nature tells us God has ordained to prolong our life so long as it shall please him. And if we do not do so, we will rightly be deemed to tempt and most grievously offend God. It is so far off the mark to assert that, by using the means he established to avoid death, we should sin against him, even though sometimes we may use them to no effect; that is to say, this occurs when he reveals our departure to us, that we are about to die, when we thought our life would still be prolonged. Asa is rebuked in this way, not because he sent for physicians, but because he put his hope of life in the physicians.⁸ So when experience has taught us that contagion creeps about among things near rather than far away, no one is to blame who, while not neglecting any part of their Christian duty, withdraws himself and his family. Indeed, the person to be greatly rebuked is the one who heedlessly casts himself and his family into the danger of infection. This is especially the case when, as the Apostle witnesses, someone who does not have such great care over his family as he ought to with a healthy godliness and charity is worse than an unbeliever.⁹

FOURTH ARGUMENT

But let us see whether this next point is of any more solid stuff. “It is by those names that are attributed to the plague in the holy Scripture,” they say, “that the quality and manner of it is sufficiently and thoroughly expressed. Therefore, because the plague is called ‘the hand of God’ (2 Sam. 24), ‘the sword of God’ (1 Chr. 21), and is also signified by the term ‘arrows’ (Pss. 38 and 91),¹⁰ it does not proceed by contagion, for neither hand, nor sword, nor arrow wounds by infection.” I respond: Although I might rightly call into doubt whether each of these proofs are brought forward appropriately, I too do not deny this conclusion. For elsewhere in another passage, such as Psalm 17:[14], David calls his enemies, who assaulted him by natural means, “the hand of God.” And when it is said that the hand of God made us, this does not exclude physical generation. And it is clear that “arrows” in the Scriptures are all kinds of evils that God inflicts upon

8. 2 Chron. 16:12: “In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians.” (ESV)

9. 1 Tim. 5:8: “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (ESV)

10. Original cited: Ps. 31

humanity, using either the ordinary laws of nature only or the service of angels.

Second, I ask, how do they define the quality and manner of the disease? They will say, “By the very nature of each of those names.” But I assert that by those metaphorical terms of hand, sword, and arrow, no more is signified about what manner or quality this disease is in itself, than what hail or scabies is when God is said to have struck Egypt with an outstretched hand. And finally, what is the cause and nature of every disease listed in the appendices to the law among the curses to be inflicted by God? What then? Surely it belongs to physicians and medical doctors to investigate the nature of diseases, insofar as they depend upon the laws of nature—which we see them do with such good success and certainty—so that they can predict both the diseases and their likely outcomes. But concerning supernatural and divine causes of sickness and other miseries: those a theologian explains, teaching that we must ascend far above nature and all physical things when one deals with avoiding and removing them. For the true and principal cause of these diseases is our sins, by which God has been provoked. And he raises and stirs up against us all these inferior causes to inflict just punishments upon humanity. Therefore, I assert that it is absurd to confuse these things that are so far distinct with their very different, yet not contrary, ends; but which are things only distinguished as *ὑπαλλήλοις*, that is, as subordinates or subalternates.

Third, since by this argument they contend that the plague is not infectious, on account of its often being called the hand, and sword, and arrow of God, I ask: is leprosy also the hand of God or not? Is it therefore infectious or not? And since it is infectious, were not the leprosy therefore commanded to withdraw from the rest that were clean?¹¹ I ask this also, if there is no evil in a city except what the Lord has done, should those afflicted today with leprosy still be considered infectious?¹² And I would gladly ask of those who find fault with our withdrawal during a time of plague whether they think that those who are infected with leprosy are to

11. E.g., Lev. 13–14

12. Cf. Amos 3:6; *Elephantiacus*, or *morbus magnus*, was one of several Latin synonyms for *lepra*, leprosy, in the early modern period; this is not the disease caused by the *Filaria* worm and is known as Elephantiasis in modern medicine. Cf. Galen of Pergamum, *De Simplicium Medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 11.1.1 in *Galenii Opera Omnia* (Leipzig: C. G. Kühn, 1821–33), 12:314–16; cf. Luke Demaitre, *Leprosy in premodern medicine: a malady of the whole body* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 86–87. For early modern Latin synonyms for leprosy, see Simon Pelgrom, *Sylva synonymorum* (Amsterdam: Henricus Laurentius, 1635), 199–200.

be tolerated in the general company of human society? If they think that they are to be tolerated, why do they not cry out also against those who exclude the leprous? If they do not think they are to be tolerated, and think they must be avoided for fear of contagion, why, without exception, do they rebuke those that shun the contagion of the plague as the most harmful of all human beings? But perhaps they will deny that leprosy is the hand of God. Then let us speak of scabies, no matter whether it be a French or Spanish one—oh, why not even a German one? It is a punishment divinely inflicted for whoring, which in this age is considered a sport. I do not think anyone would dare deny that scabies is truly the hand, sword, or arrow of God that strikes whoremongers. But is it not therefore infectious? And does not a whore also infect many with this disease, who then again pollute another, so that this exceedingly filthy sickness is contracted, not only by sleeping together, but also by breathing and touching? And so it is even sucked out by infants from their nurse's breasts, and then nurses contract this disease by nursing an infant, which is either conceived by an unclean father or born of an unclean mother. Arguments like these, therefore, are the sort that need no refutation. It is certainly absurd to think it more preferable to assert that as many individual persons as there are, that many plagues are immediately (as they say) inflicted upon each person, than to say that this is the kind of disease where one person infects another. For whether God slays everyone with one stroke or whether, as happened to the Midianites, he struck them down by everyone wounding each other, and whomever he appointed to die, died, what difference does it make?¹³ Again, there is no distinction in the matter we are addressing, whether someone is laid out by the bolt of God himself, or by another's infection.

