

**JESUS SAID,**

**“ON ACCOUNT OF ME,  
YOU WILL STAND”**

**MARK 13:1-13**

**A lecture on religious freedom by**



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## Introduction

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, the Prosecutor General of Finland decided to bring charges against me and Member of Parliament, Mrs. Päivi Räsänen. We will be summoned to the Helsinki district Court for the court session on January 24, 2022. The indictment is for incitement to hatred against a group, which falls under the section of ‘war crimes and crimes against humanity.’ The description of my alleged offence is as follows:

*Juhana Pohjola has made and maintained available to the public opinions and allegations defaming and insulting homosexuals as a group on the basis of their sexual orientation.*

For the first time in my country a Lutheran pastor and bishop is charged with hate crimes. How did I end up in the court facing these criminal charges?

## A Few Facts about Finland

Many people have asked me how this is possible in Finland which, after all, is a modern Western liberal democracy which values highly the rule of law. Let me quickly run you through some facts about my home country. Finland is a small Nordic country with a population of approximately 5.5 million. This small nation shares an over 700-mile border with our neighbour Russia—and historically speaking, the border hasn’t been very peaceful. Around 68 percent of the population belongs to the established Lutheran Church; a few decades ago, the number was 90 percent. In an annual United Nation-sponsored report, Finland has been named the happiest place in the world, for a fourth year running—but I tell you, not in November! Finland is ranked as the fifth safest country in the world. Freedom of the press is placed number two globally. Transparency International lists Finland as the third least corrupt country out of 180 countries in the ranking. As a patriot, I could go on talking about our rewarded education systems and so forth. But unfortunately, Finland has been ranked in the nine least religious countries. Our divorce rate is in the top 15, and we are in the top 20 for lowest birthrate. So, on the one hand Finland is safe, clean, and wealthy, but on the other hand, it is committing demographical suicide and is under enormous pressure to take more immigrants, is secular, has lost its Lutheran roots, and families aren’t doing well. What goes for Finland to a large extent goes as well for all the other Nordic countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland.

## The Story Behind the Booklet

I have been charged as the editor in chief for publishing and distributing the pamphlet *Male and Female He Created Them: Homosexual Relationships Challenge the Christian Concept of Humanity*. I wish I could tell you a great story about how we were courageous Christians and decided to stand against the cultural revolution and ungodly practices and ideologies by publishing a shocking pamphlet with huge media coverage. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but this is not what happened.

The story goes like this. After my Master of Sacred Theology studies at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1998 and my ordination in 1999, I started a confessional Lutheran congregation in 2000 with 30 people in the midst of the liberal established church. I wanted to offer for the faithful remnant the gifts of Christ in the divine service and to teach sound Lutheran doctrine to my flock. We wanted to offer doctrinally and liturgically-sound congregations with family-like community in the midst of our individualistic society. So, with the support of the Lutheran Heritage Foundation, I began to publish a booklet series for catechetical purposes. The first booklet was on worship by Dr. John Kleinig, then the Lord's Supper by Dr. Hermann Sasse, justification by Dr. Robert Preus, sanctification by Dr. David Scaer, and so on. How radical and heroic does this sound? And then in the year 2003 there was pressure in society and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland to open up marriage for same-sex couples. I asked a fine Lutheran lady—Member of Parliament and medical doctor, Mrs. Päivi Räsänen—to write an article about this issue. In 2004 we published booklet number 29 in our series: *Male and Female He Created Them: Homosexual Relationships Challenge the Christian Concept of Humanity*. We handed out this Christian teaching on marriage even to all the members of our Parliament without any media interest. It was just one booklet among the others. This series was later put on our webpage without any fuss. Little did we know!

I was years later defrocked from the ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, not for publishing these materials but because we refused to accept the ordination of women and other unbiblical practices. We were accused of being misogynistic and being against equality, which of course is utter nonsense. The question was: does the church remain faithful to the institution of Christ and to the mandate of the apostolic office; and does the national church keep its freedom and integrity with different understandings of equality; or does it follow the ideological agenda of the surrounding society? The bishops in the established church eventually chose the latter option. They decided to close all doors for ordination and ministry in congregations for those pastoral candidates and pastors who were not for diversity, equality, and inclusiveness concerning women and, later, concerning

practicing homosexuals in the ministry. We were forced out from our baptismal church.

The work which we had started in 2000 had grown from one congregation to 25 by 2013, when we formed the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland—a church body which is a member of the International Lutheran Council and sister church of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This past Sunday before my trip to the United States, I installed a pastor for a new congregation. Now we have more than 45 congregations and mission sites. If the struggles over the past 20 years dealt with the issue of whether there was space to confess biblical doctrine in the liberal established church, now the question has changed: is there space in wider society to publicly teach basic Christian teachings on marriage and sexuality? First, we were thrown out of the “synagogue,” and now “we stand before governors” (Mark 13:9).

