

# Comfort My People: Early Modern Protestant Approaches to Congregational Comfort and Pastoral Calling in Times of Plague

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## **Basic Issues of Comfort, Plague, and Pastoral Calling**

Perspective in history, as in art, is often a matter of proportion, distance, and viewing angle. Sometimes the experience of contemporary events, like a global pandemic, can provide such a viewing angle and inspire a new interest in familiar historical events and ideas, offering new opportunities to enrich our historical perspective. Such is the case when exploring Christian theology and practice of pastoral ministry in response to seasons of plague in the early modern period. How did pastors and theologians in the early modern period consider their calling and ministry? What did that mean in seasons of plague? Just as many pastors and church leaders are today, early modern pastors were frequently perplexed by pastoral and theological questions about how to conduct a consistent and faithful pastoral ministry before, during, and after a plague outbreak. Plague outbreaks sharpened doctrinal formulation as well as shaped pastoral practice in the early modern period. By highlighting these issues, we can gain a sense of perspective and a point of comparison for our own discussions today. A study of the past will not solve present pressing issues in the church, but it is my hope that this contribution might foster further thoughtful conversations doctrinally, pastorally, and practically.

I will briefly consider these questions to stimulate our own reflection: in general, what is the pastoral calling and duty with respect to comforting congregants? The Lutheran theologian Friedrich Balduin (1575–1627) is helpful

at this point not only for his influence on later Lutheran casuistry but also upon pastors and theologians across the Protestant spectrum throughout the early modern period. Next, what is the nature of public assembly, communion, and Christian comfort? What were the range of practices regarding the sacrament of communion and its function within pastoral care to the sick? A consideration of a few Lutheran and Reformed theologians opens a range of views and issues involved in ministering communion to the sick and the importance of the public assembly of the congregation.

But first, a few general points are in order. Both Lutheran and Reformed confessional documents emphasize Christian comfort. Luther's *Large Catechism* states, "There was no counsel, help, or comfort until this only eternal Son of God in his unfathomable goodness had compassion upon our misery and wretchedness, and came from heaven to help us."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, "Everything therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here."<sup>2</sup> Similarly among the Reformed, the Heidelberg Catechism question 1 asks,

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ: who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.<sup>3</sup>

Comfort and its connection to Christ and to his Church are basic points in both confessional traditions. Both traditions emphasize pastoral ministry and

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<sup>1</sup> *Large Catechism (LC)*, I.29, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et. al., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> LC, I.55.

<sup>3</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism* 1, in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:429; cf. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (1919), 1:539.

an engaged practice of pastoral visitation. However, there were different conceptions of how this shared emphasis on comfort should be worked out in pastoral practice and congregational care of the sick in times of plague.

Now, with respect to the history of plague in Europe, it is indisputable *that* a major disease or series of diseases swept over the continent intermittently from the fourteenth century well into the eighteenth century, which contemporaries called the pestilence or plague (Latin: *pestis* or *plaga*). Among epidemiologists there are still lively debates about such deadly times as to *what* the precise etiological cause of so many deaths was.<sup>4</sup> The bacterium *Yersinia pestis* is commonly stated as the cause, given the bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic forms of plague. Among the infected, these forms of *Yersinia pestis* had a mortality rate of approximately 80, 95, and 100 percent in the medieval period, respectively; in the modern period, the mortality rate ranges from 30 to 100 percent if left untreated; with early antibiotic treatment, 11 percent.<sup>5</sup> The primary sign was distinctive: lymph nodes swollen into hard, golfball-sized bulges in the groin, armpit, and on the neck called *buboes*. From first exposure to final breath was around three days to a week.

The severity and frequency of plague outbreaks are also debated in scholarly literature. There is not agreement among medievalists and medical historians on the percentage of population loss in the infamous outbreak of the Black Death (1347–1353). Estimates of the death toll from the Black Death with respect to the projected medieval population in Europe ranges from a conservative 30 percent to an even starker figure of 60 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> It has been demonstrated in a variety of ways that in some cities the death toll was much higher, others lower; and the same could be said

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<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Noymer's review article, "Contesting the Cause and Severity of the Black Death: A Review Essay," *Population and Development Review* 33/3 (2007): 616–27. On whether or not the Black Death was *Yersinia Pestis*, see Noymer, 620; cf. Didier Raoult, et al., "Molecular Identification by 'Suicide PCR' of *Yersinia pestis* as the Agent of Medieval Black Death," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 97, no. 23 (2000): 12800–3.

