



# The Harvester

*Preparing Souls  
To Serve The Lord!*

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## We Have Been Here Before (Part 2)

Bruce Daugherty

The coronavirus epidemic is something new for everyone. Nothing like this has occurred in our lifetimes. Since it is a new experience and with all the media hype, it is uncertain as to how to respond. The desire is to be prudent but at the same time not give oneself over to panic. We want to live by faith rather than fear.

Though we have not lived through a pandemic, there are precedents in history that can help give guidance as to what course of action individual Christians or congregations should take. One reason for studying church history and the history of the Restoration Movement is to be reminded that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9-10). Examining the responses of God’s people in previous times of pestilence and plague can prove to be beneficial to God’s people today. Part 1 of this article examined the responses given to the “Black Death” of 1348, Martin Luther’s course of action during the plague, and David Lipscomb’s example during the cholera epidemic in Nashville in 1873. Part 2 will examine the impact of the Spanish flu of 1918-1919 on some Christians in the Ohio Valley and give some practical lessons the church today can learn.

### Experiences of Christians During the Spanish Flu

The worst pandemic in recent history is the Spanish flu of 1918-1919. It resulted in an estimated 50 million deaths worldwide and 675,000 in the United States (“Spanish Flu”). Children under the age of five were

especially susceptible and a high mortality rate ran among those aged 20-40, as well as those over age 65.

No effective prevention existed. The medical advances necessary to isolate the virus and develop a vaccine would not occur for another fifteen years. The flu epidemic at the end of 1918 seemed a devastating throwback to the plagues of the Middle Ages. (Cooper, 320)

Like pestilence and plagues of the ancient world and the medieval era, only preventative measures stopped the spread of the disease. Isolation, quarantine, the practice of good personal hygiene, the use of disinfectants, and limitations of public gatherings were the responses to the epidemic.

All of these measures had an impact on churches and preachers. As health officials suggested the closing of all public meetings to prevent the spread of the virus, the first reaction of many Christians was to keep attending the assemblies. Fred Rowe, owner of the *Christian Leader* gave this response to an inquiry from a reader in Glasgow, Kentucky, whose elderly parents were advising them to stay at home.

By all means attend the worship. If the state authorities close the meetinghouses, you can meet in small groups in your homes, but if the meeting house is open, that is the place to go. I have never known a person to be harmed by obeying any of the commands of the Lord, so I answer this sister by saying emphatically, attend the church worship as your duty to the God of heaven. (Rowe, 5)

Rowe went on to state that he was astonished that the authorities were shutting down church gatherings. He believed they should be calling on God-

fearing people to gather in prayer rather than close the doors of churches.

D. J. Poynter also shared his convictions about closing down the assemblies. He said that he wanted to “enter a solemn protest against closing the churches.” Poynter listed his reasons. First, he doubted whether the quarantine did any good, since he knew of individuals who worked in solitude and still came down with the flu. But while he did concede the point that it was best not to congregate, he believed church assemblies had a different character than other public gatherings.

Only well people attend, as even the slightest headache is excuse enough to stay away from the house of God. Those who attend are clean, having taken a bath and put on their clean clothes. The house of worship is clean. The assemblage lasts but a short time. The minds of the worshipers are taken away from earthly troubles, so that the effect is beneficial to their bodies. (Poynter, 1)

Poynter went on to say that if ever there was a time where men needed to humble themselves in God’s house and call on Him in prayer it was now. Though he had respect for the “learned men” he would rather trust in God and obey Him in fighting the flu.

Despite these initial reactions, many congregations in the Ohio Valley had to suspend assemblies for a six to eight week period by orders from state and local governments. Ira Moore, an editor of the *Christian Leader* spoke of his

situation. “I have done but little preaching since Oct. 6th, when the ‘flu’ ban was put on” (Moore, 4). Some churches, especially small country congregations, continued to meet. Attendance numbers were low and protracted gospel meetings were canceled.

Church practices were also changed by the epidemic. In that era, many, if not all the congregations in the Ohio valley used one cup for the Lord’s supper. But as the influenza epidemic spread, practices had to adapt. In 1918 the governor of the State of West Virginia ordered all people sharing drinking vessels to have their own individual cups. This was directed towards railroad gangs and logging crews who shared a common water cooler on the job and everyone drank from the same metal dipper or cup. But the new law also included churches. Ira Moore, who had long argued for better hygiene habits from Christians, like giving up smoking and chewing tobacco, endorsed this new law and helped brethren to see that it was the contents of the cup, rather than the container itself, which was of importance in keeping the Lord’s supper.

