

A Letter to Ministers of the Church in the U.S.

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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

For seventeen years I was a minister of the church in Switzerland, and since 1986 I have been Professor of Reformed Theology in Germany at the university in Goettingen. In Switzerland most Protestants are Reformed. In Germany the Reformed are a small minority in relation to Lutherans and the United Churches, but they are Reformed more consciously than in Switzerland. Here they like and learn the Heidelberg Catechism. They sing the Geneva Psalms, and they sing with loud voices and by heart. And they take care that the commandment against images in the churches (including those of the cross) is observed exactly.

I have spent time in the U.S. before, and this fall I was there for two months. Each time it was a pleasure for me to meet members of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches and others. Once again it astonished me how strongly you differ from the impressions held about you at a distance. Certainly, I am not an American. But as a foreigner I am a brother of the brothers and sisters of the Church of Jesus Christ in your land. Even if the holy services I visited differ quite a bit from the Sunday services at home, it was while in worship that I felt most strongly how much we belong together under the one head Jesus Christ as members of his body.

Thank you for the invitation to write a letter to you! At first I want to speak about what impresses me in the churches of your country, things which I wish our churches, especially in Germany and Switzerland, would learn from you. Maybe what I find best in your churches is not obvious to other congregations in your land, but it is enough that it struck me in this way.

First, I enjoyed being present at holy services that were well attended and coherently shaped. At home only a very small portion of the baptized members of a church come to the Sunday gathering. In the U.S. I was astonished to see that even in congregations with not many members the pews were well-filled on Sunday. And how impressive it is that so many people take part in the presentation of the service! It agrees with Calvin's ideas that at Columbia Theological Seminary Eucharist is celebrated at least once per week. In some holy services the bulletin showed in an exemplary manner the order of worship in five parts: Gathering around the Word (with the important Prayer of Confession), Proclaiming the Word, Responding to the Word (it is great that the collection is gathered in this context!), and last but not least, Bearing and Following the Word into the World. Unforgettable for me was the voice of a young boy at Ebenezer Baptist Church, who sang movingly, "Go tell it in the mountain...." At the end of the Sunday service the congregation was not "dismissed with the Lord's blessing," as is said in Germany; here the Sunday service aims at *sending* of all members of the church among their neighbors. It seems that you understand better than we do at home! what Karl Barth wrote 1959: "To be a *witness*, ... it is for *this* that the Christian can and should continually believe and obey. It is for this that ... he receives the forgiveness of his sin and light and power for a liberated life."²

Second, during our stay at Columbia Theological Seminary it became important for me to learn that in comparison with Germany the *theology* is far more clearly oriented to service—independent from the question of in which denomination service will be done. That service is a primary aim of theology study is expressed by daily devotion in chapel. I heard that the students are specially prepared to serve in worship before they themselves stand in the pulpit. There we heard solid sermons. Such preparation will bear fruit in their future life as ministers and the time spent in such practice, I think, is not at the expense of other training, learning, and reflection. The theological education in your country has the merit of providing concrete preparation to those called to be missionaries in the name of Christ. On the other hand, it seems to be taken as self-evident at home that even after a six or seven years of study theologians are not thought ready for a pastorate, but must train for two and a half years more and take a seminar for preachers. And it is also strange to me that at home pastors and theologians are dismissed from their ministry once they reach the age of sixty-five, while in the U.S. they can work without such limits, and fifty-year-old seminary students are not uncommon.

Third, I noticed at Columbia Seminary a positive *ecumenical openness*. Far more people from other parts of our world study there than is usual in Germany. And conversely, students from your country receive further training by travelling to certain places in the wide world. Neither way is known to me in Germany. I guess that in your country seeds from such experience will bear manifold fruits in the congregations. And I hope your congregations will grow in knowledge about congregations in distant places, and will participate in the sorrows there, and learn from the spiritual riches to be found there. It was important for us to hear from one another in the Campbell Seminar how the Church is growing among the poor people of Nicaragua, and that fifteen million Christians live among the Arabs. The former moderator of the PCUSA shared his firsthand experience with violence against the Palestinians by the State of Israel, a topic about which the media is silent. The present moderator of the PCUSA shared information about the engagement of U.S. Christians in forbidden, but nevertheless active, border rescues of hard-pressed people from Latin America. It is amazing that at a time when so many people in the world are shocked about the the U.S. war in Iraq, so many Christians in the U.S. are engaged at home and in other countries against the bad spirit of violence and especially religiously “baptized” violence.

Now I want to declare some wishes for my sisters and brothers in the U.S. Maybe these wishes are already fulfilled in some places about which I don’t know. Maybe these wishes will seem to many to be unrealizable. In any event, I name them as a friend who has received a gift by being among you, and as a Christian from abroad who hopes with Christians in your country for what I want to speak of now.