FIFTH ARGUMENT

Let us now come to what they allege regarding second causes, which they deny to be a certain position of the stars or a corruption of the atmosphere. I respond first that, as far as I know, medical doctors do not think any plague or contagion arises from those causes. I respond second: but let us even grant this, and furthermore imagine that they did list the actual natural causes of the plague. Now grant me this: why do they all at once

13. Beza is referring to Gideon's defeat of the Midianites recorded in Judges 7:22–23 in which "the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army."

exclude natural causes, and with such certainty that they want people who hold that the plague is received by these second causes according to God's will to be considered poorly trained in the Holy Scriptures? "Because," they say, "the Holy Scriptures testify that the plague is inflicted by angels," such as in Psalm 88, 1 Chronicles 21, Ezekiel 9, and also in the account of Sen-nacherib, and in Revelation, where it mentions the worst kind of sore.¹⁴ "For," they say, "that which God inflicts by angels does not belong to natural causes." I grant that, insofar as it concerns the angels themselves, who I concede are not reckoned among natural instruments. But what prevents God from commanding that the natural causes be stirred up by the angels themselves? For surely it is not debatable that both good and wicked angels do stir up the human will in some way, whatever kind of motion it is, such as when Satan is said to have entered into the heart of Judas¹⁵ (unless perhaps we say it is permissible that good angels have somewhat less power than bad ones). And this is also clear in the account of Ahab, from the efficacy and power of the spirits of error.¹⁶ And what sort of person would dare to deny that the will of man is to be reckoned among the principles, even the chief ones, of human actions? But if the human will is not excluded from the ministry of angels, why will we think that other natural causes must necessarily be excluded? Moses stretching forth his rod raised up lice and countless kinds of flies, suddenly brought out dreadful hail, and struck the Egyptians with the most grievous sores. And certainly the ministry of Moses was just as extraordinary as the ministry of angels. But then did not the lice and flies arise from putridity, did not the hail arise from vapors freezing through sudden compression,¹⁷ and did not the sores also arise from the putridity of the humors?¹⁸ When Satan received a concession from God, to suddenly stir up the wind and hurl fire from heaven and burn down Job's houses together with all his children, does it then follow that this occurred without any intervening natural causes?¹⁹ Or would we not rather say that those princes of the air (as the Apostle, not without cause, calls them) suddenly made certain natural impressions upon the air? The devil sends the godly to prison in Revelation 2:10, but it is through tyrants

14. Isa. 37:36–38; 2 Kings 19:35–37; Rev. 16:2

15. Lk. 22:3

16. 1 Kings 22:19–23

17. *Ex vaporibus per ἀντιπερίστασιν repente concretis*. Cf. On the ἀντιπερίστασις and περίστασις of turbulent winds as the cause of hail, see Aristotle, *Meteorology*, 364^b14–30.

18. Beza is referring to the third, fourth, and seventh plagues in Exod. 8:16–32; 9:13–35.

19. Job 1:13–19

and persecutors of the Church. In the same book (Rev. 6:8), the pale horse, on whom Death the rider sits, receives power to kill by the sword, famine, pestilence, and the sending of wild beasts. Here, if we will understand that rider to be an angel, why will we not also say that he used natural material to cause the plague and famine equally as a sword and wild beasts, which themselves are also natural instruments? Then later (Rev. 9:1), the angels are commanded to stand in the four corners of the earth, and to compel the winds not to harm the land and sea with their blowing. From this it follows that when God commands, they send the winds out in a similar manner. From these it is evident without a doubt that there proceed a great many changes upon the air, and chiefly infection. Finally, whether natural causes are moved little by little by the force implanted in them, or otherwise are suddenly brought to their effects extraordinarily by God's command, they are natural; and to that extent their effects are also rightly judged natural, which no reasonable person can deny.

I respond third: If no natural causes may intervene in the plague, those whom the plague has touched cannot be comforted at all, much less healed by natural remedies. But experience and sense prove this to be most false. I respond fourth: I profess that I am one of those who so far detests the superstitious astrology of diviners,²⁰ the horoscopes of genethliacs, and all other kinds of impious predictions, that I could wish the ancient edicts of princes concerning those things were renewed and strictly observed. Nevertheless I think it is an error not to grasp something from the different concourses of the stars, the natural constitutions of the air, and the effects in our bodies that depend upon them. To behave as if the stars were only placed in their spheres to be gazed at or to distinguish time²¹ is not a mark of judiciousness, but rather of perverse stubbornness. Farmers are daily aware of this. Storms shout out the same, and it is self-evident that temperate and intemperate [weather], and even contagion itself in some measure, may be foretold by skillful astrologers.²²

20. Gk. *μαντικὴν*

21. E.g. Craig Martin, "The Ends of Weather: Teleology in Renaissance Meteorology," *Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 3 (2010): 259–82. Martin helpfully notes how Aristotelian conceptions of meteorology were frequently viewed as portents of the judgment of God and eschatology in the medieval and early modern periods. Beza's comments here seem to be in harmony with such views.