<sup>5</sup> Noymer, "Contesting," 619; World Health Organization, "Plague" (Oct. 31, 2017) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> accessed Oct. 24, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Noymer, "Contesting," 624.

regionally.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the plague may not have been as virulent as the medieval strains, but it was no less terrifying. Whenever and wherever it occurred, the population loss in a relatively short period of time was staggering. In Italy, the Low Countries, the Alsace region of France and Germany, or Switzerland, or Spain, the death toll ranged from 8 percent of the population to as high as 43 percent depending on the outbreak and population density.<sup>8</sup> The frequency of plague was also of concern. For example, in Switzerland between 1560 and 1670, there were outbreaks every decade or so impacting anywhere from 30 to 150 communities each time.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes there were two or three extended periods of plague within a decade in a region. Imagine being a pastor and losing 20 percent of your congregation or town every three years.

Plagues and pestilential fevers were more feared and disruptive than famine or war due to its seemingly fortuitous appearance and severity. Other sources for information on the plague were contemporary accounts of plague in popular sources like plays, poetry, and music, as well as academic sources like theological treatises, legal texts, civil histories, and medical texts, to name a few. There is a broad array of theological literature, such as biblical commentaries, sermons, academic disputations, and occasional pamphlets. Our sources for consideration select a few theological treatises representing works of moral theology and pastoral theology.

What we call moral theology or pastoral theology in a seminary today were termed *christianae ethices*, *theologia moralis*, or *casus conscientiae*, that is, moral casuistry, in the reformation and post-reformation period. Moral casuistry is a genre of systematic moral reasoning that arose in the medieval monasteries and university theology faculties for the training of priests and confessors.<sup>10</sup> Manuals of casuistry in the early modern period did not function in exactly the same way among Roman Catholics and Protestants given different forms and

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<sup>7</sup> Guido Alfani, "Plague in Seventeenth-Century Europe and the Decline of Italy: An Epidemiological Hypothesis," *European Review of Economic History* 17/4 (2013): 408–30.

<sup>8</sup> Alfani, "Plague," 411.

<sup>9</sup> Edward A. Eckert, "Boundary Formation and Diffusion of Plague: Swiss Epidemics from 1562–1669," *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1978): 53.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Astesanus, O.F.M. (d. 1330), *Summa de casibus conscientiae* (Strasbourg: Johann Mentelin, 1469).

practices of confession, contrition, and repentance, but these manuals were all geared towards the pastor's calling in the identification of sin and the goal of holy conduct in their congregation. For an example of its role among the Lutherans, Benjamin Mayes fittingly observed, "Casuistic categorizing of knowledge is especially appropriate to seventeenth-century Lutheran pastoral care, for it is here that the teaching of the gospel comes into contact with the many struggles and situations of life."<sup>11</sup> A similar point could be made from the English Puritans. J. F. Keenan demonstrated that in the European context between 1560 and 1660 high casuistry "grew out of two contexts: public policy and private piety."<sup>12</sup> Taken in a broad sense, whether Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Lutheran, casuistic literature developed in tandem with various growing needs for pointed practical theology and moral deliberation throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Besides moral instruction from within their confessional boundaries and a kind of public discourse, casuistry was also an opportunity to explore rival traditions on specific debated practical questions. In the Dutch context, for example, in his *A Treatise on the Plague, or a Spiritual Antidote for the Plague*, the Reformed theologian Gijsbert Voetius (1589–1676) engaged German Lutheran ministerial manuals, Roman Catholic confessional treatises, Italian medical tracts, and Jesuit conceptions of plague ministry as a form of Christian martyrdom.<sup>14</sup> The tract originated as an academic disputation in the context of training theology students at Utrecht University, but it was republished for further

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin T. G. Mayes, *Counsel and Conscience: Lutheran Casuistry and Moral Reasoning after the Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 39.

<sup>12</sup> J. F. Keenan, "William Perkins (1558–1602) and the Birth of British Casuistry," in *The Context of Casuistry*, ed. J. F. Keenan and T. A. Shannon (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 105–30, here 107.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., among the Reformed, see William Ames, *De Conscientia et Ejus Jure, vel Casibus Libri Quinque* (Amsterdam: Johannes Jansson, 1631); among Lutherans, Friedrich Balduin, *Tractatus ... De ... Casibus nimirum Conscientiae* (Wittenberg: Paulus Helwigius, 1628); among Roman Catholics, Francisco de Toledo, *Summa Casuum Conscientiae, sive de Instructione Sacerdotum, libri septem* (Constance: Nicolaus Kalt, 1600).

