

Paul Althaus

A Representative of the Erlangen School

REINHARD SLENCZKA



AS YOU ARE COMING TO THE motherland of the Reformation, you will observe that reformation is not only a once-and-for-all event in the history of a church, but it is a necessity within the church ever new. Abuses, errors, and temptations are always new, and the struggle between the true and the false church remains a sign of the church in her existence until the end of this world. Therefore the apostle admonishes the congregation in Rome, as well as us today here and now: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed (Latin: *reformamini*) by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). Conformance and accommodation to the world is the permanent temptation for the church as well as for every Christian. Transformation, however, is God’s gift and a miracle within the church and for every Christian. The Erlangen Faculty, as it existed from 1743 until 2008, is an example of this.

Karlmann Beyschlag (1923–2011) in his wonderful book *Die Erlanger Theologie*¹ characterizes the beginning of the faculty with the following words:

As the Erlangen theologians took the datum of their personal experience as the point of departure for their theology, something surprising that never before was observed by critical reasoning happened to them: All at once—and you cannot put it in another way—they began to understand God’s language in the unchangeable text of the Bible. At the same time they began to understand the almost entirely forgotten Christian confessions and Luther’s language, which also was more or less forgotten. . . . That way theology was no longer historicism or morality, but they are thinking *within* God’s history, not only *about* it. They judge *in* faith, not *about* it.²

And the miracle also was that this insight did not come out of the faculty—it was not given to so-called Lutheran theologians—but to a layman, the professor of mineralogy Karl von Raumer (1783–1865), and to the Reformed pastor Christian Kraft (1764–1845) and their home circles (*Hauskreise*).

At the beginning, the *Statutes* from 4 November 1743 declared, “No one can be inscribed in this theological Order, if he does not accept the doctrine of the evangelical church according to God’s word as it is contained and proposed in the Augsburg Confession (*invariata*), its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord.”

Nevertheless, at the beginning the faculty was rather rationalistic in the way of the time of the Enlightenment. But the *Erlanger Schule* in the nineteenth century was formed by the Awakening movement, the central point being a real experience of faith with no separation between faith and theology.

THE CATHEDRA/CHAIR OF THE PROFESSOR AND THE PULPIT/CATHEDRA IN WORSHIP BELONG INSEPARABLY TOGETHER

For a long time the theological faculty was the largest among the four classical faculties of the university, with about half or a third of all students in the university. In its so-called second blossoming during the 1920s and 1930s, Erlangen was a world-famous faculty representing Lutheran theology, still known today, among them the dogmatists Werner Elert (1885–1954), Paul Althaus (1888–1966), Hermann Sasse (1895–1976), and Walter Künneth (1901–1997).

There are many others to be mentioned, but let us quote the professor for Old Testament, Otto Procksch (1874–1947), from his almost forgotten *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (published posthumously in 1950):

If Christ is the center of theology then the Old Testament seems to be outside from a historical-theological perspective. . . . The New Covenant appears in confrontation with the Old Covenant and suspends it. Nevertheless it is impossible to eliminate Jesus from its final composition as he is inseparably connected with it. The historical personality, in which he is seizable for us, has its background in the Old Testament. His image grows from this background, is getting corporality and color; it breathes the atmosphere of the Old Testament.³

REINHARD SLENCZKA is professor emeritus of Systematic Theology at Erlangen University in Germany. This lecture was prepared for a German study-abroad program arranged by Concordia Theological Seminary and was presented on 2 June 2010 in Neuendettelsau.

1. Karlmann Beyschlag, *Die Erlanger Theologie*, Einzelarbeiten aus der Kirchengeschichte Bayerns, 67. Band (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1993).
2. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

Where do you find such a christological-trinitarian approach to the Old Testament today?

As a criticism against the political theology of the twenties Procksch wrote: “Only if the church is not involved in politics will she fulfill her task among the peoples of the world.”⁴

Confessional obligation was abolished in the 1970s as a consequence of the “university revolution.”

