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“Challenges to Seminaries in Forming Lutheran Pastors Today.”  
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Keynote address by Professor Dr. Reinhard Slenczka, D.D., Erlangen, Germany:

“Confessional Church and Theology – Confessing Theologians.  
A Global Challenge Today.”

*0 – What’s our challenge today?*

The keyword of this conference is ‘*challenge*’. A lot of challenges are mentioned in the program such as ‘institutional challenge’, ‘cultural challenges’, ‘ecumenical challenges’, ‘theological challenges’. Without much thinking we have before our eyes the tasks and perhaps much more the needs we are facing in theological education and research. This will be expounded in different lectures and we will exchange our experiences, discussing means and methods how to cope with the situation we are in.

But what really is our challenge?

Another word for challenge is ‘*provocation*’, (in German: “*Herausforderung*”) and this means *to call forwards, to call out from*. You certainly remember, that this is the original meaning of the Greek word for church: ‘ἐκκλησία’ – to call out from the peoples of this world the chosen people of God. This is what started with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the apostolic Pentecost in Jerusalem and what will go on until the second coming of our Lord in his visible godly glory at the end of this time and world. This is what underlies everything in world history. Because everything what happens comes from God’s eternal plan in Christ and leads back to it as it is revealed to us in Holy Scriptures:

*“... just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth (Eph 1,4-10).*

The Greek word for “*summing up*” sounds: ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι, and this means: to sum up under the head of Christ. This is, and we will keep this in mind for everything what follows, *the universal or global challenge* of God’s history with his world.

Besides there is still another aspect of challenge, that is an *individual challenge*. This is the calling from the Lord and the following after of the disciple. The shortest form in which this happens we find in Mat 9, 9: “*As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector’s booth; and He said to him, “Follow Me!” And he got up and*

*followed Him*”. Just six words for a dramatic change in a man’s life. But nothing is mentioned about internal deliberations and external negotiations about accommodation, income, family, ability and the like. As this man is called by the Lord, he follows him. That is to say: Calling and following coincide. In following our Lord we get to know that we are called.

For this we find a lot of examples in Holy Scriptures, and we hear from the disciples, as they are called by the Lord: “...*they left everything and followed Him*” (Luk 5, 10 pp).

Following according to the biblical languages means simply to go or to follow after some one: in Hebrew: **יָלַךְ אַחֲרָיו** – Greek: ἀκολουθεῖν or ἔρχεσθαι ὀπίσω. But how does this happen? It is not sitting, but moving of the whole person. Thus the disciple goes where his master goes, he hears, what he is saying, he sees, what he does, he is called back in case of error or disobedience. One of the twelve betrays him, another denies him, all without exception flee as their Lord is imprisoned and crucified. But they are called together by the risen Lord, they are encouraged and strengthened by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all nations.

This is God’s history we ourselves are involved in. Therefore the challenge of the Lord is the permanent and prevailing basis of all what happens and what we do: “...*for apart from Me you can do nothing*” (John 15, 5).

In conclusion we may say and keep in mind: *Challenge* is not what comes to us out of historical and social conditions, but what is revealed to us by God’s word about what he is doing and how he acts in our world and time, and first of all in our personal lives. Therefore our challenge today is to listen to God’s word and to follow our Lord as he sends us to all nations.

#### *1 – To confess – confession – confessional writings (books).*

Looking at our Lutheran confessional writings at first sight confession appears as some historic document and source, maybe even linked with a certain time and situation, and conditioned by it and limited to it. But why then do we keep to them, preserve them? Why are they binding for our church constitutions and ordination vows?

If speaking about confessions we always have to go back to our Lord’s word about confessing and the opposite to it, which is denying, as he says: “*Therefore everyone who confesses (ὁμολογεῖν) Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies (ἀρνέισθαι) Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.*” (Mat 10, 32f pp). In Mark 8, 38 the word for denying is “*to be ashamed*” ἀισχύνεσθαι.

