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Apostasy from the Foundation of Christian Fellowship in Protestantism

**Warning Voices from Russian, Baltic, and
African Churches**

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What this is all about

Under the pressure of social groups and political movements, many Protestant churches in Europe and America have been making decisions and issuing statements for some time now which are without any foundation in God's Word and the confessions of the Christian Church. In most cases, this takes place even in open contradiction to the clear witness of Holy Scripture. These decisions and statements address primarily the relationship between man and woman but also touch on the topics of marriage and family. They also treat liberation or emancipation from heteronomy and—seemingly religious—coercion. All this is based upon the post-Enlightenment assertion of the autonomy of modern man. Invoking human rights, it is claimed that each individual should have the right to live and act autonomously in a way that is in agreement with personal desires and drives. This is done in the belief that every human being possesses reason in the same way and acts and behaves accordingly.

When this thesis of a progressive moral improvement of mankind is contradicted by invoking God's Word, then this is repressed by pointing to the progress of "scientific knowledge" or simply to the altered social conditions with which the individual must comply. Already at this point one may ask, whether and to what extent such conditions may determine behavior within a Christian congregation—or should, in spite of all the ominous signs from the most recent history of the Church, the criteria of "timeliness," the "call of the hour," and the "voice of the people" be once again put back into effect?¹ The apostolic rule "one must obey God rather than man" (Acts 4:19; 5:29) offers a clear distinction between divine commandments and human, even churchly, demands. This is why the Christian congregation has since its inception never followed the dominant patterns of behavior in a given society—e.g., in ancient Rome—but it has observed the order and law of God. Accordingly, it is admonished by the unchangeable testimony of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to remain in what God says and in what it has received by the rebirth in baptism. Unavoidably, this leads to a conflict within every Christian between the old man in the flesh of sin and the Spirit of God. But frequently the Christian is also confronted outwardly by society's "surprise" and "maligning" "when [the Christian does] not join them in the same flood of debauchery" (1 Peter 4:1ff.). The desire to avoid and repress such conflicts is humanly understandable. Yet one must then also realize that thereby the gift of salvation is lost, and at the same time, the responsibility of the Christian congregation for the evangelistic witness to society is gambled away. If the order of marriage and family in the cultures of Europe and other continents was shaped by Christian missions, then one can only say that it is precisely the Christian churches of the Protestant tradition that have today made a substantive contribution to its destruction.

In this situation, contradiction within the church, and among church bodies, arises. Yet anyone who raises objections by invoking the Scriptures and confessions—in other words, invoking what establishes fellowship within Christianity—are disqualified and defamed as fundamentalist, unscientific, or, as far as work in the church is concerned, disciplined by the threat and implementation of the denial of ordination or removal from office. This means that the conflicts are not enjoined via doctrinal trials, as would be proper, but by legal measures. Regardless of the position one takes personally, it cannot fail to be noticed that earlier theological discussions within the churches have recently been elevated to cases of confession. More than a few cases have ended up before a court of law, and the difficulty in grasping the resultant personal pressures I do not need to explain.

Let us review a few examples of this. In a statement by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (hereafter EKD) on "Women's Ordination and the Office of Bishop" dated a July 20, 1992, the solemn declaration is made:

Criticizing the election of a woman into the evangelical office of bishop, therefore, departs from the common ground of the Evangelical Church... However, even a principled criticism of women's ordination departs from the common ground of the doctrine in effect in the evangelical church.²

To put this bluntly, simply criticizing women's ordination has already been anathematized and will result in excommunication.

¹ Note of translator: Slenczka here refers to popular arguments during the Third Reich that were invoked in favor of adapting the proclamation of the Church to the historical and political times that, beginning with A. Hitler's coming to power in January 1933, were perceived as a radically new age of national renaissance.

² *Frauenordination und Bischofsamt: Eine Stellungnahme der Kammer für Theologie*. EKD Texte 44. (Hanover, 1992), 3, 4. For a discussion of this decision of the Council cf. R. Slenczka, "Die Ordination von Frauen zum Amt der Kirche," *Id., Neues und Altes* (Neuendettelsau, 2000), 3:183-210, esp. 203ff.

A Lutheran bishop declares:

*One can talk with us about theology, but there are two issues which cannot be discussed and which we will not give up, first, the historical-critical method of the interpretation of the bible, and second, the ordination of women.*³

It is generally known that in various German territorial churches pastors are removed from office in connection with these conflicts. Such matters, however, are normally left to the lawyers employed by the churches to settle. Documentation of similar events in Scandinavian churches is contained in the astonishing report by Tapani Simojoki, "Verfolgung bekennnistreuer Lutheraner in Finnland"⁴ ("Persecution in Finland of Lutherans Loyal to the Confessions").

It is within this situation that the Lutheran churches of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Kenya, as well as the Russian Orthodox Church have spoken out with several statements in which they point out and deplore that Protestant churches are in an egregious manner constantly breaking the consensus of Christian fellowship in the foundations of faith, doctrine, and life. It is probably no accident that here is found, on the one side, the churches in the European and American societies of affluence and, on the other side, the churches which in Eastern Europe have overcome decades of persecution by the state ideology of a militant atheism or which currently exist under the difficult economic and political conditions of African states.

All of these churches are or were recipients of generous aid between churches which should be something that goes without saying. Yet, unfortunately, this aid in many cases has been and continues to be coupled with material pressures by which, directly or indirectly, women's ordination or the recognition and possible ecclesiastical blessing of homosexual unions is forcibly introduced and established.⁵ This is done by formally threatening to revoke church fellowship, and thus the accompanying economic assistance. It has also happened that formerly approved funding was denied because of interference from Protestant churches in Germany, as was the case when the Luther Academy in Riga was established.⁶

Those unfamiliar with the extremely difficult conditions after the collapse of communism will hardly be able to appreciate the effect of these pressures. What is more, these churches and their theologians are mocked and decried as uneducated, as "lagging behind the enlightenment," and, of course, as fundamentalist.⁷ However, the spiritual insights that were granted to these churches and especially to their individual congregations under persecution remain unknown; and it is apparent that the West can neither see nor understand this.

