



"Doing Public Theology in the One World"

Lecture on Dec 5, 2022, in Neuendettelsau

- *Es gilt das gesprochene Wort* -



Introduction: Inspiration from the Karlsruhe Assembly

"Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity." This was the motto of the Karlsruhe assembly of The World Council of Churches. It is clear that it is not a visible empirical truth. But as Christians we say: it is not yet an empirical truth. We trust that God's ways for us will not lead into darkness but into a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus Christ cried out at the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?" Just as the Ukrainians whose homes are destroyed by Russian bombs are crying out today. Just as Russian mothers who receive the dead bodies of their sons killed in this war cry out as well. And just as the mother in Northern Kenya who looks at her child dying of thirst cries out.

Why have we nevertheless dared to again and again repeat this sentence: "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity"? The answer is clear: We have repeated it and we are repeating it today, because we deeply believe that the realities of suffering that we have in front of our eyes are not God's last word - just as Jesus' cry of despair was not God's last word. Christ has risen. This is what we deeply believe in our hearts and souls.

We have experienced in Karlsruhe that this confession is not only empty words. In our prayer services we have felt how the Holy Spirit has brought us together as people with completely different backgrounds and yet united as brothers and sisters in Christ. In our discussions in the plenaries, committees and ecumenical conversations we sometimes had to struggle to stay together or even to come together in the first place. The power of unity, however, was stronger than the forces of division.

If we look at the biblical stories on Jesus and his words and deeds, we see that Jesus never put the correctness of theological teachings or the abidance to given rules above relationship. "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath" (Mark 2,27). Let us be together in this spirit. Let us be grateful for all the denominational traditions that we come from. But let us always be aware that these denominational traditions are never an end in themselves but serve as a door to Christ himself. And if we are in relationship with Christ, in prayer, in reflection and in action, we will always be in relationship with our fellow human beings and, in a special way, with our sisters and brothers in Christ all over the world. That is why it is intolerable if those who call themselves sisters and brothers in Christ put each other down,

spread hate against each other or even kill each other in war or through other forms of violence.

Through this, we betray Jesus' call to be salt of the earth and light of the world. And we destroy all efforts to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded us (Mt 28,19f). We can only live the mission of God when we do not only speak of the love of Jesus Christ but also radiate it with our own lives.

"Doing Theology in the One World" is one of the clear consequences of this inspiration from Karlsruhe. And it surely is exactly the right theme on a day in which we are celebrating both a place of theological education and the work of our Center for ecumenical partnership Mission OneWorld. The one is doing Theology and the other is our gate to the global One World. Therefore, I want to use the opportunity of this very special day to elaborate one of the six criteria of public theology, which represent one of the fruits of my academic work.

The first five criteria are:

Public Theology must be grounded in tradition (1), Public Theology must be bilingual (2), Public Theology must be inter-disciplinary (3), Public theology must be prophetic (4), Public theology must make politics possible (5).

And the sixth and last criterion is: Public Theology must be universally oriented. I want to describe what it entails by connecting the theological depth, which Augustana University tries to teach with the global horizon, which Mission OneWorld tries to implant in people's hearts and souls. I will do this by speaking about creation doctrine and its consequences for the One World, about Christology – and especially sin and forgiveness – and its consequences for global Christian witness, and finally on the relation between dogmatics and ethics in a universal horizon.

1. The gift character of all existence (creation doctrine)

In each worship service we speak the Apostolic Creed together. We confess God as the Creator of Heaven and Earth. We sometimes do not understand how much this confession is relevant for public life. In a culture in which our possessions are normally seen as an expression of our own achievements, there is an enormous potential for reorientation in this confession. Because knowing that we are created by God and God sustains our lives every day changes our world view. It teaches gratitude. And gratitude for the blessings that we receive from God teaches humility. Those who understand that everything we are and everything we have is a gift become free to give.

The word "self made man" is from this perspective simply a heresy. We are not self-made-men, but God-made-men and-women. Overcoming this heresy leads to solidarity. Confessing God as our creator makes us understand how much we owe to others what we are and what we have, because we can understand it from our faith as a gift of God, This is the basis for becoming free for others. There is no greater spiritual basis of the struggle for universal solidarity than this awareness of one's own undeserved blessedness. It enables to share.

Confessing God as the creator also changes our relationship to non-human nature. It is co-creation together with us. It is not our possession, which we can exploit, but a gift of God entrusted to us to care for and to share with fellow human beings.