<sup>14</sup> For the English translation, see Voetius, *A Treatise on the Plague, or a Spiritual Antidote for the Plague*, in *Faith in the Time of Plague*, trans. and ed. Stephen M. Coleman and Todd M. Rester (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2021), 69–122; henceforth *FTP*.

circulation among an educated readership.<sup>15</sup> Voetius in this regard was not unique in this timeframe but illustrates a general academic posture of wide-ranging engagement with confessionally divergent views in part driven by the pressing need of the hour. And while it may have originated in academic contexts, frequently works of casuistry made their way into public circulation and discourse.

Public crises often reveal the boundaries and limits of a vocational calling. In the early modern period, the public health crisis of plague also generated a moral crisis regarding Christian duties and vocation during an outbreak. The Latin medical adage *cito, longe, tarde*, “flee quickly, far, and return slowly,” was extremely controversial; perhaps more controversial than masking is in the United States during COVID-19 at this time of writing. As general advice to avoid all infection, this adage upended congregational and social life because the limits of the advice were vague. Who precisely could flee in the context of plague? Could a pastor flee the plague and abandon his congregation? Could an employer abandon their workers when fleeing a city infected with plague? Who was responsible for the poor, the infirm, and the aged? What were the limits of the magistrate’s office in time of crisis? What of a pastor’s office? All these and more were debated in early modern theological reflections on plague using the genre of moral theology and casuistry.

### **Pastoral Calling, Comfort, and the Sick in the Lutheran Friedrich Balduin**

On the question of pastoral calling and congregational comfort, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Friedrich Balduin is a foundational representative figure of Lutheran casuistry and pastoral theology. Balduin taught theology at Wittenberg from 1607 until his death. In his work *Brief Instruction for Ministers of the Word written from the first epistle of Paul to Timothy* (1623), he included a chapter on comforting the sorrowful.<sup>16</sup> Balduin began by stating:

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<sup>15</sup> Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum*, 5 vols. (vols. 1–4, Utrecht: Johannes Waesberg, 1648–1667; vol. 5, Utrecht: Antonius Smytegelt, 1669), 4:292–325; idem, “Tractatus de peste, seu pestis antidoto spiritali,” in *Variorum Tractatus Theologici de Peste* (Leiden: Johannes Elsevirius, 1655), 139–249.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Balduinus, “De Modo consolandi Tristes,” in *Brevis Institutio Ministrorum verbi, potissimum ex priore Epistola D. Pauli ad Timotheum Conscripta* (Wittenberg: Georgius Mullerus, 1623), 175–82.

A good part of the ministry is comfort (παράκλησις), for which reason the Holy Spirit, to whom this office belongs, is called the παράκλητος, the comforter ... now when it is granted to us, not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him (Phil 1:29), even still our flesh would be impatient with these sufferings, so there comfort is necessary, which works patience so that we would do the will of God (Heb 10:36). So then God himself enjoined upon ministers [the tasks of] comforting his people and speaking to the heart of Jerusalem (Isa 40:1). Therefore, the office of the minister is called paracletic or nouthetic (from the term νουθησία).<sup>17</sup>

Balduin had argued elsewhere that the ministry of the Word is primary in the pastoral office.<sup>18</sup> Here he argued that the other core aspect of ministry is comforting God's people. He elaborated upon the source of comfort: "All comfort that mitigates sorrow must be sought from the Holy Scriptures. If any is brought from another source it is adulterated and ineffective."<sup>19</sup> By contrast there are no effective comforts unless "the soul of the afflicted has been first purged from sins."<sup>20</sup> Scripture is both the source of conviction of sin and comfort in grace. In this regard, comfort has both a public and private aspect; the public ministry of the Word in preaching, and the private ministry of comforting the sick. Where there is no posture of full repentance in response to God's Word, there can be no full comfort.

Christians were to take comfort from the Word of God and participation in the Lord's Supper. In Balduin's exposition of the significance of the holy supper, it is the comfort of the Word, the process of repentance, and the celebration of the Eucharist that converge. Consider his point that "the holy supper must not be denied to the sick in private dwellings, provided they would have the rest [of the other characteristics], that is, provided that the sick person is truly penitent and desirous of this food and has his reason, so that he understands what is happening."<sup>21</sup> In his chapter on the sacrament of communion,

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<sup>17</sup> "De Modo," 175.

<sup>18</sup> "De Modo," 170–175.

<sup>19</sup> "De Modo," 176.

<sup>20</sup> "De Modo," 179.

<sup>21</sup> "De Modo," 234; cf. Guilielmus Bucanus (d. 1603), locus 48, q.125 "Quo loco est administranda?" in *Institutiones Theologicae, seu Locorum Communium Christianae Religionis* (Berne: Jean & Isaias le Preux, 1605), 788; Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci Communes* (Basel: Sebastian Henricpetri, 1599), 370.