In view of this troubling situation, the purpose of this contribution is to present objections raised by Eastern European and African churches and, as much as possible, awaken an understanding for the exchange of bodily and spiritual gifts (Rom. 15:27) that are behind their witness that is mostly repressed and mocked. May God grant that the outrage in Western churches gives way to understanding and repentance and that broken fellowship is healed. However, there is a serious danger that it also becomes apparent here how in some Protestant churches "the church has already ceased to be church," because by "the way the ruling church party [and its majorities] act," Christian fellowship is destroyed by alien presuppositions.⁸

1. The Moscow Patriarchate Concerning the Female Chairperson of the EKD Council (December 12, 2009)

³ Thus Bishop Dr. Hans-Christian Knuth in an October 2007 presentation in St. Louis, MO. Quoted according to Jobst Schöne, "Was ist das lutherische Bekenntnis heute: Tradition, Erbe oder Stimme der Kirche?" *Lutherische Beiträge* 3/2009, 141.

⁴ *Lutherische Beiträge* 3/2007, 203-210.

⁵ It is understandable that the affected churches do not discuss such processes publicly. This gives all the more weight to the astonishing report of a Lithuanian theologian which has also been published in German: Darius Petkūnas, *Wiedergeweiht: Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Litauen*. *Lutherische Beiträge Beiheft 6* (Groß Oesingen, 2007), esp. 18-23.

⁶ Between 1997 and 2005, the author established and directed the Luther Academy in Riga as a place of instruction for pastors, female teachers of religion, church musicians, and laypeople in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. He collected and documented the experiences of that time in a "history of calamities," from which are taken the pieces of information that are only hinted at here.

⁷ On this cf. my article "Bewahrte und verfolgte Kirche in Lettland: Zwischen militantem Atheismus und europäischem Liberalismus," *Johanniterorden Heft 2* / June 2009, 10.

⁸ Quotes taken from the preamble of the 1934 *Theologische Erklärung zur gegenwärtigen Lage der Deutschen Evangelischen Kirche* ("Barmen Declaration").

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the theological discussions between the EKD and the Moscow Patriarchate an open conflict broke out. That these talks could have begun after the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, continue during the time of the so-called second church struggle under Khrushchev in 1959, and regularly be held every other year⁹ was in and of itself miraculous. At that time, the churches of the Eastern Block were also given the opportunity to participate in ecumenical organizations and conferences. All involved understood that it could not have taken place without preconditions and reservations on both sides.

Now, however, after the Iron Curtain has been removed and there are no more obstacles for encounter and exchange, and even after a series of newly independent states have joined Western alliances such as NATO and the European Union, conflicts have arisen by which ecclesiastical encounter and fellowship have not only become strained, but in some cases, have directly ended. This has taken place due to new church-divisive factors.

The election of a (divorced)¹⁰ woman to the office of chairperson of the EKD's Council¹¹ caused the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, to cancel his participation in an event on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the theological discussions. This was done in a letter dated December 10, 2009.¹² He was, however, prepared to send his deputy. Yet the reason for this cancellation was not only women's ordination (which is seen as an inner-church matter that already does not feature prominently because the Protestant churches, in the opinion of the Orthodox, do not have a sacramental priesthood). The reason for the cancellation lies deeper:

Although we have not recognized the existence of a priesthood in the Protestant congregations formerly and, consequently, have not recognized them as "churches" in the sense in which we understand this word, we maintained a dialogue with them in the form "church-church." However, as a woman has become the chairperson of the EKD, the situation has changed. This act raises a principal question of the prospect of maintaining a dialogue in the mentioned form. This election shows that in spite of the fifty-year-long dialogue with Orthodoxy, the other side has gone down a path that dramatically aggravates the differences between our traditions. Naturally, the principle question should be posed: What is the meaning of our dialogue if its outcome is not a movement towards each other as formerly declared by both, but a movement of one of the participants in the dialogue in an opposite direction? Besides, we cannot but take into account the opinion of our members to whom meetings and talks within the church chaired by a woman are absolutely inadmissible.

... However, the main reason for this is not any pronouncement made recently, but the processes that have been going on within Western Protestantism for several decades. The Russian Orthodox Church is worried about the growing influence of the secular approach to the development of theology and ecclesiastical life within Protestant congregations. The liberalization of moral standards and departure from the apostolic rules in organizing the life of the church prompt us to bring witness about the authentic Christian tradition to our brothers and sisters in the spirit of Christian love.

At present the gap between the traditional Christian Churches and the congregations of Western Christians that have embarked on the road of liberalizing the dogma, church order and moral norms to satisfy modern secular standards is becoming even wider. This is not the fault of the Orthodox who have not made any step backward from their Protestant brothers and sisters during the years of the dialogue, but have honored their commitments.

It may be humanly understandable that this declaration triggered the fiercest of protests. Yet this should not lead to the turning of a deaf ear to a very serious fundamental question and to the suppression of a significant issue. For it can be seen already from the quotations above that this is about the sustaining and connecting foundations of

⁹ Cf. Hans-Christian Diedrich, "Wohin sollen wir gehen ..." *Der Weg der Christen durch die sowjetische Religionsverfolgung: Eine russische Kirchengeschichte in ökumenischer Perspektive* (Erlangen, 2007) and R. Slenczka, "25 Jahre Theologische Gespräche zwischen Evangelischer Kirche in Deutschland und Moskauer Patriarchat," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 34 (1985): 446-467.

¹⁰ It is quite embarrassing when it is pointed out that of the four women to whom so far the office of a bishop has been entrusted three are divorced.

¹¹ Note of the translator: On February 24, 2010 – incidentally, the day of St. Matthias (cf. Acts 1:20-21!) – the woman referred to here, Dr. Margot Käßmann, resigned from her offices as chairperson of the EKD's Council and as bishop of the largest Lutheran territorial church in Germany (Hanover) after she had been arrested by the police for running a red light while intoxicated (.154% blood alcohol content).

¹² The English translation of the letter is found on the internet site of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (<http://www.mospat.ru/en/2009/12/10/news10042/>).

ecclesiastical doctrine and Christian witness of life. Yet, above all, one must see and know that since the fall of the Iron Curtain there are conflicts between East and West that do indeed have the form of a church struggle.

