

COVID-19 and the Necessity of the Church

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Introduction

In late 2019, what was initially thought to be a small viral outbreak began in the vicinity of Wuhan, China. By February 2020 however, this outbreak had metastasized into an epidemic in Wuhan and soon spread across the world. Initially called the Wuhan virus, what is now known as COVID-19 (the SARS-CoV2 virus) has caused a pandemic creating chaos and death across the world, stretching the capabilities of healthcare systems to the breaking point. South Korea, Northern Italy, and New York City in the United States became the next epicenters of this virulent disease. 6 months later, this plague continues to spread without a clear indication of subsiding. Governments around the world have implemented drastic and even draconian measures in an effort to manage or halt the spread of the disease, measures that have yielded varying degrees of success.

As part of such measures, some countries have implemented social distancing with a desire to contain the outbreak, and thus have closed down various establishments in society, one of which are churches. The scientific rationale for such closure of churches is that by doing so, social interaction would be limited. As the number of social interactions decrease, the probability that the virus will spread from one individual to another is reduced. Slowing the spread of the virus is paramount to getting the pandemic under control ("flattening the curve"). Once the spread is controlled, the next step will be the eventual eradication of the virus from the populace through isolation of infected individuals and treating them for their hopeful recovery. When the virus is isolated and the infected individuals are cured, society can then return to normal. Thus, while such measures are acknowledged as drastic and even draconian, the idea here is that short-term pain is necessary in order to eradicate the virus. People should endure such measures, and the sooner they are implemented successfully, the faster society can return to normal.

As a Christian, the part that is concerning is the part of closing of churches. I am also trained in the life sciences, and thus I do understand the science behind the viral outbreak. But when dealing with life, there are many things that must be considered, and I will do so here in this article.

Science and COVID-19

I start here with the science behind the COVID-19 outbreak. First of all, the pandemic is real, not a hoax. I find it sad that there are so many people who are functionally scientifically (and philosophically) illiterate. While some may take science to be the only interpreter of the world, that is not my position. But that does not imply that science is of no value whatsoever and that scientific knowledge can be discounted altogether.

The natural sciences are Man's attempt to decipher the workings of the world. Due to its dependence on induction, science does not yield infallible truth, but an approximation to the truth.¹ Yet, an approximation to the truth is still closer to the truth than other approaches to understanding nature that stand independently of experimentation. Science is not infallible and does not (and should not) claim to be infallible. That said, what it reveals can be trusted in some measure, and unless viable alternatives can be found, it yields to us an adequate understanding of the world.

As shown by Thomas S. Kuhn, science does operate within paradigms of thought.² But just because paradigms of thought frame the study of nature and the discipline of science does not imply epistemic relativism. For example, the concept of phlogiston in chemistry was superseded once the oxygen theory of combustion was proven through experimentation. However, there is something behind the concept of phlogiston despite it being ultimately wrong. Many things do lose mass when burned, and the air in a chamber after combustion does not really support further combustion. Therefore, while phlogiston itself is shown to be not real, it reflected reality in some manner. Thus, while differing scientific paradigms do frame the study of nature and the discipline of science, the truths of nature themselves are not relative.³

Science does give us some idea of what is actually happening in the natural world. When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings of scientists are generally trustworthy (the media's spin however not so much!). Here is a simple explanation of how the virus works, and how it spreads through the populace:

The virus SARS-CoV2 is made up of a single strand of RNA enclosed in a viral envelope. The virus infects cells by entering the cells of the host organism. Once it enters the cell, it hijacks the cellular machinery in order to produce many copies of itself. The infected cell then bursts, releasing many virions that will repeat the cycle throughout the host organism.

SARS-CoV2 is a waterborne (maybe also airborne) virus with human-to-human transmission. Through droplets in the air, the virus spreads from person to person. Infected individuals spread the virus as they spread droplets into the air through means of sneezing, coughing, talking or singing. There are also asymptomatic carriers who can and do spread the virus while remaining healthy. As individuals interact in society, the virus moves through the populace infecting person after person. The virus is extremely infectious in this regard.

