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Trust in Times of Crisis

Wrap-up and Outlook¹

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1. Paul in the talkshow

Late one Tuesday evening at the end of April last year, Markus Lanz was hosting a panel discussion on the corona crisis in the “x-te” show on ZDF. In the studio were Lower Saxony’s Premier Minister Stephan Weil, virologist Henrik Streeck from Bonn and the author and philosopher Thea Dorn. To start with, they talked about face masks, the latest studies into the COVID-19 virus and prognoses for overcoming the pandemic and the repercussions of the corona crisis. Finally, the host turned to Thea Dorn’s widely read essay on the solitude experienced by those dying in times of corona, which she had published a few weeks previously in the newspaper “ZEIT”.

The conversation turned into an unexpected pinnacle amongst the usual talkshow chatter. Where can people draw consolation from during the corona crisis, especially those dying and their family members? That is precisely the famous question at the start of the Heidelberg Catechism, which of course none of the participants in the show had in mind: What is the sole consolation in life and in death? Thea Dorn openly stated that she was not a believer, that she belonged rather to the camp of “structurally disconsolate people”. She continued: “We are a society that has lost faith”, that no longer believes in any paradise or eternal life.

But then came the climax. Ms Dorn related how her journey to the studio in Hamburg had taken her past a church. Outside hung a large banner with a quote from the letters of Paul. “And I wouldn’t have thought,” the philosopher said, “that I would ever sit in a TV studio and say that the cleverest sentence I’ve heard today was a quote by Paul from the Bible! And that was ‘For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of consideration.’” This sentence “somehow blew my mind because I get the impression that we are currently allowing ourselves to be led massively by the spirit of fear and not power, love and consideration. And I believe that it’s not good for society to start letting itself be governed by the spirit of fear.”

These were not the words of a Bishop or a professor of theology, but of a non-believer and “rather a structurally disconsolate” author. Whilst heads of churches have been acting incredibly defensively in corona emergency mode and very little is to be heard of public theology, this single sentence from the Bible uttered here sums up the plight and promise of the current situation succinctly in a way quite unparalleled in all the statements issued during the past months by churches or theologians. The fact that the second letter to Timothy, which this quote comes from, was not written by Paul himself, but from an anonymous student – is irrelevant. The quote is certainly brimming with the spirit of Paul.

¹ Paper presented at the CPCE online consultation “What can be learned from Corona?”, 17–19 March 2021.

I experienced this momentous scene with Markus Lanz by chance, as that single quote from the Bible encapsulated the entire Gospel and, in that unexpected setting, unleashed its surprising effect. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who, as he himself said, became old but not pious, would presumably have remarked upon the “potential for truth” in religious annals.

2. A pandemic era

It is worthwhile not taking this quote from the Bible in isolation, but also considering the context in which it is set. The full paragraph reads:

“For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of consideration. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.” (2 Timothy 1,7-10)

The corona virus has come to stay. It has shaken up people’s lives all over the world. If at the start of the pandemic there was talk of light at the end of the tunnel, that we hoped to reach after a few months or at least by the end of the year, new mutations evolving in the meantime have destroyed hope of a quick end to the pandemic. Expert virologists and epidemiologists are carving out different scenarios. It is possible that the virus and its mutations will weaken over time and become no more dangerous than annual ‘flu. However, it might also be the case that at least some mutations prove to be more aggressive, resistant and deadly than the original COVID-19 virus. Even if it proves possible to adapt the astonishingly speedily developed vaccine quickly to the new mutations, it might turn out that medicine and health policy cannot keep up with the virus, with the result that despite all the lockdowns and vaccinations we can’t get the virus under control, let alone eradicate it. The “Zero Covid” notion vaunted by eminent international scientists² would then be doomed to failure.

In any case, it’s already possible to say now that the world will not make its way back to the normality that reigned prior to the outbreak of the corona pandemic. In the best case, a new normality will arise in which the areas of the globalised economy and its flows of goods, mobility, the world of work and mass tourism will undergo extreme changes. With regard to climate change, some of the changes to be anticipated are certainly desirable, but they will also be linked with social disturbances and possibly even political upheaval.

Besides Sars-CoV-2 (COVID-19), other viruses have also jumped from animals to humans. With the world’s population reaching almost eight billion, factory farming and close contact with wild animals, whose habitats keep withering further, we have to reckon with further cases of zoonotic viruses in the future, indeed exacerbated by climate change. A paper published by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Research in February 2021 suggested that climate change has caused the bat population to expand significantly in recent decades around Wuhan, i.e. precisely the city in China where Sars-CoV-2 appears to have been traced in humans for the first time.