2. Declaration of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the decision, made by the assembly of the Church of Sweden on October 27, 2005, to introduce an official rite for the blessing of same-sex unions (January 2006)

Here one reads:¹³

With deep disappointment and great pain we receive word that the Lutheran Church of Sweden does not only have no objections to entering into so-called "same-sex marriages," but that it even decided to introduce an official rite for their blessing.

It is apparent that such a decision contradicts the biblical teaching on family and marriage. The biblical witness does not leave any doubt that homosexuality is to be regarded as sin and "abomination" (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). According to the word of the apostle Paul people that commit this sin "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). A blessing of "same-sex marriages" means that one approves of a sinful disfiguration of the image of God in man and a perversion of his nature. The Christian church has always understood the marriage between a man and a woman as a sacrament, precisely because out of this covenant new life is born. This natural order of things has been established by God and has been blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ in Cana in Galilee. The attempts to destroy this and to depict the perversion as the norm represent an open contradiction to God's will, a transgression of the commandments of God of Holy Scripture and of the centuries-old tradition of the church. The rejection of unnatural vices, homosexuality being one of them as well, has always been an important element of Christian ethics, which formed and guided many generations of people. This is why the approval of the shameful practice of "same-sex marriages" is a serious blow to the entire European intellectual-moral system of values, as it came about under the influence of Christianity. Such "innovations" undermine the moral foundations of European civilization and inflict upon it a totally unjustifiable loss of its intellectual influence in the world.

3. "In concern for unity" An Open letter of the Baltic Lutheran bishops (March 6, 2006)

This letter¹⁴ is about the fellowship of churches in the Lutheran World Federation. At the general assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Winnipeg (July 21-31, 2003), a motion of the Swedish Church seeking the recognition and ecclesiastical blessing of same-sex unions was rejected due to the objection of Baltic and African churches. Consequently, the Church of Sweden itself adopted a similar motion. This led to the following comments in the open letter:

This is exactly why we have received word from the decision of the general assembly of the Church of Sweden from October 27, 2005 to allow for the ecclesiastical blessing of "registered partnerships" and, respectively, homosexual unions that have been entered legally, with concern and sadness. We reject the expression of enmity against homosexual people; we nonetheless are convinced that it is the duty of the Church and its pastoral responsibility to bring the entire Word of God also to these people: law and gospel, repentance from sin and the forgiveness of sin for the sake of Christ for the congregation which he has redeemed with his blood. Our churches believe that homosexual relations are irreconcilable with being a disciple of Christ; here, rather, applies the word of the Lord: "Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In our opinion, this is founded clearly enough in the Holy Scriptures as the apostolic church has read and interpreted it from of old. This is why we cannot simply view the blessing of a homosexual couple as an act of pastoral care. This decision, rather, means a deep change in the Church when it comes to carrying out the task of teaching and guarding the flock.

¹³ Published in *Cerkovnyj Vestnik*, No. 1-2 (326-327), January 2006. Translation of the author from the Russian. One ought to remember in this context that the planned reception of archbishop Karl Gustav Hammar by pope John Paul II was cancelled in October 1998, after an exhibition of the work of the photographer Elisabeth Ohlson had taken place in the cathedral of Uppsala with the support of the archbishop. It displayed twelve photos depicting Jesus as a homosexual amongst disciples that are gay, transvestite, and suffer from AIDS.

¹⁴ Author's translation from the Latvian according to the Latvian church magazine *Svētdienas Rīts* (March 11, 2006), No. 10 (1647).

Even as we recognize and respect every church's right to make its own decisions, we can only state with regret that this decision has been made in a one-sided manner and without regard for the view of other churches. The discussions that were triggered by the introduction of the draft resolution regarding homosexuality by the Church of Sweden at the general assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Winnipeg, made foreseeable the unavoidable damage which the adoption of this point of view would inflict on the fellowship of the Lutheran World Federation. The Council of the Lutheran World Federation strove to avoid this damage; and for this purpose a special commission was established in order to study the question of family, marriage, and sexuality in order to establish a foundation for further debates. Without waiting for the result of the commission's work, the general assembly of the Church of Sweden has turned the work of this commission into an empty formality.

We also regret the damage that this decision has inflicted upon the ecumenical endeavors by removing the possibility of a visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ into a far distance and, in our opinion, by eroding the credibility of all Lutheran churches in their relationship to other churches even further. We have a hard time understanding why such a high priority is given to the question of homosexuality that ecumenical responsibility and fellowship in the LWF are sacrificed for its sake.

The fact that all Swedish bishops have consented to the decision to bless same-sex unions makes it unclear for us, how at the present time these bishops understand their service in view of the unity of the church as well as the contents of the sign of apostolic succession.

The unilateral decision of an individual member church of the LWF to bless same-sex unions has created a fact that quite substantially affects a relationship with the Church of Sweden as well as the fellowship within the LWF. The blessing of same-sex unions is irreconcilable with the faith of our churches, with their confession of faith, and with their doctrine. The constitutions in effect in our churches and their regulations would not permit the recognition of those as ministers of our churches, and the remaining in fellowship with those, who practice or support a blessing of same-sex couples. This, consequently, holds also true for the relationship with ministers of other churches. Yet this means that we cannot recognize and practice fellowship with any minister of the Church of Sweden. It also follows consequently that the full range of unrestricted fellowship in the context of the LWF will also not be possible in the future.

The fellowship of the body of Christ, his Church, is very important to us, and this is why we want to maintain the relationships with the Church of Sweden and the fellowship in the LWF, as far as this is possible under the new circumstances. This is precisely why it will be necessary to continue to analyze the results of the abovementioned decision and the extent of the changes resulting from it and to seek for possible solutions. We call upon all the member churches of the LWF to turn their serious attention to the decision of the Church of Sweden because it affects us all. We also urgently want to ask the Secretary General of the LWF, Dr. I. Noko, to seek a way in order to hold negotiations about the situation that has emerged in the fellowship of our churches. We should, in prayer and intercession, seriously reflect upon possible ways to continue our relationships while preserving integrity and honesty.

