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The Braunschweig Theses on the Teaching and Mission of the Church

(EDITOR'S NOTE: *The translation is by Paul M. Bretscher, graduate professor of exegetical and systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The lettering of paragraphs is his, since there is no consistent pattern followed in the original. This document was published by the Aktionsgemeinschaft für Bibel und Bekenntnis in Braunschweig. For background information see the editorial in this issue of this journal.*)

I. OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF THE THESES

In an accelerating tempo, theologically and doctrinally false teachings are infiltrating the life and proclamation of the church. These teachings claim that since they derive from a so-called "existential interpretation" of Biblical passages, they are the only way in which the proclamation of the Gospel can be made relevant and do justice to man's current understanding of the present world.

In this approach the attempt is made to divorce the true import of Biblical passages from their substantive content and to regard the latter as the vestment worn in a past age, a vestment therefore that is not of the essence of the Gospel and is meaningless to modern man. As a result the message of the mighty acts of God that were effected in Christ for our salvation and on which the Christian faith is based are divested of their objective truth and are thought to be the mythological form of faith (due to man's "objective way of thinking") current in an earlier age.

Thus the salvific events become, with respect to their true historic occurrences, at least partially meaningless. It follows that the Biblical word becomes mere "faith literature" (*Glaubensliteratur*), which indeed stimulates impulses for faith in modern man but does not determine and possess

the content of Biblical faith. Thus Christian faith runs the danger of losing its foundation, which lies outside itself, as well as its content and goal and is reduced to a mere disposition.

The Biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ is impoverished and becomes only a proclamation of a new understanding of existence and an exegetical-philosophic message couched in Christian words and concepts. This reinterpretation of the Christian traditions of faith must be regarded, in terms of its results, as a radical dissolution of the Biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because of the situation sketched above, it devolves on all, especially on all those who are engaged in the ministry of the Word, to sound forth a clear witness of the "reason of the hope that is in us." It must be stated with unambiguous clarity what the substance of the Gospel is and where the line of demarcation runs between Biblical faith in Christ and a disposition that indeed claims to be Christian faith but is in the light of the Gospel in reality unbelief.

The following propositions are intended to give an account of our Christian hope and to confess in our day the truth of the Gospel. They appeal to all who bear the Christian name not to be "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14) but to abide in the truth.

II. THE THESES

1. The church of Jesus Christ is called to proclaim in the world the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19-20). In doing this, the church is "the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). "The powers of death shall not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:18)

2. This saving Gospel of Jesus Christ is clearly defined with respect to its content (1 Cor. 15:1 ff.). Therefore it must also be clearly distinguished from and delimited in contradistinction to "a gospel contrary to that which we preached." (Gal. 1:6, 8)

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. divest the content of the Gospel of its sharply defined substance and assertions and counterfeit it into a mere offer of a new understanding of being or declare the substantive assertions of the Gospel to be irrelevant for faith;

b. deny that in its proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the church must necessarily draft doctrinal statements having ontological significance;

c. view the Christian faith exclusively as a subjective activity and contravert the truth that the Christian faith has a relation to the substantively defined Gospel of Jesus Christ as a prescriptive "given" reality.

3. The Gospel is the proclamation empowered by the Holy Spirit of "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11 ff.) effective by Christ for our salvation. The Gospel is the attestation in this spatial-temporal world to the divinely ordained facts dealing with the person and history of the man Jesus of Nazareth. The salvation of the world is to be found only in Him (Acts 4:12; John

14:6). He is also appointed judge of the living and the dead. (Acts 10:42 f.)

We must therefore repudiate the views of those who dissolve the facts comprehended and witnessed to in the Gospel as matters of no importance and who question God's action in Jesus Christ as really having taken place in the spatial-temporal reality of this world.

4. The Gospel attests the historical person Jesus of Nazareth to be the incarnate eternal Word, the only and unique Son of God (John 1:14) in whom "the fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9; 2 Cor. 5:19) and in whom God manifested His glory (1 Tim. 3:16). This Jesus is, in terms of the Nicene Creed, "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, . . . of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made." The Gospel attests that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35). Through Him alone do we know the eternal living God as the Father, who created and redeemed us.

