

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Pandemic Affects On Doctrine

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Pandemics can radically change cultural behavior. After a year of Covid -19 concerns, many of us if not most go about our daily routine in confined public places with masks covering our faces. What previously was the look of sick patients, pro-active doctors, nurses, and chemical workers has now become a public norm for all. In less than a year, a pandemic has so altered behavior that if you do not have a mask on, you are viewed negatively by many.

Pandemics can affect religious doctrine as well. In a recent article, Francesco Arduini informed readers of a pandemic that passed through the Roman Empire in A.D. 165, under Emperor Marcus Aurelius' rule (*Biblical Archaeology Review; Spring 2021, pages 70-71*). Mr. Arduini pointed to this pandemic for the origin of child or infant baptism.

The Antonine Plague was probably “*the first appearance of smallpox in the Mediterranean and Europe.*” It “*probably originated in the city of Seleucia, near present-day Baghdad.*” The widely accepted theory is that in A.D. 165, when the Roman soldiers were sent to invade Parthia, they returned spreading the infectious disease all the way back to Rome.

The effect of this outbreak of smallpox was devastating, killing “*approximately 5,000 people per day.*” The pandemic witnessed the scourge that “*reportedly wiped out more than 90 percent of the population in limited areas of Egypt and probably more than 20 percent of the Roman Empire’s total population.*”

Infant baptism was mentioned first by Irenaeus in A.D. 180 (*Adversus haereses 2:22.4*). Tertullian spoke against the practice in A.D. 200 (*De Baptismo 18.4-5*). About A.D. 215, the theologian Hippolytus provided a “*liturgical formulation of the baptism of children.*” Before the second century, infant baptism was not practiced. In his article, Francesco connects the dots for its origin. He theorizes that since the mortality rate of smallpox in children was exceedingly high, parents submitted their seriously ill children to baptism to save their departing souls. During the emergency of the pandemic, “*learned debate was silenced.*” But when the pandemic ended, the practice was debated, and finally widely accepted in religious orthodoxy.

Infants and young children are not guilty of sin and are not capable yet of understanding the significance of the Gospel message. All who are commanded to be baptized in the New Testament

understood they were sinners before God, and through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, they could now be saved in Him. Being baptized for the remission of their sins, they rejoiced having believed in the Lord (*Acts 8: 26-40, Acts 16:30-34*).

While the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 may not become the origin of a new doctrine, it has brought to the surface a doctrine widely accepted. It is the teaching that one may partake of the Lord's supper by oneself apart from assembling with the saints of a local church. Is this practice authorized by God? In the New Testament, Christians are commanded to partake of the Lord's supper (*I Corinthians 11:23-28*). The approved example as to “*when*” Christians were to proclaim the death of Jesus in the supper was on “*the first day of the week*” (Sunday) when all come together “*in one place*” (*Acts 20:7, I Corinthians 11:18, 20*).

“Zoom” is not being together in one place. During emergencies practices are changed, but God's revealed pattern must always prevail. If one part of the pattern of “when” can be changed, why not partake of the Lord's Supper on Friday night? Why would you ever condemn the practice? Beware! Pandemics can affect doctrine and expose unauthorized religious practices.