22. In sixteenth-century Europe, astrology included the relationships between meteorology, astrology, astronomy, and medicine, which were blurred. Here Beza is observing that while there are obvious superstitious elements found among astrologers, his category of natural physical causes covers a broad range of phenomenon.

I respond fifth: But now should we grant that those plagues, examples of which are drawn from Holy Scripture, were sent by angels and therefore occurred without contagion? Yet is it any less absurd to conjecture that no plague is sent except by angels, than to contend that no hail, showers, or lightning occur in the usual course of nature, since in many passages of Scripture we read that by the ministry of angels it has hailed, the most violent winds have blown, and that it has horribly thundered?

Their exception: “But,” they say, “those examples of plague by angels are set forth to us as an example so that we may learn from them to judge rightly regarding mediating causes and the origin of the plague.”

I respond to the exception: But who will deny that whatever has been written, has been written for that reason, so that we should be instructed? And everything mentioned in the Holy Scriptures regarding the ministry of angels—not only in the plague, but also in famine and other calamities—occurs first to destroy the wicked, and then to chastise and exercise the good. And they bring us the greatest profit so that we may learn both to fear and love God, who is not bound to the laws of nature, as the Stoic philosophers thought. And he has certain instruments of his judgements more fearful even than those which are perceived by our senses. But what you want—namely, that we are taught that angels do not employ any natural causes in executing the commands of God—does not result in the least.

I respond sixth: What about the fact that Scripture provides us examples of plague being sent without any mention of angels? Those against whom I dispute do in fact concede that Hezekiah was sick with the plague, but it did not say that he was stricken by angels. Through Moses and other prophets, the Lord frequently threatens the plague to sinners, and there is no doubt that these threats were not empty; yet there is never mention that he always sends them by angels. In some Psalms, the psalmist seems to hint that he was seized with the plague, nevertheless we never read he was smitten with any sore or wound that was given by angels. Therefore, all these points, unless I am very much deceived, accomplish nothing at all to remove contagious air as the secondary cause of this sickness.

SIXTH ARGUMENT

But also upon what reason is the argument they set down founded? They assert that the plague is inflicted upon men by a singular providence of God. I respond: And what do they assert here that may not be affirmed of

everything that happens in the world? For, as our Lord says, not even one sparrow falls to the earth apart from the providence of God, and the hairs of our head are numbered.²³ That singular providence, if it is extended to singular things, certainly is in itself such a universal genus that it is also singular in singular things.

SEVENTH ARGUMENT

They say next that, as often as the plague roams in the world, all those whom God decreed to preserve alive are excepted from this infection; and for the rest all other places are infectious, even if they are the farthest away from those who struggle with the plague. They also add further and say, “Why then do we fear contagion? Is it not foolish to fear what is not infectious to me?” I respond first: But for my part I cannot discern how these things are not entirely incoherent.²⁴ For how can all places be infectious to everyone if there is no contagion, unless perhaps they concede that there is? Second, I respond: But it cannot by any means be truly inferred from the certainty of God’s providence that the plague is not infectious. And so, this argument runs beyond the proposed question. I respond third: Next, will we think that the amount of those who will die is more certain when God sends the plague than when he hurls other bolts? Now if they do not sin against the providence of God—who leaves things unknown to us with regards to his good will and pleasure, as is fitting—when they use medicinal remedies to both prevent and treat disease, why would we not also do the same thing when the plague is roaming nearby? Therefore, just as God appointed that some will not die of the plague, so he has also appointed remedies by which, as far as they can, people may avoid the plague. But in all kinds of diseases it is one and the same providence of God by which he has ordained what will occur with an immutable decree, even if the natures of the diseases do not differ so much among themselves. Now among the chief precautions in medicine against infection, a timely withdrawal is counted worthwhile, to which even the very nature and meaning of the word “contagion” attests; yet not all who flee will be safe, nor will all who remain die. Undoubtedly, when God sent a famine upon Egypt and the surrounding regions, he had determined who should die in that scarcity.