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. interpret the substantive deity of Jesus Christ and the true incarnation of the preexistent Logos abiding in Him as thought forms conditioned by time and deny that His conception by the Holy Ghost and His birth of the Virgin Mary were historical occurrences;

b. regard Jesus of Nazareth only as "the man for others," only as the "witness to the faith," only as the originator and archetype of faith, but do not decisively stress also the other side of faith;

c. understand the Christian faith to be a "believing like Jesus" and not a believing in Jesus Christ, the Son of God;

d. question that our God is a personal God and doubt the personal confrontation between God and man and reduce God to a mere cipher denoting immanent phenomena and their relationships to one another.

5. The Gospel attests the words and deeds of the man Jesus of Nazareth that reveal His divine majesty and manifest Him as Israel's Messiah promised in the Old Testament and as the Savior of the world. He is attested "by God with mighty works and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). He proclaims salvation to the poor, heals the sick, exorcises demons, forgives sin, and proves Himself to be Lord over the powers of nature and death. (Matt. 11:4 ff.)

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. refuse to regard Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic promises or question His Messiahship and divine majesty or regard these truths to be irrelevant to faith;

b. assert that the historic figure of Jesus can no longer be ascertained and that the Evangelists do not report real events;

c. assess the words in the Gospels which attest the divine majesty of Jesus as being no more than honorific epithets attributed to Jesus by the primitive church to express its "faith."

d. regard the Messianic signs in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the miracles recorded in the Gospels to be no more than a mythological way of speaking and deny their actual happenings;

e. present all that is supernatural and superrational in the person and history of Jesus of Nazareth as being a legendary and redone portrait of the original;

f. deny also the reality of demonic powers and forces.

6. The Gospel attests Jesus of Nazareth as Him who was crucified and died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 4:25), as the Lamb of God (John 1:29) who gave His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). Through the blood of His cross He made peace (Col. 1:20; 1 Peter 1:18-19) and procured forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14; 2 Cor. 5:21). The heart of the Gospel is the attestation of the substitutionary satisfaction made by Jesus Christ for our sins and of His death on the cross as the completely valid sacrificial expiation for us.

We must therefore repudiate such teaching as:

a. reject the death of Jesus as being the expiatory sacrificial death for the sins of the world and brush aside His substitutionary satisfaction as being a mythological idea;

b. deny, on the one hand, the objective reality of sin and guilt and, on the other hand, God's wrath and judgment;

c. interpret the cross of Christ as being exclusively a sign of human weakness and utter dependence on God (*Geworfensein auf Gott*) and the term "cross" therefore as merely denoting the paradox of a new understanding of existence.

7. The Gospel attests the crucified Jesus of Nazareth as the truly risen and exalted Lord, who sat down at the right hand of God. It attests the fact of the real resurrection of the Lord, also the empty tomb, and, above all, the new pneumatic corporeality in which Jesus appeared to His disciples. (1 Cor. 15:1 ff.; the Easter accounts in the Gospels). It also attests His real ascent into heaven, the sanctuary of God, which can, however, not be comprehended

by means of spatial-temporal categories (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9; Eph. 4:10). The Gospel also attests His almighty, present rulership over the whole world. (Eph. 1:21)

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ as having been a genuine personal bodily event and the fact of the empty tomb;

b. contest the truth that the body of Jesus did not see corruption;

c. interpret the resurrection of Jesus Christ as meaning for the congregation no more than the significance of Jesus' death on the cross or an expression of Easter-faith, but not to be acknowledged and attested as an act of God antecedent to Easter faith;

d. speak of the fact of the genuine resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ as being irrelevant for the Christian faith or understand Jesus' resurrection as being merely a term for the continuation of the proclamation of Jesus;

e. deny the personal identity of the historic and crucified Jesus of Nazareth with the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ;

f. characterize the account of the ascension of Jesus Christ as a legend and as a mythological term for the confession of Christ as the Lord.

