

Confessional Lutheranism within the EKD (Evangelical Church of Germany)

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1 The situation¹

1. "Leading Protestants withdraw more and more from the principles of reformation of the evangelical church." This quotation introduced a report in one of the leading German newspapers about the recent 31st *Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentag* which took place in Cologne from 7th to 10th of June this year.² Since 1945 the *Kirchentag* / "Church Day" is the most remarkable event for the presentation of everything that is possible and what is impossible in German Protestantism. Right after World War II it was started as an encouragement and public confession of faith. But over the years it has developed into a platform for the public presentation of political initiatives, for the self-presentation of marginal groups from environmental activities to homosexual pressure groups, and—last but not least—for experiments in worship and Holy Supper (the so-called *Feierabendmahl*—"Celebration Supper"—in Nuremberg 1978).

Women's ordination was introduced under political pressure just in the time of the so-called *Theologenschwemme* (affluence of theologians). For the recognition and even the blessing of homosexual partnerships there

¹General survey: 1. Federal Republic of Germany: Inhabitants: 82.437.995; Christians: 53.026.301 (64,3 %); EKD: 25.385.618; Roman Catholic: 25.905.908; Orthodox: 1.376.100; Independent churches: 320.892; 2. My church body: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD—Evangelical Church in Germany); 3. Polity: Episcopal and non episcopal with synods; 4. Membership: Baptism and church tax payers; 5. Affiliation: LWF, WCC, CEC. But we keep in mind that statistics and polls have no authority whatsoever in the Christian church (2 Sam 24,1ff; 1 Chr 21, 1 ff; 27, 24!).

²"Führende Protestanten entfernen sich immer mehr von den reformatorischen Grundlagen der evangelischen Kirche." Felix Grigat, 'Streit über das protestantische Selbstverständnis. Kirchenleitende und Kirchentagspräsidium machen aus ihrer Unterstützung der 'Bibel in gerechter Sprache' keinen Hehl.' In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Nr. 231, 11. Juni 2007, p. 8.

are synodical decisions, following the decisions in Civil Law. The same is true for abortion. Without being aware of it, the Synod of the Bavarian Lutheran Church in its "*Rosenheimer Erklärung*" from 1991 followed the abortion law of the then German Democratic Republic from 9.3.1972, saying that it is "the individual right of every woman to decide about interruption of pregnancy".³ Some years ago the Church of the Rhineland abolished the rules for church discipline, especially for the admission to the Holy Supper. Pastors who are following the rule of 1 Cor 11:27–32 to prevent participants from taking the body and the blood of the Lord for their condemnation, are sacked. Two years ago, the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover abolished the rules about the incompatibility of the ministry and divorce. For a long time now, divorce and remarriage of pastors—even two times and more—are a testimony to the visible incredibility of and contradiction to Christ's teaching about marriage, divorce, and family. This year the bishop of this Lutheran church announced her divorce and was applauded for her openness by church authorities. Oberkirchenrat Dr. Werner Führer from Schaumburg-Lippe, who publicly pointed to the incompatibility of divorce and ministry, was dismissed. It is remarkable that these and many other cases lead to a kind of confessing conflict in the way of a *casus confessionis* in questions of social-ethics. Opponents very often are dismissed or not admitted to ordination. And this is a struggle about matters of life, not of faith.

2. In December 2002, the General Synod of the United Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) received, with only one voice against, the so-called "*Leitlinien kirchlichen Lebens. Handreichung für eine kirchliche Lebensordnung*" (rules for church life),⁴ which is meant as a substitute for the "Orders for Christian Life" formulated during the time of the *Kirchenkampf* (Church struggle) and in the years after the War. The gist of this document is the opinion that the change of social situations calls for a change of rules for behaviour, even in open contradiction to God's commandments. There is nothing about God's punishment in time and eternity, and in consequence of this there is nothing about salvation from God's judgment through penitence and forgiveness of sins. At the place of the justification of sinners

³Cf.: Reinhard Slenczka, 'Theologische Stellungnahme zur Rosenheimer Erklärung.' In: R. Sl., *Neues und Altes Bd. 3. Dogmatische Gutachten und aktuelle Stellungnahmen*. Neuendettelsau 2000. 211–218. Der entscheidende Satz lautet: "In Konfliktsituationen kann die letzte Entscheidung der betroffenen Frau von niemandem abgenommen werden; sie muss sie in ihrer Verantwortung vor Gott treffen" (a.a.O. 213).

⁴*Leitlinien kirchlichen Lebens*. Gütersloh 2003.

we are faced with a justification of sin. The foundations of Scripture and Confession are left.⁵ Here the church ceases to be the church.

Referring to church organisation during the last years and under the pressure of reduction of the income of church taxes, the autonomy of the “*gliedkirchlichen Vereinigungen*”, that is the confessional bodies of the territorial churches (*Landeskirchen*) are administratively merged in the central *Kirchenamt* (Church office) in Hanover. This is a consequence of the so-called *Leuenberger Konkordie reformatorischer Kirchen in Europa* (‘Leunberg Concord’) from 1971, declaring the full union of pulpit and altar among the assenting churches. This means that the differences between churches stemming from the reformation are lifted or neglected—at any rate, they are taken for irrelevant.