23. Matt. 10:29–30

24. Gk. *ἰσόστατα*

Yet for all this Joseph does not cease to provide the Egyptians with his utmost diligence and wisest counsel.²⁵ These same things the churches also did in the time of Claudius the Emperor, when they learned by Agabus the prophet that a famine would soon come.²⁶ The Lord also knew who should die in that cruelest war of the Assyrians in the days of Hezekiah, and yet both Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah himself secured themselves within the walls of the city.²⁷ What more should I say? Paul assuredly knew that neither he nor any of those with him would perish in the shipwreck, yet he still said to the sailors who were preparing to flee from the ship, “You cannot be saved unless these men remain.”²⁸ Christ also, though he well knew that his hour was not yet come, withdrew himself more than once when the Jews sought to kill him.²⁹

EIGHTH ARGUMENT

Finally, what they assume to be the most certain—namely, “That contingency is repugnant to the sure and steadfast decree of God”—even if it does not pertain to the topic much, yet who will grant it to them? We call contingent causes those which of their own nature can occur on either side. If anyone should remove them from the nature of things, I know not whether he would have any man of right judgment to agree with him. They say, from Augustine, that “the will of God is the necessity of things.”³⁰ I respond: I grant this insofar as it pertains to the end and effects of the causes themselves. But as Augustine says very well, it does not follow that although all things which God has decreed will occur necessarily must occur, still that they would occur from necessary causes; as the Stoics did falsely conclude, and the same may be proved by certain and most evident examples.³¹ For do we not believe that Christ did in fact have human bones, and therefore

25. Gen. 41:46–57

26. Acts 11:27–30

27. Isa. 36–37

28. Acts 27:21–32

29. E.g. Luke 4:28–30; John 6:15; 7:30

30. Cf. Augustine, 6.15.24, “hoc enim non erat in conditione creaturae, sed in placito Creatoris, cuius voluntas rerum necessitas est.” in *De Genesi ad litteram* in PL 34–1:350, idem, *Saint Augustine on Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, 2 vols. (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1990–1991).

31. Beza here is engaging debate regarding Augustine, *De Genesi Ad litteram* 6.14.24–6.17.28; cf. Cicero, *De Divinatione*. 1.38.82 in LCL 154:314–15 and Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 6.17.28 in PL 34–1:350–51. Also see Augustine, *City of God* 5.9–10 in NPNF1 2:90–93. Cf. Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.7 and idem, *De Fato*, 10.14.

such by their own nature might have been broken at any time? And yet in fact they could not be broken, for it was otherwise decreed by God.³² Therefore contingently, which pertains to their own nature they were not broken, whereas notwithstanding they were such as might have been broken, and yet by God's decree they remained of necessity unbroken. Again, that Christ from the very time that he assumed our human nature was endowed with a mortal body, all Christians confess. Therefore according to his own nature he might have been slain by Herod along with the other infants; but by God's decree he could not. Therefore, that he was not then slain occurred contingently, if you consider the nature of his body, when it could have occurred otherwise. But, from God's decree, he could no more be slain by Herod than the will of God could be changed. Christ, when he was carried off to be crucified, was then undoubtedly of such health that he needed not at that time to have died. He died therefore contingently, if you consider the cause of his natural death; and yet he died of necessity, if you look to the unchangeable ordination of his Father, because his hour was come. And at the same time he died willingly because he laid down his life for us. So far therefore neither contingency nor a human will is repugnant to the most certain decree of God.

NINTH ARGUMENT

There remains one argument taken from experience, which in appearance seems the strongest, yet is of no force to destroy contagion. "If the plague," they say, "occurs from natural causes—from some certain constellation or from corrupt air—then certainly should not all be infected who dwell under the same constellation or breathe in the same corrupt air? But this is found to be false." I respond: Even reason itself proves the falsehood of this

32. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.9; our modernized citation from the Norton translation and the Latin, idem, *The institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton, (London: Reinolde Wolfe and Richarde Harison, 1561), fol. 61r: "I grant there does not always appear the same reason, but undoubtedly we ought to believe that whatever changes of things are seen in the world, come by the secret stirring of the hand of God. But that which God purposes is of such necessity to come to pass, that yet it is not of necessity precisely nor by the nature of the thing itself. Just as there is the familiar example of the bones of Christ, for inasmuch as he had put on a body like ours, in no way will anyone deny that his bones were naturally able to be broken, yet it was impossible that they should be broken (John 19:33, 36): by this we see that not without cause were invented in the schools the distinctions of necessity in respect (*necessitas secundum quid*) and necessity absolute (*necessitas absoluta*), of consequent and consequence, whereas God had made the bones of his Son subject to frangibility, which he had exempted from being able to be broken, and so brought to necessity by reason of his own purpose, that that result could not happen, which naturally might have."

argument, for who is so ignorant that he does not know that one and the same cause does not always operate alike, much less equally? Indeed, the effects are different, according to the variety of the objects that are acted upon.³³ The same sun certainly hardens the mud and wilts the grain. One and the same north wind does not equally annoy men with cold. Everyone therefore sees how weak this reasoning is. But even let us grant that in some place every man will receive the corrupt air, yet many things may happen so that the same effect would not occur in all of them. For example, one man takes a preventative medicine, another does not. One immediately uses a good medicine, another very late, or never. Lastly, that which is the principal point must be considered: that Almighty God governs and moderates natural causes and their effects as it pleases him, so that it happens that contagion does not affect everyone who is exposed to it, as it is written in Psalm 91:6. Nor yet is it deadly to everyone that is infected; just like a poison that is drunk is not, as it is written in Mark 16:18. Therefore this argument also is no more valid to prove there is no infection in the plague just because many which keep company with those that are sick of the plague are not taken, or those that are absent are infected. As if the poison of a viper were not deadly, because Paul was bitten by one and felt no harm at all (Acts 28:5). Thus far concerning contagion.