² Cf. <https://zero-covid.org/> (accessed: 15.2.2021).

The corona pandemic might “not be in the form that humans have been subject to sporadically over time, but the start of a pandemic phase that humanity has not previously experienced.”³ Historian Frank Snowden refers to concurring expert opinions that the outbreak of bird ‘flu in 1997 “marked the start of a dangerous era in human health.”⁴ Snowden cites the comparison already made by medical scientists Anthony Fauci and Julie Gerberding at a hearing before the U.S. Senate in 1995: “If you live in the Caribbean, you can assume you will experience a hurricane. You don’t when or what magnitude, but you know that it’s going to happen. It’s exactly the same for pandemics.”⁵ However, Snowden offers some consolation in the fact that we can prepare for pandemics.

In this situation, the words taken from Paul’s second letter to Timothy carry particular weight. For we are being told right now that God gives us the spirit of strength, love and consideration, and this is being said to all of us. It is the task of the church and each and every one of us to give witness to the Gospel in word and deed. And even if our society has become increasingly secular, as so glaringly apparent in the corona pandemic, we should not and do not wish to shy away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is precisely now that people are called for who live from the spirit of strength, love and consideration and who face the pandemic and its repercussions as vigorously as they do lovingly and clear-headedly.

Hope that is based on faith in Jesus Christ is more than the plain optimism that politicians, economists, psychologists and futurologists try to disseminate. This hope is not founded in human self-confidence, but in faith in God as the all-determining reality. It is founded in the trust that we are not at the mercy of a nameless fate or the uncontrollable forces of nature, but that we can continue to count firmly on God’s presence and his action in the world to this day. The world might sometimes seem as though there were no God. People might also have their reasons for not believing in God. But the world is not without God. It cannot rid itself of God, who created it and became man through Jesus Christ because He loved it so much, as stated in the Gospel of John. Contrary to all appearances, we can believe that we do not live in a godforsaken world, and that we have not been abandoned by God, but are loved. As Christians, we are called upon to give witness to this to other people – in our families, our private and working lives, and society.

3. Corona theology

The corona pandemic not only puts ethics to the test, but also dogmatics as the intellectual accountability of the Christian faith.⁶ The systematic theologian Günter Thomas (University of Bochum) explained right at the outset of the pandemic:⁷ “The corona crisis leads to a profound shake-up of the stage on which the church performs. Tried-and-tested scenarios retreat into the background, while forgotten ones come to the fore. It’s not just a thematic interface that

³ Bernd Ulrich, Normal? Wohl kaum, in: DIE ZEIT, 11.2.2021, p. 2.

⁴ Frank Snowden, “Ein Trost” (Interview: Samiha Shafy), in: DIE ZEIT, 11.2.2021, p. 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cf. Ulrich H.J. Körtner, Religion und Corona. Eine erste Zwischenbilanz aus evangelisch-theologischer Sicht, <https://konfessionskundliches-institut.com/allgemein/religion-und-corona/>, 4.6.2020 (accessed: 15.2.2021).

⁷ Günter Thomas, Gott ist zielstrebig (I–V). Theologie im Schatten der Corona-Krise, <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/8206>, here Part I (accessed: 15.2.2021).

becomes important, such as responsibility, creation or theodicy. This crisis touches entire theology – to use the metaphor of a church organ, the corona crisis pulls out all the stops. It forces us into theological honesty and constructive debate. This crisis has the power to break down trusted theological forms and publicly expose hollow words as just that: empty shells of battles long past.” Thomas’ dogmatic discourses are substantive and provide important impetus for material dogmatic discussions. But these need to be conducted quite independently from the corona crisis and also not only triggered by it.

Reading the statements on the corona crisis issued by university theologians during the past year, including those criticising the indeed remarkably reticent church leaders at the beginning, it is quickly apparent that the theology is by no means entirely new, but that they all use the situation to prove the relevance and pertinence of their existing theological concepts – be they feminist, liberationist, Barthian, or whatever.⁸ Theology is also subject to the fundamental finding by sociologist Armin Nassehi at the end of the immediate lockdown phase: “The virus changes everything, but nothing changes.”⁹ Nassehi says of the individual subsystems and social protagonists: “The virus really has changed everything, but nothing has changed in the slightest in how a complex society reacts to such an exceptional situation. One might say that it does so rather routinely. We see that all the protagonists act exactly the same as ever. [...] All the protagonists play the roles that they always have. This is certainly not a reproach, but rather ultimately represents the structure of society, which thus reacts with its own means.”¹⁰

During the corona crisis, there is need not only for ethical guidance, but also for religious guidance and provision of meaning. The global effects of the corona pandemic absolutely cannot yet be estimated. However, I would like to warn against overestimating them theologically. “Need” – the Austrian author Karl-Markus Gauss is right in this respect – “is not an experience of spiritual awakening and the crisis is not a moral correctional institute.”¹¹ And yet even in a secular society, the Gospel can exude a liberating force. The loss of systemic relevance for theology and the church also creates new room for manoeuvre and is not only lamentable.¹² After all, God’s kingdom does not stem from existing social systems and their optimisation, but transcends and breaks through them.

