

Inviting - inspiring - evangelical ¹

The Mission Understanding of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia ² facing the challenges of the 21st century

Statement on Thesis 1 "God's Mission"

To formulate God's mission as the basis and criterion of the missionary activity of the church in 43 lines is high art. Only with the courage to fill the gaps a path can be found between the bright heights of the doctrine of the Trinity to the lowlands of churches action in their diverse contexts. If you recognize that I concentrate on these gaps in my remarks, then that's true in explicit respect for the thesis and its authors and in full awareness of leaving further gaps, as well as in the hope of being able to make a constructive contribution.

1. Origin and aim of the missio Dei

The talk of missio Dei starts with God's Trinitarian action: God's threefold commitment in creation, Son, and Spirit. Both in the biblical witness and in the trinitarian unfolding of God's doctrine as the conceptual sum of the Gospel, creation, redemption, the presence of salvation and consummation are variously related to one another. The "life in abundance" promised by Christ (John 10:10b) therefore refers not only exclusively to the human world, but to the whole realm of creation. The goal of God's mission is the assertion of his fullness of life against powers of life negation and degradation. This is biblically conceived as a new heaven and a new earth in which all creatures can join the praise of God. On the way to this goal God takes his church in analogy to Israel (lines 48f.) by commissioning, empowering and sending. The church is therefore only a tool and vehicle, never the goal of God's mission. God's mission does not pass church, but goes far beyond it.

2. God's action and work of the Churches

The talk of the missio Dei reflects the difference between God's action and actions of the Churches. **Concerning the Churches, a distinction must be made once again between the Church in matters of Christians as individuals and the constituted Church as an institution and organization (cf. lines 67-69).** This differentiation does not mean separation, but an appropriate determination of the relationship. God's mission is opposed to missionary activities of the church in three matters:

- God's mission as enthusiasm – or origin, reason and source of strength.
- God's missions as a call to conversion – or a critical corrective to the church's sinful entanglements in self-preservation and unjust power logics. As it also acts beyond Eden, as part of - theologically speaking - the world, involved in contexts and dynamics marked by sin (continuing lines 47f. and 57f.).

and finally

- God's mission as a challenge to self-transgression - the church serves the salvation of others, and its actions and structures have to be oriented to this (mission-shaped church).

3. Missio amoris Dei

The mission of God finds its focus in love: missio amoris Dei (Joh 3,16; line 51). Love, however, not only creates the content but also shapes God's mission: as selfless giving, as kenosis (Phil 2), as being

inclusive, which includes breaking through ethnic, religious, social and gender boundaries (Gal 3:28). The missionary witness of the Churches must therefore take measure concerning both: content and form have to correspond to love of God in Jesus Christ (coherence); it is a corresponding body language of the Body of Christ. This goes beyond a spreading of the word of God (line 65) in the sense of classical proclamation and can be defined more precisely with the term "communication of the gospel" (line 67).

Love does not reach out, but perceives persons as a subject and releases him or her into a space where one can be different without fear. If the Church, in her missionary witness, exposes herself to the encounter with the other in love, she is transformed and grows deeper in the understanding of her own truth. "Let me learn about you, your thinking and speaking, your questioning and being, so that by it I may learn anew the message I have to deliver to you" (Klaus Hemmerle). Preaching and inviting people to trust the Word of God and join a congregation (lines 65f.) one-sidedly shortens this reciprocal dynamic and gives the impression that evangelism is only about (congregational) membership recruitment and integration into existing congregational forms. The paper goes beyond this narrow understanding (cf. 445-448).

4. Empowerment and powerlessness

The mission of churches is grounded in the mission of Christ and the empowerment of the Spirit. However, the effect of their mission in the sense of discovery of faith and the healing spread of divine abundance of life is withdrawn from the Churches. They themselves are left with the integral witness of God's mission in the basic attitude of pleading (2 Cor. 5:20). Thus the missionary activities of the churches take place between empowerment and powerlessness. This tension leads the Church from prayer - in listening and thanksgiving, pleading and lament - to action. An action embedded in the requested, hoped for and unavailable action of God. In this tension, the Churches share the mission of Christ and the cross as a paradoxical sign of powerless vitality.

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