AND WHETHER IT IS LICIT TO WITHDRAW IN PLAGUE

Now we must discuss withdrawal, for so I would rather call it than flight, although I do think it belongs to a wise person to flee peril with reason. There are some who, without exception, find fault with withdrawing from the plague and therefore consider it a nefarious wickedness, although they think that those who remain ought not to be reckless. There are, on the other side, those who hold that every man, as soon as the plague comes, ought to look out for himself [and withdraw], having no regard, or very little regard, for the fellowship and duties that Christian charity commands. Now, I for my part disagree with both of these, and especially with the latter, that they have the most lawful causes. But before I clearly declare my own judgement on this matter, I ask that first we would hear their disputes with each other. So therefore, they who think it not lawful to flee first of all

33. Lat. *Secundum obsectorum patientium varietatem*: lit. "according to the variety of the patient objects" that is, of the objects being acted upon.

dispute philosophically against those that hold it not lawful to remain at all. The former allege, from Plato's *Gorgias*, that: (1) it is folly to fear death; (2) no one can be a temperate person who flees death, because it proceeds from an excessive delight in life; (3) no one is a just man that in the time of plague provides for himself by flight; and (4) he does not render to God or man his due.³⁴ To these arguments they add others, drawn from the Holy Scriptures, such as: (5) they do not think high enough of the providence of God, by whose unchangeable decree the course of human life is limited; (6) they distrust God, and do not believe his promise, "I will be your God, and the God of your seed;" (7) they are devoid of all charity, indeed, even more, of *στοργῇ φυσικῇ*, that is, all natural pity and affection;³⁵ (8) they tempt God according to the example of the Israelites (Exod.17:3, Ps. 78:18), prescribing to God the manner, time, place, and means by which he could save them; (9) they do not love God from their hearts because, loving earthly goods, they neglect heavenly ones; (10) they fear death too much, since they set themselves against the will of God, which is always good; (11) they think themselves stronger than God and that they can escape his hand; (12) they openly break the law of Christ, and nature, by which they are commanded to do to others as they would have done to themselves; (13) they do and teach what no Christian has done, but what was often customary by the heathen. And the latter, who under pretense of saving their lives argue flight without exception, have nothing to answer the former.³⁶

And so if these allegations against those that do flee the plague are true such that they deviate the least bit from the laws of godliness and charity, I agree with their adversaries; and if they were found to not have the least spark of humanity, I count those worthy of all blame who flee from wherever they are to wherever they think fit to run. But if these arguments have been twisted against those whose withdrawal is motivated by just causes, who maintain the mean whereby they do not omit any part of their duty towards either God or their neighbors (which we claim most frequently occurs), then we affirm that all these arguments, however valid they may appear, nevertheless do not have any force if the circumstances are diligently examined. In fact, to their first biblical argument ([argument] 5) we

34. Plato, *Gorgias*, 522.d–523

35. Cf. Rom. 1:31 and *ἀστοργος* in Aeschines, *Speeches*, 2.146.

36. In the original Latin, this entire list of both sets of reasons philosophical and biblical is unnumbered. For the reader's convenience, we have numbered this schema parenthetically. This list will be referenced in the subsequent few points.

respond that even though the decree of God is immutable and his eternal providence has set immovable boundaries on our lives, nevertheless this does not subtract anything in the least from the ordinary and lawful means to guard our lives. No, not even if someone has received an oracle from God prolonging their life, as we have previously demonstrated from the clear example of Paul (Acts 27:14, 31). And much less is it the case that it is not lawful for us to use these means when it is yet hid from us what God from everlasting has decreed concerning the prolonging and ending of our life. Moreover, why should anyone be charged with distrusting the promises of God if they follow the methods prescribed by God to avoid evils in such a way that they wholly depend upon God, unless perhaps we can find this commandment expressly written somewhere in the Holy Scriptures: “While the plague is raging, you shall not flee.” Counted among these methods are also preventative ones;³⁷ and among preventative remedies, withdrawing in an appropriate time, which even the very term “contagion” makes clear.

But this also is plain: Not only does one not offend against Christian charity and not tempt God who withdraws to avoid the plague in such a way that in the interim he does not omit any act of piety towards God or of charity towards his neighbor; but on the contrary, if he did not withdraw, he should be thought to provoke the wrath of God against himself and be worse than an unbeliever, since he is someone who needlessly puts himself in danger of deadly contagion, without any due care for himself or his family.

Their fifth and sixth biblical claims (arguments 9 and 10) are no truer. “They do not love God,” they claim, “and, longing for earthly things, they neglect heavenly ones.” I demand to know on what grounds? Because those who love God desire nothing more than to be with him, which happens to us through death? Or that they, on the contrary, fear nothing more than death? Not at all! The one who would consider only this ultimate goal set for himself, with the result that for the sake of his own benefit he may gain possession of the thing loved by any means, is rightly understood to love himself more than his friends. And so the same person who desires to be set free and be with Christ is also the one who even desires to be separated from Christ, like one accursed, for the benefit of his brethren (Rom. 9:3).³⁸

37. Gk. *προφυλακτικά*

38. Original cited Acts 9:3

Also, he does not deliver up his life to enemies who lay in wait for him, but appeals to Caesar (Acts 25:11), and gives thanks for the restoration of his health (2 Cor. 1:11). What would they make of David, just as much a worshiper of God, who did not so much flee from Saul and Absalom as flee from death?³⁹ What of David and Hezekiah who each expressly prayed against death?⁴⁰ And so, one must not immediately think that anyone who flees death does not love God, just as on the contrary not everyone who longs for death must be accounted as one who loves God. But the only one who counts as loving God is the one that, while obeying the will of God with right reason and a good conscience, prepares himself for whether he is about to suffer or avoid death.