Balduin goes on to note a debate: should the holy supper be served to the sick? Albeit with polemical intent, Balduin helpfully describes, by their lack of full consensus, a range of opinions among Reformed theologians on the question of whether the sacrament could be administered to the sick. The *Sacramentarii*, as Balduin called certain Reformed theologians, did not allow the holy supper to be administered outside the assembly for public worship. On one hand, Bucanus and Musculus rejected private administration of the supper. And on the other, Balduin claims, Beza took a more moderate approach.

Bucanus, however, did acknowledge that in the ancient Church, the supper was brought from the assembly of the Church to the sick at home and in hospitals. But this was done, Bucanus said, “without superstition,” that is, not with a view towards transubstantiation, “and not with any other goal than as a symbol of concord and consensus in doctrine and in a full profession.”<sup>22</sup> However, since the custom degenerated into superstition, in his local context he asserted that this practice must be set aside since Roman Catholics argued that without the Supper, Christians do not go to heaven.<sup>23</sup> For Bucanus, differentiation from the Roman Catholic position required a much more limited practice.

Balduin would agree with his Reformed counterpart on these two points of administering the Holy Supper: it was not a *sine qua non* for admission to heaven and it should not be taken with an *opere operato* view. But in disagreement with some of the Reformed, he asserted that since it is useful for comfort it should be administered to the sick privately. Balduin also noted that, in contrast to Musculus and Bucanus, on the other hand, a Reformed theologian such as Beza granted that the supper could be brought from the church assembly to the sick.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Balduin argues from the *Life of Calvin* that Beza administered the supper to Calvin in his own home, indicating that in Balduin’s view for Beza this practice might have prudential exceptions rather than

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<sup>22</sup> Balduin, *Brevis Institutio*, 235.

<sup>23</sup> Bucanus, *Institutiones*, 788.

<sup>24</sup> Balduin, *Brevis Institutio*, 235; cf. Beza, *Quaestionum et Responsonum Christianarum Libellus*, 2 vols. (Geneva: Eustathius Vignon, 1571, 1577), qq240–41, 2:131–133; idem, *Tractationes Theologicae*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Eustathius Vignon, 1582), 3:363–4. Subsequent references of Beza’s *Quaestiones et Responiones* will be from the 1582 Vignon printing of the *Tractationes Theologicae*.

absolute principal prohibitions.<sup>25</sup> Despite Balduin's assertion, it should be noted that Beza's account of Calvin's last days only mentions that the Genevan ministers shared a common meal together *pour marque d'une étroite amitié*, "as a mark of our friendship," on the evening of May 19, 1564, several days before Calvin's death.<sup>26</sup> The account does not say the ministers and Calvin ate the Lord's Supper, *la Cène du Seigneur*, as it does in almost every other mention in Beza's account, but only that the ministers dined together. The last time Beza explicitly stated that Calvin partook of the Lord's Supper from his own hand was on April 2, 1564, on Easter Sunday.<sup>27</sup> We will have occasion to return to Beza's views momentarily.

What are the limits for Balduin when serving communion? In his work entitled *Cases of Conscience*, Balduin expounded the intersection of the pastoral ministry, comfort, and right administration of the holy supper.<sup>28</sup> Besides questions that relate to the participation of the impenitent in the supper, many of the cases address the administration of the Lord's Supper to the sick. For example, in the second case the question is whether a pastor ought to serve communion to people in the throes of death who, due to disease have nearly lost all use of their reason and sense, such that they do not understand what they are doing. In that instance, should a minister give the supper?

Balduin answered with a distinction between the clearly ungodly and the godly. The godly "are those who while they were healthy diligently heard the Word of God, reverently used the holy supper, and conducted their life in a holy fashion as much as they could despite their imperfection."<sup>29</sup> For those who could sign, indicate, or agree that they desired to take the Lord's Supper, even though debilitated by disease and their memory weakened, "These must

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<sup>25</sup> Balduin, *Brevis Institutio*, 235.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1908), 108–9; idem, *Les Vies de Jean Calvin et de Théodore de Bèze mises en français* (Geneva: Jean Herman Widerhold, 1681), 168–69.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin received the Lord's Supper from Beza's own hand: see Beza, *Les Vies*, 144–45, "Le 2. d'Avril qui estoit le jour de Pâques, quoy qu'il fût dans un abbatement extreme, il se fit porter au Temple, il entendit toute la prédication, il receut de ma main la Cène du Seigneur, et quelque foible que fût sa voix, il ne laissa pas de chanter les Pseaumes."

<sup>28</sup> Balduin, *Tractatus ... De ... Casibus nimirum Conscientiae* (Wittenberg: Paulus Helwigius, 1628).

