

KEEPING JESUS IN THE CENTER – PRECISELY BECAUSE OF CORONA

Biblical Refutation of the Thesis Paper “Keeping Jesus in the Center – Despite Corona”

With this statement, we oppose the thesis paper “Keeping Jesus in the Center – Despite Corona” by Michael Kotsch, Wilfried Plock, Matthias Swart, Marco Vedder et al., which was published (2nd edition) on November 25, 2020 but only recently came to our attention. Since the thesis paper has a multitude of theological flaws, we fear that biblical truths are thereby obscured and thus the consciences of some Christians are grieved and, therefore, see it as our duty to counter the most serious theological misconceptions of the thesis paper with a biblical view. To the theses stated in the thesis paper, we present the following antitheses:

- 1. It is the sacred duty of the church to name the wrongs in the state, expose the sins of those in power and call them to repentance from their evil deeds.**
- 2. Certain state-imposed Corona requirements, for churches, violate God’s commandments and offend the consciences of many Christians, in that the state improperly interferes with Christ’s dominion over the Church.**
- 3. All Christians are therefore called to obey God more than men and to resist injustice in a godly manner,¹ even if this may result in state persecution.**

In the following, we will give biblical evidence for these antitheses.

I. The Sacred Duty of the Church

The signatories of the thesis paper rightly point out (point 2) that the Church and the state are two separate spheres of God’s rule. However, they fail to recognize the scope and limits of these spheres. They are apparently of the opinion that the Church should largely stay out of politics, i.e. the affairs of the state. The thesis paper states that elders should not engage in “party politics” and that ethically wrong or dubious laws of the state, which, however, leave the Christian the possibility to act rightly, do not have to be fought; the Bible nowhere declares it to be our duty to check up on the government or to resist questionable decisions.

In doing so, the signatories fail to recognize the sacred duty of the Church to proclaim the Word of God to all people. Biblical preaching, however, also means pointing out injustice, convicting of sin, and calling all people, including those in government, to repent of their evil works and to obey God’s commandments. As Christians we must have nothing in common with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them (Eph. 5:11). The weapon for this fight against darkness and wickedness, that is God’s Word (Eph. 6:17), was not given by the Lord to His church for nothing.

From ages past, those who proclaimed the Word of God have fulfilled this sacred duty: the prophet Nathan confronted King David for his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah; the prophet Elijah confronted King Ahab for his idolatry and the confiscation of Naboth’s vineyard; and the prophet John the Baptist confronted King Herod not only for his unlawful marriage but for all the evil he had done, to name but a few examples. To the prophet Isaiah, the LORD commands: “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins!” (Is. 58:1). The prophets also proclaimed judgement on pagan nations and kings for

¹ *By oppose, resist, etc., we always mean resistance in the biblical sense throughout this statement, i.e. non-violent – through prayer, preaching, petitions and calls for repentance to politicians, taking legal action, or peaceful civil disobedience.*

their evil works. Thus Daniel challenged King Nebuchadnezzar, “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.” (Dan. 4:27).

Today it is the task of the church to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to keep all that Christ has commanded us (Mt. 28:19,20). This includes commanding all people, in all places, to repent (Acts 17:30). This also includes those who govern. Thus the Apostle Paul also preached righteousness, abstinence, and coming judgement to Felix the governor (Acts 24:24,25).

When the Apostle Paul writes that the state is a servant of God, which is to praise the one who does good and to punish the one who does evil, thereby carrying out God’s wrath (Rom. 13:3-6), then it is essential to proclaim also to the servants of the state what God, their Lord, whom they are to serve, expects of them and what is good and to be praised or evil and to be punished in His eyes. But who should make known to the rulers the will of God concerning their exercise of office if not the Church, to which the Word of God is entrusted, as the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15)? Moreover, we have the commandment to honor the rulers. Is it reverence if we let the rulers go to ruin without warning them that they are heaping up the wrath of God by their faithless conduct in office?

Therefore, the Church is not only allowed, but it is its sacred duty to expose injustice and wickedness, on the part of those in power, as sin and to call them to repentance – with the necessary reverence (Acts 23:3-5) – when they do not fulfil their task as God’s servant, but rebel against God by – to take up an example from the thesis paper – deciding on so-called “marriage” for all. The Church must not remain silent on this.