4. In the same matter: Declaration of the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, Archbishop Dr. Walter Obare (November 12/ 13, 2009)

This declaration addresses, on the one hand, "the apostasy of the Church of Sweden" to consecrate not only a woman but also a confessing lesbian as bishop in the cathedral of Uppsala on November 8, 2009 and, on the other hand, the August 21, 2009 decision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in Minneapolis to admit homosexuals to ecclesiastical offices.

The text has the solemn form of an anathema. It reads as follows:¹⁵

- 1. We condemn in the strongest terms possible this unfortunate and anti-scriptural development in a church body that bears the name of the great reformer, Dr. Martin Luther.*
- 2. These Church Bodies have rejected the faith of Christendom as has been confessed all along starting with the Apostles and the fathers as is also confessed today in the three ecumenical creeds.*
- 3. These church bodies have out-and-out rejected the authority of the Scriptures as the Word of God.*
- 4. To the Lutherans, Dr. Martin Luther brought the Church from being under the authority of man and speculations of human philosophies to be under the authority of the Scriptures.*

¹⁵ Available online, e.g., http://www.gemeindenetzwerk.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Nov-2009_ELCK-Press-Release-on-the-Church-Apostate.pdf.

5. *We want to remind those Lutheran Churches and others who ordain women into office of the Word and Sacrament that this unfortunate practice is a novelty that just started some fifty years ago and is indeed an epicenter of spiritual lesbianism in the Church today.*
6. *We condemn sexual perversion in all its manifestations.*
7. *A same-sex marital union is not only contrary to God's will as clearly expressed in the Holy Scripture, but also repugnant to the natural created social order.*
8. *God's plan and purpose of marriage is fulfilled only in heterosexual (one man - one woman) life-long commitment.*
9. *This act by the Church of Sweden constitutes a loveless and callous disregard of the spiritual condition of those caught in homosexual bondage. And*
10. *most seriously of all, it is nothing less than a denial of the transformative power of the love we know in our Savior Jesus Christ, Who seeks all sinners in order to restore them to communion with the Father through the ministrations of His Holy Spirit in Word and sacrament.*

African states have before their eyes the terrible temporal punishment of God for transgressions of the Sixth Commandment (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28) which are repressed and covered up in the societies of affluence.

5. "Spiritual Renewal and Lutheran Unity in the Faith." Appeal of the seven Baltic bishops from November 2009

In view of the global economic crisis, society and governments are called upon to reflect anew on the foundations of the divine order of creation:¹⁶

Consumerism and individualism of the modern society have taken their toll. To look for solution only by means of mending economy would mean to repeat the same mistake. A spiritual renewal must come first, a renewed sense of balance between rights and obligations, communion, empathy, solidarity, and mutual support. We believe that the most convincing inner motivation for that change is found in an encounter of a person with the living Christ. To facilitate that encounter by word and deed is the first and foremost calling of the Christian church.

This is why the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation are called to a joint witness in this situation in which especially in the area of marriage and sexuality, agreement with the Word of God and therefore also fellowship among churches is not only threatened, but in which it is in part already destroyed:

The Bishops call upon Lutheran sisters and brothers to unity and co-operation based upon the foundation of Holy Scripture and loyalty to the Lutheran confessions. Contemporary challenges demand a firm stand based upon timeless truths and values. The common understanding of the Gospel by churches is a treasure we cannot afford to lose and it needs to be passed on to the current and future generations. Our mission is to be faithful in that which we have received: God's mercy. We are to serve our Lord and our neighbors thus until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph. 4:13).

6. Reorganization of the church in Latvia

All these official documents of different churches make clear how existing church fellowship has deliberately been destroyed both within churches and in relation to other churches by the continuous series of decisions concerning the ordination of women as well as same-sex relationships.

Certainly, the seriousness of the ecclesiastical declarations that have been adduced cannot be missed. And this has nothing at all to do with church-political conservatism or, as it is frequently called in the West, theological backwardness. Of course, one can dodge the basic questions raised by such objections and possibly even ridicule them. This has already led to the fact that these texts are hardly distributed in the West and, above all, also not taken seriously.

The churches in the former states of the Eastern Block find themselves in an extremely difficult situation. In the West, one has no idea of what it means to rebuild a society that has been destroyed in its morals and conscience: broken families, economic and political robber barons, neglect of children and youth. One might be surprised to hear

¹⁶ "Baltic Lutheran bishops call for unity among Lutherans and spiritual renewal" is available online <http://www.lalb.lv/en/?ct=home&fu=read&id=29&start=>

in the West that the Latvian parliament (*Saeima*) spontaneously and without any prompting by churches decided in December 1997 to introduce religious education as a required subject at state schools. Against this backdrop, it was certainly not surprising that in most of the states of the Eastern Block the strongest objections against joining the European Union were voiced by the pastors in those countries because the influence of Western liberalism on church and society was feared.

Yet these churches are by no means backwards; rather, they experienced what happens when Christian responsibility for society is no longer exercised; and they now are faced with the extremely difficult task of reestablishing in a destroyed society, by a living witness and instruction of consciences, those “values” that are often first invoked when they are lost. This happens both in ecclesiastical reorganization and in cooperation with government entities. What follows are just a few examples from Latvia.

It is, thus, understandable—what is hardly understood in the West—that a change of article 110 of the Latvian constitution was adopted on December 15, 2005 which now reads:¹⁷

The state protects and supports marriage as a union of a man with a woman, the family, and the rights of parents and children. The state helps especially children with disabilities and children who are without parental care or suffer violence.

Very clear and unambiguous are also the pertinent regulations in the new church law which went into effect on July 1, 2008, governing the ministry of pastors.¹⁸ It contains a number of rules which probably are met by a lack of understanding and even outrage in the West where all this has almost totally been eliminated or is no longer heeded. This refers not only to the duties but also to the doctrine and life of the pastor (article 4), as, e.g., the minimum age of 25, good reputation among non-Christians (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:15ff.). Explicitly excluded, and this for evident reasons, is working for governmental or non-governmental “security services,” as well as membership in or support of illegal organizations.

The rules for leading one’s life should actually be self-evident for the minister of the church. However, we live in a time when in certain churches the special qualifications for ecclesiastical offices set forth in the Pastoral Letters and elsewhere in the New Testament are set aside. Now it is enough if the candidate is divorced at least once or lives in a “marriage-like” heterosexual or homosexual relationship. This is why the section on “The Pastor’s ethos of life and ministry” (articles 18-29) will cause astonishment or even outrage. I highlight what follows.

