

Plague and Sanctification: Indonesian Reflections

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various responses among church leaders, as it has among politicians. We will draw on some ideas in the Reformed tradition of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Ralph Venning, who all wrote on the plague, and relate their ideas to our current situation in Indonesia.¹

I. *John Calvin*

For Calvin, self-denial helps believers to bear adversity. Self-denial is self-surrender to the God who regulates every part of our lives by his divine will. The more we believe in this divine arrangement, the more we are liberated from discontent:

Therefore, he alone has duly denied himself who has so totally resigned himself to the Lord that he permits every part of his life to be governed by God's will. He who will be thus composed in mind, whatever happens, will not consider himself miserable nor complain of his lot with ill will toward God. How necessary this disposition is will appear if you weigh the many chance happenings to which we are subject. Various diseases repeatedly trouble us: now plague rages; now we are cruelly beset by the calamities of war; now ice and hail, consuming the year's expectation, lead to

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¹ A booklet containing reflections on the pandemic was published by Billy Kristanto in June 2020. The reflections draw from the thoughts of Calvin, Beza, and Venning, among others.

barrenness, which reduces us to poverty; wife, parents, children, neighbors, are snatched away by death; our house is burned by fire.²

A life of submission to God's will and doing God's will is not fatalistic. Self-surrender is not an escape from responsibility. Calvin quotes Psalms 78 and 79 to indicate the certainty of God's providence. In his commentary on Psalm 78:26, he points out that the providence of God can be sometimes hidden so that the desires of believers are frustrated while the desires of the wicked seem to be fulfilled.³ In fact, in his wrath God grants the perverse desires of the wicked. In his providence God does not yield to human foolish desires but regulates his generosity for the sake of the well-being of his people. In this context, suffering and illness should not make believers lose their patience. On the contrary, they will see the righteousness and gentleness of God's chastening to make them patient. Christ's patience is formed in the life of believers through difficulties.

God's hidden and wise providence has prepared the church with a technological tool during this pandemic. The pandemic temporarily closed the door to the church meeting physically for worship;⁴ however, it opened another door, the digital door, which has led to a greater ministry. While the digital ministry was not totally ignored in the past, it had not been well developed. Since the Reformed Injili YouTube channel was set up nine years ago, only 72 videos have been posted. But in the past seven months, 306 videos have been posted. Most of these videos are recent ministry from 2020 by the Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia (GRII) or the Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI).⁵ Other branches of GRII have also developed their own digital ministries. The current situation has allowed the church to adapt to and adopt technology for the preaching of the Word. In the past, the Reformation succeeded in Europe partly because it could make use of the new printing technology. Now, the church is equipped and trained to labor in a new direction of ministry.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 3.7.10 (1:700).

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: CCEL, n.d.), Ps 78:26–29.

⁴ The practices of the church in worship and ministry have been directed according to the rules and regulations of the COVID-19 Response Acceleration Task Force under the coordination of the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management, involving the Ministry of Health, the Indonesian National Police, and the Indonesian Armed Forces.

⁵ To an estimated eight thousand children at the National Bible Camp held June 23–25, to ten thousand teenagers in the National Reformed Evangelical Teen Convention held July 2–5, and to more than thirty-five thousand participants from eighty-five countries in Global Convention on Christian Faith and World Evangelization held October 1–6.

II. Theodore Beza

For Beza, a pandemic should lead to self-examination before God. Unlike Calvin, who emphasizes the sovereign will of God in the plague, Beza attributes the plague to human sins as the main cause. This is not to say that Beza did not believe in God's sovereignty over the plague; rather, he was more concerned to remind humankind of their mistakes and shortcomings before God:

... but this especially must be agreed upon, that as our Sinnes are the chief and true cause of the Plague, so that this is the onely proper remedie against the same; if the Ministers dispute not of the Infection (which belongeth to Physicians) but by their Life and Doctrine stir up the People to earnest Repentance, and Love, and Charitie one towards another.⁶

Beza reminds pastors that they should be aware of their limitations and not speculate about illness, which is the field of medical doctors. Pastors who seek to ensure the physical health of their sheep are shepherds who neither recognize their special calling nor respect that of doctors. Pastors are not to go beyond their calling as the shepherds of the souls of their sheep.

In the Indonesian context, churches responded to the pandemic differently. The pandemic caused tension between churches that have strong and sound doctrine and those glorying in miraculous healing ministries. During a streaming Sunday service on April 5, Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong passionately criticized a recent video of a charismatic pastor. This pastor dared to say that Jesus asked him specifically to follow in rebuking a great storm by rebuking COVID-19 and the economic crisis: "Be silent, be still!"⁷ In line with his past criticisms, Dr. Tong challenged the radical charismatic leaders to conduct a healing service for COVID-19 patients.⁸ This caused a ripple effect among church leaders between those who follow Reformed theology and those in radical charismatic groups. The debates will likely be ongoing, with questions raised over the issue of loving cooperation or rebuke among church leaders. Matthew 18:6 authorizes stern rebukes of heretical sin, but

⁶ Theodore Beza, *A Learned treatise of the plague: Wherein the two Questions: Whether the Plague be Infectious or no? And Whether and how far it may be shunned of Christians by going aside? are resolved* (London: Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A27641.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

⁷ Niko Njotorahardjo, YouTube, March 31, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA-Vp2cV_JQ.