We also need to state the same point regarding the fear of death; namely, that if this fear rests upon a good reason and keeps within proper bounds, not only must it not be condemned, but in fact it must be approved of as a guardian of life implanted in us by God. Accordingly, the fear of death that is condemned from the writings of philosophers is only the one opposed to courage and the one that distracts us from what we owe to each other. But from the Holy Scriptures, the fear of death that is censurable is the one that fights against faith and love. Now it is one thing to destroy natural affections (which no one could do even if one wanted to do it) and another to keep them within their proper bounds, which even the philosophers rightly teach must be done. But just how this could be done rightly, only the Word of God shows through the Holy Spirit. Now regarding what they cite from Tertullian: in part they overshoot his target when he speaks of fleeing only in persecution, and in part they number among his blemishes what in fact has the highest agreement of the Church, so that their argument is like a runner whose course carries him away from the finish line. Certainly, no godly person—or at least anyone of average intelligence—ever condemned Jacob for his withdrawal, David for fleeing from Saul's rage or Absalom's condemnation, Elijah for running away from the path of Jezebel's fury, or the multiple escapes of Athanasius.⁴¹ And on this point we do not take refuge either in the suffering of Christ or that passage in Matthew 10:23, "if they persecute you in one city, flee to another"; passages that, I confess, are not brought forward in an appropriate way. For what applies to Christ's fears rests upon a particular consideration and ought not to be brought

39. 1 Sam. 19, 21; 2 Sam. 15

40. Isa. 38:9–20

41. Gen. 27 (Jacob), 2 Sam. 15 (David), 1 Kings 19 (Elijah)

forward as an example because it concerns the mystery of our salvation, which only Christ could and did take upon himself. And specifically, in his bearing those fears, Christ saw and in fact experienced the terrible wrath of the Father, bearing the punishment due for our sins. By contrast, when we die, we are not alarmed by those terrors because we have a Father appeased and, through faith, can contemplate life in the very midst of death. But that saying of Christ is not in the least actually a command about flight, but on the contrary admonishes faithful pastors that if they are driven from one place, not being terrified by any threats, they should hurry to another, which we see the apostles do diligently afterwards.

But let us hear something else weightier perhaps. “There can be nothing sent from God,” they say, “but that which is good. Indeed, there is nothing good, but that it comes from God. But the plague is sent from God, and therefore it is good; if not of its own nature, yet in view of the best end, namely, to punish our sins, to test our faith, to drive us to repentance, and to drag hypocrites into the light. Who therefore can deny but that they flee a good who flee a plague, through which God causes these good things?” And likewise, “Anything God sends upon all—that is, upon any one in the Church or Commonwealth—such as for example, the plague, he wills it to be endured by everyone. How can someone flee, if the plague must be endured? Therefore, those who flee the plague set themselves against the will of God. Indeed, they flee in vain, because it is vain to resist the will of God.”

Could more absurd things than these have been said? Now, setting aside their fallacious usage⁴² of the terms good and evil, to what end, I ask you, did they need to bring the nature of things into this disputation? The prophet says there is no evil (that is, no calamity) in the city, which the Lord has not caused.⁴³ Why then will we call famine, pestilence, war, and such things, good? “Because,” say they, “they result in the good of the godly.” I grant this, because the Lord does bring light out of darkness. But the godly are also brought out of their own sins. Surely sins, therefore, are not good? And does the one who resists sin resist God? To be brief, who does not see that to pray to God against things that by their own nature are harmful to us, and likewise to use just and lawful remedies to avoid them, if it could be done so that we commit their outcome to God, is a far different thing than what they rage on about—that we should hope to withstand God, or in

42. *Paralogismus*: cf. Gk. *παραλογισμός*: false reasoning, captious argumentation

43. Amos 3:6

some way escape his judgements? Abraham himself, Isaac, and Jacob did flee from famine, which was itself also sent from God, yet they cannot be said to have fled a good thing, or to have sinned in doing so. But as for that point which they make so much of, namely, “That those who flee the plague break that immoveable precept that humanity itself teaches: ‘Whatever you would that others should do to you, do the same to them,’” it is fittingly turned back upon them that those who neglect to flee contagion, or any other danger, then neglect the duties of a Christian. So in no case does it accomplish anything against those who avoid the plague by withdrawing, unless they may be judged to have neglected to perform those duties they owe both to their country and to their neighbor. And I am truly amazed that those who, without exception, condemn withdrawing as being repugnant to charity do not consider that charity requires no less than that we provide for the healthy as we provide more help for those who are gripped with illness.