The seal of confession and pastoral care is enjoined (art. 19). This excludes using examples out of one’s pastoral practice in one’s sermons or discussing them at length in professional pastoral-psychological publications. “The family life of a pastor is an example for the congregation and society and must not undermine the reputation of the pastoral office” (art. 24, 1). Therefore, divorce (art. 25) and practicing as well as propagating homosexuality (art. 26) are as irreconcilable with the pastoral office as political activity and propaganda (art. 28). In such cases, pastors can be dismissed, and this has also happened in a number of cases as a matter of church discipline. It should be well-known that, as a violation of equal-rights laws and human rights, this may lead to legal persecution in the European Union today.

Especially against this backdrop, it is important and helpful that the “spiritual assistance for pastors” is explicitly pointed out (art. 36). Pastoral care for pastors is a special duty of bishops, and this appears to be the decisive reason as to why there are now four bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. One wishes them that they may exercise this office not only as representation or oversight, but as visitation and pastoral care for pastors. Everywhere one can deplore terrible conditions in the church; the spiritual damage, however, lies much deeper in that most pastors have to live and work without spiritual care, guidance, support, and reproof (*paraclesis*). It is very bad when this is replaced by legal measures and psychological techniques to deal with burn-out syndromes.

7. The ecclesial-theological controversy regarding human rights

¹⁷ Section 35 of the Civil Code (*Civillikums*) states: “Marriage between persons of the same sex is prohibited.”

¹⁸ For more details see R. Slenczka, “Zur Neuentwicklung des Kirchenrechts in Lettland,” *Zeitschrift für evangelisches Kirchenrecht* 49 (2004): 333-350 and “Kirchenrecht in der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Lettlands: Neue Regelungen,” *Zeitschrift für evangelisches Kirchenrecht* 55 (2010): 77-91.

That which has been emerging for years in the form of a series of conflicts regarding individual issues has now entered the stage of a direct theological conflict on the European level. On June 26, 2008, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted a document entitled *The Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights*.¹⁹ This document was countered by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)²⁰ in *Human Rights and Morality*.²¹ These two documents highlight the controversial issues, which will be shown in what follows.

A. *Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights*

This text is very detailed and, above all, clearly formulated and its theological position is clearly grounded in Scripture and tradition. According to Orthodox understanding – and Lutherans are quite able to agree with this – tradition is not a second source of revelation, but the consensus of the orthodox doctrine of church fathers and decisions of councils.²² This is exactly what, according to AC I, the *magnus consensus* is. Part of this is the witness of the liturgy in worship; for in worship, the Christian community manifests itself not only in time, but also with God's eternity. Therefore, theology is not defined – as done by Schleiermacher and in neo-Protestantism – as the “knowledge of the doctrine now in effect in the evangelical church, and with ecclesiastical statistics, as knowledge of the social conditions in all the different parts of the Christian church” – “... what is officially claimed and heard without causing official objections.”²³ Right theology, rather, takes as its point of departure the fact that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are not texts of antiquity that are to be read in a religious-historical perspective, but the unchanging Word of the triune God, in which he reveals himself, speaks, and acts. Accordingly, it is true about worship that here the congregation gathers around the means of grace of Word and sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ is built up. This is why the entire document is not about the social-political situation of the church but its spiritual reality, as it is established by Word and sacrament. All reformers saw and taught it just like this.

The reason for this declaration is this:

In the world today there is a widespread conviction that the human rights institution in itself can promote the development of human personality and social organization in the best possible way. At the same time, human rights protection is often used as a plea to realize ideas which in essence radically disagree with Christian teaching. Christians have found themselves in a situation where public and social structures can force and often have already forced them to think and act contrary to God's commandments, thus obstructing their way towards the most important goal in human life, which is deliverance from sin and finding salvation.

In this situation the Church, on the basis of Holy Scriptures and the Holy Tradition, has to recall the basic affirmations of Christian teaching on the human person and to assess the theory of human rights and its implementation.

Thereby, the goal of the document is stated: It is not about the historically conditioned interpretation of texts but about churchly pastoral care for the tempted and also seduced consciences of Christians in the current conflicts; but it is also, as will be shown, about the foundations of society.

Since it is impossible to reproduce the entire content of the document, I will merely emphasize the points that are decisive in the current controversy.

¹⁹ This document is available in English at <http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/introduction/>. It was brought into the decision-making process of the church and commented by the then-chairman of the Department for External Church Relations and current patriarch, Kirill.

²⁰ The CPCE is an association of 105 Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe which in 1973 adopted the *Leuenberg Concord* which, in the view of its subscribers, ended the church-divisive controversies between Lutheran and Reformed churches, especially in view of the Lord's Supper.

²¹ The document is available in English at <http://www.leuenberg.net/daten/File/Upload/doc-9806-2.pdf>. Cf. W. Schlichting, “Menschenrechte und Gottes Gebot: Biblisches Menschenbild ohne Bedeutung,” *Confessio Augustana* 2009, No. 3, 43-48.

²² This is, after all, the evident claim of the Augsburg Confession: we are not innovators or heretics, but stand on the foundation of the *ecclesia catholica*, cf. AC I, 1 and Conclusion of the First Part. For more, see below.

²³ F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums zum Behufe einleitender Vorlesungen*, §§ 195-196.

1. "Human dignity as a religious and ethical category"

The point of departure is not some human right for which, as demanded also in Marxism-Leninism ("... the *Internationale* fights for the human right"),²⁴ one should fight, but the human dignity which is given by God. It is ontologically founded in man created by God as God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). The image of God is, to be sure, affected by the fall into sin, but, as far as God's relation to his creature is concerned, not fully lost. This is demonstrated by the assumption of human nature without sin (Hebr. 4:15) by the Lord Jesus Christ who is the image of God and by whom is restored the image of God in man (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Human dignity is understood as an ethical category because

... the ideas of what is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul. Considering the state of human nature darkened by sin, it is important that things dignified and undignified should be clearly distinguished in the life of a person. (I, 2)

For this very reason the patristic and ascetic thought and the whole liturgical tradition of the Church refer more to human indignity caused by sin than to human dignity. (I, 5)

Thus, the Christian life, to put it in Luther's words, takes place in "daily sorrow and repentance."²⁵ And this also is the task and ministry of the church in the world.