The opinion of the signatories that “ethically wrong or doubtful laws, but which leave the Christian the possibility to act rightly,” does not have to be fought, also seems naïve to us. The signatories themselves cite the example of “marriage” for all. Do they not realize what is the spirit behind such a law, and that it is not content with “marriage” for all? Have they not heard what these developments have already led to in other countries, where our brothers and sisters are prosecuted, for example, because a Christian baker refuses to make a cake for such a “wedding,” or a Christian registrar refuses to issue marriage certificates for such “marriages”? Many more examples could be listed.

Raising our voices against injustice has therefore nothing to do with party advertising, but with godly fear and love of neighbor. Isn't it said: nip it in the bud? Ultimately, we must ask ourselves whether the current circumstances and the rampant lawlessness in politics are not also coming upon us because the Churches have been silent for too long on the ungodliness and abominations of the State.

II. The Present Injustice

The reason why the signatories of the thesis paper call for not opposing the present injustice is that they do not recognize the injustice, or at least not to its full extent. The signatories are specifically of the opinion that certain state Corona requirements for churches must be observed by them, and justify this in two ways: firstly, the enactment of such measures falls within the domain of the State; secondly, the measures are not contrary to God’s commandments. Both justifications are flawed.

On the one hand, the signatories claim (point 3) that the only limit to obedience to the government is “direct conflict” with a “clear command” of God’s Word. Resistance to the State is “primarily about inalienable contents of faith.” The signatories thus conclude that the Corona requirements for churches (e.g. masks, distancing, number of participants) are subordinate issues; such “temporary ordinances on external conditions and forms of congregational events” do not fundamentally violate biblical

commands. Even though this is a thesis paper, it is very surprising that the signatories do not even begin to attempt to provide biblical evidence for this all-important thesis.

Unfortunately, it remains unclear what exactly the signatories mean by the many vague terms, which, in any case, are not found in the Bible. Is it permissible to “indirectly” violate God’s Word? Which requirements of God’s Word are “unclear” and therefore need not be followed? And which contents of faith do the signatories consider “alienable”? In any case, we would like to state that for us there are no alienable contents of faith, and would expect every Bible-believing Christian to agree with this.

It is also incomprehensible to us how one cannot recognize the spiritual dimension of the measures and dismiss them as mere externals. Do the signatories not see that the great distress of conscience of many God-fearing Christians and the “considerable tensions in churches” are not simply caused by “temporary” interventions in the “external conditions and forms of congregational events” (some of which have already lasted a year!)? Rather, these distresses of conscience are caused by the fact that these measures indeed conflict with God’s commandments. The fact that the signatories do not recognize this is due to their misconception that this is not a conflict with a “clear command” of the Word of God. What they probably actually mean by this is a violation of an “explicit” commandment. So unless Scripture contains the explicit commandment “Thou shalt worship in person on Sunday with the whole assembled Church, without mask and without distance,” there is no “clear command” of the Word of God.

Such an approach to the Word of God is ignorant. For not only explicit but also implicit demands of the Word of God are binding on Christians. Does not our Lord Himself teach us this when He explains that the explicit commandment “Thou shalt not kill” also includes the implicit commandment “Thou shalt not be angry with thy brother” (Mt. 5:21,22) or the explicit commandment “Thou shalt not commit adultery” also includes the implicit commandment “Thou shalt not look upon a woman to lust after her” (Mt. 5:27,28)?

The signatories’ view that limits on the number of participants do not violate biblical commands reveals a flawed understanding of the Church. The Church is the body of Christ, and every member of the Church is a member of that body. The gathering for worship is the gathering of the whole body, not just some parts of the body. Scripture contains explicit commands not to miss the gatherings (Heb. 10:25) (A livestream is not a gathering and not an assembly.) It is hard to estimate the spiritual damage already suffered, and still to come, by churches that have not gathered as a whole Church for a year by now and also no longer celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, which is supposed to strengthen the whole body of Christ.

Moreover, limitations on the number of participants impair the proclamation of the Word. For it is not only an impairment if the content of the proclamation is restricted, but also if the number of possible listeners is restricted. And aren’t limits on the number of participants a lack of love towards those for whom there is no more room and who therefore have to stay at home? How dare the State presume to determine how many people may gather to worship God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth? Is this really a “subordinate” question?