Once infected, the individual has the potential to die. While the virus is not as deadly as other killers such as Ebola, it has a significant fatality rate. According to the CDC in America, as of August 7, 2020, there are about 4.86 million cases and 159 thousand

¹ The problem of induction for the scientific enterprise is an old problem and has no good answers. See Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 39-56

² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3rd ed.; Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970, 1996)

³ Science itself cannot show that there are truths of nature which are not relative. Ontology of created things as objective reality must come from something other than science, i.e. Christianity. See J.P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989)

deaths, a fatality rate of about 3.27%.⁴ This compares with an estimated fatality rate (in the U.S.) for its relative, the seasonal flu, at 0.0429 – 0.160%.⁵ The elderly and those with pre-existing conditions have a higher risk of dying from COVID-19. Younger persons have a lower risk of dying from the virus but they can be carriers and pass the virus to others.

The combination of being highly infectious with a significant fatality rate means that the virus is indeed a threat to all of us. Its lower fatality rate is more than compensated by its high rate of infection, and thus the virus should be taken seriously.

Therefore, over and against those who downplay the pandemic as being akin to seasonal flu, it must be said that the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed a serious outbreak. The fact that it does not give any indication of subsiding is cause for much concern.

Measures taken to mitigate and reduce the outbreak are termed “flattening the curve.” The rationale is that if such measures are followed, the transmission of the virus can be slowed and reduced such that the pandemic in that area is contained. Once contained, it can be slowly eradicated. Three of those measures are hand washing (or using hand sanitizer), mask-wearing and social distancing. Cleaning of the hands is important since we touch many things with our hands, and also touch our faces with them. Thus, the virus can be transmitted through the medium of our hands through touch. Washing with soap destroys the virions, and thus protects the individual from being infected. Mask-wearing aims to prevent droplets from the mouth and nose from either being released into the air, or from entry into an individual from the air. The physical barrier blocks the droplets, and thus the virions in the droplets are blocked as well. Both cleaning of hands and mask-wearing aim to block viral transmission from individual to individual.

Social distancing seeks to block viral transmission by even removing the possibility of transmission. If two individuals are not close enough to each other, the probability of droplets suspended in the air and moving from one to the other decreases rapidly to zero, as the droplets fall to the ground instead.

Other even more drastic and draconian measures include lockdown of movement and mass quarantine, which are generally not used except in extreme circumstances. All of such measures aim to get the outbreak under control with the eventual goal of resolving the outbreak.

Critics of such measures question their effectiveness. Concerning mask wearing, it is true that masks do not guarantee protection from the virus, but then nobody will give such a guarantee, since the issue is one of **reducing** the probability of the virions from the droplets entering the individual. Just because masks do not guarantee protection

⁴ CDC, “Cases in the U.S.,” *CDC*, accessed August 8, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcases-updates%2Fsummary.html

⁵ CDC, “2019-2020 U.S. Flu Season: Preliminary Burden Estimates,” *CDC*, accessed August 8, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/preliminary-in-season-estimates.htm>. Estimated cases are 39-56 million cases and 24-62 thousand deaths. All numbers rounded to three significant figures.

from the virus does not imply that masks are of no value whatsoever, since the issue of one of reducing the probability of infection, not of total protection from infection.

Scientifically, it is true that masks do provide a barrier to droplets. If worn properly, they would reduce the probability of infection. That said, it is true that their overall effectiveness in combating this pandemic is uncertain. But just because its overall effectiveness is uncertain does not imply that mask-wearing should not be seen as one measure to fight the pandemic.

Concluding this section, it can be seen that COVID-19 is a serious issue. It is not just a mere flu bug, and the measures implemented by governments around the world do have a scientific basis behind them. While I am under no illusions that governments care about their citizens, at least they do care enough about themselves so as not to be responsible for negligence in a pandemic.

That said, how does the severity of COVID-19 relate to the church and her assembly? Before we answer that question, we need to understand what the church and her assembly is.

The Church as a physical assembly

The Church is literally an assembly, translated from the Greek *koininia* (κοινωνία). Having church without assembling together is like having a square circle – a logical contradiction. That said, it is possible to have a virtual assembly?

The question of “virtual reality” is whether it truly is a form of reality. Here, some knowledge of church history would be important. Gnosticism was an esoteric movement in the ancient Greco-Roman world in the 1st and 2nd century AD. The main teaching of Gnosticism was that the physical body, and the physical world, were evil.⁶ The Scriptures however teach that the body is good, and this is seen in the fact that our bodies will be resurrected at the Last Day, with Christ’s physical and bodily resurrection seen as a guarantee of that reality (1 Cor. 15: 42-54). While there are many errors in Gnosticism, one key truth confessed by the church was that the body, and the physical world, are good and created by God.

