

A LEARNED TREATISE OF THE PLAGUE

Wherein the two questions:

Whether the Plague be Infectious, or no

&

*Whether and how far it may be shunned of Christians by
going aside are resolved*

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INTRODUCTION

THEODORE BEZA (June 24, 1519 – October 13, 1605) was a Reformed theologian who took over the spiritual leadership of Geneva upon the death of John Calvin. The work before you was one of his many productions and it deals with the ethical duties of a Christian during an outbreak of the plague. In the body of the treatise, there is no mention of an actual outbreak, which makes it difficult to identify which outbreak of the plague Beza was writing about. The preface to the 1665 edition (the edition upon which this is based) indicates that a Mr. Edward Percival published Beza's *Of the Plague* in London in 1665, the Plague Year. Whatever the occasion for the original work of Beza, Mr. Percival thought it worthy of republication in his day.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus strain COVID-19, the Church is forced to ask questions we have not had to face since the recurring outbreaks of the bubonic plague. The Plague ran through several epidemics during the Middle Ages and continued up to the year 1665 in England. The questions the Church is facing now are the same questions faced by Beza and Mr. Percival, and it is the wisdom of the Church to listen to her forefathers in the faith. Since Be-

za's day, the responsibilities of the Church haven't changed. The relation between the sovereignty of God, the duties incumbent upon Christians, the relative wisdom and morality of quarantine or "turning aside" (as Beza phrases it), and the role of the magistrate during an outbreak are all on the table once again. The primary focus of Beza's work and the chief source of our moral reasoning in times of outbreak is the relation between the primary cause of all that comes to pass and the secondary causes by which they fall out. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 3, paragraph 1 says:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; *nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*

This paragraph is teaching that, even though all things that happen do so because God decreed them to happen, they still occur according to the nature of cause and effect. Bullets cause wounds. If you are shot with a gun, you will probably get a serious wound. This effect (your wound) comes about through the cause of being shot. This whole chain of cause



PREFACE

I CONFESS myself to have been so unacquainted with this question (whether the plague ought to be regarded as infectious) that until these past few years I had believed it never to have been doubted. But that this sickness in particular among all others was to be judged contagious, for testimony whereof before any man that is not given to quarrel I refer myself to the judgement of the writers of all countries who have treated of these things. But now in our times men have taken in hand to dispute this question upon this occasion, that many do so greatly fear this disease and the death which commonly follows the same that, forsaking all duties, not only of Christians, but also of humanity, they have greatly increased the very wrath of God, which is the chief cause of this sickness. And there has in a manner been no stay or let in them. But where this great misery has happened, the bonds of Man's fellowships being once broken, it is much to be wondered at that all Mankind has not perished and been destroyed. These men being demanded what they can allege for so impious a crime commonly bring nothing else for their excuse but the fear of infection. Thus, it has come to pass that those in whom there is a greater boldness do think

that they can in no other way remedy this evil than by teaching that this sickness is falsely supposed to be infectious.

I do judge that this fear, which brings with it a forgetfulness of all duty, both may and also ought to be put away. But because I think that this paradox or strange opinion can no more be proved by good reason than if a man with Anaxagoras should hold the snow to be black or out of the hypothesis of Copernicus labor to prove that the earth does really move and the sun stand still as the center of the world, this fear ought to be put away in some other manner. Neither will I believe this disease not to be infectious until some man shall teach me either out of the Word of God or by evident and good reasons to the contrary. For there are in the very course of Nature certain and most sure grounds and proofs of this truth, so long as the order of necessary causes agree with themselves. For I deny that the station in which God has placed every man is to be forsaken even though all agree that the plague, of all other diseases, is most infectious, yea more, that unavoidable death for the most part does swiftly follow.

I deny, I say, that therefore that which we owe unto God, to our Country, and which we owe unto men, either for some public or private respect, is not to be preferred before life itself. And I had rather they would bestow their endeavors in persuasive disputes, to restrain men's flying away for fear of