In 2008 the theological faculty, which for centuries was the first among the four classical faculties, was transformed into a department within Philosophy. Why? Partly because of economic reasons; partly because church and theology are no longer aware of the fact that the triune God is not an invention of theologians but the origin and foundation of the whole cosmos. From this comes the responsibility of theology for all other faculties as “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).

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among the peoples of the world.”**

Today many theologians are eager to prove their esteem for science and their social usefulness by taking over methods from other faculties. Theology lost its autonomy, that is to say, the responsibility for the ontological basis for thinking and for the ethical norms in acting. Or to put it bluntly, theology is no longer understood and done as knowledge about the one triune God in his revelation in his word but rather about religion as one social and historical phenomenon among others in a pluralistic society.

Moreover, in Erlangen there came up the special local problem with the intriguing question of how to cope with the real or assumed guilt of the fathers. Some are calling this “historical pharisaism.” In the foreground this refers to the relation to Nazism, for instance, the messianic mission of Adolf Hitler in the time of economic depression, the attitude against Jewish predominance in economics, in culture and politics, all under the perspective of racial anthropology, the last word in scientific research of that time. A special but very strong motive is also the question of political and social responsibility of the church in its attention to the aspirations, needs, and movements of the populace. In the deeper background there are some intriguing and burning issues like God’s acting in history—an unsolved problem and task until today. Terms like *order of creation*,

natural law, *ontology*, *metaphysics*, *cosmology* are discredited in German theology and have a negative connotation, and the insights behind them are ignored. Instead, understanding (hermeneutics) in the way of assent and activity in political and social affairs take the lead.

As for criteria in theology we are standing before the open contradiction of either Scripture and confession or political identity (left/right, conservative/progressive, and so forth). How is doctrine related to politics? What about the clear distinction between *doctrina/coelum* (doctrine/heaven) and *vita/terra* (life/earth), as Luther put it? What is the essence and the task of the church? Is it politically appealing propaganda for an afflux of membership (church/tax payers) or calling out of the world those who are elect before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4)?

The ongoing question and aim of historical research in and about Erlangen is that of the guilt and entanglement (*Schuld und Verstrickung*) of the former generation. These questions are asked by those who did not have the personal experience of temptation and persecution during the Third Reich.

In the program of the Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag in Nürnberg in 1979, representatives of the faculty, students, and some professors presented a kind of public confession of sins for their faculty under the question: “How was it possible? The Erlangen judgment concerning the law excluding non-Aryans from civil service” (Arierparagraph, April 1933). This led to a deep conflict about the doubtlessly world-famous former celebrities of the faculty. On the one side was the younger generation under the compulsion to cope with the assumed guilt of the fathers; on the other side were the still-living thankful pupils and admirers of those professors. Since the latter had theology on their minds, the former felt the necessity to clean the public reputation of the faculty. As a matter of fact, Erlangen was the only faculty of theology in Germany that felt the compulsion for this kind of self-criticism, since others in which National Socialist supporters and members dominated like Göttingen, Bonn, and Heidelberg never felt the compulsion for public repentance for their predecessors.

As a consequence, Erlangen became a catchword for politically conservative, right-wing confessional theology. What those professors really did for church and theology is more and more forgotten because of this. This follows the simple rule: If the name is turned into an inflammatory catchword, you must not read or will not read what they really wrote and said.

This is in short the background that forms the basis for some impressions of one of the typical Erlangen theologians, Paul Althaus, under the following aspects of biography: the two kingdoms and *Uoffenbarung* (fundamental or original revelation).

Paul Althaus, such as his pupils Karlmann Beyschlag⁵ and Jörg Baur⁶ describe him, was an impressive personality in his behavior and his communication with colleagues and students;

3. Ibid., 148.

4. Ibid., 147.

5. Ibid., 149 ff.; 184.

6. Jörg Baur, “Vermittlung in unversöhnten Zeiten: Zum Gedenken an Paul Althaus,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 34 (1988): 168–92.