The Protestant theologian Frank Vogelsang is right to recall that “churches’ actions can also be critical to the system”. He continues: “It is neither the primary task nor the primary interest of churches to prop social systems. There are certainly social systems that restrict human rights, massively increase the wealth of a few and promote the exploitation of humans and nature.

⁸ This, incidentally, also applies to philosophy. Philosophers are making a name for themselves during the corona crisis as life coaches and world interpreters. For example, Konrad Paul Liessmann in a “Profil” interview, 31.3.2020 (<https://www.profil.at/shortlist/gesellschaft/liessmann-coronakrise-einsamkeit-11423809>); Giorgio Agamben (<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/coronavirus-giorgio-agamben-zum-zusammenbruch-der-demokratie-ld.1551896>, 15.4.2020 [accessed: 15.2.2011]); and Slavoj Zizek (<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/coronavirus-der-mensch-wird-nie-mehr-derselbe-gewesen-sein-ld.1546253>, 13.3.2020 [accessed: 15.2.2021]).

⁹ <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2020-05/corona-massnahmen-lockerungen-kontaktverbot-lockdown-social-distancing>, 4.5.2020 (accessed: 15.2.2021).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview in “Presse”, 28.3.2020.

¹² For information on the debate about the church’s relevance to the system in the corona pandemic, see Ulrich H.J. Körtner, *Nicht mehr systemrelevant. Theologie und Kirche im Corona-Krisenmodus*, in: *zeitzeichen* 21, 2020, vol. 6, pp. 12–14; also, *Sind Kirchen systemrelevant?*, <https://www.mensch-welt-gott.de/Downloads/Vortrag-Ulrich-Koertner.pdf>, 2.7.2020 (accessed: 15.2.2021).

These can be authoritarian systems, but also some of those based on the free and unregulated market. In other words, relevance to the system in itself is in no way a measure of quality for churches.”¹³

Humans don’t live from bread and medical care alone. Culture and art also provide important sustenance. Faith is not a must. However, it remains an option (Charles Taylor, Hans Joas), just as God is not necessary, but rather – having spoken to Eberhard Jüngel – more than necessary, and He precisely by giving us a sense of possibility adds meaning to our reality. Even in a minority position, theologians and the Church are called upon to carry on caretaking the world as God’s creation.

Some ask if the corona pandemic is a punishment from God. So says an evangelical interpretation that finds accordance not only in conservative Catholic circles, but also amongst some followers and scholars of other monotheistic religions. Or does God at least want to tell us something by means of the corona virus? Even those who reject interpreting the pandemic as a punishment or lesson from God – a wake-up call or call for repentance – ultimately cannot avoid the historical theological question of God’s hand in things.

Under these circumstances, I wish to recall the first thesis in the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934): “Jesus Christ, as attested to in the Holy Scriptures, is the only Word of God that we need to listen to, trust and obey, in life and in death.” And on the subject of repentance, without which there can actually be no true faith (Thesis 1 of Luther’s 95 Theses), so it is actually God’s clear Word in gospel and law that is to bring about such reversion.

As for those who believe that God has sent us the COVID-19 virus to tell us something or call upon us to turn around, I wish to remind them of Jesus’ parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). As the rich man smoulders in Hell and asks Abraham to at least send Lazarus to warn his brothers, Abraham answers: “They have Moses and the prophets; [...] If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one risen from the dead.” (Luke 16:29-31). If we don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, and we didn’t listen to Christ resurrected, who “is the only Word of God that we need to listen to, trust and obey, in life and in death”, then not even a corona pandemic is going to help us. The fact that certain lessons can be learned from it, however – e.g. that we should start manufacturing more medicines and medicinal products in Europe and rethink how we travel or how we treat animals – goes without saying for anyone with half a sense. It’s also quite easy to work out that the world, once this pandemic is halfway overcome – whenever that might actually be, will not be the same as before in many respects. There’s really no need for a message from God to spell this out. However, the question that concerns me is what it means to overcome the current situation by trusting in the sole Word of God, as witnessed through the Tora, the prophets and the New Testament.