The situation of this word is persecution by the surrounding society or by law-courts. On one side, there is the judgment or verdict of our fellows of which by good reasons we are afraid of. On the other side is God’s judgement and salvation from it through Jesus Christ. Confessing Christ in the last and fundamental instance means to appeal to Christ in God’s last judgement (Rom 10, 9-13) as it is written: “...*if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved: for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, ‘WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for ‘WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE*

*NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED'* (Joel 3, 5)." With 1 Cor 12, 3 we also are reminded, that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."

This confession is the gift, the sign, and the elementary criterion of the Holy Spirit. That is to say: To confess and confession is not at all some historic document or manifestation, but it is a spiritual event in our life, in the church, in this world. This is decisive for salvation.

Moreover it is interesting to see, that the Hebrew  $\text{הָדָר}$ , the Greek  $\text{ὁμολογεῖν}$ , and the Latin word *confiteri* have three meanings or aspects<sup>1</sup>: *Confessio laudis*, that is confession of praise; *confessio fidei*, that is confession of faith; *confessio peccati*, that is confession of sins. This inseparably belongs together, because God is praised as we are confessing our faith in His son and confess our sins for which Christ had to die.

That this is done in the right way is the intention and the contents of all kind of confessing, of confession and of confessional writings in the Church of Jesus Christ from the beginning until the end. This is not just interpretation in the process of human history and social situations, but it is the action and the presence of the Holy Spirit in us and among us. This is not just a thing of libraries, but rather of worship in the congregation, which always is an spiritual event, as the congregation is called together in the name of the Triune God, in the name of whom we are baptized.

Discretion of the Spirit ( $\text{διάκρισις πνευμάτων}$ ) 1 Cor 12, 10) and of the spirits which are active in us and among us, is the theological responsibility of theology and theologians in the church. This is something else than mere interpretation; it is not a *hermeneutical problem* to be solved, but a *spiritual phenomenon*, we have to pray for, to receive and to discern.

In summing up this means: *Confession is the manifestation of the church in her spiritual reality.*

## 2 – Confessing theologians.

Either a theologian - and the same way a church - is confessing under all the three aspects of what we have seen in the last chapter, or he is no theologian - and the same way a church is not a church if she is, maybe just confessional after the name, but not a confessing church in what she does. This is quite clear if we look at the meaning of the Greek words  $\text{θεολογία}$   $\text{θεολογεῖν}$   $\text{θεόλογος}$ . Because the meaning is not only to speak about God, but also to praise God, and to proclaim His word and to live according to His word.

The famous medieval theologian, bishop and scientist Albertus Magnus – Albert the Great (ca 1200-1280) formulated the following very precise definition of what theology is. In Latin it sounds: "*Theologia a Deo docetur, de Deo docet, ad Deum ducit*"<sup>2</sup>. – in English: "*Theology is taught by God, it teaches about God, it leads to God*".

Let us reflect a little about the three parts of this wonderful definition: In the first part, God himself, the person, is the subject of theology as it is He who teaches theology. In the second part it is the theologian for whom God is the object of what he is teaching or speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Altenstaig, *Vocabularius Theologiae*. Hagenau 1517. s.v.

<sup>2</sup> Albertus Magnus, 1. Sent. Dist. 1, art. 2.

about. In the third part, however, it is the aim of all theology, to lead back to God those who are far or averted from him.

It is interesting to see, that all three parts of this definition are in the present tense. That means all this happens at the same time, coincidentally, simultaneously. As we are confessing theologians, are we aware of the fact and of what it means that God at present is acting in what we do? It is exactly what the Lord says to his disciples: "*The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me*" (Luke 10, 16), or as the apostle Paul puts it: "*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*" (2 Cor 5, 20). "*On behalf of Christ*" that is at the place of Christ. In Latin it is "*vicarius Christi in terris*" – "*Vicar of Christ on earth*". This is not at all a prerogative of the bishop of Rome only, but it is the basis of and the limitation for all spiritual authority.