“he lived what he taught.” He had a considerable afflux of students. His pupils characterize him as a demanding and inspiring teacher, but at the same time a pastor, a soul carer, and an impressive preacher, serving as university chaplain for long years even after his retirement.

Here we have the characteristic of this epoch of the Erlangen school: the renewal of the theology of experience (*Erfahrungstheologie*), which, in spite of all differences, unites Werner Elert and Paul Althaus. What does this mean? Both had the experience of serving as army chaplains during World War I. They were nationalists but not National Socialists. Elert lost his two sons in World War II, Althaus one of his sons. Both represent in their theology the fundamental relation between worship and theology (which was strictly denied by liberals like Adolf von Harnack [1851–1930] in his *History of Dogma*). Both were doing theology in research and teaching in a wide range of the theological disciplines.

For Althaus, rebirth is not at all a datum of psychological or mere existential experience; rather, as he puts it, rebirth is not an empirically experienced datum from which you may draw conclusions to the transcendent origin, but a Christian believes to be reborn as and because he believes in Christ.⁷ What is Christian comes from Christ.

Referring to reformation in a widely circulated early booklet called *The Cemetery of Our Fathers* and meditating about the hymns about dying and eternity, Althaus writes:

The reformation came up at the frontier to death. . . . Praying is as serious as dying. You will understand this in the right way from the perspective of dying only. . . . That is why the experience of justification for Luther’s Christendom is a continuous anticipation of death. . . . It is the special value of reformation Christendom that justification is understood from the perspective of dying.⁸

In Althaus’s research work and in his publications you will see the wide range of at least three disciplines. He started his academic career (doctorate and habilitation) with a dissertation about “Die Prinzipien der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik im Zeitalter aristotelischer Scholastik” (“The Principles of German Reformed Dogmatics in the Age of Aristotelian Scholasticism”).⁹ This refers especially to the relation between theology and philosophy, the relation between reason and revelation, and finally the question of certainty and assurance. Among other interesting information in this dissertation, Althaus mentions that he sees “a fundamental biogenetic law in the history of human thinking (*Geistesgeschichte*).” (By the way, as for me, I do not believe in a Darwinism of human thinking.)

In 1922 (this occurring not as it mostly happens with theologians at the end of their career, but with Althaus at the begin-

ning of his career), he published his *Die letzten Dinge: Lehrbuch der Eschatologie* (“The Last Things: A Compendium of Eschatology”). Only ten years before, just before World War I, Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) had announced in his dogmatics lectures, “The bureau of eschatology is closed.”¹⁰ What an error! The book became a continuous bestseller, and the ninth and last edition was published in 1970.

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In this book we can observe an interesting development in Althaus’s theological thinking: In the first editions he shows the relationships between Christian eschatology and secular elements of eschatology in the general “experience of definite or absolute values” (*Erfahrung letzter Werte*). But later in the fourth edition from 1933 onwards he came to a clear distinction between philosophy and theology in the field of eschatology, saying: The reality of God which we experience in faith can never be subordinated under the terms and the experience of values and norms. Otherwise we would not keep in mind the fact that God is living, a personality.¹¹ But Althaus is still aware of the necessity to think about the relation or coexistence of Christian eschatology and the expectations in human thinking and acting.

In the field of exegesis, Paul Althaus regularly offered a lecture on Romans. His commentary on Romans was first published in the series *Neues Testament Deutsch* in 1932. The last revised edition appeared in 1966. Even today this commentary is a real help for preachers as well as for the congregation. After World War II, during the short time when he was suspended from office, Althaus published his dogmatics, *Die christliche Wahrheit* (“Christian Truth”), in two volumes in 1947 and 1949, later consolidated into one volume. This also became a bestseller. The eighth edition was published in 1969. After his retirement, he published his rich investigations on Luther: *Die Theologie Martin Luthers* (1962; sixth ed. in 1983) and *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (1965). If you want precise information with excellent documentation, you must know these books. I do omit the different collections of sermons and articles, but this may suffice to show how Althaus was most productive in exegesis, in church history, and in dogmatics.