This insistence on physicality cements Christianity as a religion that has to do with physical reality. Christianity treasures the physical as much as the spiritual. Orthodox Christian theological anthropology or the doctrine of man, sees Man as a composite of body and soul, not a soul inhabiting a body.⁷ The intermediate state, the state

⁶ “Gnosticism is an amalgam of psychological and ethical dualism with a cosmic dualism of this material world and the supercelestial world.” [Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987, 1993, 2003), 310]

⁷ E.g.: “Man has a “spirit” ... must, by virtue of its nature, inhabit a body. It is of the essence of humanity to be corporeal and sentient. ... The body is ... just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul.” [Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 2:559]; “... man’s constituent elements are the material body and the immaterial soul (or spirit) ... which are in a mysterious, vital union” [Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd ed.; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 422)]; “The important point is that human nature is not to be identified exclusively or even primarily with the soul; the ‘real self’ is the whole self—

between one's death and the Last Day, is unnatural because the soul is separated from the body, whereas it should be with the body, therefore all will be made whole at the Last Day as the soul is reunited with a physical glorified and resurrected body.

What implication does this have on the issue of the church as an assembly? It means that the church assembly must be physical with the saints bodily present. "Virtual presence" is an oxymoron, and thus does not exist. Virtual connections are connections at a distance, like phone calls. There is therefore no such thing as a "virtual assembly," just a connection of people in virtual space. Without the body present, there is no assembly, and thus no church.

The modern denigration of the body and physicality in favor of "virtual reality" is therefore a form of modern-day Gnosticism,⁸ embraced most heartily in transhumanism. While there is nothing wrong with connecting with people online, such connections are not truly meetings. A church service online is no different from a live-stream of a church service, where those who connect to it are spectators and not part of the gathering.

Therefore, if we hold to passages such as Hebrews 10:25, then we must hold that the in-person gathering of the church is commanded in Scripture. That is a very important factor when we consider the church service in a time of pandemic.

When it comes to ethics in real life, various factors have to be weighed. In the case of COVID-19, there is some element of risk of community transmission through in-person services. Therefore, it is possible that, although the gathering of the church is important, preserving human life is weighted as being more important **at that moment in time**. Churches therefore might evaluate and judge that the ethical thing to do is to temporarily suspend church services for a time. Such judgments are matters of wisdom. Nonetheless, such a decision to suspend church services **OUGHT** to be made with a heavy heart not flippantly, out of choosing between two competing bad choices. Whatever decision a church makes, it must be made with a full understanding that they are forced by the circumstances to suspend an important part of the Christian walk, the weekly sabbath gathering of the people of God. It is a decision to be made with lament, and to be grieved over.

The problem with the churches today is to see how little they make of the weekly services. Christians think that online services are suitable substitutes for in-person gatherings, and thus show their ignorance of biblical anthropology and their imbibing of the culture's gnostic views of the human person. Christians are not sorrowful over the closing of the churches and do not lament over it, instead it is business as the "new normal." There is little desire to open churches as soon as possible. Instead they farm

body and soul." [Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 377]

⁸ For the resurgence of Gnosticism in the modern times, see Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America* (Mukilteo, WA: WinePress Publishing, 1997)

out their decision making to governments who have their own vested interests in keeping churches closed, thus making Caesar the head of the church.⁹

While different churches can come to different conclusions over when they should suspend (in-person) church services and when they should reopen, the issue is whether they are eagerly looking forward to opening the church at the earliest opportunity.



Fig. Tweet by Sye Ten Bruggencate on the issue of “virtual church.”¹⁰

But besides the fact that church gatherings are to be physical gatherings, there is something in the weekly sabbath gatherings that makes them even more important in the life of the believer – the nature of the gathering itself.

The Church gathering as a means of grace

WSC Q.88. What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

HC Q. 103. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained; and that I, especially on the sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, to hear his word, to use the sacraments, publicly to call upon the Lord, and contribute to the relief of the poor. Secondly, that all the days of

⁹ C.f. Grace Community Church, “Christ, not Caesar, is Head of the Church: A Biblical Case for the Church to Remain Open,” *GraceChurch.org*, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://www.gracechurch.org/news/posts/1988>

¹⁰ Bruggencate, Sye. Twitter Post. August 4, 2020, 12:16 AM. <https://twitter.com/SyeTenB/status/1290320586158288897>

my life I cease from my evil works, and yield myself to the Lord, to work by his Holy Spirit in me; and thus begin in this life the eternal sabbath.¹¹

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt. 18:20)

The weekly worship of God is more than a mere human gathering. It is unfortunate that in the history of the Christian church, low church evangelicalism has eviscerated the church gathering of the divine initiative. The focus of low church evangelicalism has been the human component, which is why many low church evangelicals have become Baptists in their view of the sacraments. In Evangelicalism, the church service is where THEY are coming to church to give God worship and for God to teach them His Word.