Rapid climate change increasingly manifest through droughts, storms and flooding has made it impossible to further deny the social, cultural and ecological destruction that characterizes our current ways of "doing economics". The wide gap in the consumption of natural resources between the wealthy countries of the North and many poor countries of the South reveals the major injustices which need to be addressed in search of a sustainable economy for this and subsequent generations.

Our generation is already consuming the next generation's resources. And the use of natural resources is extremely unfairly distributed on this globe. This becomes very clear if we look at the numbers of per capita CO2 emission worldwide. In the USA in the year 2018 there was a per

capita emission of 16.1 t. In China it was 8 t. In Germany it was 9.1 t. Tansania has a per capita CO2 emission of 0.2. In Rwanda it was 0.1 t.

These numbers show that those who suffer most from climate change because they are especially vulnerable for weather extremities contribute the least to cause this climate change. This shows the extreme injustice, which characterizes our present ecological and economic situation worldwide.

It is possible to quietly set aside these numbers and continue theological business. Doing theology in the One World is the only way of seriously doing theology. Because creation theology naturally reflects all of creation. It reflects the basic equality of every human being created in the image of God.

Theological reflection on creation must therefore lead to advocacy for a global economic system, which respects the interests of people in other countries of the world and those of coming generations just as much as our own.

2. Sin and Forgiveness (Christology)

The first of Martin Luther's 95 theses reads: "Since our Lord and Master Jesus Christ speaks "Repent"..., he wanted the whole life of the faithful to be repentance."

Anyone who speaks of repentance, sin and forgiveness today initially encounters little understanding among most people. These words are not popular. Nowadays in our societies here, we tend to trivialize the concept of sin by speaking of parking sins or dietary sins,

The original religious content of the term "sin" has been widely lost. However, I am convinced that people have a clear intuition in their soul of what this term religiously means. The "homo incurvatus in seipsum", the "being bent in oneself", which Martin Luther understood as the core of sin, is a phenomenon highly familiar to all of us. Behind the public complaints about egoism, greed and loss of social cohesion lies precisely this awareness, or at least an intuition of it.

The word "sin" gives expression to familiar forms of human self-isolation from God and one's fellow human beings. The culture of sober self-perception, which makes it possible to speak of human sin, is the first step towards overcoming the self-isolation associated with it. Only where sin is called by name can the liberating power of forgiveness be experienced.

Reflecting upon this in the universal horizon of the one world shows the cognitive power of the old Reformation concepts: We can further develop Luther's concept of sin as "incurvatio" by speaking of "communio incurvata in seipsam", a community bent in itself. Whoever exaggerates his own country or his own ethnic group and thereby puts it in position against the others, produces hatred, sometime violence and in the end perhaps even countless deaths again. That is why nationalism is a manifestation of sin. Nationalism poisons the climate between people. It is in contradiction to all that the Christian tradition stands for.

Colonialism has been one of the most terrible expressions of sin, of *communio incurvata in seipsam*. The Eurocentrism of the colonialists has kept the European settlers from truly seeing those whose land they took as fellow human beings and has led to violent occupation, humiliation and killing of so many.

The sin of colonialism still remains to be one of the blind spots of our German remembrance culture. Fortunately we have established such remembrance culture in relation to the historical crime of the holocaust. A similar effort to establish a true remembrance culture in relation to the crime of colonialism still remains before us.

3. Freedom of a Christian (Dogmatics and Ethics)

Given the central importance of the freedom theme in our modern world it is remarkable and a hint to the timeliness of the old tradition when we remember that freedom was also the central theme of reformation. Luther's book "On the Freedom of a Christian" (1520), is his most brilliant

work. Here he explores internal and external freedom in the paradox contained in two sentences: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all."

The first of these two theses on freedom – subject to none – expresses what we would call civil courage today. People stand up for what they believe in. People let their conscience be their guide even when they have to face consequences by the authorities. The ability to completely follow our conscience because we know that in the end we are only responsible to God – that is inner freedom!

If we only had this first thesis, freedom could be understood simply as the protection of the individual from the demands of others. This is why the second thesis at the beginning of the text on freedom – servant of all – is so important. It emphasizes that freedom is not true freedom if it is seen apart from service to others or responsible actions for the world. Freedom exists only when it is associated with service to the other.