<sup>29</sup> *Tractatus*, 1087.

be sedulously comforted, and even if they at least indicate their agreement and assent to what is read to them with a nod, must not be denied, for even the external gestures are a mark of interior desire and devotion.”<sup>30</sup> But those who do not have use of their external senses or their reason do not hear, understand, demonstrate contrition or faith, and therefore cannot eat or drink properly.<sup>31</sup> Balduin articulated five basic criteria for participation in the Lord’s Supper. There must be: (1) a remembrance of the Lord’s death, (2) a proving of the communicant, (3) a godly desire for the most holy table, (4) an avoidance of a bare use of the sacrament apart from a good motive, and (5) a nourishment of security in the godly. And finally, he reminds his readers that “it is not the privation of the supper that condemns us, but contempt of it.”

In time of plague, Balduin asks how, in rural areas where a pastor lacks a colleague, ought the holy supper be administered to the sick so that the whole church is not infected with a fear of the pastor?<sup>32</sup> The issue was that if a pastor is known to visit the sick and dying, how can the healthy be near him? Pastoral engagement with plague victims would—and did—incite fear of the pastor and invite avoidance in congregants. First, said Balduin, the pastor is to be meticulous regarding his own calling and behavior with the sick lest the people fear infection from him in his public ministry. His personal habits of care (what we would call hygiene) should be meticulous. Second, Balduin rejected the use of assistants who would take communion to the sick after a minister has consecrated it, since to him this had the appearance of papistry. Instead, so that there will be less danger of infection, the pastor should visit the sick person, order him to be moved from his sick room, placed in a sunny place, downwind at distance from the pastor but still close enough that the pastor may hear his confession, and then the pastor should administer the sacrament to him, maintaining distance.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, when infection strikes an area, the pastor should not venture into those areas so that he does not bring exposure from the sick to the whole assembly. In this case the sick should use catechisms, passages of Scripture, and Luther’s *Postilla* “so that they are not entirely devoid of some exercise in the divine word.”<sup>34</sup> We see here the importance of accessible

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<sup>30</sup> *Tractatus*, 1087.

<sup>31</sup> *Tractatus*, 1087.

<sup>32</sup> *Tractatus*, 1098–1100.

<sup>33</sup> *Tractatus*, 1099.

<sup>34</sup> *Tractatus*, 1099.

Christian literature as an available means of comfort when a minister was unavailable. Furthermore, “there is not such great need of the sacrament of the supper that due to one or other sick person somewhere the whole assembly is brought into the risk of infection.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, Balduin views communion as helpful, but not requisite. And while all should attend the holy supper if they are well and there is no risk, if there is a risk of infecting others,

... those who labor with a dangerous disease should spare their brethren and at this point the sick should acknowledge this is a case of necessity, where even without the use of this sacrament they can die blessedly. ... therefore, whoever can have the holy supper without risk to others, should not neglect it. However, those who are in an extreme case of necessity (to which we also refer that time when it cannot be used without detriment to one’s neighbor) should be deprived of it. Therefore, they should not despair because it is not privation of the sacrament, but contempt of it, that condemns.<sup>36</sup>

The issue of a case of necessity is whether a person is stubbornly or willfully neglecting the holy supper, or only withdrawing due to sickness. Attendance at church services and participation by members was obligatory and one could not be absent for light reason. Thus, due to the extraordinary circumstance of deadly infection, the sick need not worry that they are in a contumacious and rebellious state. But if someone is not sick and avoiding the public assembly, that is not a case of necessity but some form of contumacy. Balduin applied this last comment repeatedly, *non est privatio sacramenti, sed contemptus eius condemnatur* (it is not privation of the sacrament, but contempt of it, that condemns) throughout his work when dealing with either the infectious sick or the impenitent.

### **Reformed Approaches to Comfort, Pastoral Calling, and the Plague**

The Reformed pastor and theologian, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), endorsed the administration of communion privately to the sick with qualification. As Balduin noted, Beza does reference the custom of the ancient church when deacons brought the Eucharist to the sick who were absent from the

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<sup>35</sup> *Tractatus*, 1099.

<sup>36</sup> *Tractatus*, 1100.

public assembly. “Therefore no custom of anyone, no matter how ancient, moves me at all because this issue must be judged by its reasons and not by examples.”<sup>37</sup> It is scriptural principle not historical example that should have primacy. So what were Beza’s reasons for his moderated view? In Beza’s *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, question 241, he had asked, “Do you think the Lord’s Supper ought to be celebrated elsewhere than in the common and public assembly?”<sup>38</sup> Since, in Beza’s opinion a person prohibited by disease from being bodily present should be considered as equally present, “I do not doubt at all that this thing would bring great comfort to the sick; I wish greatly that this custom was restored, but whether it should be brought to the sick to be celebrated at a time when the Lord’s Supper is not being administered in the Church, I am exceedingly undecided about that.”<sup>39</sup> Beza’s indecision is due in part to the recognition that other Reformed communities, pastors, and theologians in the period differed widely as to whether the Lord’s Supper could be celebrated outside of the public ministry of the Word in the regular worship meeting. There was perhaps, however, not as much distance among the Reformed as Balduin had claimed.