It is certainly not a subordinate question for James Coates, pastor of GraceLife Church in Edmonton, Canada. Pastor Coates understands that the current attendance limits are very much against God’s commandments and held services with the whole Church despite threats from the authorities. For his courageous faithfulness to his Lord, the family man is now in prison. When Satan tempted him there and he was offered that he could be released immediately if only he promised to abide by the Corona requirements, he refused. His wife understands that her husband was doing this out of love for his Lord, and commented on her husband’s decision to stay in prison, saying, “For that, I love him.”

May the Lord reward our brother James Coates and his family! If the signatories of the thesis paper are consistent, they must argue that the State was justified in taking action against Pastor Coates because he was guilty of sinfully resisting the State, even though its actions did not violate biblical commandments. Do the signatories really want to go down this road?

It is astonishing that the signatories do not mention the state ban on congregational singing, which had already been in force for more than half a year in some German states at the time of the publication of the thesis paper. Does this prohibition not fit the thrust of the thesis paper, because here it obviously cannot be denied that Scripture is full of “clear” commands concerning singing (cf. only Ps. 47:7)? In the view of the signatories, would resistance be called for here? For what authority does the state have to deny the Lord His glory in His songs of praise? Singing is an indispensable part of biblical worship.

But compulsory mask wearing and social distancing rules for worship can also offend the consciences of Christians. For are we not called upon to express brotherly love to one another and to greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom. 16,16; 1 Cor. 16,20; 2 Cor. 13,12; 1 Thess. 5,26; 1 Pet. 5,14)? Of course, one can keep one’s distance for a while if one is ill, so as not to infect anyone. But state-imposed masked distance for months and possibly years? It is a mystery to us how one cannot recognize that this entails considerable spiritual and psychological/emotional damage. The signatories themselves write that they are confronted with great pastoral tasks. We can well understand this, because we have cried with those who suffer from loneliness and alienation, who despair because their church has not gathered for a year or only done so with distancing and masks. Does this not violate the commandment to love one another and to have heartfelt compassion for one another?

And what if someone’s conscience is violated when he is supposed to meet his God and his brothers and sisters, for months and perhaps years, only when wearing a mask – actually something that naturally triggers distrust, unease, and fear in us? What if he considers it unloving to give his brothers and sisters the impression, through distance and mask, that he considers them a danger to life and limb from which he must protect himself? What if his fear of God forbids him to worship his Lord with his face covered? Are these not comprehensible reasons why a Christian may be compelled by his conscience to oppose these measures? Would it not be sinful for him to comply with these measures all the same? Therefore, it is wrong for pastors to make the observance of such commandments of men as a condition for participation in worship and thereby rule over the consciences of their sheep.

On the other hand, the signatories claim (point 2) that the state regulations also apply to the Church and that the State’s sphere of authority only ends where the interpretation of the Bible or the spiritual and ethical areas of congregational life are concerned; in all “external” aspects the Churches would have to bow to state rules; the thesis paper gives some examples of this (building, labor law, security, financial law, criminal law).

As already explained above, it is incomprehensible to us how the signatories cannot recognize the spiritual and ethical dimension of the Corona requirements and be of the opinion that these are mere external aspects comparable to building law. In any case, we are not aware of Christians ever having conflicts of conscience because of state requirements to build an emergency exit or hang a fire extinguisher. The reason for this is that the examples correctly cited in the thesis paper do not directly concern the circumstances of worship, because in such matters the State has no God-given authority. Otherwise, the State could too easily hinder the practice of faith by, for example, permanently limiting the number of participants in religious services to ten people. In that case, however, the State would not be acting within its sphere of authority, but as a tyrant. This must be resisted!

Once the State has invaded the Church’s sphere of authority, how do we know that it will not extend its sphere of authority, step by step, and impose more and more requirements on the Church? We are concerned about how readily Churches give up their freedoms, which our brothers and sisters

fought, suffered, and sometimes lost their lives to achieve in past centuries. It is precisely an expression of love for our neighbor and love for our children and grandchildren that one jealously guards the freedoms of the community and one's neighbor.

We are particularly surprised that some Christians even think they have to be grateful to the State for "allowing" church services at all. In a reader's comment on the thesis paper, for example, it says: "Full agreement! The State also grants the church (...) many privileges (...) even with the current measures." Such statements reveal a fundamentally wrong understanding of the State, which, although not explicitly stated in the thesis paper, is nevertheless promoted by it. It is not the State that graciously allows us to worship under many restrictions, but this is our God-given right. The State, as God's servant, is obliged to ensure the undisturbed exercise of this right. We should not thank the State for "allowing" us to worship, but the State should be afraid to interfere with the worship of God. Thanks are due to God alone that He still restrains our State so that it cannot persecute the Church, as it does elsewhere.