As opposed to Evangelicalism, Reformed orthodoxy and piety has always asserted the divine initiative in the worship of God. We worship God only because God invites us to worship Him. After all, the church is a creation of the Word of God (*creatura verbi*).¹² It is the Holy Spirit speaking to us creating faith through the Word (c.f. Rom. 10:17). Thus, the people of God are called into a community created by the Word,¹³ as opposed to the Evangelical view of the church being a voluntary association of believers.

As a community created by God, we have no right to “give God worship.” It is not us that decides when or how to worship, because God does not need our worship and neither does He necessarily wants it. Those who presume to “give God worship” are like Nadab and Abihu, whom God destroyed with fire (Lev. 10:1-2). Rather, worship is granted to us because of the call of the Holy Spirit in His creative work in creating the Church.

Again, the church community according to Scripture and the Reformed tradition is NOT a voluntary association of believers coming together. It is the work of God. Worship therefore is from the divine initiative. It is granted to us the privilege of worshipping Him. It is God’s worship, where we are the guests. We come at his behest, and there He meets us. This covenantal meeting is the encounter of God with His people, the place where God will meet His people. Therefore, the two major things in the service (the preaching of the Word and the sacraments) are called “means of grace” (WSC 88, HC 103), because God through His presence grants grace to us who participate in these

¹¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) Question 88 and Heidelberg Catechism Question 103. As taken from Westminster Seminary California, “Reformed Creeds and Confessions.” Google Play Store, n.d.

¹² Horton, 751

¹³ D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 51-7

elements of worship.¹⁴ That is why the Heidelberg Catechism Question 103 explicitly ties the fourth commandment to attendance to the worship of God.

Since the physical (in-person) worship is where God encounters His people, where grace is granted through His presence, the weekly sabbath worship is the holiest day of the Christian calendar, given to us 52 Lord's Days per year. In it, no matter how it looks externally, God meets His people in the service through the preached Word and the sacraments administered.

There are of course many implications of such a view of the church and her weekly worship for the church's practice of worship. With regards to the issue at hand however, the thing that is to be noted is that by suspending church service, the people of God are robbed of these means of grace, with the only thing left being the preaching of the Word. The people of God in a virtual service are robbed of the divine liturgy, the sacraments, and the very essence of the church gathering (for a pale facsimile of the real thing). Suspending church services for online connection is not just robbing believers of the physical gathering, but denying believers the weekly encounter they have with God in the service!

To see what that means, think of the means of grace as spiritual sustenance or food. Every Lord's Day, God has prepared for His people a feast, so that we may partake and be satisfied. Suspension of church services is cutting off most of the feast, leaving only one main course (preaching of the Word). Is there still some sustenance? Sure. But is the spiritual sustenance sufficient? Doubtful!

To drive home the issue, this is the analogous situation when applied to physical food: In response to COVID-19, the government has locked down the entire city, only allowing everyone 30 minutes per day to get out and buy enough groceries for one meal per day. Assuming the person has no emergency food supplies, he can only eat one meal per day. Would he starve? No, he probably wouldn't. But is that good? No, it is not. Most people probably would not advocate for such measures in response to COVID-19, yet they have no problems for such measures when it comes to spiritual nourishment.

The pietist solution is to focus on "Quiet Time" and the privatization of religion ("Me and my personal relationship with God"). But that manifests **precisely the point of contention** between the Reformed orthodox and the Evangelical views of spirituality. The Reformed orthodox does not deny the benefit of private devotion, but sees it as not able to provide for the spiritual needs of the person, precisely because in God's economy private devotion does not occupy that place in Christian worship. One can do all the private devotion one can do, and still there is spiritual poverty in the person, because it is only God that can provide the grace we need; we cannot create the grace we need by ourselves! Our piety cannot create grace, and if we think that our piety is somehow valuable to God, then we have lost the Gospel already! It is God, and God alone, who can nourish and sustain us, not us by our own fervent devotion.

