

# How Has COVID-19 Affected My Teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary?

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It would be easier to list how COVID-19 has *not* affected the experience of teaching than it would be to list all the ways it has! The mission is still the same: to train biblically faithful pastors and theologians in the whole counsel of God's Word that they might equip God's people for the work of the ministry and discipleship for the proclamation of the gospel, whether locally or globally. The commitment to intentional mentoring and fellowship with students is the same. Since we, as a faculty, are committed to the advance of the gospel and the good of God's people, we cannot turn back from our teaching responsibilities and calling. Where this intersects with the COVID-19 pandemic is that as a faculty, we have had to stay true to our mission while being creative and flexible via digital means in meeting the contexts and contours of that mandate. It has grown us, I believe, far beyond the confines of a traditional, physical classroom. Physical presence is invaluable for a dialogue or discussion, and I long for the day when our classrooms are back to normal. What I hope I do not lose once normal returns is how much at this point in the pandemic my family and I value and prize fellowship in person.

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In February 2020, who could have imagined how much our lives would shift in a year due to a globe-trotting virus and rapidly changing public policies and procedures? In February 2020, I started my second semester at Westminster Theological Seminary teaching church history courses. By the end of May 2020, I had moved from teaching all my classes in person to all my classes via Zoom and various means of recorded lectures. Students at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), Philadelphia, responded in a variety of ways: some returned to communities and congregations in other states and in some cases even returned to their home countries; others decided to stay in the Philadelphia area. In response to trending epidemiology and the prevailing wind of state government, it was last May and into early June that Westminster decided to suspend in-person classes for the 2020–2021 school year and move to an online learning environment. For me personally, this meant I had to become even more familiar with and proficient in integrating digital tools like Zoom, Google Meet, Yuja, Canvas, Slack, Populi, Calendly, and many others so I could serve students well. For my classes, the shift to teaching online has also required a shift to online resources both for class readings and training students in research methods. If it were not for generous and far-sighted donors who saw the need for digital access to databases and digital books, it would have been very difficult to teach seminarians at the level necessary this past year and into the future. Our library and tech staff at WTS have done a tremendous job in helping faculty integrate these new resources for students. It is definitely more challenging for a distance student to interlibrary loan a book these days, but with such a helpful staff, we have been able to get students what they needed.

One aspect of teaching on Zoom that I have appreciated is that I have had international students in their home country in real time on Zoom. The result is that questions in class discussions reflect more global contexts and perspectives than might have been available in a traditional classroom. In one class, I had students representing every time zone in North America, one in Europe, another in Africa, and another in Asia. It is hard for a North American student to complain about class time when their classmate on another continent is up at 2 am to attend class! I am humbled and encouraged by our students' sacrifices and commitments to do their best regardless of their circumstances.

### ***1. How Have I Responded to COVID-19?***

The first response of our family was to commit to prayer, specifically that God would glorify himself, that people would turn to God in repentance and

faith, that God's people and pastors would be faithful in both biblical doctrine and lifestyle, that God would grant wisdom and care to leaders at every level of society, that each of us in our family would be faithful in our various callings, and that in his mercy and good time, God would remove this pandemic from us. My second response was to commit myself to a path of careful but confident service to WTS students. As a result, I have pondered how I could turn COVID-19 and its attendant challenges into an opportunity and a blessing. One way to do that is through research and translation.

Current events do spur research questions; this is true for any pastor or theologian, but especially for a church historian and historical theologian. From March 2020 onward, as I watched lockdowns, quarantines, and masking implemented variously across countries, I began to wonder how Reformed theologians, pastors, congregations, and communities responded to plague outbreaks and all of the attendant circumstances, issues, and challenges in the past. How did their theology shape their response to plague? And how did plague clarify or develop their doctrine and practice? As I researched and read about historic plagues that shaped Christian identity, doctrine, and practice over the past two thousand years, I pondered what sort of church history course could bless future pastors. As I read, I discovered a variety of questions, conversations, debates, and writings that could be described as "plague and the doctrine of ...." This realization sparked 1) a desire to teach an advanced elective on Christianity and plague and 2) a desire to bring some of these untranslated works into English as an anthology for seminary students and, Lord willing, the broader church and public.<sup>1</sup>

When I mentioned these two desires in a faculty meeting in the spring of 2020, my colleagues and administration were encouraging and supportive. I then entered into conversation with Westminster Seminary Press about building such an anthology and endeavoring to publish it relatively quickly.<sup>2</sup>

The first task was to select sources as there are many Reformed responses to plague. At least twelve issues the Reformed addressed were: 1) How is God sovereign over evil and ills like plague? 2) Is plague a divine punishment, divine discipline, or both? 3) If plague is a divine chastisement, can someone flee it or use preventatives? 4) Can you love your neighbor and avoid them at the same time? 5) Is death the worst thing? 6) What are a pastor's duties

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<sup>1</sup> For more details and bibliographical information, see Todd M. Rester, "Stay or Leave? Reformed Ministry During Plague," *Westminster Magazine* 1.1 (Winter 2020): 12–22, <https://wm.wts.edu/content/reforming-christians-in-a-time-of-plague>.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen A. Coleman, ed., *Faith in the Time of Plague*, trans. Todd M. Rester (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2021).

to their congregation in time of plague and vice versa? 7) What are the duties of the healthy to the sick and vice versa? 8) How should someone prepare to die? 10) How should the dying comfort their survivors? 11) What are the mutual obligations of magistrates and citizens? and 12) What are the mutual obligations of husbands and wives, children and parents, masters and servants?

The second task was not simply to deal with the topic addressed but the literary form. Some of the works I wanted students to read were questions occurring in exegetical commentaries, sermons delivered in churches, public disputations in seminary settings, public orations before a civic setting, devotional reflections on dying, pastoral counsel in letters to friends, and personal letters among families dying of plague. People in the past responded to plague in multifaceted ways, just as we are responding now; they were not agreed on the proper response to a widespread pandemic, just as our society is not now. One of my goals in this anthology is to give multiple lines and layers of approach to a complex topic. Such an approach may demonstrate that within the Reformed world of the early modern period there was quite a bit of unity doctrinally even while specific practices, approaches, and applications were debated. The overwhelming majority of the contents in this anthology are newly translated into English and reflect a variety of voices from across Europe in this period.

## **II. *What Do I Hope This Will Contribute?***

First, I hope this will help Christians understand that plague is not new, even though it is new to us. Second, Scripture frequently enjoins believers to remember God's covenant, to reflect upon their ways, and to look to God in faithful obedience for the future. Many Reformed theologians and pastors in the past reflected on this particular issue of plague and various aspects of the Christian life by expositing the Scriptures and working carefully through doctrinal and pastoral questions. I think this set of writings could serve as a helpful point of reflection and encourage Christians in a variety of ways doctrinally and practically.