Now, however, one could object that in the event of a present danger to life and limb, Christians may very well modify certain aspects of the worship service in order to protect themselves and others. The Corona measures must, therefore, also be evaluated against the background of the actual epidemiological situation and the question answered as to whether, at present, attending a church service without a banning signing, limiting the number of participants, spacing/social distancing, and masks constitutes a concrete and present danger to life and limb of those attending the service.

The signatories claim in this regard (point 5) that the situation is unclear. Therefore, Christians are allowed to decide which medical professionals or politicians they trust and should display an attitude of humility and readiness for correction; missionary zeal was inappropriate here.

We do not believe that truth is honored by this assessment. One could perhaps speak of a lack of clarity in the situation in the first few weeks. We also understand if the situation may seem unclear to individual Christians, especially if one is exposed to the influence of certain media or the ungodly and cannot find a counterbalance to this in the Church. But there has been no objective lack of clarity in the situation for a long time. It is the task of pastors to inform themselves comprehensively and to assess the situation on the basis of the knowledge gained in order to lead their sheep rightly. Ignorance is not virtuous humility, but folly.

At the time of publication of the thesis paper, numerous scientific studies, figures, and facts from all over the world were available, which allowed a very realistic assessment of both the dangerousness of the coronavirus and the effectiveness and appropriateness of government measures. But regardless of how one assesses the situation, decisions on measures, in particular relating to worship, must always weigh up the risks to life and limb against the risks to mind and spirit. But the State is not qualified to make such a weighing up, since it cannot understand and judge spiritual concerns, and this the less the more ungodly the state becomes. Pastors must remember that they are to watch over the souls of their sheep as those who will give an account (Heb. 13:17).

What we also find incomprehensible in this context is the statement in the thesis paper that Christians are allowed to decide which politicians they "trust." Should Christians really trust godless politicians and not rather critically examine their statements to see if they actually correspond to the truth, especially when it comes to issues of such great ethical and spiritual significance? Have the signatories not understood that every person's thoughts and actions are shaped by spiritual influences, either the spirit of truth or the spirit of error (1 Jn. 4:6)? That one is either with Christ or against Him (Mt. 12:30, Luk. 11:23)? That there are only two kinds of people in this world: Believers and unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:15), light and darkness (2 Cor. 6:14), the children of God and the children of the devil (1 Jn. 3:10)?

Have not the signatories read how our Lord speaks that the children of the devil want to do the lusts of their father, who is a murderer of men and the father of lies (Jn. 8:44)? Is this not true of politicians who declare the murder of 100,000 unborn children a year in our country to be right and call it “reproductive health/justice,” who deny the truth about the very nature of marriage, family, gender, sexuality, indeed, who deny their Creator Himself?

God has given the State the task, as His servant, to praise the one who does good and to punish the one who does evil (Rom. 13:3-6). Is it not obvious that the State is fulfilling this task less and less and that this development has accelerated drastically, especially in recent months? That the state increasingly calls evil good and good evil (Is. 5:20)? Thus, on the same day that the current version of the thesis paper appeared, November 25, 2020, our brother Pastor Olaf Latzel was convicted by the State for incitement of the people because he had proclaimed biblical truths. Is the rebellion of our state and its public servants against God's truth not obvious?

Doesn't the current crisis show that those in power do not hesitate in adopting measures that are manifestly evil, when they even deprive us of such rights as all human beings have by nature as creatures made in the image of God? For example, when they forbid countless people for months to go to work, although God commands that man should work and provide for his family? When people are punished for visiting and holding family members, celebrating their wedding, or saying goodbye to a loved one at his funeral? When a father is not allowed to be present at the birth of his child or a daughter is not allowed to hold the hand of her dying mother? Many other examples could be given. Especially when politicians make it sound as if all this is necessary for our protection, we should remember the words of our Lord: “The kings of the nations rule over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors.” (Luk. 22:25).