⁸ In the past, Dr. Tong challenged radical charismatic leaders to heal AIDS patients in an open stadium, a setting they often use for their "miraculous" meetings.

forgiveness is available for those who repent (Matt 18:15–20; see also vv. 21–35 on the parable of the unforgiving servant).

In our era, dominated as it is by naturalistic ideology, Beza's words indicate both what pastors should not do and what they should do as they carry out their calling. Those who only hope in medical doctors and do not care for spiritual health ignore the spiritual dimension of humankind. It belongs to pastors to remind their sheep of their spiritual needs by calling them to repentance and love.⁹ Just as physical health is important, so is spiritual health. The latter includes human awareness of sin and transgression before God and an invitation to live in love. Here repentance is not understood as judgment in the midst of suffering and sickness, but rather as an opportunity for a loving life. As Christians, we are to show our love for others both in their spiritual and physical needs.

The church has always been ready to help those who are in need, especially fellow believers. The mercy ministry (*diakonia*) of GRII has been ready, especially for the many and varied natural and humanmade disasters that occur in Indonesia. In the past, we have allocated and distributed relief for the victims of the tsunami, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and flood.

This pandemic caught the whole world by surprise at different times in different countries. The mercy ministry of GRII in February 2020 sent many face masks to churches in Hong Kong and South Korea to ease the shortage; at that time, Indonesia had no official record of COVID-19 victims. When the pandemic struck Indonesia and lockdown measures were taken, the ministry of mercy distributed food and other necessities to poor and needy families, and various churches are still doing so. GRII also helped congregations by creating a network to advertise services, especially to support those who had lost income. Most countries in the world had already gone into recession before the lockdowns; therefore, the church ought to be helping those in need. A good reminder from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:58 during this trying period is, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

III. *Ralph Venning*

Venning was an English nonconformist well known for his sermons. He preached that the suffering or calamity people experience is under the hand

⁹ Similarly, John Piper understands the coronavirus as "God's thunderclap call for all of us to repent and realign our lives with the infinite worth of Christ." John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 77.

of God (Amos 3:6). In this context, it can be said that God brings about evil but does not bring about sin. Sin comes from man himself. Thus, there are two kinds of evil:

There are afflictions of several kinds, and they are all called evils. “Is there any evil (of any kind whatever) in the city and I have not done it?” (Amos 3.6), says the Lord. You see that God will own himself the author of that evil, but not of sin, for that is a bastard begotten and bred by another. The evil of plagues and afflictions are brought by God, though deserved by sin. And now indeed no affliction seems to be joyous for the present (Hebrews 12.1); although they are not to be desired yet they may be endured.¹⁰

When humans suffer misery, it is something they deserve as sinners. We should not ask where God is when we experience misery. Instead, we must ask why in the midst of a fallen world there is still God’s goodness. In this context, there is no problem of evil; what we have is rather the problem of goodness.

Suffering, though never a good thing, must be endured patiently. Unlike suffering, “sin on the contrary is neither to be desired nor endured. Any sin is worse than any suffering, one sin than all suffering, and the least sin than the greatest suffering.”¹¹ Venning relates suffering not only to the glory that is to come, but also to the evil of sin: compared to the evil of sin, even the heaviest suffering is nothing.

Sin is more fearsome than suffering, according to Venning. In the book of Amos, the plague was brought about by the Lord. In his hands, adversity can be a tool to make us aware of sin, leading us to repentance and drawing us closer to God. Sin, on the contrary, is far more devastating than the greatest suffering. People who are more afraid of suffering than of sinning do not understand the evil of sin. Believers are called to be like Christ as intercessors for the world. The church is called to perform the priestly function of mediating between the angry God and the sinful world. It should pray not only for the storm of the plague to pass, but especially for humankind to repent and return to God.

Like Venning, Dr. Tong affirmed during the conference at Kuala Lumpur (KL2020.com) on January 29, 2020, that suffering is a necessity for Christians who seek to follow Christ. Tim Keller was more hesitant about this proposition and argued that suffering does not necessarily make one a

¹⁰ Ralph Venning, *Sin, The Plague of Plagues* (1669), https://www.gospeltruth.net/sos/sos_application.htm.

¹¹ Venning, *Sin, The Plague of Plagues*.

better Christian; it may lead in the opposite direction. In response, Dr. Tong commented that for God's chosen people, suffering will make them better Christians, while for the others it will make them worse. For the elect, suffering may effectively serve as a tool for sanctification.

May Christ have mercy on us during this difficult time.