If we take Luther's two theses seriously we have a key for a constructive view on modernity beyond false alternatives. The one of these two false alternatives is a rejection of modern individualization as we know it from conservative culture critics. We have lost community life, they say, and they therefore want to go back to traditional – often patriarchal – life patterns which seem to give security in times of disorientation. The other alternative is an individualism which sees the self as the center of the world. The individual comes first. Community comes second. The maximization of one's own interests is the driving force of one's existence. This understanding of the world is driven by modern capitalism. This is why Luther's two freedom theses are so timely.

Luther's understanding of freedom which Wolfgang Huber has developed so poignantly as "communicative freedom" is the basis for a relationship between individual and community which overcomes the prioritization of the one against the other. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers in Germany who – out of freedom – are supporting refugees who are seeking a life in dignity are a living example of this communicative freedom.

They all give witness of the inseparable relationship between dogmatics and ethics – or – on the level of personal piety – of faith and love. Against all those who believe that justification by faith alone is connected with a devaluation of good works it must be emphasized that the opposite is the case. Good works gain their special dignity through the nurturing ground of free love in which they are rooted.

Martin Luther expressed this with beautiful words: "from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss... Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence as our heavenly father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and our work, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we maybe Christs to one another"i

For a Christian life between private and public affairs this is an extremely important insight. Trying to change our life styles to living more in accordance with the one world and with non-human nature can create a moralism, which is in tension to a life of faith out of grace alone. Therefore, a life of authentic public faith needs continuous spiritual nurture. Prayer, the experience of the Holy Spirit in community with others in worship and listening to the wonderful texts of the Bible are the basis of personal and public witness. Love needs continuous nurturing by faith.

The inseparability of faith and love, however also means that there is no service to God without service to the other. The cult critique of the prophets is a powerful reflection of this insight. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.... Take away from me the noise of your

songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Am 5,20-24).

Confessing God as the creator of human beings and non-human nature, developing self-critical awareness by repentance and forgiveness, understanding freedom as a spiritually based communicative freedom and understanding the inseparability of faith and love are characteristics of a new spiritual authenticity of the church. They are examples for the witness of an authentic public church – a church which gives comfort by its spiritual authority and at the same time offers clarity by giving orientation in moral questions.

How can such an authentic public church contribute to society as a whole?

Global church in a global world

There is probably no institution in which personal connectedness in community is more local and at the same time more universal than the church. It is the connectedness of the concrete experience of abundant life in relationships, connected with a sense of universal brother- and sisterhood, which makes me believe that the church plays a crucial role in the healing of the world. Being rooted in local parishes all over the world and being at the same time universal in the fullest sense makes the church an ideal agent of a global civil society.

It is therefore be one of the most important public tasks of the church today to open the eyes for the suffering of those far away. When hunger increases and the number of people dying in consequence of the economic breakdown after the Corona pandemic and as a consequent consequence of climate change, it is the churches task to direct attention to this situation and speak up for global solidarity. If the biblical theological assumption is true that each human being is created in the image of God, this is not a side issue. It reaches to the very core of the Christian tradition and the call that comes from it.

The challenges are great. There are, however, many examples in history where the impossible has happened. The image of Nelson Mandela dancing before the eyes of the world after his release from prison has been eternally ingrained into the memory of the world. As a German who had been raised 10 kilometers from the barbed wire which separated the two parts of Germany and then witnessed the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989 I am blessed enough to have experienced the openness of history in my own life. After the lifting of the Iron curtain between East and West, it is the great challenge of our time now, to lift the Golden curtain, which separates a wealthy world in the North from a struggling world in the South. Gold and riches then will no more be a reality, which divides the world, but which are used to commonly serve the whole world.

With the biblical message we have the most powerful story of hope that the world has ever seen. It is the story of a people led out of slavery into the promised land. It is the story of the people who threaten to despair in the captivity of the Babylonian exile and then have the wonderful experience of salvation. It is the story of the God who loves human beings so much that God becomes human, that on the cross God shares the deepest darkness with human beings and overcomes death in the resurrection. Death doesn't have the last word. Violence doesn't have the last word. Life wins.

We need a reformation of hope and confidence in this country and throughout the world. We need people who work for the weak, people who overcome violence and who respect non-human nature. People who love radically because they draw strength from the God who is Godself radical love.

We need people who take seriously what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: "If the illusions have such a great power in people that they can keep life going, how great is the power that has a justified hope? Therefore it is no shame to hope, to hope boundlessly!"

We can never get enough of that!

ⁱ M. Luther, The Freedom of a Christian, in Luthers Works Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I (ed. By Harold J. Grimm, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia 1957, 333-377 (367f)).