If this approach is correctly understood, then it is not about confessional peculiarities but about the life of a Christian under God's grace out of baptism unto renewal and salvation of the sinner out of the judgment of God and into communion with God which is understood not only in Orthodox theology as "deification" (I, 3) (2 Peter 1:4).

2. "Freedom of choice and freedom from evil"

"The image of God can be either darkened or illumined depending on the self-determination of a free individual, while the natural dignity becomes either more apparent in his life or obliterated by sin" (II, 1), and this is why the pastoral task of the church consists precisely in calling man back and in liberating him from his inner ties and dependencies which contradict the Word and will of God. The freedom of choice, therefore, cannot be understood as an absolute and definitive value. One can right away remind oneself here of Luther's important writing *De servo arbitrio* – *On the (due to sin) enslaved will*. "It is impossible to find freedom from sin without the mysterious unity of man with the transfigured nature of Christ that takes place in the Sacrament of Baptism (cf. Rom. 6:3-6; Col. 3:10) and becomes ever stronger through life in the Church, the Body of Christ (cf. Col. 1:24)" (II, 1).

The weakness of the notion of human rights consists, therefore, in that servitude to, and liberation from, sin are not recognized: "free choice loses its value and meaning if it is made in favour of evil" (II, 2). Who is the Christians who could or might contest this?

3. "Human rights in a Christian worldview and in the life of society"

If human rights are separated from the ontological foundation laid in God's Word concerning creation, fall, and redemption and are regarded as the highest, universal value, then there emerges inevitably a conflict with the divine revelation. The orders of the state, to be sure, ought and can prevent the evil in social relations; but they are not able to eliminate its cause in the sinfulness of the human nature (III, 2). The law and commandment of God is eternal and unchanging (III, 2):

²⁴ Note of the translator: Dr. Slenczka here quotes from the refrain of Emil Luckhardt's 1910 German translation of the 1871 anthem by Frenchman Eugene Pottier, *L'internationale*. A literal English translation of the entirety of the French original's refrain would be: "This is the final struggle / Let us group together, and tomorrow / The Internationale / Will be the human race."

²⁵ Small Catechism IV, 12.

*For an Orthodox Christian [and here one needs to emphasize: **for every Christian (RS)**] this law sealed in Holy Scriptures stands above any other rules, for it is by this law that God will judge the individual and nations standing before His throne (cf. Rev. 20:12).*

The document states accordingly (III, 3):

The development and implementation of the human rights concept should be harmonized with the norms of morality, with the ethical principle laid down by God in human nature and discernable in the voice of conscience.

Based on this presupposition, it is then asserted:

It is inadmissible to introduce in the area of human rights the norms that obliterate or altogether cancel both the Gospel and natural morality. The Church sees a great danger in the legislative and public support given to various vices, such as sexual lechery, perversions, the worship of profit and violence. It is equally inadmissible to elevate to a norm such immoral and inhumane actions towards the human being as abortion, euthanasia, use of human embryos in medicine, experiments changing a person's nature and the like.

Part of this is finally also the protection of the environment and the responsible management of natural resources because "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1)" (III, 5).

4. "Human Dignity and Freedom in the System of Human Rights"

This section examines six individual human rights as to their relation to God's command with the summary result (IV, 9):

Both the social value and effectiveness of the entire human rights system depend on the extent to which it helps to create conditions for personal growth in God-given dignity and relates to the responsibility of a person for his actions before God and his neighbors.

5. "Principles and Areas of the Russian Orthodox Church's Human Rights Work"

On two pages examples are given of how and where the church has to become engaged publicly in cases of social and political injustice. This begins with unjust distributions, terrorism, pseudo-religious groups and destructive sects, protection of the traditional family with father, mother, and children, prostitution, addictive behaviors, and much more.

In summary, one can only state: What this document says about human rights based on the foundation and task of the Christian Church expresses what can only be seen as the consensus of Christianity, if and when it stands on the foundation of the Christian Church and does not give it up or forget it. Of course, if the latter happens, then the function of the foundations does not remain unfilled; other norms and goals take their place.

B. *Human Rights and Morality: The Protestant Response by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)*

The contents and form of this text strongly suggest, on the one hand, the question of whether the Russian text has been understood at all (perhaps it was not even read in full) and, on the other hand, the question of what the authors actually mean and do under the names of theology and church. For the necessary conversation on an important subject matter, this is a markedly strange reaction which is neither able to comprehend at all the other side nor to produce a clear and theologically well-grounded response. Instead, a confessional antithesis is formulated that has nothing at all to do with the theology of the reformers, or for that matter with any theology. However, it is clear in this document from what position the argument is made. One has to state in all frankness: This is not about confessional differences but about basic theological knowledge. This will now be demonstrated in the decisive points:

1. On the "doctrine of justification"

Right at the beginning of the response by the CPCE to the Orthodox, the Orthodox document's explanation of human dignity according to Gen. 1:26 is criticized:

Here the statement makes a distinction between an "ultimate value"²⁶ of human beings because they are in the image of God and a "dignity" of the human being still to be achieved which rests on a similarity to God.

What is more, it is then asserted within the response by the CPCE that "human dignity is not governed by a person's own achievements but solely by God's grace, a precondition which is simply outside of his or her disposal."

These quotations show that the authors of the CPCE response understand neither what the Russian text clearly states about fall, justification, and sanctification nor how, according to the understanding of the Reformers, justification of the sinner by faith in Jesus Christ is taught, and how it is distributed and received through the Word and the sacraments.

The blatant error of the CPCE response consists in that justification as well as faith are emptied into some kind of human existential²⁷ which is then fitted into a formal mechanism of faith and works. Yet the *sola fide* of the reformers does not consist in just believing and not doing anything, but it is *sola fide per Christum*, that is, it is trust in what Christ has done for us and what he still does in us through Word and sacrament. Likewise, the "works" do not refer to ethics in general, but to a false practice of repentance (satisfaction, indulgences!!). In the entire New Testament as well as in the theology of the Eastern churches, the renewal of man begins from the sacraments; and the life of a Christian according to Rom. 6-8 consists precisely in the tension between the old Adam in the flesh of sin and the man that is renewed by the gift of the Spirit. In other words, it consists in a daily return to baptism (cf. Large Catechism IV, 64-86). Obviously, neo-Protestant theology lacks all understanding for this reality. And this clearly shows in Christian life and in ecclesial practice.