That God is speaking and acting through us is the highest imaginable authority and at the same time the utmost submission of what our task is. This is why the apostle Paul calls himself a servant or slave of Jesus Christ, His property: δούλος Χριστοῦ (Rom 1, 1; Phil 1, 1; 2 Cor 4, 5). This refers to preaching as well as to the administration of sacraments. We find this quite clearly expressed in the fundamental Lutheran Confession, the Confessio Augustana, the Augsburg Confession, in the articles 5, 7 and 8. Word and Sacrament are the means, the instruments, through which the Holy Spirit is given, who is leading to faith where and when God will, when it pleases Him and perhaps not us with our plans and wishes.

I think there are many problems and difficulties arising in theology and church if we are not aware of what and how God is present and working even in our time. Sometimes it seems to me, that there are a lot of theological problems and difficulties, which at the basis are not at all theological problems, but problems produced by theologians. The reason for this is that we forget the means through which God is working, and as a consequence of this we are looking for other means and techniques in order to make faith interesting and to prove, how and why the church is attractive, useful for society, and so on.

Therefore let's get our eyes opened to what and how the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, is present among us. The proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, prayer and confession are the discernible audible and visible signs for this.

### *3 – Atheism in theology.*

"*Atheism*", to explain this term, is not just the denial of God's existence. More exactly it is the contradiction to some "*theism*" on the basis of something else which is thought to be God.

Speaking about atheism in theology is at first sight a contradiction in terms as theology is just about God and not at all without God. But looking back at the very clear definition of theology by Albertus Magnus, this atheism in theology begins with the fact, that the first part of the definition is missing and God is not recognized and acknowledged as person and subject of theology but as its object only. A very clear hint to this is to be found, when the names of God are taken for terms and pictures, created by human imagination and theological inven-

tions. Then we forget, that, as pure theologians teach, “*the name of God is God himself*”<sup>3</sup>, as he reveals himself and as therefore we are able to address and to confess him. And atheism in theology and church may lead to the opinion that it isn’t any more the task of theology to call the chosen people back to God in preparation for His kingdom to come, but to make the church, her mission and task useful for society and interesting and attractive for modern men. A very sad and widely spread consequence of this latent and unavowed atheism is, that worship before God turns over to theatre before men.

You certainly will feel already, this is a very delicate question if looking at what we are doing in theology and church. The spontaneous objection will be: So shall we do nothing as God is doing everything? Shall we put our hands in our lap and just look and wait?

But think of the apostles’ example: At the first Christian Pentecost they were not sitting in some research institute, discussing strategies and methods how to bring the good news of Jesus to gain as many as possible members for congregations. They neither made polls or statistics. The Holy Ghost gave them courage and strength, and they knew that they were sent and they followed. Sometimes three thousand were baptized and added to the congregation (Act 2, 41). Sometimes after big public proclamation and intellectual discussions in the capital of Athens we hear about the apostle’s missionary success: “*But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them*” (Acts 17, 34). The Acts of the Apostles do not tell the triumph of the first missionaries, but rather the miracle that through persecution, weakness and temptation the Gospel of Jesus Christ is spread to all nations.

And remember these beginnings of the Christian Church: After the death of their Lord, the disciples were afraid, hiding behind locked doors. It was through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that they got courage to go to the open and to proclaim the good news. It was through the gift of the Holy Spirit, that their preaching was made understandable in all languages and nations. It was the apostle Peter, who denied his Lord and was recommissioned by the risen Lord (John 21, 15-19). It was Saul, a well trained Pharisee, who persecuted the Christians in order to bring them to jail and punishment. He was converted by Christ himself. This is what we have before our eyes in history until today. Look only at the persecuted Christians in socialist or Moslem countries, or even in so called multicultural societies.

Therefore if speaking about atheism in theology and church, this refers to our blindness, not to be aware of what God is doing through word and sacrament in our time, in our congregations, and even outside the Church among nations and in creation. There will appear a lot of examples before our eyes, but I will not go into this.