¹⁴ "And in worship, through the means of grace, God is also at work, extending his blessing to his people, and transforming us into his image." (Hart and Muether, 144)

Suspension of church services, even if judged necessary, will cause spiritual malnourishment within the flock. This should be a factor under consideration even as we continue to think about the church's response to COVID-19.

The elements of worship as commanded by God

Closely related to the importance of worship is the elements of worship. The Reformed tradition has always taught the Regulative Principle of Worship, derived from the Scriptures through focus texts such as Leviticus 10:1-2 (c.f. Num. 16:35). Briefly stated, the Regulative Principle of Worship states that we can only worship God as God has positively commanded, and we are not allowed to worship God in any way He has not commanded us to do so. Nadab and Abihu had attempted to offer strange fire to God, and were incinerated despite the fact that they were sincere and were properly consecrated priests. This ties in theologically with the doctrine of God as the initiator of worship as discussed in the previous section. It is not up to us to worship God anyway we please, as a form of "will-worship," for our God is a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24. Heb. 12:28-9)! He is God, and He is owed reverence and awe. That so many professing believers are not consumed by God's wrath as they worship God falsely is a sign of God's patience and kindness, but we are not to mistake God's patience with acceptance, just as unbelievers should not mistake the fact that they continue to live for God's tolerance of their sin (Rom. 2:4). God is not our "pal" and the more we trivialize God, the more concerned anyone should be of whether that person is in fact a true believer (c.f. Heb. 12:5-11). Those who shout "Grace, grace" are probably those with the least knowledge and experience of true biblical grace, as God is both a God of grace and a God of holiness. It is impossible for those who have truly experienced biblical grace to make a mockery of it in hyper-grace charismania,¹⁵ or other forms of antinomianisms.

If we are to worship God only as He has commanded us to, then we need to know exactly what elements should be in our worship, and have those only. What God has commanded, we must do. What God has not commanded, we must not do. The elements of worship therefore are the preaching of the Word (2 Tim. 4:2), the reading of Scripture (Neh. 8:1-8, 1 Tim. 4:13), prayer (Acts 2:42, 1 Tim. 2:1-3), reading of the Law and the Gospel, the confession of sin (Neh. 9, Mt. 6:12, Is. 6:5), the declaration of pardon (Is. 6:7), the sacraments (Acts 2:41-2, 1 Cor. 1:17, 11:20), the call to worship (Is. 6:1-2), the benediction (Num. 6:24-6; the endings of the epistles for example 1 Cor. 16:23-4), offerings (1 Cor. 16:1-2), and congregational singing (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16).¹⁶ Notably absent from this list are modern "elements" like drama, dance and solo musical performances.

Since this is the case, if we want to be biblical, then we must apply the regulative principle of worship to our worship. While most of the time we consider only how we must not participate in these modern "elements," yet for the purpose of this piece I

¹⁵ Even the NAR charismatic Michael Brown rejects the Hyper-Grace movement. See Michael Brown, *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014)

¹⁶ C.f. Hart and Muether, 77-102, 149-50

want to focus on one element that the Scriptures have commanded us to do: congregational singing. Now, if God has commanded us to do it, yet we do not do it, according to Scripture in the Regulative Principle, it is sin. Sins of omission are just as much sins as sins of commission.

The Commands of God and COVID-19

In the church's response to the pandemic, there are a couple of factors that have been laid out for us to consider. The pandemic is real. But so are the commands of God and the command of God to worship Him. Again, as my analogy states, should we accept the restriction of food to one small meal per day just because of a pandemic, unless of course food itself is scarce? But what would we think of a government who forcefully restrict the amount of food purchasable by all citizens despite the fact that there is plenty of food available? Would that be considered an unjust response?

With regards to singing, in the case of many countries around the world where masks are worn and social distancing are mandated, why should singing be banned? If these measures are as they are supposed to be scientifically, singing with masks is no different from speaking with masks on, or shouting at naughty children in schools with masks on. The measure is illogical and unscientific. It also infringes upon the worship of God, forcing believers to either sin or engage in civil disobedience.

The fact of the matter is that despite the pandemic, the worship of God must continue. Detractors continue to warn of the risks of transmission, and it is to this that I will next address.

Life as a risk

Many people warn of the risks of transmission of the virus if churches were to meet again. And singing supposedly also increases the risks of viral transmission. All of these are supposed to happen in spite of the practice of the other measures such as mask-wearing and social distancing. How should we address this issue?