8. The Gospel attests the crucified and risen Jesus Christ exalted to the right hand of God as the Lord and Head of His church, who through the sending of His Holy Spirit founded, builds, gathers, sanctifies, and rules it (Eph. 1:22 f.; Col. 1:18). He is present in His church to the consummation of time in the saving means of His Word and the sacraments, which He

offers through the ministry of the Word instituted by Him. In like manner, just as the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was a real event in space and time, so also the presence of Christ in His church is a real, concrete, and objective presence independent of man's faith. This presence takes place *in* the word of the apostolic Gospel, *in* the holy sacraments and the pronouncement, specifically, of absolution and retention. The Gospel attests the real speaking activity of the living Lord Jesus Christ in the doctrine and proclamation of His church, the real regeneration by water and Spirit in Holy Baptism (John 3:5; Titus 3:5-7; Rom. 6:3-9), the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23 ff.; John 6:54-55), the real forgiveness and retention of sins, specifically, in the absolution and retention (John 20:22-23), and the real and unconditioned authority of Christ in the pastoral office (Luke 10:16; 2 Cor. 5:20).

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. deny the miraculous pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to the accompaniment of visible and audible signs as having been a real occurrence;

b. deny the real, concrete, and objective presence of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ in His church, that is, in the means of grace in His church;

c. understand His Word as being wholly the word of man, which only now and then can become God's Word, and regard His Word and sacraments as being no more than symbolic signs;

d. deny that Holy Baptism truly and really gives man a new birth, that the consecrated elements of bread and wine in the

Holy Eucharist are truly and substantially the body and blood of the crucified and risen Lord, and that absolution and retention are in God's sight valid forgiveness or retention of sin;

e. contest the divine institution and real and unconditioned authority of the pastoral office;

f. understand the true church to be a wholly spiritual, invisible reality;

g. understand the church as an organized group of individual Christians and not as the body of Christ, which is always a "given" prior to the person becoming a Christian.

9. The Gospel attests the incarnate, crucified, risen, and exalted Lord Jesus Christ as Him who will visibly return as the omnipotent Lord of lords for the purpose of perfecting His church, of raising the dead, of executing judgment, and of inaugurating the new creation. (Matt. 25:31 ff.; Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 4:15; Rev. 1:7 f.)

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. deny the visible return of Christ at the end of time as a longed-for real event;

b. contest the resurrection of the dead and the new creation as real and expected events;

c. deny the divine judgment of the world as being a real event and Jesus Christ as the real Judge of the world;

d. empty the Christian hope of its total factual content and reinterpret this hope to mean no more than a mere eschatological posture (a kind of open-mindedness toward the future);

e. deny the reality of eternal salvation and eternal damnation;

f. understand God's judgment as being

only an immanent historical process in this temporal world.

10. The Gospel calls all men to repentance and faith in *this* Jesus as the only Savior of the world (Acts 17:30-31). It challenges every person to make a decision (Mark 16:16; 2 Cor. 2:16). For those who believe, the Gospel becomes the divine power of salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18); for those who do not believe it becomes foolishness and an offense. (1 Cor. 1:23; 1 Peter 2:7-8)

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. understand the Christian faith not as a return to Christ and reliance on Christ and His redemptive work but merely as a practical help in life;

b. interpret the decision of faith as something different from a decision for the person of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord;

c. level out the difference between belief and unbelief and dilute unbelief to mean a latent mode of being a Christian (*Unbewusster Glaube*).

11. Saving faith is effected through the Gospel presented to it and rests entirely in the Gospel (Rom. 10:14). Faith is more than a rational assent to certain doctrines. It is primarily trust in Christ and His work, while at the same time acknowledging one's own lostness and sin. Faith is at the same time subjection to Christ's Word. When faith lays hold on Christ and His Gospel, it at the same moment confesses Him as the true Son of God and His completed work of salvation. Therefore Christian faith is always *also* a clear and comprehensive confessional statement regarding Christ. (Matt. 16:16; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 John 4:2 f., 15)

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. view the decision of faith as an achievement of man and not as a gift of grace;

b. regard the Gospel to be only an impulse to any kind of faith and view faith only as a new understanding of existence but not also as a clear and definite confession of Christ;

c. adjudge a binding dogma as not belonging to the essence of the Christian faith.