The consequence out of this blindness, however, is that we ourselves are looking for other means and techniques how to make God’s word interesting and attractive for the world. The result out of it is compromise with and accommodation to the world and losing the word.

4 – “*Pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith*”.

To begin with this new paragraph let’s hear what the apostle Paul wrote to his pupil Timothy:

“*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at*

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<sup>3</sup> So z. B. *Abraham Calovius* (1612-1686), *Biblia Testamenti Veteris Illustrata*. Wittenberg 1672. 314 zu Ex III; *Biblia Novi Testamenti Illustrata*. Hildburghausen 1719. 231 zu Mt 6, 9f: “*Nomen Dei est Deus ipse, ut inter homines nominatur, h. e. agnoscitur et celebratur...*“

*Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. Certain persons by swerving from these have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions” (1 Timothy 1:1-7).*

In many respects this is a guideline for forming Lutheran pastors today and evidently a rather effective one. I will just underline some insights for our studies:

1. The apostle as a teacher has his commission from God himself. The pupil or student is not just a fellow or chap, but he is addressed as *a child in faith*. The apostle Paul does this on several occasions (2 Timothy 1, 2; Tit 1, 4; 1 Cor 4, 14) or as it is in the letter to Philemon 10: “*I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment*”. More exactly this should be rendered: “*whom I have begotten in prison*”. Or take Gal 4, 19 the apostle addresses his congregation with all urgency: “*My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!*”

This shows us, there is a spiritual relation between teacher and student as faith is the communion with Christ and in Christ as it is according to Eph 3, 17 ff: “*And that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.*” In short: Children in faith are not made, but born, “*born anew*” by baptism (1Pet 1, 3).

2. “*...whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith*”. *Heart, conscience and faith* belong together. This is what we find in the Old as well in the New Testament. In a way this is the meeting place between God and men. This is much more than mere understanding in the way of recognition and assent. These terms or better parts of men include the *physical* and the *psychic* reality of men. There is no separate religious department in us. It is not the question what I believe, but rather what is my God with whom I am in communion. Is this the true Triune God or some idol of my own?

Luther puts this quite clearly in his exposition of the first commandment in his Large Catechism answering to the question: “*What does it mean to have a God or what is God?*” and he continues explaining: “*A God is called to what you should trust for all good things and a refuge in all troubles. Thus to have a God is nothing else but to trust him from heart and believe as I said on several occasions that the trust and faith of the heart makes both God and idol. Is trust and faith right so your God is right and in return if trust is wrong and not right so there is not the right God. Because the two belong together, faith and God. Therefore, to what your heart clings and on what you rely, this is your God*” (BSLK 560, 8-24). The question is not whether or not God exists; in fact there are no real atheists, but rather those who take some other things for their God, what they adore, on what they rely or even are afraid of.

3. The apostle is referring to “*vain discussions*”. These are empty discussions and frustrations. During decades at theological faculties and seminaries we experienced a growing amount of special disciplines, methods and working fields, not necessary to be enumerated. But what is about the “*one thing, which is needful*” (Luk 10, 42). This is the critical question for all of us, teachers and students of theology and for our study plans. Therefore Luther admonishes his students in his lecture on Romans 8, 19 with a quotation from the philosopher

Seneca (4 b. C. – 65 a. C. A contemporary of Paul) saying: “*We don’t know what is necessary, because we have learnt unnecessary things, even more: we do not know what is healthy because we have learnt abominable things*”<sup>4</sup>

Reformation right from the beginning was also a reform of theological studies. Do we not also need today what is needful for our studies as well as for the life in this world and for the world to come?

### *5 – The global challenge: The Church universal.*

Globalisation, multicultural, multireligious, these are the catchwords for describing the situation in which the church today is existing. That’s why these phenomena seem to be a special challenge for us today and the question is: how are we able to stand and to cope with this in theology and congregations?