In question 240 Beza had evaluated whether the Lord’s Supper could be celebrated in private houses. “I have nothing to say against private houses, if the Church, that is the common assembly should meet in them, just as this was also needed under the tyranny of the Roman Empire in ancient times, and just as it is still necessary in many places in our times.”<sup>40</sup> The key issue on which Beza insisted is that these assemblies should not lack the preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacrament.<sup>41</sup> In a further question along these lines, on whether private nocturnal meetings were forbidden, Beza had answered that the Church might need to meet in private homes at night due to persecution, as in the case of the French Reformed churches “who have born the weight of the most horrible persecutions for over fifty years now.”<sup>42</sup> The issue then is not the location of the building (a public building or a private residence),

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<sup>37</sup> Beza, *Tractationes Theologicae*, 3:364, “Nihil igitur me mouet quorundam consuetudo, quantumuis vetus, quia rationibus non exemplis iudicandum est.”

<sup>38</sup> Beza, *Tractationes Theologicae*, 3:363; cf. cited in Balduin, *Tractatus*, 235.

<sup>39</sup> Beza, *Tractationes*, 3:363.

<sup>40</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:363.

<sup>41</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:363.

<sup>42</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:363.

nor the time of its assembly, but whether the congregation is regularly assembling for the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

In a follow up point on question 241, Beza asked whether the Lord's Supper ought to be celebrated outside of the public and common assembly of the Church. Here Beza articulated his primary objection, "First, since the Lord's Supper is not some family's private action, but purely an ecclesiastical one, and thus Passover was eaten in Israel by the household, even so it still was eaten at no other time than when the whole of Israel celebrated the mystery."<sup>43</sup> Beza contrasted the change in administration from the Passover meal in the household to the public celebration of the Lord's Supper, and then posed a hypothetical question. Even if the whole Christian world celebrated the Lord's Supper daily if possible, but at least on certain established days, "I do not know how it is in opposition to the institution of the Lord's Supper, if when the entirety of the rest of the Church proceeded in one way, some house would celebrate those mysteries outside the [regular] order."<sup>44</sup> Beza asked whether, due to abuses of private communion, the sick must be deprived of this comfort. No, they should not, provided communicants are well instructed; there must not be a magical understanding of the Supper wherein the thing signified is bound to the sign as if by a magical incantation. There must not be any favoritism in the administration of private communion by the pastor, privileging the rich over the poor.

I certainly think that one must take especial care to excise those errors. But I do not think that the sick are to be deprived of either the comfort of the Word or of the Sacraments, if they should be instructed. Even if a season of disease or of dying should prevent them from celebrating the Supper publicly with the rest of the brethren. Such impediments do not allow them to be present in the public assembly, notwithstanding obviously, they should not be deprived in the least from the benefit of the Supper any more than they would have been previously.<sup>45</sup>

With these qualifications Beza concluded, "If anyone thinks that all these obstacles could be avoided and that in an assembly with a sick person asking for it, these mysteries can be celebrated, and at least with these conditions, I

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<sup>43</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:364.

<sup>44</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:364.

<sup>45</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:364.

would not interdict this [i.e., the ancient] custom.”<sup>46</sup> Like Balduin, Beza put forward the primacy of the public assembly while noting the extraordinary necessity imposed by sickness or dying.

In his *De Peste Quaestiones Duae Explicatae*, after Beza considered the nature of secondary causes and the importance of human agency in utilizing medicine and all licit preventatives of plague, he outlined the nature of Christian vocation with respect to plague.<sup>47</sup> The occasion for his writing in 1579 was not an abstract consideration of the plague and God’s sovereignty but aimed at giving pastoral counsel and instruction to Christians struggling with their various callings and vocations in a time of plague in Geneva and its environs. May someone flee the plague? Beza answered,

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.<sup>48</sup>

The issue is not whether you should love your neighbor, but how you should love your neighbor in your calling if you must avoid infection. One must distinguish between public callings, like magistrates and ministers, and private ones, like the common laity. Beza pleaded that “everyone must have regard to their station and calling; for some serve in public offices, either civil or ecclesiastical; the rest are private persons.”<sup>49</sup>

His exhortation would apply not only to a Christian’s public duties, but also their private ones as well. Husbands are not free to abandon wives, and vice versa; nor parents their children, children their parents, nor citizens their fellow citizens. If this admonition to faithfulness is true of Christians in their various private callings, it was especially true for ministers of the Gospel in their public one. “I do not see how,” said Beza, “any who serve in a public civil office may flee their charge in the time of plague; and for faithful pastors to

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<sup>46</sup> *Tractationes*, 3:364.