In the summer of 2019, I received a letter from the Helsinki police department. A man—who, by the way, is a theologian—had pressed charges against me and Mrs. Räsänen, arguing that the pamphlet found on our webpage was discriminatory towards homosexuals. We were caught by surprise since it had been there more than fifteen years! However, the officer in charge decided to drop the case. He pointed out that there is no precise legal definition for what hate speech is. According to the detective inspector, our pamphlet was not an expression of opinion where a certain group is threatened, defamed, or insulted, which is the legal if vague criteria for hate speech in Finland. If there was offence for the reader it was not in the words but in the subject matter. He considered it to be a religiously motivated writing, which belongs under the constitutional protection of freedom of speech and religion. He urged the complainant to engage in public debate if he disagrees with our writing—this is how a free society works! He concluded that if some biblical teachings as such were seen as hateful speech, then distributing Bibles would have to be criminalized as well. I was of course pleased with the argumentation presented by the detective inspector, but still I was astonished by the reality that our pamphlets were now being scrutinized by the police department! Case closed!

However, the decision made by the detective inspector went automatically to the table of the Prosecutor General’s office. On Reformation Day, October 31, 2019, the Prosecutor General of Finland announced that she had ordered a preliminary investigation on the matter. This was a huge surprise and a stark blow—like a bad joke or a nightmare! We were suspected of being guilty of incitement to hatred against a group. I was summoned for the first time in my life to the Helsinki Police

Department for a preliminary investigation on February 11, 2020. The interrogation took more than five hours. It was cordial but tough. The last question was: “Are you willing to take the pamphlet away from your website in two weeks?” I said no, there is no legal and theological reason to do so. If I had said yes, the case would have been most probably settled. Mrs. Räsänen, a well-known politician, has been interrogated three times during the preliminary investigations, including for two other cases in addition to the booklet. She jokes about holding a Bible study group in the Helsinki police department!

The Prosecutor General has publicly said that she will give special attention to hate speech cases. She wants to maintain classical western liberal freedoms of speech and religion grounded on our constitution, but she interprets these fundamental freedoms in the light of the equality and discrimination acts, which deal also with identity issues that are culturally dominant factors. The tendency is to interpret more broadly vague terms like defaming and insulting speech at the expense of free speech. As you know much better here in the United States, identity issues like racial diversity, immigration, sexuality, and gender—in addition to environmental questions and animal rights—form the moral compass and the great narrative of good and evil of our time, especially among the young and urbanized people.

It was not a surprise but still a shock when, on April 29, 2021, she announced that she will press charges. Most probably she will take the case if needed through as many appeals as possible through higher courts, even to the level of the European Union. We are prepared for it as well. The judgement is important due to the precedent that it sets for future free speech cases. So here we are, waiting for the first trial.

## **What is the matter all about?**

The pamphlet has been translated into English. You can judge for yourself if the Prosecutor General is right. In my answers during the investigation, I pointed out that the Prosecutor General has taken out of context one line from here and one from there. I have tried to draw the big picture of the pamphlet which consists of basic points of Christian teachings. I would have not published the booklet unless I was sure that these four points are clearly taught:

- 1) We are all created in the image of God. We are all equal and share inherent dignity.

- 2) We are all part of the fallen human race and therefore, we are all sinners. Homosexuals are not greater sinners than others but nevertheless, it is sinful to live in a homosexual relationship.
- 3) We are all loved by God and atoned for by Jesus Christ on the cross. The grace of our Lord belongs to everybody.
- 4) We are all called to live according to natural and divine order. According to the Christian view, sexual life is meant to be in the confines of marriage for life between one man and one woman, a complementary union meant to protect the triple bond of mother, father, and child. Marriage reflects the equal and complementary loving union of the Holy Trinity.

We make distinction between persons and actions, between the value of individuals and individual moral choices, and between homosexuals and homosexuality as a way of life. We have again and again said that we confess the God-given dignity, value, and human rights of those who identify as homosexuals, but at the same time we also call homosexual acts sinful and in discordance with the created order and the will of God as found in the Bible. The General Prosecutor argues however that this distinction is not valid since sexuality is so deeply rooted in the identity of a person; so, if we call the homosexual living style sinful, we deny the dignity of homosexuals. In other words, to reject homosexuality is to deny peoples' human value as human beings and thus degrade their intrinsic worth.