3. As for *theology and faculties of theology*, this means that a confessional orientation of theological education is more or less without any interest. It is not any longer the character of a faculty, its statutes and its teaching program, but rather the individual orientation of this or that teacher. My own faculty in Erlangen used to be a world-famous stronghold of Lutheranism. Only this year, the status of faculty as the first among the other faculties of the university, was reduced to a department within the faculty of philosophy. As you certainly know, this has happened world-wide with a lot of faculties who were merged as departments into faculties of social or humanitarian sciences. It is forgotten that the first place within the *universitas litterarum* at European universities was not at all due to special arrogance of church and theologians, though we must not forget that most of the universities were the fruit out of Christian cultural development work. One reason for the first place is the fact that the existing triune God is the creator, the sustainer, the judge and the saviour of the entire world, of the quick and the dead. The other reason is the acknowledgment that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. A good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever” (Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). But what is wisdom without God?

But if God is taken just as an element for individual wellness and pleasure, revealing himself in different names and forms, the Christian church and her theology are drowned in social, political, cultural and religious pluralism, which in its end is a simple neutralisation of Christian proclamation and confession.

⁵Cf. Reinhard Slenczka, ‘Dogmatische Stellungnahme zu den “Leitlinien kirchlichen Lebens der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands—kirchliche Lebensordnung”’. In: *Informationsbrief. Bekenntnisbewegung “Kein anderes Evangelium”* Nr. 213. Oktober 2002. 9–12.

This is, in short and in the form of a wood-carving, the situation we are confronted with. This is the situation not only in Germany, but I am sure in most of our churches. The general reason for this is, during the whole history of God's chosen people, accommodation with the surrounding society, the seduction through trends and even pressures in society, maybe even persecution. Natural Gods and goods always seem more attractive and even necessary for wellbeing.

In Germany we have a so called "peoples' church" (*Volkskirche*), and the main question is, whether a people's church really is the people of God which is called out of the peoples of the world into the kingdom of God.⁶

But it is exactly in these appearances of temptation and persecution throughout history that we are faced with the wonder that the church is sustained and preserved through her Lord who fulfils his promise to Peter and his confession saying: "... and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16: 18).

Therefore it is not our task to lament and to mourn about the situation, our church is in according to her outward appearance, but we have to get hold of the activity and presence of the Holy Spirit of the Triune God, which is given and recognized through His Word and His Sacraments.

2 Reformation vs. Deformation

Looking at its history Germany of course still may be called the cradle of the Reformation and in that sense of Lutheranism. Therefore, Luther, his personality and his work is present not only in Christian churches, but also in education, memorials and publications of his works and excellent research into his teaching and preaching. Among the 22 member churches of the EKD, nine call themselves Lutheran. Twelve of them are Union churches, including Lutheran confessions in their constitutions, one group is Reformed. In the same way, Lutheran confessional writings are acknowledged in the Constitution (*Grundordnung*) of the EKD. Therefore, according to the name and church law, Lutheranism has a very strong representation in German church and theology.

The question, however, is, whether Lutheranism in Germany is a historical reminiscence and cultural tradition, more or less admired or ignored, or whether it is a living spiritual foundation and movement. To

⁶See Reinhard Slenczka, 'Gottesvolk und Volkskirche. Dogmatische Überlegungen zur Beurteilung kirchlicher Wirklichkeit'. In: *Neues und Altes*. 3, 58-76.

answer this question I would like to remind us of what reformation was in church and history.

1. According to the admonition of the Apostle to the congregation in Rome, reformation means: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be *conformed* to this world, but be *transformed* by *the renewing of your mind*, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom 12:1-2). That is to say: Reformation is renewing and transformation, but not conformity with this world.

This means reformation is a permanent task for all churches and in every Christian.

2. In that sense *reformation* was a movement against *deformation* in the church. The beginning was not to develop some contemporary theology and programs to meet the demands of time and society, but rather to remove the abuses and pitfalls in church life, first of all in worship, preaching and administration of the sacraments, and—last but not least—in soul caring. The document for this is the Augsburg Confession which was presented to the Diet in Augsburg 1530 with its two parts: Part one, articles 1–21 containing the fundamental articles of faith (*articuli fidei praecipui*), and part two, articles 22–28, referring to the abuses in church life (*articuli in quibus recensentur abusus mutati*).

The first part was meant to prove: We are not heretics who should be condemned by the Pope and punished by the Emperor, but we are the church catholic which is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20) in agreement with the fundamental definitions of the catholic church and her councils (CA 1: *magno consensu docent*) and even with the Roman Church (BSLK 83c; 7 ff.).

The second part enumerates things which are changed, reformed, in church practise because they are not in agreement with the Word of God. For this we have the administration of Holy Supper under one species only (CA 22), obligatory celibacy as a precondition for ordination and ministry (CA 23), the understanding and celebration of the mass as a sacrifice offered to God through the priests (CA 24), the abuse of confession, asking satisfactions such as indulgences in order to be relieved from God’s temporal punishment (CA 25), fasting rules which are mere human traditions but imposed as a precondition for salvation (CA 26), monastic vows with the understanding that they are of higher value than baptism (CA 27) and finally the authority of bishops with the power of secular princes, but not

through the power of the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament (CA 28 *sine vi humana sed verbo*).