<sup>47</sup> Theodore Beza, *De Peste Quaestiones Duae Explicatae* (Geneva: Eustache Vignon, 1579); idem, *A Shorte Learned and Pithie Treatise of the Plague*, trans. John Stockwood (London: Thomas Dawson, 1580); idem, *FTP*, 3–31.

<sup>48</sup> *FTP*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *FTP*, 27.

forsake but one poor sheep at the time when he most of all needs heavenly comfort, it is too shameful, indeed too wicked to even consider.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the commandment not to murder applies as much to others as oneself, “therefore ... neither their own, nor the lives of any belonging to or depending on them, are to be thoughtlessly put in danger of deadly infection.”<sup>51</sup> The goal and role of diligent love in one’s several relations and callings are the primary consideration in times of plague. And with respect to conscience, “no one should either withdraw or remain who has a doubting conscience about it. But rather, when someone 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.”<sup>52</sup>

In agreement with Balduin, then, Beza noted that the sick also have obligations to the healthy, namely to be careful that “they do not abuse the love of their kindred and friends at a time when they desire to have themselves provided for.”<sup>53</sup> He was concerned that the sick should not spread infection, either publicly or privately. Here Beza resorted to his own experience of having plague when his friends, John Calvin and Pierre Viret, wanted to visit him, “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.”<sup>54</sup> Part of love of others, said Beza, is to keep them from harm if you can, especially if one is infected with an infectious deadly disease. Beza insisted that an individual’s needs cannot unduly jeopardize the lives of those essential for the well-being and continuity of the Church and Commonwealth.

Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), a pastor in Augsburg and a Reformed professor in Bern also provides a helpful window into varied practices of the administration of the Lord’s Supper. Musculus authored commentaries on Genesis, the Psalms, Isaiah, the Gospels of Matthew and John, and most of the Pauline corpus. He was respected as a scholar, colleague, and godly friend by such reformers as Martin Bucer (Strasbourg), Heinrich Bullinger (Zürich), and

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<sup>50</sup> *FTP*, 28.

<sup>51</sup> *FTP*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> *FTP*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> *FTP*, 28.

<sup>54</sup> *FTP*, 29.

John Calvin (Geneva). After his death, what is known as his *Loci Communes* was compiled from his exegetical commentaries into a theological handbook and published in 1560. By 1577 his *Loci* had also been translated into French.

As has been noted, there were a range of opinions on the necessity of final communion. Commenting on Roman Catholic beliefs and practice in the mid-sixteenth century, Musculus noted that one immediate consequence of not receiving a final communion included disqualification from burial in a Christian cemetery, but more importantly they “think that those departing this life without their last communion do not gain entry into heaven.” But even if Roman Catholics did receive final communion, “yet,” he says,

they are not prepared in such a way so as to go straight to heaven, at least not before they first go into the papal fire for a full purification, and not without the sacrifices of the Mass on the first, seventh, and thirtieth of the month, and on the anniversary of their death, as they say, at last they depart to that heaven which the papal indulgences bring them, being expiated and redeemed.<sup>55</sup>

Musculus also observed that some “evangelical churches” (*ecclesia evangelica*), that is, Lutheran churches, retain a private and last communion not for the sake of purgatory, but “so that through the body and blood of the Lord they are made stronger in their faith, and more equipped to resist the temptations of Satan and to sustain the pains of death.” He does not disagree with the goal of such activity, but on the wisdom of this practice.

Contrary to these evangelical churches, Musculus argues for the particular importance of communion as part of the public worship and only received in the public assembly of the Church. His concerns can be reduced to three: 1) scriptural faithfulness, 2) ecclesiastical attendance, and 3) doctrinal prudence. “The rest of the churches abstain from this private and household communion of the sick for these reasons. The first is because the Lord wanted this communion to be ecclesiastic and public, just as is seen in the apostolic tradition in 1 Corinthians 11.”<sup>56</sup> Musculus consistently emphasized the public nature of communion as necessary for full participation in the Church and its fellowship. In describing who must be admitted to the table, he stated that “the administration of the Supper is not a private rite that pertains to a select few, but to

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<sup>55</sup> Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 370.