If we follow this argument to its logical conclusion, the ramifications for Christian teachings and religious freedom are severe. It abolishes the basic Christian understanding of God, creation, and the fall, the preaching of the Law and the Gospel, and repentance and grace. This kind of argumentation concerns not only homosexuality but other issues as well. God created everything good but due to sin even good things like sexuality and other earthly gifts are broken and twisted in and among us, appearing as lust, greed, and so forth. We need to maintain the freedom to call some moral choices and actions wrong according to natural order and, in the light of the Word of God, sinful and shameful. And to show the mercy for all of us found in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Mrs. Räsänen writes in the booklet: "The Church is guilty of discrimination against homosexuals if they are not allowed to hear the full truth of the Word of God, which includes both the Law and the Gospel." My anxiety is that many of the people who are struggling with questions of, for example, same-sex attraction will feel that there is no room for them in our congregations although Christ is there with his gifts for everybody!

God, creation, the fall, atonement, and the Christian way of life have all been the teaching of the Church throughout the ages. As a Lutheran bishop, it is my calling and duty to hold on to this truth and publicly teach it no matter what the cost is—not because we want to wage a cultural war in society but because we want to call people to repentance that through faith in Christ they may receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is not primarily a legal issue; the Gospel of Christ is at stake!

## **Where do we stand now?**

We cannot choose the time in which we live nor the issues we have to face. We are called in truth and love to confess Christ and his Word.

First of all, we need to see and understand the radical cultural change at work in society. This case is only a faint echo of the cultural eruption that is taking place in Western countries. We in Finland live in a post-Constantinian age. Although we still have the blue cross on our flag, Finland is not a Christian nation anymore. Church attendance is about 1 percent. The less people know about basic Christian teachings, the less they understand and tolerate Christian teachings in the public square. When postmodernism swept over Western countries, its basic core was the denial of absolute truths. The only truth was that you must allow everyone to have his or her own subjective truth. This hyper-individualism continues today, but it has now a different tone. If you are against LGBTQ+ ideology, so-called diversity, equality, and inclusiveness, then you are not only considered old-fashioned or tolerated as weird but instead rejected as morally evil. This is what the Prosecutor General understand her duty to be: to protect fragile citizens and victims from intolerant and hateful Christians, who are considered to be on the top of the power hierarchy. In these days of cancel culture, no wonder some commentators like Rod Dreher speak about soft totalitarianism (not hard, like in North Korea) in Western countries when all aspects of life, media, business, education, culture, courts, military, and church bodies are taken over by the same ideology or pseudo-religion that suppresses freedom of speech and suffocates differing opinions and viewpoints.

In the last week before I visited the United States, I spoke with pastors in Latvia. They are also facing the struggle over the concept of natural family in the society. First, they faced the red flag as Christians; now, they face the rainbow flag.

I'm not personally afraid of the court case's outcome. We might even lose the case although we have strong arguments. The maximum penalty for this charge is two years in prison but in our case we would most likely be fined. We have to remember that there are Christians elsewhere who fear for their lives at this moment. But what makes me worry is what happens to Finland and other western countries if we abandon our basic liberties.

The Finnish pastor, Johan Candelin, who has worked among persecuted Christians, has pointed out that there are always two steps before open persecution. The first step is disinformation—wrong and negative labeling. A certain religious, ethnic, or ideological group or congregation is publicly and constantly depicted one-sidedly and untruthfully. *They are all hateful, narrow minded, and intolerant. They are all against equality and common good.* If you belong to this group, you are guilty by association. The next step is discrimination. Doors are closed from you in society, in workplaces, in the media, and so forth. *You do not deserve to have same rights as others because you are wrong, uncooperative, and dangerous. It is the right thing to cancel you and to get rid of you in the workplace or in the school.* When this happens, more and more people keep quiet; they know that this is not an accurate depiction of this group, but they are too scared to defend them openly. These two steps pave the way to open persecution. And I have to say, the disinformation about Mrs. Räsänen and this case spread by the national and respectable media and even the Prosecutor General's office is worrying. Sometimes when I read these stories, I say to myself, no wonder why pressure for discrimination grows.

I give you an example. Mrs. Räsänen was invited to appear on a family television show in Finland called *Masked Singer*. The show has nothing to do with politics or religion but is instead pure entertainment. Despite this, there was strong negative reaction and outrage to her appearance by many commentators. *She should not have been invited because her opinions are hateful and her presence on the show could make viewers feel unsafe!*

The rule of law is an essential barrier in societies against these tendencies. That is why I'm worried if ideology takes over the legal system. It will undermine respect of the rule of law among citizens, which is detrimental in the long run for any society.