I want to draw your attention to just two problems with which Althaus struggled, and which really must be a task for us today, especially as they are more or less pushed aside and

7. Paul Althaus, “Erfahrungstheologie,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1957–1965), 2:553.

8. Paul Althaus, *Der Friedhof unserer Väter*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1948), 22.

9. 1914, reprint 1967!

10. Baur, “Vermittlung,” 172.

11. Althaus, *Die letzten Dinge: Lehrbuch der Eschatologie*, 18.

neglected rather than discussed or even solved. One of them is “God acting in history”; the other is “revelation, creation, conservation, the question of *Uroffenbarung* or *Grundoffenbarung* or *Schöpfungsoffenbarung*” — original revelation, fundamental revelation, or revelation in creation.

From the Old and the New Testament we learn how God is acting in history, guiding and preventing, blessing and punishing. God’s action refers not only to his own people but to all mankind in general and to the whole cosmos. Whether or not we are aware of this, it is a difficult and controversial question, because God’s acting includes not only insight and obedience from our human side, but also obstinacy and disobedience and therefore grace and punishment from God. In the practice of Christian life, this includes prayer, praise, and intercession (see the Psalms!). In consequence of this there can be truth and error, and this is connected with human hopes and disappointments. Only looking back in history may we recognize how and where God has acted and at the same time how and where the preachers and teachers of the church did err or were right. Especially in German theology, there are good reasons to avoid this problem and at the same time to criticize those who tried to understand the signs of the time.

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As an example of this mostly forgotten task, we can look at the book *Die deutsche Stunde der Kirche* (“The German Hour of the Church”) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933; 2nd ed., 1934) with some quotations. Here are the contents of Althaus’s book: (1) The “Yes” of the church to the German new era; (2) Experience of the people and revelation; (3) History of the people and history of salvation; (4) Third Reich and God’s kingdom; (5) Nomos and gospel; (6) God and people; (7) The position/attitude of the church in the life of the people/ nation.

Here is a quotation from chapter seven:

We must say: Prayer and hope of Christians, if we understand this in the right way, are more secular (worldly) than we were used to express it in our preaching for a long time; political expectations go deeper, they are more comprehensive, more eschatological than the immediate aims and the foreground seem to show. They have a messianic tendency.

But is this not just the illusion against which Christian proclamation must fight relentlessly? There is no doubt that political messianism during the last year among its clerics and its in no way few faithful adherents turned into

a substitute for faith in Jesus Christ, a secular faith of salvation, which faith in Jesus Christ must recognize as a death enemy (*Todfeind*) the same way as it was with the Emperor’s cult for ancient Christianity. But it does not suffice that our theology opposes its “No” to this political messianism, to this secularized eschatology. That way we are not doing justice to the problem of religious nationalism as well as before to religious socialism. Both, however, are in their appearance a product of the antichrist and an attack against Jesus Christ. But if we want to overcome them, we must discover the place on which they are living from a truth that was silenced for a long time in our church’s proclamation of God’s kingdom. We must meet the wrong messianic inflation of political expectation and experience by discovering the true and pure relation between political welfare (*Heil*) and salvation in Christ, between national resurrection and the resurrection of Christ.

In the background of this we must see what was called political religion in the time of the Weimar republic with its struggle between different parties with their ideologies and confessions.

Althaus turns to his student audience and to German youth with their almost religious expectations for the Third Reich, referring to the impression that there is a hidden relation between God’s kingdom and the engagement for a solution in the disastrous economic and political depression of that time. For this he introduces a distinction between the “first and the second word” (*erstes und zweites Wort*).