2. On a Christological deficiency in the CPCE response

Thus according to the Christian conviction a soteriological orientation of human dignity is added to its foundation in the theology of creation. This christological foundation is lacking in the statement of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus the statement lacks an essential theological element as a basis for human rights.

Here one can only ask: have the authors actually read and understood the Russian text? For them, without any understanding for Word and sacrament, theology is apparently no more than an intellectual exercise that has nothing at all to do with the actual reality and presence of God. The fact that the Russian text speaks in detail about the person and work of the living Lord Jesus Christ goes unrecognized. Instead, one speaks of soteriology and Christology in a scholastic-speculative sense.

3. "A Misunderstanding of human rights"

In the statement of the Russian Orthodox Church this leads to a misunderstanding of human rights. As the Russian Orthodox Church develops human dignity only as a moral criterion, it cannot understand the dignity as the foundation of an unconditional protection against human encroachments. Thus human dignity does not stand for a taboo which categorically resists any reification and instrumentalisation of human beings but becomes a distinction which human beings must acquire through their actions and therefore can also forfeit.

One may ask oneself, also by looking back to what was reported on the Russian document above, who misunderstands what. Apparently, this statement offers a totally atheistic ("secular") understanding of human rights which takes as its point of departure the claim that all men are good by nature and act rationally unless they are prevented from doing so by their social conditions:

²⁶ To be precise, the Russian texts here speaks of "an inalienable dignity," - The author.

²⁷ In view of such an understanding, Martin Luther speaks of a false *sola fide* without Christ and calls it an "obsoleta qualitas in anima" ("an obsolete quality in the soul," AE 32:239). More on this in R. Slenczka, "Glaube VI," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 13:318ff., esp. 324.

In the face of an exclusive claim of theology to be the foundation of human rights, the secular character of human rights must be taken seriously. The concept makes it necessary to think of them in universal terms and to seek possible ways of linking them up with the cultural traditions of humankind.

This has nothing at all to do with a biblically grounded Christian understanding of God, world, and man. However, one can recognize here the abovementioned revolutionary understanding of human rights, according to which the human rights as a goal of action help to realize a universal society of affluence. The same happens in Marxism-Leninism under the goal of a "classless society," where "man is man's supreme being,"²⁸ thereby replacing God! The churches in Russia know from experience where this leads. The same thinking occurs in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: "If a people is led to destruction by the instrument of governmental power, then the rebellion on the part of each and every member of such a nation is not only a right but a duty. ... Human rights break State rights."²⁹ And we too know where this leads when the commandments of God are abrogated. This is, unfortunately, also the thinking in some of the social statements of the Evangelical Church in Germany³⁰ in connection with so-called "questions of survival," where people are not called to repentance but to resistance in extra-parliamentary opposition.

4. "Immoral phenomena"

The Protestant document responds twice to references in the Russian text which point to the fact that human rights—without being tied to, and in agreement with, God's law—can lead to the destruction of morality and society as well as to conflicts in the conscience of Christians: "We cannot go along with these examples." The existence of such conflicts can hardly be denied. The Protestant statements, theologically speaking, exhibit the same libertinism and antinomianism which arise when the continuing sinfulness of man is no longer recognized and when the unchanging commandments of God are no longer taught and kept. In this regard, the apostle Paul asks (Rom. 6:15): "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"

5. Law and gospel

In the background of this text of the CPCE stands a study document titled *Law and Gospel also with reference to decision-making in ethical questions*.³¹ It is directly quoted at a critical point of the document, where it posits apodictically: "Historical and theological insights forbid us to identify an ethic which has been formulated directly with God's law." This document requires detailed discussion which is not possible here. Necessary, however, is a reference to what can be called the "trauma of German Protestant theology"³² and what stems from a widely-publicized accusation by Karl Barth that Germany

*... suffers from the inheritance of the greatest Christian German: from the error of Martin Luther concerning the relation between law and gospel, between secular and spiritual order and power, by which his natural heathenism was not limited and restricted but rather ideologically glorified, confirmed, and invigorated.*³³

²⁸ Karl Marx, "Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie," *Frühe Schriften* (Darmstadt, 1971), I:497.

²⁹ *Mein Kampf*, ed. J. Chamberlain et al. (New York, 1941), 122-123.

³⁰ E.g., in the 1985 statement *Evangelische Kirche und freiheitliche Demokratie*, cf. R. Slenczka, "Kirche und Politik," *Neues und Altes* (Neuendettelsau, 2000), I:389-405, here 399.

³¹ It was originally published in German in 2007. The English translation is available online at <http://www.leuenberg.eu/daten/File/Upload/doc-7161-1.pdf>.

³² "The churches of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe must concede that they have also embarked on a number of fateful wrong courses in connection with this theme. The failure to relate law and gospel correctly has led the church in its ethical orientations to assimilate itself to the self-glorifying powers of the 'world'. And as a result of a failure to distinguish between law and gospel, it has come to oppress men and women with a moralistic 'legalism' ..." *ibid.*, 6.

³³ K. Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme* (Zurich, 1945), 113. Harald Diem showed in his 1938 dissertation, *Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen*, that this view originates in Arno Deutelmöser's book *Luther, Staat und Glaube* (Jena, 1937) which draws a developmental line from Luther via Nietzsche to the Third Reich from the perspective of the German Christians, see G. Sauter (ed.), *Zur Zwei-Reiche-Lehre Luthers* (Munich, 1973), 7f, 43.