I pray that this case could be a wakeup call for defending freedoms. Some positive signs are seen. One well known reporter in Finland wrote:

*The Prosecutor General is demonstrating how the freedoms of speech and religion can be undermined. It happens just like this, in little steps. This methodology is used in trolling and hybrid warfare: well-intended*

*solutions are presented— for example, in the name of protecting minorities and guarding against hate speech— and at the same time this creates room for thought police who then begin to sensor speech and writing. First, there are fines, then there is imprisonment, finally there will be stoning. Immediate intervention must be taken against this misuse of power before it becomes established as acceptable.*

We shouldn't be intimidated or discouraged but speak the truth and boldly and joyfully confess Christ. Christ sent his apostles, who were a very small minority, into a hostile and pagan environment. To face opposition in this world, to be ridiculed and even persecuted hasn't been something uncommon but rather normal in the life of the church. As Martin Luther stated: bearing the cross is a mark of the true Church. This is what Christ himself endured and what he promised to us (Mark 13).

What makes me worried in this court case is the signal already sent and received by so many, even Christians: if they come after a member of parliament and a Lutheran pastor, they can come after you. *So, teachers, pastors, reporters, professors, keep silent about these issues. Be filled with fear. Do not confess biblical truth publicly. Do not rock the boat. Learn to play ball.* Such self-censorship is already evident. I'm afraid that if we do not use the freedom of expression we still have in the public square, then we will lose it. We fear men more than we fear God.

It also makes me worried that, when we face injustice, we can be filled with anger and bitterness, and if the tide changes repay evil for evil—if we get the chance, to use the same unjust methods as those who suppress us. But what did our Lord say? “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who oppose you” (Luke 6:28). Roman Catholic teaching on the seven spiritual works of mercy does not belong to my catechetical program, but one of them comes often to my mind: to bear wrongs patiently. This is our personal and sacred calling! We fight in the courts and in the media, but on the personal level we must prepare to bear wrongs patiently.

I love my country and cherish its rich heritage. I want to be obedient to our government and legal system. But what did the apostle Peter write? “Fear God. Honour the emperor.” This is the order, not the other way around. My calling is to be a servant in the Church of Christ. I haven't received any promise from the Lord for my nation and its future, but I have his promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church. My profound concern is how to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation and how to prepare them to face growing hostility toward Christians.

## With boldness

I was encouraged by an article that I recently read by Peter Leithart. It dealt with the Greek word *parrhesia*, which means telling the truth forthrightly. *Parrhesia* means to tell openly and freely the truth, especially when it differs from the majority opinion. He reminded me that in this world of censorship, intimidation, and speech police, the church is a free speech movement.

Christ Jesus said: *“They will deliver you over to councils and you will be beaten in synagogues and you will stand before governors and kings for my name’s sake to bear witness before them, and the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations”* (Mark 13:9-11). We remember that the apostles John and Peter were arrested and taken to the court of high priest for healing a lame man. When the apostles faced the trial... when they were told to be silent... when they were seen as a threat to peace and stability, what did the apostles and congregation with them pray? Did they say, “Lord, let us have justice”? Did they pray, “Lord, keep us safe”? “Lord, spare us from trials”? No, they did not. They prayed: *“And now Lord look upon their threats and grant your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”* (Acts 10:29)! They prayed for *parrhesia* in the Holy Spirit. They prayed that they would proclaim the truth that set men free. They prayed that they would faithfully witness for him, who is the way, the truth and the life, Jesus Christ.

Many people have asked: “What can we do for you?” We are blessed to have so many individuals supporting us: the Alliance Defending Freedom, for example, who is assisting us with legal matters; and the International Lutheran Council, along with church bodies from five continents, who stand with us, pray for us, and have shown their support in various ways privately and publicly. We have felt that we are one body in Christ! The best thing for us is that you remain faithful in your own vocations and make a good confession of natural order and biblical truths. What I’m asking from you is the same thing that the apostle Paul requests in Ephesians: *“To make supplications for all saints and also for me that words may give be given to me in opening my mouth boldly (parrhesia) to proclaim the mystery of the gospel”* (Ephesians 6:19). Pray also for our country and for our Prosecutor General. Pray that this court case will be, in the hands of our Lord, a blessing for us and bring glory to our Lord’s name!

We all will one day stand before the King of kings. The only thing we should really fear is meeting the Holy God and heavenly judgment on our own. But what do we have to fear when we are justified in Christ and made holy in his name in the waters

of Holy Baptism? The most wonderful thing is that we can stand not in despair but boldly, with confidence, with *parrhesia* on account of him!

Let me conclude with words from the letter to the Hebrews about the only judgement that really matters: *“Since we have confidence (parrhesia) to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with true hearts sprinkled clean from evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”* (Hebrews 10:19). On his account you and I will stand and not fall!

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***Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola*** is Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland. His November 2021 lecture tour of the United States was sponsored by the International Lutheran Council, a global association of confessional Lutheran church bodies which affirm the ultimate authority of Holy Scripture.

*For more information on the International Lutheran Council, and for additional information on the legal situation facing Bishop Juhana Pohjola, visit [www.ilcouncil.org](http://www.ilcouncil.org).*