The first word of our preaching cannot be to call the young generation away from the Third Reich and to God’s kingdom, which is entirely different from it. A thousand times we made the mistake, to preach the second word before the first word. That is why the second word became not only incomprehensible but false.

Similar reflections we find also in Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) in these years, especially with the distinction of *letzte* (“last”) and *vorletzte Dinge* (“prelast things”)¹² and what became a slogan later: *religionslose Verkündigung* (“nonreligious proclamation”).

In conclusion Althaus says: “The first word must be: The Reich (kingdom) is accomplishment of creation, fulfillment, and restoration of this life, answer to our questions, and salvation for our bodily and political miseries. Every historical liberation and recovery therefore is a previous indication, a hint to God’s kingdom.” The second word should be: “Earthly regeneration is a parable, but just alone a parable of the things to come.”

The struggle to cope with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) led to a continuous opposition within German church and theology after 1945, which may be difficult to understand from the outside. At the beginning is a December 1939 letter from Karl Barth (1886–1968) to the then-president of the Protes-

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1953), 75 ff.

tant French Church Federation, Charles Westphal (1896–1972), published only in 1945. It contained a strong accusation against Luther’s doctrine about the two kingdoms and the relation of law and gospel as one of the reasons for National Socialism. The decisive sentence is this:

Germany suffers from the heritage of the greatest Christian German: Martin Luther’s error concerning the relation between law and gospel, between secular and spiritual order and power, by which its natural paganism was not so much limited and refrained but rather much more ideologically transfigured, confirmed, and corroborated.¹³

This “very” strong and most effective criticism against Lutheran theology, especially as it is represented by the Erlangen school, means that political attitude and consequences are the outcome of false theology. The point of this reproach is that for Lutherans there is not only a distinction, but a separation, between law and gospel and between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, so they lost the impulse for political responsibility and resistance.

This (Barthian) position is contained in the second thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration from 1934, that “Christ is the unique God’s word as it is witnessed in Holy Scriptures which we are to trust in life and death, and there is no other source for revelation in ‘events, powers, figures and truths besides this one word of God.’”

In his criticism, Althaus called this a *christomonism*. In consequence this means that there is no distinction between God’s three priestly mandates and offices of church, politics, and family (*ordo triplex hierarchicus*). There is also no distinction between the use of law theologically (*usus sanctus/theologicus*) and politically (*usus politicus/civilis*).¹⁴ Let us remember that there is an elementary difference, namely, that the holy or theological use of the law is always connected with the gospel and therefore with confession and remission of sins, whereas under the political use there is not confession and remission of sin but the accusation and the execution of the sinner only—and the sinner, of course, is always in need of the other.

The possible consequence of this could, but must not be, that the first and the third article of faith with their contents are pushed aside.

The question that never was discussed is, however, What happens if you do not accept Holy Scripture as the one, inspired, and infallible word of God, active in law and gospel? As this is an entirely indisputable attitude and conviction among modern theologians, you will end up inevitably in a position in which historical developments and social movements are taken as criteria and norms for church and theology. As they are taken for the context of interpretation, they are in fact the norm and rule to judge over Scriptures but not through Scriptures (Jas 4:11–12).

The holy or theological use of the law is always connected with the gospel and therefore with confession and remission of sins.

We have two documents to examine the two positions after 1945. One of them is the *Stuttgarter Schuldbekennnis* (“Stuttgart Confession of Guilt”) from 18 October 1945. This was an act of confession and absolution between churches, representatives of the World Council of Churches and the reorganized Council of Evangelical Churches in Germany (Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland). Similar acts took place not only with the church in Germany but from and between other churches also.