Finally, they say that as many as flee the plague do that which no Christian ever did, since there is no example of this in the holy histories. I answer that this is an exceedingly fallacious kind of argument, when it is evident enough that in the Holy Scriptures it is not in the least recorded what everyone did. And in many instances, the general rules of doctrine are sufficient material to establish those things about which we have no commandment or any particular example. Doubtless it is not recorded how often the people of Israel were visited with the plague, nor still how every person conducted himself in one. But they say they have altogether contrary counsel in the Holy Scriptures, for David calls us back to the tabernacle of the Most High (Ps. 91), as though someone who lawfully uses withdrawing did not flee to God. “But still,” they say, “David did not flee that virulent plague mentioned in 2 Samuel 24, nor did he remove his household to any other place.” I grant this. But how many particular circumstances forbid us to make of that a general conclusion? In fact, he personally was the cause of that plague, and rightly was so anxious that he bears witness that he was ready to redeem the public calamity even with his own destruction.⁴⁴ Next, when this plague did not continue beyond three days at the most, what room was left for him to deliberate? Where should he have fled when the plague raged throughout his entire domain, and yet there is not anything said, or at least very little, that it touched the capital city itself? Again, they

44. 2 Sam. 24:17; 1 Chron. 21:17

say Isaiah did not flee from Hezekiah when he was sick of the plague, as if we held that shepherds, in good conscience, might willingly and of their own accord abandon their sheep. Indeed, and what if I should take exception and mention that Isaiah did not come to Hezekiah but by the special command of God?⁴⁵ For so the history bears witness. “But,” they say, “Jeremiah also and Baruch, as well as other godly men, did not flee from the city when it was besieged by the Chaldeans, although a great part of the people also died of plague as well as of famine.” Neither do we say that we may rightly shun the plague by withdrawing if in doing so we abandon our obligation to God, our country, and all of our neighbors. But I cannot but be astounded that those who allege this example of Jeremiah have forgotten that he was captured at the gate of the city when he attempted to get out (Jer. 37:12).

Lastly, they offer an exquisite example of the church of Alexandria from the seventh book of Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, chapter 20,⁴⁶ as if we approved of the withdrawal of everyone in all places and every circumstance, or as if we do not teach that such constancy and charity ought both to be praised and also followed, provided that it does not establish a general rule. For Eusebius does not say that each and every one did this, but only that very many of the Christians did.

And so, to conclude these things at last, there has not been anything alleged yet whereby the plague has been proved either not to be infectious or that withdrawal to avoid infection is to be condemned without exception. In fact, reason and experience both teach that withdrawal is one of the chief natural precautions during contagious diseases. For doubtless the very word *contagion* proclaims this: those things that are nearer to it are more in danger of it. And it is daily evident that by removing in a timely fashion to healthier places, many have been preserved. If anyone wants to take exception, maintaining that he would have been saved even if they had remained at home because God had so decreed it, what, I implore you, will he then say? Is it inappropriate to take other precautions and remedies for all other perils? Therefore, we ought to scorn as needless not only medicine, but also all prudence and wisdom, which is used to avoid dangers

45. Isa. 38

46. Beza probably cites chapter 20 of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (book 7), which describes Dionysius' festal letters, as the beginning of the account of which the pestilence in Alexandria is a part. The specifics of the pestilence and the Christian's response to it is found in chapter 22, especially paragraphs 7–10. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.20–22 in *NPNF2* 306–307.

of all kinds. Nor should there be any difference between recklessness and discretion, between bravery and audacity. But the matter is far otherwise, because just as God by his everlasting and unchangeable decree has appointed the course of our life, so he has also ordained mediate causes, which we should use for the preservation of life.

It now remains for me to demonstrate to you when it is appropriate to withdraw. For just as in other indifferent matters, so also a person may employ withdrawing both well and poorly. And I am so far from persuading the same thing to every person without exception that, on the contrary, I confess that they offend much less who, when they might otherwise with a good conscience withdraw themselves, yet remain and risk and endanger their lives rather than that they might appear to have forsaken their neighbor or family. I confess, I say, that these offend much less than those who, being carried away with too much distrust or with an immeasurable fear of death, forget and neglect all the duties of humanity and have only this dictum before their eyes: "Flee quickly, far, and return slowly."⁴⁷ Surely these people are the most worthy to be thrust out of all human society, the bonds of which they break all to pieces. Now what must be preserved on this point, I think may be determined in the following way.

First of all, I think everyone must view the plague like the arrival of a messenger of divine wrath; because each person will stand before the judgement seat of God, everyone should condemn himself so that God may acquit him. And at the same time, it is decreed that each person will be summoned forward to plead their own case, and that this rod of judgment cannot be avoided by change of place but by change of morals.⁴⁸ And if one must die, it is decreed for the good of those who die, inasmuch as they are blessed who die in the Lord.

Another point is that no one should either withdraw or remain who has a doubting conscience about it. But rather, when he has learned out of the Word of God what his duty is, he ought to commend himself to God and persevere with constancy in it.