The impact on preachers was especially hard felt. Most preachers of that era in churches of Christ were not located and they had no fixed salaries. They were itinerant evangelists who were paid as they held protracted meetings or preached for various congregations from Sunday to Sunday. When churches closed,

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preachers received no income. Thad Hutson spoke of his situation during the epidemic:

I am anxiously waiting for the flu epidemic to abate so I can get back to the work of preaching the gospel. But I intend to work with my hands as opportunity allows until that time comes. I ask for the prayers of God's people. (Considerations, 8)

Another Ohio Valley preacher was J. H. Pennell. Pennell had helped to establish the church meeting in Zanesville, Ohio, and evangelized up and down the Muskingum River valley to small country congregations as well as congregations in towns and cities. But in the winter of 1918-1919, he reported that he and his family were on a "7 week vacation." The "vacation" was imposed because he and his family were quarantined. As a result, Pennell had no income for seven weeks. Despite the dire straits, Pennell kept his faith. His report concluded, "But the Lord will provide. No prospects for getting out soon" (Field Reports, 12).

Many Ohio Valley homes paid the ultimate price during the epidemic. "More doughboys fell to the flu than to enemy bullets, and thousands of the wounded died because they were weakened by the disease." (Cooper, 320). Two Christian young men from Ohio, drafted into the military, died from influenza. Edgar Calliccoat of Lawrence County, Ohio, was called up to serve on September 4 and died a month later of Spanish flu in Camp Sherman, Ohio ("Obituary," 18). Hobart Morrison, of Harrietsville, Ohio, also died from the influenza.

The home of A. A. Bunner was draped in black crepe during the fall and winter of 1918. Bunner was an evangelist from Marion county, West Virginia, but was living in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was establishing a new congregation. In November 1918, Bunner reported the death of his youngest son, Laurence, aged 18. Laurence had graduated high school in the spring and had just begun his college studies at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Bunner reported, "While we feel we have sustained a great loss, our loss is his gain. Pray for us." (Obituary, 13). Three months later, sorrow was added to the Bunner family as they were bereaved of a second son.

With a heart filled with sadness I must tell I lost another son—Rawlins Harding Bunner, aged thirty-three years. He leaves a wife and three small children. Rawlins had developed into a strong and useful preacher of the Word. Bro. Hendershot will prepare a suitable notice for the C. L. The Father knows best. Remember us in your prayers. In hope. (A Second

Son, 9)

Countless other Christians suffered loss in the period, but these cited give an indication of the heartache suffered by good people during the epidemic.

## Selecting a Course Of Action

In light of the examination that has been made from these precedents from history, what course of action should Christians pursue today? Whether an epidemic is raging or not, ways to serve and be our brother's keeper should be a priority. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45, NKJ). A spirit of faith, rather than fear will energize Christians. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7). Certainly, everyone at this time should take sensible precautions without falling into paralysis. Compassion for those in need must be a part of how God's people respond in this crisis.

By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. <sup>17</sup>But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? <sup>18</sup>My little children, let us not love in word, or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (1 Jn. 3:16-18)

Times like these inevitably will produce friction, even among good people. Not everyone has the same comfort level and course of action. Rather than criticize and judge others, peace and harmony must prevail among the heirs of heaven.

Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. <sup>17</sup>Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. (Rom. 12:16-18)

Let's be ready to share love and the gospel message with others in this time. This pandemic may cause people to awaken to their spiritual condition and their need for Christ. There will be opportunities to share faith. "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15).

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We must also be prepared for the inevitability that some of will suffer loss in this epidemic. May all of God's people weep with those who weep and bind up the wounds of those who suffer.

While things look bad now, I am firmly convinced that good will come out of this. God is greater than any pandemic. I am already seeing good things being done as people make the church a reality that is not tied to a building, but manifested in the lives of people.

It is easy to talk about Christianity when things are going well. It is another thing when we find ourselves in the storm and faith is being tested. No matter what may come the need is to persevere in doing what is right!

The example of Epaphroditus, while in a different situation, ought to inspire all of us to greater expressions of our faith.

Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need; <sup>26</sup>since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. <sup>27</sup>For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God

had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup>Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. <sup>29</sup>Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; <sup>30</sup>because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me. (Phil. 2:25-30)

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