<sup>56</sup> Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 370.

the public, entire, and common Church, so that however many are counted among the members of the Church must be admitted.”<sup>57</sup> There is also an interesting pivot on the term tradition. While others might speak of ancient custom or patristic tradition, Musculus reduced the question to apostolic tradition, that is, in his usage, to a matter of written Scripture in 1 Corinthians 11. And so, while there might be matters of prudence that could be informed by considerations of past practice, of ultimate concern for Musculus is that ancient custom should not surmount clear scriptural teaching. This is similar to Beza’s point that it is *rationes*, reasons, not *consuetudines*, customs, that are determinative of right practice.

Musculus continues the discussion of his concerns:

Second, so that in hope of gaining a private and last communion they would not desert the public and ecclesiastic one, and it would happen that those communions would be held more infrequently than it is fitting for the church that has been properly instructed. Third, so that an opportunity would not be opened by private and household suppers for the opinion of *operis operatum*, and of a false confidence (*praepostera fiducia*), whereby like papists with their private Masses, so more carnal evangelicals would depend upon sacramental signs so received in place of a farewell [communion]. And these seem to be sufficiently grave and pregnant reasons why the sick should be visited by ministers of the Word and pastors with a sedulous diligence, and invigorated and strengthened with the comfort of the Word of Christ. Next, ecclesiastic communion should be held quite frequently.<sup>58</sup>

Private communion, according to Musculus, tended towards individuals forsaking the assembly of God’s people. A third warning to believers was directed against a *praepostera fiducia*, a false confidence derived from a ritual as opposed to a true confidence in Christ. The solution in Musculus’ view is a vigorous policy of pastoral visitation to comfort the sick through a close ministry of the Word to them. And, while the Lord’s Supper was only to be celebrated publicly in the regular public assembly of the Church, it should be administered frequently and regularly that occasional absence due to sickness might be

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<sup>57</sup> Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 369.

<sup>58</sup> Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 369.

mitigated. Otherwise, it seems, if communion were offered more infrequently, a regular source of comfort would be limited.

### **Findings**

With respect to these samples from early modern Lutheran and Reformed theologians, there are multiple aspects of consideration when dealing with the sick. Balduin identified the pastoral task as taken up with preaching and comfort, in emulation of the work of the Holy Spirit. Beza and Musculus would largely agree. With respect to the Lord's Supper, all of these figures would agree that repentance and faith are necessary elements in deriving full benefit from participation in it. These pastors would agree that no one should willfully absent themselves from the table. However, someone suffering a deadly sickness or other infectious diseases are sufficient reason to absent oneself from the public assemblies of the Church. For Beza, withdrawing from plague is legitimate if it is in keeping with a person's calling and vocation. However, pastors, magistrates, and others have a duty of care towards the sick. Balduin sharpens this argument recommending how pastors should exercise all lawful means to stay well as they visit the sick. Balduin, Beza, and Musculus would all agree that recklessness and timidity are unbecoming of a Christian. But in the exercise of communion and its usage with the sick and suffering not all of the Protestants agreed; Lutherans in general affording communion to the sick, but the Reformed with a high degree of reticence, if at all.

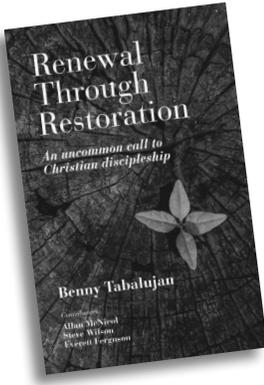
Where these reflections may be most helpful is the consideration of the importance of healthy participation in the local church. All of these pastors agreed that the public assembly of the Church under the Word and Sacrament cannot be lightly avoided. Beza and Musculus are more cautious in the bringing of communion to the sick. Beza, like Balduin, would hold to a moderate position that the ancient custom of the patristics could be used not because of its antiquity, but because of scriptural reasons. All of these theologians agree that it may not be possible or wise to visit the sick at all times. Balduin makes a point that it is important to have Christian literature for the comfort of the sick. Musculus, while denying that the sick should receive communion at home, still maintains that it is the ministry of comfort and the promises of God that should encourage the sick most, and this should be applied frequently. It is hard to imagine Balduin and Beza disagreeing that the ministry of the Word

should have priority in comfort. The debate then was whether Word and Sacrament could be administered privately and separately from the congregation. The ministry of the Word was both public and private; the debate was whether the Lord's Supper was.

With respect to the pastoral ministry and plague, perhaps the most interesting reminder is the integrity and importance of the public ministry of the Word. The public worship of God and fellowship of God's people should not be forsaken. Instead, each should take due consideration of their various callings, their circumstances, and commit themselves to live faithfully in communion with God and his people.

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US Distributor – Austin, TX