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**Coronavirus Pandemic and theological Challenges –  
a reflection from Rev. Hans Guderian,  
former General Secretary of EBM INTERNATIONAL – Dallgow, May 2020**

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### **Situation and dynamic developments**

A worldwide pandemic - Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, combined with the resulting disease Covid-19 in late 2019 in Wuhan in the Chinese province of Hubei, the whole world has been affected by this life-threatening pathogen. In Germany, the spread of this virus seems to be currently under control; but anyway there is no reason to give the all-clear, because in some of our neighboring countries (France, Italy and Spain), in the United States and in the future presumably also in Africa, we are still dealing with rapidly increasing numbers of infections and death rates. At the beginning of May 2020, around 3.2 million people were infected worldwide and around 240,000 people died from the novel corona virus.

### **Outbreak Hotspots**

The pathogen is primarily passed on from person to person through "droplet infection". As far as we know, this happened at the beginning (around mid-February 2020) especially at certain major events, namely - on one hand in connection with wet-humorous carnival celebrations and - on the other hand at religious mass meetings (for example at events of the end-time sect "Shincheonji" in South Korea and at an evangelical-charismatic conference in Mühlhausen in Alsace).

Enormous burdens - This new type of corona virus and its spread are so dangerous because the risk of infection is very high, since an infected person can expel the virus for days before the first symptoms are noticed. In addition, without comprehensive protective measures, it can be expected that exponential rates

of increase will again occur very quickly, both with regard to

infections and the number of deaths. Moreover, there is no cure or vaccine yet.

Ethical challenges and conflicts: there is a danger of overloading and seriously damaging our health system and our social interaction and economy. In this context, questions arise and there can be very serious ethical conflicts, for example, regarding the compensation between the protection of health and life, on the one hand, and the care of social coexistence in the family, the church and the society on the other hand, or also - regarding the worst case scenario among patients who, depending on their health and age, as well as the severity of the disease, have to be granted or refused medical treatment (introduction of the so-called "Hospital triage").

### General biblical references

In view of the frightening global spread of the novel corona virus, there are not only medical challenges, but also theological questions. Why does God allow people to suffer and die in such great numbers? How are illnesses and epidemics described and interpreted in the bible. How do we as Christians deal with the threat of this virus? How do we behave with regard to the protective measures and restrictions that affect our families as well as in the life of the church and society?

Plagues and diseases as God's punishment - war, hunger and pestilence can be understood in certain biblical stories as God's punishments for particularly sinful behavior of people. The best known in this context is certainly the story on the so-called ten "Egyptian plagues" (Exodus 7-11). Indeed, in such narratives, on the basis of a act-and-consequence connection or a "sin-disaster connection", the image is drawn of a fear-making and partial God who punishes the enemies of Israel. However, this image of the God "punishing the children for the sin of the fathers..."to the third and fourth generation" is already surpassed in the proclamation of the Old Testament by the promise A God "showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20: 5-6).

Job as an example of enduring inexplicable suffering - the report on the immeasurably suffering, God-fearing and by no means sinful Job, however, sounds quite different. God does not appear here as the punishing Lord, but as the Sovereign testing his servant Job (as "deus absconditus"). God allows suffering and Job accepts this action of his God, which remains inexplicable to him: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). This understanding and behavior of Job is exemplary, but there is no answer to the fundamental question underlying this story of Job about God's righteousness ("theodicy question"): How can a God who is both loving and almighty allow so much suffering in the life of an individual and on a global scale?

The Messiah as the suffering servant of God - The question of God's righteousness is not answered here in the Bible or elsewhere, but it is put in a completely different perspective at one point. In the prophetic proclamation of Deuteroisaiiah (Isaiah 40-55) the question of suffering is sharpened to the question of God's suffering, more precisely the suffering that the Messiah of God, in the person of the "suffering servant of God", takes on and carries on behalf of us: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed". (Isaiah 53: 4-5). God is not a stranger to suffering, but he suffers with us.

### Christological orientation

Both in the "Christological hymn in Philippians 2", one of the oldest confessions of early Christianity, as well as in the key passages of the letter to the Romans, this image of the suffering servant of God is related to Jesus and related to Jesus, to his suffering path and to his death and resurrection: "He (Jesus Christ) humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross." (Philippians 2, 8); "(Our Lord Jesus) who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." (Romans 4:25).

Jesus is the center of Scripture - No one else spoke of Jesus Christ as the center of Scripture as clearly and unambiguously as Karl Barth in his theology. Jesus is the center, the "revealed Word of God" in comparison to the proclaimed Word of God (the sermon) and the written Word of God (the Bible). More precisely: Jesus is the center of Scripture in his person and his work (Karl Barth: Dogmatik I / 1, p. 114ff.). All biblical texts should therefore be referred to and interpreted from him. Our faith finds foundation and orientation in his person and in his work.

### Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

The revelation of God's love to humanity is most clearly recognizable in the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is how Paul described it in many of his writings, but above all in the Letter to the Romans: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". (Romans 8, 31-39). So we can, "in the midst of this horror, defiantly keep our eyes on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus..., undauntedly turn from the hidden to the revealed God... (Ralf Frisch: God, the virus and us, 2020, [www.zeitzeichen.net](http://www.zeitzeichen.net)). And so we can join in the comforting words of Paul Gerhardt:

If I should part, do not part from me;  
if I shall suffer death, then come here / come to me / be with me;  
when I'll be most scared in my heart, / when my heart will be in the greatest anguish  
pull me out of fear through / with the power of your fear and pain.