3. This shows, in short, that neither Luther nor the other reformers established a new church or left the catholic church. They were excommunicated, however, by wrong reasons and accusations which were openly not in agreement with God's word.⁷ And in this case church inevitably ceases to be the church, in the 16th century in Rome as well as in the 21st century in Lutheran churches today.

3 The struggle between the true and the false church is a sign of the church.

To begin this concluding chapter with a quotation from Luther: "Therefore where Word and Sacraments remain in substance, there must be also the Holy Church, in spite of the antichrist reigning there".⁸

That is to say: the struggle between the true and the false church does not happen between different church bodies only, but first of all within every church, every congregation, as it is in every Christian as a consequence out of baptism in the struggle between the old man in the flesh of sin and the new man in the Spirit of God (Rom. 6-7) and this continues at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-22). A visible unity of the church is nowhere promised to us but rather, "The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Pet 4:17)

This is this process of transformation and renewal, mentioned in Rom 12:1-2. For this, however, we have to get hold of the means and the ways in which the Holy Spirit is active in our times as well as in ancient times since the Apostolic Pentecost and the same way in each of us from baptism. I will try to show the decisive points for this:

1. *The Holy Scriptures are the Word of the Triune God*, in which He reveals Himself in what He is and does with His name, by which He is addressed in praise and prayer, and acting in Law and Gospel. Therefore we must know what the Lord said about the spiritual authority and at the same time the binding service (slavery) of apostolic ministry: "He who hears

⁷See e.g. the *Errores Martini Lutheri* in the *Bulla Exsurge Domine* from 15 June 1520 (DS 1451-1492) and most of the condemnations in the decisions of the Council of Trent.

⁸"Ubi igitur verbum et sacramenta substantialiter manent, ibi es sancta Ecclesia, non obstante quod antichristus ibi regnet." WA 40.I.71:21-23

you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me" (Luke 10:16). This is not only talking about God, but God Himself is speaking to us and is invoked by us. God is present in his word, and at the basis this is a relation of persons, me and you.

If, however, the Scriptures are understood as texts in human words from ancient times to be transferred—as far as possible—to modern times, we will lose the insight that the Triune God is speaking and acting through his word from the beginning till the consummation of the world. You will never understand how God is acting in Law, preserving the hole cosmos and calling back from evil and punishment to repentance, and Gospel offering the good news of the kingdom to come and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ from eternal punishment.

This is the reason why preaching and teaching or even worship in general turns over to be a kind of theatre in order to make the church attractive for everybody. To give a recent example from my own experience: Law and Gospel are transferred to the opposition of law and heart. That way the severe and salutary law of God is annulled and the heart, i.e. conscience, is relieved from its accusation to pure hedonism. The feeling of wellness in the cult is a sign of Gnosticism.

2. *The sacraments are instituted by the Lord with His word in commandment and promise and with the respective elements.*

If, however, as has become a more or less undisputed opinion and practice, you understand the sacraments as instituted by the church after Easter,⁹ there inevitably is taking place a change of the subject from the Lord to the congregation—and its theological fantasies and aspirations.

This is the reason why the sacraments are turning more and more into happenings, social events, but are no longer means for renewal and salvation. And what is most terrible: Nobody believes any more in the gift, received in baptism, that Christ is living in us through faith (Eph 3:17) and we are living in Christ (Rom 8). The visible and audible sign for this is prayer in which we, being children of God, are authorized to address God as our Father in Jesus' name (Matt 6:9; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5). The communion between God and men is removed or transferred into some religious feelings. The consequences are to be seen in soul caring, when there is nothing about penitence and remission of sins in returning under baptism, but psychological counselling and support to cope with conflicts and to avoid a

⁹For this, see the "Lima Documents" on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* of the Commission on Faith and Order, 1982.

bad conscience, which in reality is a good conscience because it is working in self accusation and self defence (Rom 2:14 f).

3. With this we are coming back to the wonder of the church's preservation in fulfilment of the Lord's promise and this leads us to the discretion or discerning of the Holy Spirit from other spirits, active among and in us. According to 1 Cor 12:10, the discretion of spirits is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit himself, acting in the congregation. It is not just a profession or limited to professional theologians and church leaders, or majority votes of synods. But it is certainly given where, when and to whom the Spirit will give it. From our side we have the commandment and the promise of our Lord saying: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13).

Knowing this, we can clearly state where the true church is and where the church has ceased to be the church, to which the Lord says as to the congregation of Sardes: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1).

To be the true church is not a question of quantity in membership and money but of quality in the spiritual gifts. But these gifts are given through the pure proclamation of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments alone, instituted by the Lord himself. Therefore, confessional Lutheranism is nothing about church politics but it is witness in the passing world with all its fears, temptations and pressures under the certitude that the Lord himself will fulfil his promise he has given to his church: "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

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