The problem with those who talk about risks is that they are extremely unreflective of life in general. The problem with them is that all of life is a risk. Think about it: How sure are you that you will not be hit by a car as you cross the road and die immediately?¹⁷ Or how sure are you that you will not trip over some stairs, fall down and hit your head and immediately die? Or, since we are talking about diseases, how sure are you that you will not be patient zero in a new pandemic in the year 2020 (COVID-20?)?

But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? (Lk. 12:20)

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— yet you do not

¹⁷ There are people alive who refuse to take airplanes due to the risk of plane crashes.

know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." (Jas. 4: 13-15)

All of life is a risk. All life is contingent. Every single day, we make decisions that come with the risks of any or all of us dying. The only difference is whether we are conscious of it or not. Those who are not conscious of it are just like the rich fool of Luke 12:13-21, or the arrogant bragger of James 4:13-17.

Since all of life is a risk, the question then is not whether there are risks involved with church services or singing. The question is whether the risks are acceptable. But even as we evaluate the risks of opening the church and singing, we must also consider what are the risks of the church not reopening, especially as it relates to the spiritual health of believers? Do we talk about the physical only, and not the spiritual also? Believers are robbed of the means of grace every Sunday the church remains closed, and are thus spiritually starved. Is that a reality that is acceptable to the leaders of the church?

Even as the risks are weighed, it must be said that there remains one important fact that has to be considered, which is related to the virus. While it is admitted that the virus is a serious threat, SARS CoV2 pales in comparison to *Yersinia Pestis*, the organism behind the Bubonic Plague. The Black Plague killed half of Europe, and sporadic instances of plague have broken out even in the early modern world. In comparison to this, SARS CoV2 is relatively benign.

Therefore, as risks are weighed, we must be balanced in our view. And here is where historical consciousness is important, because then we can perceive things properly in perspective. Measures should be taken with regards to this pandemic—that is true. But we are NOT to react disproportionately to the pandemic. A fatality rate of 3.27% is nowhere near a fatality rate of 50%. Thus, do the risks of reopening church and singing outweigh the risks of not reopening church and not meeting God in worship?

Summary and Conclusion

These are the positions argued for in the paper:

- 1) COVID-19 is a real and serious viral outbreak
- 2) Measures to manage and move towards the eventual eradication of the virus are generally based upon good science
- 3) There are questions over the real-life efficacy of these measures, yet these measures do aid in the control of the virus
- 4) The Church is a physical assembly
- 5) Physicality (the body) is essential for biblical anthropology
- 6) Anything other than in-person gathering does not fit the biblical requirement for an assembly of the saints
- 7) The weekly Lord's Day meetings are God's means of grace to us

- 8) Only God can determine how He will meet us; our piety does not determine God's grace
- 9) God has determined certain means of grace, and apart from that, there is no covenant meeting with God
- 10) Therefore, not attending to the means of grace, for whatever reason (legitimate or otherwise) robs the individual of God's means of grace
- 11) Spiritual nourishment (through the means of grace) is important for the life of the believer
- 12) Private piety cannot provide the spiritual nourishment that God only gives through His ordained means (see 9 and 10)
- 13) God has ordained that we worship Him only as He commands, and no other [Regulative Principle of Worship]
- 14) The elements of worship include singing as one of the elements.
- 15) Therefore, singing is mandated by Scripture. Not singing is a violation of the Regulative Principle of Worship and a sin against God
- 16) All of life is a risk
- 17) When considering how to do church in light of the pandemic, competing risks have to be weighed.
- 18) There are real spiritual risks to not worshipping God and not singing in corporate worship

As it can be seen, there are many things that churches should consider as they decide whether to reopen churches. When all of these are taken into consideration, despite the pandemic, should churches reopen and worship God? It is the author's opinion that churches should open and worship God regardless of what the government say, because God is more important than death! Nevertheless, to each pastor and elder, he is responsible to God for making a decision, and so there is no necessary compulsion either to re-open or remain closed, as long as the decision is made while wrestling with the issues involved.

As for me, the risks of not worshipping God is more dire than the risks of dying of COVID-19. God is more important than life. While I do not attend a church where I have a real say in the running of the church, the least I can do is to voice out my biblical convictions and reasoning. May the LORD see fit to convict others of His truth, and bring people back to worship the God who is sovereign over all things, including life and death and COVID-19.

HC Q1: What is your only hope in life and death?

A. That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and

therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and make me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

Amen.