12. The proclamation of the saving Gospel was commanded by Jesus Christ Himself to those apostles selected by Him (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). The Lord sent forth the apostles in His name and with His authority (Luke 9:1 ff.; John 20:21). For this task He promised them the guidance and preservation by the Holy Spirit, who would lead them into all truth and also bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had told them. (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13)

We must therefore repudiate such views as:

a. question the mission and authorization of the apostles by Jesus Christ for the authentic attestation of the Gospel, His doctrine, and His commands;

b. question the divine guidance by the Spirit of the apostles in their proclamation of the Gospel and of Christian doctrine and attribute errors to the apostles in their proclamation of the Gospel;

c. regard the apostolic tradition as being unreliable in its essence and unity and as being subject to human contingencies.

13. Obedient to the mission command of Jesus Christ and trusting in His prom-

ise, the apostles, subsequent to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the Gospel with the Spirit's power both orally and in writing and taught therefore not merely the word of man but in truth the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). The written documentation of apostolic proclamation lies before us, in direct or indirect form, in the writings of the New Testament. These writings (together with those of the Old Testament to which the New Testament writings refer on almost every page) are the source and norm of all Christian proclamation. Every Gospel that claims to be true Gospel must validate itself against this norm.

We therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. regard the writings of the New Testament and the apostolic proclamation recorded in them as purely subjective and therefore not as divinely prescriptive theologies;

b. differentiate in the writings of the New Testament between genuine or spurious, Christian or extra-Christian, elements of proclamation;

c. question the normative character of the New Testament (in its unity with the Scriptures of the Old Testament) for all Christian proclamation and regard norms other than the content of proclamation in the entire New Testament to be valid for determining Christian proclamation and doctrine.

14. There are in the New Testament multiple witnesses who, though in different ways, attest the *one* Gospel. The peculiarity of each New Testament witness does not invalidate the inner unity of all the witnesses. By delimiting the canon of Holy Scripture the church confessed the inner

unity of the combined Scriptures. The church attested the content of the Holy Scriptures as the genuine apostolic tradition as opposed to pseudo-apostolic and heretical traditions. The acceptance of the canon is an act of faith, which is a part of faith in the apostolic Gospel and is repeated by every Christian living in the community of the church.

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. question the inner unity of the New Testament within the bounds of the canon and criticize certain constituents found in the content of the proclamation in the New Testament;

b. level out the canon as the line of demarcation between unconditional dependable apostolic tradition and other questionable traditions.

15. In Holy Scripture God's Word is given in the words of men (2 Cor. 4:7). But both sides of the Word of Scripture, the divine and the human, must be preserved unimpaired and undiluted. Faith acknowledges the Spirit's creation of the word of Scripture (John 14:26; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21) and its total historical character. The results of these considerations are:

A. that the exploration of the word of Scripture in a secular — scientific way (for example, the historical-critical method) is justifiable and necessary and;

B. that nevertheless the true divine assertion of every passage in Scripture, the Word of God in the word of man, can be grasped only through faith in the entire Gospel attested in Scripture. (1 Cor. 2:14-15)

The latter statement provides the regulator for the possibilities of the historical-

critical method. This method may not be employed in matters pertaining to the Christian faith when it finds fault with any part of the content of the New Testament writings; when it, for instance, absolutizes the mode of thinking employed in historical analogy and correlation.

We must therefore repudiate such teachings as:

a. deny the operation of the Spirit in the word of Scripture and evaluate the Biblical writings as having been composed only for specific occasions and as religious-historical documents;

b. question the total historicity of the word of Scripture and therefore deny that secular-scientific methods of research can and must be applied to Scripture;

c. absolutize the historical method and apply it to the word of Scripture in such a way that the character of the word of Scripture as a word of the Spirit's revelation is not taken into account:

d. deny the principle that Scripture passages must be interpreted not only by themselves and occasional analogies found in extra-Biblical materials but also, and above all, by considering the total content of Scripture (*dem Ganzen der Schrift*).