Albert Camus’ novel “The Plague” comes to mind.¹⁴ Physician Dr Rieux is fighting not only the disease (metaphor for the Nazi occupation of France and the war), but at the same time also absurdity, and I have always seen a proximity – not identity! – between Camus’ philosophy of absurdity and a Christian faith characterised by the dialectic rescission of apocalypticism, which

¹³ Frank Vogelsang, Sind Kirchen systemrelevant?, <https://frank-vogelsang.de/2020/05/22/sind-kirchen-systemrelevant/>, 22.5.2020 (accessed: 15.2.2021).

¹⁴ Albert Camus, The Plague, translated from the original “La Peste”, published in 1947.

I understand as the courage to be questionable and fragile.¹⁵ If some of this humanity can now be experienced – I’m thinking of the doctors, nurses and carers who are working themselves to the bone, in Italy in 2020 even into the ground! – then for me, this is godly spirit in action, which is indeed the spirit of Christ that can fill us with gratitude and motivate us to go and do “likewise” where we have been put (Lk 10:37). Not that I wish to declare Dr Rieux and his current-day successors anonymous Christians, but rather in the sense of Barth’s teachings on light as luminaries who reflect the light emanating from the sole Word of God and light up the world even in darkness.

In Camus’ novel, the Jesuit priest Paneloux interprets the Plague as a punishment from God, linked with the optimistic expectation that it will open people’s eyes and force them to think or reform. Compare the various calls these days to see the corona crisis as an opportunity. In contrast, Dr Rieux says to his neighbour Tarrou: “What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. It helps [a few] men to rise above themselves.” On this subject, the Catholic theologian Paul Michael Zulehner says: “It thus certainly calls for a good dose of contra-factual historical optimism to see the current crisis as an opportunity for the world.”¹⁶ He continues: “Basically, we can’t at all yet foresee whether anything will change for the better in our world afterwards, as we are currently living in the interim. The crisis is nowhere near over. As long as no vaccine or effective medicine has been found, we must remain on guard.”

I understand the corona pandemic not as God’s punishment, but indeed as a test of our faith, although the term “test” certainly leaves open who or what set it. Viruses are part of nature. Pandemics are partly influenced by human factors, but also include elements of fate. Hence I would like to use the word “test” in this context, namely as a question of whether our faith will persist – as the fundamental courage to be questionable stemming from Christ, his cross and his resurrection. Can we recognise the face of God – the glory of God in the face of the crucified and resurrected – in, with and under the anonymity of fate? (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I ponder “where the borders lie between necessary resistance against ‘fate’ and just as necessary surrender. Don Quixote is the symbol for continuing to resist beyond reason, indeed to insanity – similar to Michael Kohlhaas, who becomes guilty by demanding to be right [...] In both cases, resistance eventually loses its sense of reality and evaporates into theoretical fantasy; Sancho Pansa represents the full and smart resignation to circumstance. I believe that we really have to undertake great things of our own and yet at the same time do what is clearly and generally necessary, we must combat ‘fate’ – I find the ‘neutrality’ of this term important – just as determinedly as we surrender to it in due time. One can only speak of ‘leadership’ *beyond* this dual procedure; God not only meets us as ‘You’, but also ‘disguised’ as an ‘It’, and thus my question is basically how we find ‘You’ in this ‘It’ (‘fate’) – or, in other words, [...] how ‘fate’ is really turned into ‘leadership’. The borders between resistance and surrender therefore fundamentally cannot be determined; but both must be there and both must be seized decisively. Faith demands this fluid, lively action. Only then can we endure [our] particular current situation and make it fruitful.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Ulrich H.J. Körtner, Weltangst und Weltende. Eine theologische Interpretation der Apokalyptik, Göttingen 1988, p. 389ff.

¹⁶ <https://theocare.wordpress.com/2020/05/14/covid-19-konnte-wenigstens-das-fragen-anstossen-paul-m-zulehner/>.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft, ed. by Christian Gremmels et al (DBW 8), Gütersloh 1998, p. 333f.

If I understand the corona pandemic as a test, then it's about proving our faith not only in what we do (helping the sick, medical research, measures to limit infection), but also in listening to God's Word – the *sole* Word of God. Proving Christian existence in faith, love and hope (1 Corinthians 13; cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:3). Faith has to prove itself through trusting in God being present while seemingly absent: in the world that exists as if there were no God (etsi Deus non daretur), living as if God existed (etsi Deus daretur). No; living in the certainty that he exists and that he even now is and remains the “all-determining reality”.