And even if in such a great variety of circumstances rules for every single thing cannot be established, yet it is not difficult to give certain general precepts that are agreeable to the Word of God, by which, like a kind of norm, individual cases may afterwards (as they say) be tested. Therefore,

47. Lat. *Cito, Longe, Tarde*

48. Lat. *neque locorum sed morum mutatione*

let those who intend to remain know that it is the commandment of God that “You shall not murder,” and therefore that neither their own, nor the lives of any belonging to or depending on them, are to be thoughtlessly put in danger of deadly infection. On the other side, let those who intend to withdraw know that no one has such a great reason, either for oneself or for their family, that one may forget what one owes their country, their fellow citizens, and lastly to others to whom they are bound by the common bond of humanity and society or by any other kind of necessity. For love does not seek its own. And so, I confess that I cannot see any reason at all why someone should be prohibited from leaving (which should nevertheless be said without any sort of blame) who, either by reason of age or declining health, cannot help others. For if these were to remain, they could only seem to stay put that they may die with great loss to the commonwealth. For just as the cruelty of those who would thrust people out of their cities can never be blamed enough, especially if they are of the poorer lot, so it seems to me that these are to be greatly commended: both the godliness of parents who provide for the life of their children, without loss or damage to anyone else; and also the providence of magistrates especially must be praised who take care that the weak are well provisioned (without loss to the commonwealth), like a cultivated seedbed of citizens.

And here we meet that universal bond by which a person is especially bound to another and that cannot be dissolved without breaking humanity itself. There is also another bond binding every citizen to his country and city. But both of these bonds, I affirm, are to some extent natural and universal in order that everyone must have some understanding of his station and calling. For some serve in public offices, whether civil or sacred, but the rest are private persons. But there are manifold bonds between private persons that nature itself subdues, but that Christian godliness knits; and, unless they are distinguished so that each person may understand their duty in all things, it would inevitably happen that disorder would creep into all matters under the appearance of order. Therefore, let everyone help someone; every citizen a fellow citizen; everyone that needs their help, according to their ability. And let no one think of withdrawing whereby someone may be poorly cared for; still less that anyone would be swerved one bit—by contempt for anyone, or a disproportionate fear of death—from their duty to humanity. But in instances when one may take care, both for himself and his family, by withdrawing without neglecting his duty or public offense, I do not see any reason why someone could not do

this, nor do I see why no one is obligated to do it. Still, so that no one flattering themselves would sin against their neighbor, it shall be the duty of a Christian magistrate to take safeguards: that anything that either breeds or nourishes the plague be removed so far as it can be, and that there is consideration for those visited with this sickness so that no one is driven to be anxious for anyone. But I do not see how any serving in a public civil office may flee their charge in a time of plague. And for faithful pastors to forsake even one sheep through their withdrawal at a time when that sheep needs heavenly comfort most of all is too shameful, indeed too wicked, to even consider. Moreover, the bonds of private persons are diverse and manifold. Among these, the one that God testifies is necessary to give the chief place to is the natural commingling of blood, namely, the bond of marriage, so that certainly in my judgement a husband cannot in good conscience leave his wife, or a wife her husband, especially if one of them is visited with the plague. And how much parents owe their children, and children their parents, or relatives their relations, the very laws of nature declare; laws that Christian charity is so far from dissolving that, on the contrary, it draws them closer together. Indeed, for servants to forsake their masters—or for masters, who have made use of their servants' service when they were healthy, to neglect their servants when sick (which too often happens)—is cruelty. Yet the obligations of all these bonds are not equivalent, and therefore that which is less immediate must give place to the one that is more so, since many duties cannot be discharged at once.

Then, just as there is room for someone even among those who are present to forsake their duty unless those who remain do their duty, so the sick must take heed that they do not abuse the love of their relatives and friends at a time when they desire to have themselves provided for. And those who continue to do their duties must not cast themselves heedlessly into the risk of infection. For this would happen from recklessness, rather than right and Christian judgement, to many who, although they used to shun those that were sick of other diseases, now visit those with the plague so that they may seem to despise death. This contempt of God's judgments I tolerate less than I do the excessive weakness of the fearful. But how others are affected and disposed in craving the presence of their friends I do not know. When I myself was visited with the plague twenty eight years ago⁴⁹ in Lausanne, several of my friends wanted to come to me—and the one that stands out beyond the rest is Pierre Viret, of blessed

49. Circa 1551

memory, who was prepared to come to me; and also John Calvin himself brought me every kind of kindness by a messenger sent with letters—but I did not permit anyone to come to me, lest, by the great loss of such great men, I would have been thought to have provided for myself through loss to the Christian commonwealth. Nor did it grieve me to refuse their coming, although perhaps the same could not be said of me if I were in their place. But if, in calamities of this sort, the magistrate does provide as much as can be done in time —both that by such lawful means as are not repugnant to Christian charity the infection may be prevented, and also that those sick with plague lack nothing—he shall doubtless do very well both for the sick and the healthy. He shall also remove many questions, which are customarily raised in this argument. But this especially must be agreed upon, that as our sins are the chief and true cause of the plague, so this is the only proper remedy against the same: that if the ministers would not dispute about infectiousness (which belongs to physicians) but, by their life and doctrine stir up the people to earnest repentance, love, and charity one towards another, then the sheep themselves would hear clearly and heed the voice of their pastors.

FINIS.