Against this backdrop, a strange notion has developed in Protestantism that true and false theology is to be judged, and is therefore also to be formulated, chiefly according to the political consequences of the same. Representatives of the church, therefore, maintain a high profile by making political statements, frequently without having a clear Word of God as a foundation. The accusations made today, with deep conviction, against the *Deutsche Christen*³⁴ and their political dependency and enthusiasm has apparently become an unquestioned theological axiom. The theological criteria, therefore, follow the political parties of “right” and “left,” of “conservative” and “progressive,” of “contemporary” and “outdated,” etc. The question for true and false, for salvation and perdition in view of God’s judgment of the living and the dead is totally absent. Church is then a socio-political organization, a sought-after political action committee without any democratic legitimization; however, then it has long since ceased to be church.

The error behind this is clearly recognizable: Law and gospel are not recognized as word and operation of God’s Word in judgment and grace, but also in understanding and, what is normally repressed, hardening,³⁵ because Holy Scripture is no longer acknowledged as the Word of the triune God, but as a historical collection of diverse “theologies.” What is no longer recognized in the conflict over the formal ordering of law and gospel is the operation of law and gospel, of Spirit and letter on the conscience of man.

As theology is shaped by the changing historical situations and social conditions and movements, which it then has to incorporate as normative, there is then also no universality of the triune God anymore but only a plurality and a corresponding changeability of ideas about God in a multicultural and pluralistic society. As can be seen from the Old and New Testament, esp. Ex. 32:1-6, this is by no means a situation unique to modern times, but a permanent reality and, therefore, also a temptation of the wandering people of God.

The Result and the Task: Reformation versus Deformation

Thus writes the apostle Paul to his congregation in Corinth (2 Cor. 7:8-10):

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it- though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

How we receive what is said to us by other churches and how we react to this is a spiritual process. There certainly has been no lack of spontaneous and emotional reactions. Yet we should consider in all seriousness what the state of the *magnus consensus* is, of what is – or should be – “unanimously held and taught.” As churches that have emerged out of the reformation, we do well when we look to the chief confession of the reformation that, before the 1530 Augsburg diet, was all about witnessing before emperor and empire that reformation is no heresy with innovations, but that it stands on the foundation of, and in fellowship with, the *ecclesia catholica*.³⁶ *Magnus consensus*, therefore, is not an agreement that has been brought about by majority decisions and coercive measures, but the agreement with the witness of Holy Scripture, of the Old and the New Testaments, and in fellowship with the Christian, and that means rightly understood, the catholic Church.

Accordingly, it is stated without equivocation in the confessions of the reformation (Ap. XII, 66): “Neither to the pope nor to the church do we grant the authority to issue decrees contrary to this consensus of the prophets.” This is why all decisions of individuals or groups in positions of church leadership are per se invalid when they contradict this *magnus consensus*. One must add: such decisions made against Scripture and the confessions are also invalidated by church law because they contradict the preambles of the constitutions of the churches which testify to the churches’ being bound to Scripture and confessions. The arbitrariness with which today every conceivable socio-political topic of the day is picked up by churchly organizations contradicts all spiritual authority of church government.

³⁴ The *Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen*, (“Faith-movement German Christians”) was a party in the Protestant German church conventions during the 1930’s and 40’s; it was most closely aligned with the beliefs and policies of the Nazi Party.

³⁵ Isa. 6:9f.; Matth. 13:14f (and parallels); Acts 28:26f; Rom. 11:8; 2 Cor. 4:3f.

³⁶ Cf., again, AC I, 1 and the Conclusion of the First Part of the AC.

Reformation is not progress or, as Schleiermacher called it, “a natural explosion of the spirit of the age.”³⁷ The first twenty-one articles of the Augsburg Confession deal with the *articuli fidei praecipui*, the chief articles of the faith and doctrine, where there can be no disagreement. For doctrine is decisive for salvation. The second part, articles 22-28, deals with the *articuli in quibus recensentur abusus mutati*, controversial articles where an account is given of the abuses that have been changed. Here a series of topics is discussed which have arisen out of human rules and ecclesiastical decisions without being in agreement with God’s Word. These topics are all about practical and ethical questions such as the distribution of the Lord’s Supper to the laity under one kind only (art. 22), the demanded celibacy of priests (art. 23), the sale of masses and indulgences (art. 24 and 25), rules for fasting declared necessary for salvation (art. 26), monastic vows declared to supersede baptism (art. 27), political offices assumed by bishops and the exercise of their office, not by Word and sacrament, but by political power (28).

The apostle Paul has this to say about the true nature of reformation (Rom. 12:2):

Do not be conformed to this world (Latin: nolite conformari huic saeculo), but be transformed (reformamini) by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

As becomes clear time and again, the reason as to why Protestant churches and their theology are constantly tempted to adapt to the world, to the demands of a seemingly secularized time and society, as well as to the “voice of the people,” consists in that the principle of Scripture has been given up. It has been relativized in a historical manner, that is, by an adaptation to time and history. The distinction between law and gospel as the operation of the Word of God in the consciences in judgment and grace, in obedience and disobedience, in understanding and also in hardening (see above), which was so important for the reformation, is no longer understood and it is therefore also no longer received. Proclamation and instruction therefore no longer aim at repentance and forgiveness but at understanding and approval.

Especially when it comes to ethical topics, this loss of the spiritual operation of Word and sacraments results in a reinterpretation of the accusation sounding forth from God’s Word and commandment. Sin, not the sinner, is justified.

Finally, in such declarations the judgment of public opinion is apparently feared more than the loss of the salvation from God’s judgment, about which the Lord tells us (Matth. 10:32f.): “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” Yet where is the gospel still being proclaimed as salvation from the universal judgment, the unchangeable standard of which is the Law of God (Matth. 5:17-19)? Do we still expect the return of Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead, as we confess it in the Creed? Do we prepare ourselves and the Christian congregation for it, or are we busy adapting to the demands of society – thereby promoting its self-destruction and perishing? However, where the church’s office of watchman for the world is no longer exercised in the proper way (Ezek. 3:17-21; 33:2-9), there God’s judgment is already taking place – whether we want this or not.

Especially when the statement made by other churches accuse us, cause us to be outraged and even hurt, we ought to understand what takes place here in a spiritual way with the call to repentance and renewal, that is, to reformation. We should gratefully accept the ministry of these churches with their spiritual insights. Otherwise, God’s judgment will strike us, as it was announced to the congregation in Sardis by the Lord (Rev. 3:1-3):

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

³⁷ *Kleine Schriften* (ed. Reimer), II:27.