We are therefore surprised that some of the initiators of the thesis paper do not so much criticize the state as faithful brothers in the Lord, displaying the very “missionary zeal” against which they warn in the thesis paper. Thus, they have seen it as their task to repeatedly publicly rebuke John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Los Angeles, USA, for his well-considered decision to celebrate services with the entire Church again, contrary to the regulations of the State of California and under threat of imprisonment, accusing him of partly evil motives. Specifically, co-initiator Michael Kotsch has imputed dishonest motives for John MacArthur's decision by claiming in a video on his YouTube channel that John MacArthur “may (...) be far less concerned with the commands of Jesus than with the business model of Grace Community Church,” adding that John MacArthur has also in the past “reinterpreted clear biblical statements because they did not fit the interests of his church work.” Since we do not assume that Mr. Kotsch has the gift to fathom the thoughts and dispositions of John MacArthur's heart, we hereby publicly rebuke him for this publicly committed sin of defamation: “Who are you to judge another man's house servant?” (Rom. 14:4).

Lastly, how should we deal with the fearful brothers and sisters who, according to the thesis paper (point 6), should be especially accommodated during the Corona period? Should we perhaps comply with the measures out of love and consideration for such?

The signatories themselves write (point 1) that people ultimately do not die from illness or accident, but from the will or permission of God. The Bible even teaches us (Ps. 139:16) that the LORD has determined from the beginning on which day we will die. And our Lord asks the rhetorical question (Mt. 6:27; Lk. 12:25): “But who among you can add a cubit to the length of his life with worry?” Does not our Lord exhort us again and again not to be afraid, even of death? Is not dying our gain, and should we not desire to depart and be with Christ (Phil. 1:21, 23)? Has not Christ set us all free, who through fear of death have been subject to bondage all our lives (Heb. 2:15)?

Of course, a Christian can be afraid of sickness or death, and we are not to tempt the Lord our God recklessly. But we must not live in a state of constant fear and neglect even the well-being of our souls out of concern for our lives. So how do we approach fearful brothers and sisters in a right way? How do we love them as brothers? By allowing them to continue in their fear, which is ultimately an expression of their small faith, and confirming them in it? Or by helping them to overcome their fear through truth and faith?

III. Call to Faithfulness

The signatories should ask themselves whether their theological worldview is really determined by the Bible alone or not rather by worldly, secular thinking and pragmatism, lest they incur persecution by the State. But does not the apostle Paul write: “But all also who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”? (2 Tim. 3:12). If we always submit to the state and compromise one thing after another, we may escape persecution, but our witness for Christ Jesus will suffer. In particular, we admonish those who improperly exalt themselves over such Christians who are convicted by God’s Word and their conscience to oppose the State, and suffer persecution for it. We hereby make it clear that in this regard we stand firmly with our beloved brothers John MacArthur and James Coates and all those who are persecuted for their godliness. We urge the signatories to consider carefully which side they wish to take.

We encourage all Christians not to be caught up in the madness that has gripped the whole world and enslaves people in a constant fear of death, but to courageously place their hope in Christ who is life. Let us be a witness in this dark time by loving the truth and meeting together in heartfelt brotherly love! Let us reform all our thinking through the Word of God so that we may gain a biblical worldview by taking every thought captive under the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5)! “And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the will of God: that which is good, and acceptable, and perfect.” (Rom. 12:2). Let us pray for those who suffer tribulation or persecution for the sake of the Word, that they may endure to the end! Let every Christian see how he can help such through letters, donations, or letters to the responsible politicians!

Finally, we call on all pastors to fulfil their sacred duty and to preach courageously against the injustice and sins of those in power, and also to respectfully call them to repentance, verbally or in writing! We exhort the pastors and the Churches to no longer withhold glory from God and to weigh down the consciences of Christians by commandments of men, but to celebrate services again as God commands: with the assembled Church, in biblically commanded brotherly encounter and with joyful praise to the glory of the LORD!

Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but also give to God what is God’s! And if Caesar persecutes us for it, let us suffer it with joy. Be encouraged, brothers and sisters, to faithfully follow our Lord in these last times, as He says: “Do not be afraid of what you will suffer! Behold, the devil will cast some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death! And I will give you the victorious crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10). To conclude in the words of the thesis paper, there is too much at stake.

TO THE BLESSED AND SOLE RULER, THE KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS, BE GLORY AND EVERLASTING POWER! AMEN.

ON BEHALF OF THE EVANGELICAL REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH OF FRANKFURT – THE PASTORS:

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