But let me put a very simple question: Is this our situation today other than what we have before us in all Old Testament and New Testament writings? Just to remind us: The foreign Gods are the permanent temptation for Israel as it enters the promised land Canaan with its cult of Baal and Astarte and the fascination and the devotion of the powers of stars, procreation, sexuality etc. The Gods of neighbouring peoples are also a permanent temptation, especially as political and economic relations, treaties, and mixed marriages are concerned.

In the New Testament we find the permanent conflict between the proclamation and adoration of Christ as the Lord and the political obligation to adore and to bring sacrifices to the image of the Emperor. To confess or to deny in this situation was a decision of life and death as the Lord said to his disciples: “*And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*”(Mark 8, 34-38). This is decisive for salvation or condemnation.

In the Old Testament we have the strict warning of the first three commandments: “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

*3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.*

*4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.*

*5 "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,*

*6 but showing loving kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

*7 "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Ex 20, 1-7).*

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<sup>4</sup> WA 56, 371, 15f; Seneca ep. ad Lucilium 45,4.

Here also the sanction is quite clear, and this is about the wellbeing and welfare of generations.

Moreover we meet the severe and strict warning in the commentary to the second commandment in Deuteronomy 4, 15-19 which I on purpose quote in full: *"So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. "And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven."*

This is the elementary distinction between creator and creation. The communion between God and his chosen people is the written and proclaimed word, not the images of created things.

This continues in Rom 1, 18-32: If the true God is not recognized and adored, created things take his place in power, adoration, and fear, and this leads to God's punishment which appears in the destruction of human relations, especially in sexuality and morals. Three times it is said: *"Therefore God gave them over"* (Rom 1, 24, 26, 28).

Are we aware of what God in his word is saying: Those perversions are not just cultural developments to be evaluated by some Kinsey-Report, but they are God's punishment in time and society. In opposition to moral liberalism in the first world, in Africa we certainly will understand what these terrible consequences are.

As for the task and the mission of the church it is always invariably the same: the temptations from foreign Gods and natural powers, the seduction to transgress the unchangeable commandments of God. And this is not just some moral pressure group or a kind of "Bible belt". It is, and this must be quite clear for us, decision in this time for eternal judgment. Because this is the good news we have to proclaim in the name of Jesus: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"* (Mark 1, 15). This is the situation for the church in this passing world under the expectation of the second summing of our Lord. To bring this good news to all nations within the time which is left by God to execute this task. This situation does not come from our experience of time and situation, but this is revealed to us by God's word.

What than is the church in this eschatological context? To end with I will explain this in few points:

1. If a confessional (Lutheran) Church is not a confessing church, it is no church at all. Because confession and confessing, as we showed it, happens in this eschatological context between the judgment and the opinion of this time on one hand and God's judgment at the end of this time on the other.

2. In spite of all separations we have before us, there is only one holy, catholic and apostolic church. Christ is not divided (1 Cor 1, 13). And for this let us keep in mind, that Luther never left the church or built a new church. It is the claim of the Augsburg Confession before the Diet in Augsburg 1530 to claim and to prove: We are not at all heretics, but we are

on the basis of the Church of the old Ecumenical Councils<sup>5</sup>. This is the “*magnus consensus*”, and explicitly the confession the Augsburg Confession refers to “*ecclesia catholica*”<sup>6</sup>. As Lutherans, we are catholic, even if not Roman or Papal. It is our obligation to preserve this “*magnus consensus*”.

Reformation is the removal of deformations, as they are happening in churches and congregations at any time.

For this world time we do not have the promise of one church in a universal visible unity. But we are living under the struggle between the true and the false church, which is a characteristic sign of the church as well as in every one of us we are living under the struggle between the flesh of sin and the spirit of God, starting from baptism (Rom 6-7).

3. And this is the global challenge of the church universal. It is not the question how to cope with problems and situations as we see them, but how we follow the challenge together with the promise of our Lord, saying: “*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’*”(Mat 28, 18-20).

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

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<sup>5</sup> CA 1 CAApol 12, 66.

<sup>6</sup> CA conclusion of part 1 BSLK 83c, 7 ff.