16. The heart of the apostolic Gospel attested in Scripture is summarized in the confession of the church and, because of erroneous views voiced here and there, preserved and delimited. The individual Christian, because of his faith in Christ, finds his place in the community of the church and can properly hear and retain the saving Gospel only in this community. Granting the truth of the previous statement, also his knowledge of the revealed Word in Holy Scripture (*norma normans*) is bound to the confession of the church

(norma normata). Therefore, Holy Scripture cannot be read and understood apart from the confession of the church. For us the binding confession of the church are the ancient creeds and the confessions of the Lutheran Reformation.

We must therefore repudiate such views as:

a. reject the confession of the church with respect to its necessity and validity and declare its substantive content to be irrelevant for the faith and proclamation of the church or for the individual Christian;

b. assert that the individual Christian stands in such immediate relationship to the word of Scripture that he can, with respect to the full grasp and retention of its content, dispense with the community of the church and its confession;

c. regard the Holy Scriptures and the confession of the church as being in opposition to each other.

17. The church can do justice to its divine mission and can proclaim and preserve the apostolic Gospel in its truth and purity only when it continues to be obedient to the word of Holy Scriptures and when it, therefore, also safeguards the confession of the fathers. On the basis of Scripture and the confession all spirits and opinions must be tested and the Gospel of Christ sundered from pseudo-gospels. (1 John 4:1 ff.)

We must repudiate therefore the view which denies that the church may ever produce doctrinal decisions and must separate itself in its proclamation from opposing and erring doctrines.

18. God directs the church to bring the Gospel to the world, that is, to the contemporary world. The church discharges its task toward men:

a. when in its confession of the Triune God it prayerfully and doxologically conducts divine worship and administers the divine means of grace and in its prayers unceasingly intercedes for people before the throne of God;

b. when it brings the Gospel to men in every way possible (especially by its missionary proclamation to the people of Israel and the heathen or when by doctrine and instruction it brings the Gospel to the youth and to people of all classes or through pastoral care and counseling with the individual);

c. when it engages in welfare work; when, guided by the Gospel, it gives direction in current problems and when, whenever this is possible, it speaks out for truth and justice in the world.

In all its activities the church's primary concern must be the eternal salvation of men that they through the Gospel of Jesus Christ may become reconciled to God, find grace, and be gathered in His kingdom.

The church strives to gain *all* people for Christ and to lead them back into the Father's home. It knows, however, that the judgment begins already in this world and that hostility, hatred, and persecution are already assailing the flock of Christ. Therefore the church does not seek success at any price and scorns the temptation, for the sake of gaining an easier entry into the hearts of men, to alter the Gospel entrusted to it, to dilute it, or to accommodate it to a given age. The church knows that an "other Gospel" (Gal. 1:8) will not save anyone and that the Spirit of God can lead also modern man to faith in the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore the church steadfastly clings to the one apostolic Gospel, proclaims it as it is entrusted to the

church. It does this without abridging or falsifying that Gospel "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2), looking up to its Lord, who alone effects the salvation of men and guides the destiny of His church. Conscious of the provisional character of all earthly things, the church longingly looks forward to the day when its Lord will appear in glory. It prays: "Maran atha — Amen. Yes, come, Lord Jesus."

We must therefore repudiate such views as:

a. deny that the church must primarily be concerned with the eternal salvation of men;

b. understand the service of the church to the world to be primarily or even exclusively the help rendered for the conquest

of this earthly life or a contribution to the social welfare of mankind;

c. regard divine service and prayer in the life of the church no longer as the foundation and point of departure for all other activities;

d. doubt on the one hand God's gracious will toward *all* men and on the other hand the urgency and seriousness of a decision of faith to be made already in this life;

e. promote the idea that, because Christian love must necessarily adjust itself to man's varying needs, therefore the substantive content of the Gospel must also be adjusted and altered;

f. deny or disregard the eschatological factor, namely that the expectation of the return of Christ must dominate the whole life and activity of the church.