The other document is the *Darmstädter Wort des Bruderrates der evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* (“Darmstadt Message of the Fraternal Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany”) from 8 August 1947, which was an admonishment to get rid of political errors and their origin in wrong theology by neglecting the “right for revolution,” or the “admonition of economic materialism of the Marxist doctrine,” for instance. Finally there was the appeal to “be aware of your responsibility which all and everybody bears for building up a better political order, serving justice, welfare, interior peace, and reconciliation of peoples.”

The aim therefore is to avoid repeating the guilt of the fathers. The basic conviction of this attitude is that politics is the criterion for true or false theology. The task of the church, according to this conviction, is the restoration of society in accordance with God’s design (the well-known program of the “Social Gospel”).

From the opposite side other theologians did not refer to political mistakes but to a weakness in faith and obedience among Christians. Edmund Schlink (1903–1984), in *Der Ertrag des Kirchenkampfs* (“The Outcome of the Church Struggle” [1946/47]), wrote:

When this fateful ideology broke in (Christians) simply did not take notice of the fact, that this talking about the

13. Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme, 1938–1945* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945), 113. Harald Diem (1913–1941) refers in his dissertation “Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen” to the origin of this idea in the book by Arno Deutelmöser, *Luther, Staat und Glaube* (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1937), in which is to be found the line of development from Luther through Nietzsche to the Third Reich from the perspective of the German Christians (*Deutschen Christen*). See Gerhard Sauter, ed., *Zur Zwei-Reiche-Lehre Luthers*, Theologische Bücherei, Bd. 49: Systematische Theologie (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1973), 7–8, 43.

14. For this see Reinhard Slenczka, “Usus politicus legis—Das universale Gesetz und Gericht Gottes: Probleme theologischer Rechtsbegründung,” *Zeitschrift für evangelisches Kirchenrecht* 55 (2010): 374–401.

Almighty and Providence had nothing in common with the living God, the Father of Jesus Christ, but in reality was opposed to him. . . . For them Christ was not any longer a reality within the congregation but was transformed into a mere and empty idea.

And the Erlangen theologian Walter Künneth (1902–1997), in *Der große Abfall: Eine geschichtstheologische Untersuchung zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Christentum* (“The Great Apostasy: A Historical-Theological Investigation on the Relation between National Socialism and Christendom”), wrote in 1947, “We are obliged to think about this theme, because with deep sorrow we observe how the same thinking as it was in the time of National Socialism enslaves still today the souls of humanity.”

The problem is that the true God is not accepted and acknowledged in the evidence of his works.

The contradiction in short is this. One side understands the guilt as apostasy from faith, with a call for repentance. On the other side is the understanding that wrong politics came about because of wrong theology. Therefore political activity, preferably extraparliamentarian, is the program, beyond the necessity to get democratic legitimation, not to speak of theological legitimacy. Even to the present day these are the two incompatible factions in German theology and church, the last predominating in many respects.

How did Althaus understand revelation, creation, conservation—the question of *Uroffenbarung* or *Grundoffenbarung* or *Schöpfungsoffenbarung* (original revelation, fundamental revelation, or revelation in creation)? In order for us to understand what Althaus means by using this term *Uroffenbarung*,¹⁵ we should keep in mind that this term is in no way a new invention but a classical topic in dogmatics. You find it in August Vilmar’s (1800–1868) *Dogmatics*,¹⁶ and there it refers to the classical distinction between *revelatio specialis* (in Holy Scriptures) and *revelatio generalis* (that is to say, fragments of knowledge of God in nature and human thinking). This is based upon Romans 1:16 ff. and Acts 17. In the gospel of Jesus Christ God’s righteousness and God’s wrath is revealed at the same time: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood

and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:19–20). It is quite clear: God’s eternal power and deity is visible in the works of his creation. That way God is recognizable; nevertheless he is not recognized in praise and thanks—in prayer.

Here the problem is not a *theologia naturalis*, recognition of God in creation, in nature, but the problem is that the true God is not accepted and acknowledged in the evidence of his works. The consequence of this is, however, that instead of the Creator, created things in their fascination become godly power. Punishment follows, and this is evident first of all in sexual and moral perversions.