4. The spirit of power, love and consideration

Church and diaconia have the task of paying witness toward the world, through preaching and practical deeds, to the Gospel and God's unconditional devotion to people and His creation. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a resource of faith, love and hope; not just of resilience, but of solidarity and tending to those who need our help.

Our times are strongly characterised by the spirit of fear. We are by no means always aware of this. Although conflict and need prevail in the world, at our particular lines of latitude we can broadly lead safe and affluent lives. States under the rule of law and their authorities see to outer and inner security. If we fall ill, we can rely on a health system that people in other countries, for example in Africa, can only dream of.

And yet the spirit of fear lurks in all spheres of life. People cannot live without trust, and no society or state can exist without it. However, although trust is all well and good, checking is better. Highly complex societies like ours are also risk-laden. So we construct systems of checks and controls that in turn are checked by further controlling systems, and so on and so forth. We end up bringing the entire world under control. This is not only an expression of a sense of responsibility. Our attempts to control what's going on always harbour the spirit of fear.

During the corona crisis, it dramatically became clear to us how scantily we humans succeed in bringing the entire world and our own lives under our control. The virus became the point of entry for things that are not at our disposal and beyond our control.

The shattering aspect of the corona pandemic is how suddenly we lost control. Everyday life was derailed. Livelihoods were destroyed. Politics had to take drastic measures to not lose control entirely over the spread of infection with all its consequences. The health system also came under pressure. In some countries, it threatened to collapse completely – think of the images of the many dead and seriously ill on the intensive care wards in Italy and Spain.

The spirit of power, love and consideration should now in no way tempt us to become careless or reckless. For example, anyone who denies the danger posed by the coronavirus, perhaps is even still spreading various conspiracy theories, and ignores the protective measures put in place by state authorities is not demonstrating strong faith, but being irresponsible.

Instead, faith knows that our power in this world is limited. It also in no way refutes that grounds for concern keep arising in life. But it abides by the words in the first letter of Peter: “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7). Not recklessness, but calm signifies the spirit of power, love and consideration.

The spirit of power is not to be confused with acting tough. It manifests itself as inner strength and authority, which people do not draw from themselves, but from their trust in God

as their true fountain of strength. We can draw courage from trusting in God, and it is our task to encourage people to live, even and especially during the corona pandemic.

The spirit of love is not to be confused with romantic rapture. It manifests itself in loving acts towards others. However, the love that comes from God also appears in the way that we sustain one another and how. It is shown in our willingness to forgive one another. This also includes, I believe, treating others compassionately who bear political responsibility in such difficult times as those we are currently experiencing. Where mistakes were made during lockdown, or also since then, these need stating openly and set aside. But we should also be lenient with the politicians who are faced with a situation bereft of any blueprint. Politicians had and have to make further grave decisions, including the risk of getting things wrong. I found a sentence uttered by the German Health Minister, Jens Spahn, in April 2020 remarkable. He said: “We will probably have to excuse one another a lot for a couple of months.” This is a profoundly Christian thought.

The spirit of consideration is not to be confused with inertia or hesitance. It fits very well with decisive action. However, consideration also manifests itself in how we consider the effects of our actions and our omissions. It reflects willingness to act in a way that enables us to be corrected by the effects of our actions. Consideration means being aware of our own boundaries and the contradictions and dilemmas of life. Consideration results from reflection. However, reflection in a Christian spirit means reflecting upon Jesus Christ and seeking to meet up to him in life and deeds. This is exactly what Paul says in his letter to the Philippians: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). Being disposed this way towards one another – that is the spirit of consideration that should permeate and lead the church.

God has, as stated in the 2nd letter to Timothy, “saved us and called us with a holy calling”. This call goes out to people in baptism. This also happens, as we may believe, “not according to our works”, i.e. not based on our personal merits or our professional or social status, “but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ.” He has “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

Living from the spirit of power, love and consideration means living from the power of the resurrection and giving witness of this reality to the world. The hope of resurrection is not only a personal hope beyond our own death. Much rather, it is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, the purifying wind that blows from Easter into our world. This purifying wind from God is the blast of fresh air that our world so desperately needs in times of corona. Let us open our windows and doors to it so that we breathe afresh and be freed from the virus of mortal fear that also manifests itself as fear of life. It is certainly true that we are met by death in the midst of life. But as Christians we can be certain that we are surrounded by life in the midst of death. Thus fear and death should no longer control us because nothing can separate us from God’s love – no virus and no other power in this world.

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