### God's power over evil

In this christological orientation, our faith is held and kept, our life is carried by God and is not torn in a struggle between good and bad. We can therefore "take God's power over evil more seriously... than the theodicy question and... (the) state of emergency" (Ralf Frisch: op. Cit.) caused by a frightening global corona virus. Beyond all human understanding and cognition, we can rely on the fact that God's power exceeds all evil and also all diseases and pandemics, as is symbolically promised to the disciples of Jesus from an eschatological perspective: "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction."

(Matthew 10: 1).

### Dangerous heresies

What conclusions can be drawn from these general and especially from these biblical-theological considerations? Before we come to the answer to this question, however, we must first clarify which conclusions do not result from it, which behaviors and false teachings ("heresies") we have to reject and discard from this biblical-theological summary.

### Fundamentalism and belief in authority

In Romans 8:15, Paul speaks of the fact that we as Christians "have not received a spirit of slavery" so that we should be afraid anew. Sheep-like thinking, however, currently seems to take hold of some Christians, characterized by an anxiety-driven relationship with God, a narrow fundamentalist understanding of Bible texts, an almost manichaeian view of a struggle between the powers of good and evil, and a fatal dependence on authority by Christians who have not learned to critically question all human authorities. "They place their faith above the rationality of the majority, even over the political authorities" (Livia Gerster: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, April 19, 2020). They reject government guidelines on the corona epidemic and consider themselves or their spiritual leaders to be more or less "infallible".

### "Health and Wealth Gospel"

Especially in the English-speaking evangelical world, a theology of a "health and wealth gospel" has spread in the past decades, which unilaterally promises health, happiness and prosperity ("pursuit of happiness") to those who do just correctly believe. Such a "prosperity gospel" recognizes visible evidence of God's favor in health, financial wealth, business and personal success, and must therefore suppress suffering, weakness and disease, or consider them as punishment for one's own sinful behavior. In the USA, in Brazil, in Africa, and also among us, misguided preachers therefore call on their followers to act carelessly and in some cases even to disobey governmental limitations and restrictions as measures for the fight against the corona virus.

### Rejection of scientific knowledge

This has been accompanied for a long time by a rejection of newer scientific knowledge that has been cultivated in some christian groups and which could possibly become dangerous to one's own belief. To counter this, dogmatic positions are built up, which, however, are mostly unsustainable from a scientific point of view: a "creationist" literal understanding of the biblical accounts of creation as opposed to evolutionary knowledge, a rude parenting practice based on biblical texts such as Proverbs 13, 24 ("Whoever loves his child punishes it") in contrast to liberal pedagogical approaches, an openness to the use of arms and for the execution of the death penalty, in contrast to the development of a peace ethic also in the political field and for humane forms of imprisonment, an old-fashioned patriarchal thinking and acting in opposition to modern emancipation movements in favor of women and minorities

### Positive conclusions

#### Patience and hope

We live in times of great uncertainty. Nobody, no politician, no scientist and no clergyman can tell us for sure how long the threat from the new corona virus will continue, how many victims this pandemic will still cause and whether we will be personally affected. Therefore, it is understandable but not helpful when many people, including some Christians, are very restless and insistently demand that we should return to the "status quo ante" as soon as possible. Paul writes: "For in this hope we were saved... But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8: 24-25). As Christians, we can be patient because we have a gift of hope and faith. Christians can therefore pray that God strengthens their patience, grants them endurance amid great insecurity and builds up a Christian-based tolerance for ambiguity.

#### Courage to take clear theological positions

In church and theology there currently seems to be a Surprising speechlessness and reluctance to take clear and courageous statements and positions. On the one hand, this is certainly advisable and wise, since we are still at the beginning of the pandemic and are yet not able to recognize and deal with its profound

consequences, so we should therefore certainly “not take our mouths too full”. On the other hand, in some respects this is probably a hesitant, perhaps even a somewhat cowardly renunciation, refraining from engaging in public discourse and risking incorrect or inadequate interpretations. But Christian witness also includes “courage of faith”, “freedom of speech” (παρρησία) that dares and risks something (cf. Acts 4:29: “And now, Lord, take note of their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness”).

#### Love and compassion

In the confusing and puzzling situation in which we find ourselves today, one thing is very clear: our place as Christians is above all else - also above the concern for our own matters, our own church structures, services, finances, etc. - to place us at the side of our old, sick and endangered people in love, care and compassion. Perhaps this even means today that we as Christians and churches should waive some rights in favor of our duty to care for the weak, sick and lonely. If this virus is a particular challenge for us Christians, then it is a challenge to diaconal responsibility with regard to the protection of the people entrusted to us. Compassion, however, includes not only the solidarity based on Christian love with the suffering of our fellow human beings, but also the compassion based on Christian faith with Christ himself: “We always carry the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.” (2 Corinthians 4:10).

#### A time to reflect

This time is experienced as a great burden by many people. Or maybe, because of the slowdown in life associated with this novel corona virus, it could become a time for reflection and consideration of our values and our social cohesion. And maybe we could rediscover that health is not the most important thing in life, but “peace” in the deepest sense of the word, peace with God, peace with our fellow human beings and peace with creation. I want to close with a thought from a correspondence with a young theologian from Potsdam. Referring to Ecclesiastes 3: 1-4, he writes: “For me, this time does not feel like a time of activism and the desire that everything has to go on normally. It feels more like a time of silence, a time of mourning, of empathy and searching ... (that) we Christians and also the congregations now have to be able to endure, just as it is necessary to endure Holy Saturday before Easter morning can arise.” (Josef Hölzel).

Hans Guderian