

The Churches in The Netherlands and the Pandemic

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Below I try to describe in ten brief paragraphs how the Reformed churches in The Netherlands replied to COVID-19 and the effect this pandemic will have on these churches in the near future. I underline that these are my personal observations and analyses, but I do hope they give an impression of what the coronavirus brought about in the life of the church.

I. *Unbelief*

It all started in March 2020 with unbelief. For The Netherlands, China is far away, and no one knew where Wuhan was. Even when COVID-19 had reached northern Italy, we thought it was local and temporary. It was plain unbelief that a pandemic in our modern times with all that we know and with all that we can do could rise up and fundamentally disturb our activities. Thus, unbelief was also for Christians connected with a belief in science, a belief in human infallibility, and a belief that the words in James 4:13–16 were good to mention in church announcements but should not be taken too seriously—and further, with a belief that we still could carry out our planned meetings, synods, church services, and national and international trips. Unbelief in the reality of a pandemic was in fact grounded in unbelief

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that God would really decide to bring the whole world to a standstill.

II. Obedience

Once the pandemic was a fact and our government took measures, a question came up: Do we have to be obedient to the government if it is decided that churches should reduce attendance to thirty people or less? Does Romans 13 count when the government strongly recommends not to sing in church? These discussions in fact took place rather seldom in the Dutch churches. Rather, the general attitude was just to follow the rules; some churches decided to have no church services at all anymore and to tell the congregation to find online gatherings. This lack of discussion on the boundaries of political obedience is both striking and understandable as Dutch Christians were convinced that the church has a responsibility for the health and well-being of the wider community.

III. Shame

A handful of orthodox churches reacted differently and made it to the national news by giving the impression that they were ignoring political decisions and lockdown measures, or at least of pushing the limits of what was still allowed. It was negative headlines, and it shamed all churches and all Christians, especially since a good number of these churches were at the center of COVID-19 hotspots. The impression arose that the more strictly Reformed a church was, the more it was disobedient and a greater threat to national health. It will take quite some time and energy to repair the damage done to the image of the church—by a minority of Christians—as many see the church more as a danger to physical health than as a medicine for spiritual health.

IV. Innovation

The positive effect of COVID-19 was that many churches sought and found original ways to keep preaching and praising God and to uphold community life in the church. It became evident that there was much spiritual creativity in the Christian church, and some brothers and sisters have gifts that so far had not been recognized as such. Our digital era is often rightly seen as a danger, with the many negative influences and temptations the internet has to offer, but now it proved to be a great gift. It also became clear that many conventions and traditions were not as holy and biblical as we thought them

to be, and that the church can live well in spite of—or should I say thanks to—the fact that many meetings of elders, deacons, and committees could not take place.

V. *Pastorate*

For pastors, elders, deacons, and others with pastoral obligations, COVID-19 made it a heavy task to give good spiritual care. In The Netherlands, however, we also came to see that our presbyterian structure, with deacons, elders, and pastors, and our view that church members are also shepherds as well as sheep, is not just traditional but an essential part of the church of Christ. COVID-19 in this respect showed the truth that once you miss something, you come to see how much you need it. The Presbyterian, Reformed church structure prevented the church from falling apart. This gives hope for the situation after COVID-19, where we again have to learn to be the church, but where we also have already learned that the Reformed tradition offers so much of lasting value.

VI. *Death*

COVID-19 caused many deaths in The Netherlands. Death became more of a reality than before. And the lockdown rules made funerals even more a confrontation with the finiteness of human life. The Netherlands has a long history of Christianity, and that means that every town has churches with bells. These bells rang every time someone passed away. I live in a small, medieval town with a population of some seven thousand people, but in the spring, the church bell of the main church would ring sometimes three or four times a day, and it made people stop and think. *Memento mori*: Are you prepared to die? We pray that this reality of death may have a lasting impression on people both inside and outside the church.

VII. *Preaching*

The first lockdown Sunday in The Netherlands was Easter Sunday. Churches were as empty as the tomb from which Jesus returned alive. I preached in a large church with just one elder, one technician, and one camera. It was awkward, empty, and unreal. And I have learned since then—as have all preachers in the world—that we need to see the congregation if we are to be able to preach well. We need the coughs, the yawns, the running of children, the folks not paying attention, the young people

pretending to listen but checking Instagram. We cannot do without them. We need physical, moving bodies of brothers and sisters in the church in order to be able to preach well. I hear the same from colleagues and churchgoers. I found that online sermons need to be not too long, that they need to be lively, that they need to be close to Scripture and opening up Scripture, and that they also need even more preparation. And more prayer.

VIII. Teaching

Dutch churches suffer enormously from a lack of knowledge. There is a crisis in catechism class and in catechetical preaching. COVID-19 has increased this in spite of all that has been organized online. In The Netherlands the tradition of two services every Sunday—what we call text-preaching or an exposition of a Bible text in an experiential way in the morning service and preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism in the afternoon or evening—was already struggling before this pandemic, but the lockdowns made it even worse. Scripture says that the people of God are destroyed because of a lack of knowledge (Hos 4:6), and it is this destruction that is threatening us more than ever. Here I see an immense challenge to get back the rhythm of two services a Sunday and to get back the content that feeds the flock's heart and mind.

IX. Concern

The former issue brings me to the concerns the Dutch churches have. To put it bluntly: Will all members return to church after the pandemic? Online church services can make us sloppy in attendance, and it can make us picky about whom we listen to. What are the effects on our young people whom we already had a hard time reaching? The church needs to go into rehab. But will we completely recover? Over the past twenty years The Netherlands has been confronted with a tsunami of closing churches. Many congregations have not survived the pandemic, while some could stay open, but barely. Will the lockdowns deal them the final blow? Our concern is that this country with its rich tradition of lively churches and solid Reformed theology and spirituality will become a post-Christian wasteland. And that this pandemic has even accelerated that development.

X. Hope

I started with unbelief, but I end with hope. The God who brought us down will in his grace lift us up. The God who brought us to a standstill in his

grace will get us moving. The God who reigns over pandemics will bring his glorious plan to completion. Our hope is not in vaccines, nor in politics, nor in pastors or synods, but our hope is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him has been given all power in heaven and on earth (cf. Matt 28:18). He has revealed to the Apostle John on Patmos that all the things he was shown will happen and have to happen (Rev 1:1). And we see that they do happen as revealed. These are frightening signs but signs of hope. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, slain on the cross by the pandemic of our sins, raised from the dead by the vaccine of God's almighty power, we can have hope for the future of the church and for the future of our souls.