First, it hurts me to see the big *split* between Protestant churches in your country, the separation into so many different denominations. Is it a great richness? Or a sign of liberty that your people move from one congregation into another? By God’s mysterious providence it is so. But is such division not also a burden and annoyance? If someone is a member of a congregation, he or she as a rule doesn’t go to another. Why are the only whites one sees in the black Ebenezer Baptist Church visitors? Is this the hint of the Holy Spirit? Recently a German friend asked me, “How intolerant are people in the U.S., especially in the churches?” I thought the question was absurd. But now I pass it on you. Has this variety good, spiritual reasons behind it? Maybe

Christians agree about many things—faith in the Triune God, in the incarnation of God’s Son, in the Holy Spirit and in God’s gift of justification and sanctification, and with the understanding that the Church is gathered around the Word and Sacrament and has a mission to others in the light of reconciliation and peace—but they have different understandings, let us say, about gay and lesbian people and so on. They do not look for ways to bear with one another. Instead they separate into detached denominations, not in the name of the Triune God, but in the name of certain philosophies of life. “I appeal to you, my brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: agree among yourselves, and avoid divisions; be firmly joined in unity of mind and thought ...” (1 Cor 1:10). How we can stand today for peace in the *world* if peace does not rule in the *Church* in the sense of the power to bear differences?

Second, I see with sadness the *break* between the mainline Protestant and the evangelical congregations in this country, not to mention the break in relations with fundamentalists. It is true, here and there Jesus Christ is preached, and there is faith, love, and hope in his name. But both sides are facing each other as if the other side is wrong and relies on Christ unjustly. Is there no change possible? I do not deny the possibility that sometimes in the Church one part of the church must be treated as if it is not a member of the one, holy Church of Christ. But this should not be decided by the group that makes the most noise. The Holy Spirit goes a quiet way. So it was in 1934 in Germany when with the Theological Declaration of Barmen the powerful “German Christians” were declared to be out of the Church because they accommodated the violent power of Hitler. Today the fundamentalists in your country must be asked not how nicely their speakers carry the Bible in their hands, but whether they misuse the Word of God by giving their blessing to violence and weapons. The German Pietists came through the Revival Movement in the nineteenth century close to the Evangelicals in this country, and over against the Liberals they became orthodox. My book *Karl Barth and the Pietists*³ shows how in their mutual occupation with one another both were led into a learning process. Can not the Christians in your country come to work with one another on account of the challenge by their common Lord? Both together have to confess him and must give signs of hope in time of abundance and of hunger in the face of power struggles and of violence. It is time to take the prayer of Jesus for his believers seriously: “I pray, may they all be one: as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe thou didst send me” (John 17:21).

Third, to my regret I got the impression that among Christians the relation of church and state or the relation of what it means to be a child of God and to be an American has become confused. What is confessed by this: that in some churches in your country the American flag is erected? At Lancaster Theological Seminary I was asked what I think about Americanism, and I gave the answer: “You may be grateful to God that you are allowed to be Americans. So many from this country are messengers of peace in their surroundings and for people far away. But *Americanism*? – this means violence! God preserve your country and the rest of humanity from that!” I know that officially in the U.S. churches are separated. But in some ways they are closer together than in Europe. There they *had* to learn that the church must be separated from the state, because the church had to ask again and again not what the state liked, what the nation liked, or what the people would like to hear, but what would proclaim and declare *God*. As I have learned it from Zwingli,⁴ the Church must always

be a sentinel, so that the “righteousness of a State” is to be measured by the life of the weakest and most suppressed. But now I am happy that whatever challenge I bring comes not just from outside your country. This knowledge has opened in the U.S. itself: “Today, we have to do with ‘American Christians’ who cannot separate nation from gospel, counting upon God to bless their crusades and praying to ‘Jesus, the warrior’ rather than to ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’ To this, we speak a firm ‘No!’”⁵ I hear among you the voice of the one, holy, catholic Church of Jesus Christ whom we are called to follow, in Europe, in the other parts of the world—and in the U.S.

In the community of faith, love, and hope,

Eberhard Busch

Notes

1. A good example for this understanding may be found in the books of Darrell Guder: *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); (ed.) *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 II (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1962), 593.
3. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth and the Pietists: The Young Karl Barth's Critique of Pietism and Its Response*, trans. by Daniel W. Bloesch (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
4. See H. Zwingli in Carl S. Meyer's *Luther's and Zwingli's Propositions for Debate: The Ninety-five Theses of 31 October 1517 and the Sixty-Seven Articles of 19 January 1523: In the Original Version and Contemporary Translations. With a New English Translation, Introduction, and Bibliography* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1963).
5. Letter to Pastors and Teachers in the United Church of Christ, May 31, 2004, Confessing Christ Steering Committee.