There could and must be much discussion about Althaus and Karl Barth. I have the impression that neither understood the other, not because of theological but because of political differences: conservative rightist Lutheran versus progressive leftist Reformed.

But what Althaus means, following Vilmar and all classical and true theology, is that from Scripture we are aware how God is working and witnessing about himself in “the existence of mankind” (Acts 17), in history, in human thinking. This is an ontological reality; it is in being, not in our imagination. But—and this I want to underline very strongly following Romans 1—recognition of God is not an empty thing of feeling and experience, but of adoration and prayer, that is to say, of worship. God’s word teaches and admonishes us very strongly that in all situations and things we may and shall turn to God in prayer and praise because there is nothing outside of his existence, action, and knowledge. As Luther underlines in his famous *De servo arbitrio*, “It is necessary for salvation for a Christian to know that God knows nothing accidentally only but that he with his unchangeable, eternal, and infallible will provides, decides, and executes all things” (WA 18: 615.12–14; cf. AE 33: 37). This is Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

For this I will give one of the most controversial Erlangen examples: In the *Ansbacher Ratschlag* from 1934, which is taken as a specimen for Erlangen theology, they said, “As believing Christians we give thanks to God that he gave to our people in its distress the Führer as a pious and trustful governor (*Oberherren*) and that he (God!) will prepare through the National Socialist order of the state ‘good discipline’ and honor.” If we remember the depressive political and economic situation of these years until 1934, we certainly will understand this sigh of relief. If we are looking back from what was done and revealed after 1945, this was a terrible error and blindness in political judgment—or we could better say in political prophecy.

But the theological problem goes much deeper. Must we not according to Holy Scriptures confess and recognize that God is active in all that is and happens in this world created by him, be it by Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, Mrs. Angela Merkel, and President Barack Obama? This is not a question of political judgment, but of faith and prayer. For this let us hear an example from Scriptures, Acts 4, when the apostles came back from court to the congregation and reported what had happened:

15. Paul Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit*, 6th ed. (Gütersloh: Carl Bertelsmann Verlag, 1963), §§ 4–11.

16. August Vilmar, *Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 1:145.

When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.’ For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” (Acts 4:24–28)

Likewise in Isaiah 43:13: “Yes, and from ancient days (before the first day was) I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?”

In conclusion, what can we learn and take with us for our theological responsibility and teaching today? There is always the temptation not only among us, but first of all within us, to substitute theological judgment and criteria with political options and emotions. This comes quite naturally from our striving for well-being and welfare. This inclination will be inevitably stronger as we lose Holy Scripture as the inspired and infallible and unchangeable word of God, active in law and gospel. For this Luther admonishes his congregation in a sermon on John 14:23–31: “Therefore value God’s word more than your feelings.”¹⁷

17. WA 21: 476.1: “[Christus spricht] Darum lasset doch mein Wort mehr gelten denn euer Fühlen.”

The main responsibility of the Christian congregation is not political prophecy and evaluation, but it is prayer and intercession before God. In this the Christian congregation is irreplaceable for this society and this world.

Political judgment of Christians is restricted to the criteria of God’s law, referring to obedience and disobedience in the given situation for the best and the perseverance of society. Today, however, we have before us the idea that the norm for ethical and political judgment is not God’s word as revealed in Holy Scripture, but the situation and majority vote of church bodies, mostly following or being afraid of the court of political publicity.

Through the concentration upon questions of understanding (historical hermeneutics) and human subjectivity, we have lost sight entirely of the ontological reality of God’s acting not only on our globe but in the whole nature and cosmos, in good and bad, in understanding and hardening, in success and in adversities.

The Epistle for the Sunday of Holy Trinity sums up what God says and does in his word:

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:32–36) **LOGIA**



Paul Althaus