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The One Word Of God.
Recollections of a Reformed Principle.

*Eberhard Busch**

Karl Barth and his colleagues in the theological conflict with Hitler took their stand firmly on the Reformed Confessions of the sixteenth century. The Ilanz declaration and its theses are not well-known and their story is told here, illustrating both the principles underlying Reformed Confessions and their abiding relevance in twentieth century conflicts.

1. The disputation of Ilanz (January 1526).

Johannes Comander (1482 - 1557) was one of those who played second fiddle in the Reformation. Let it not be said: *only* second fiddle! Because at this time those who played first fiddle would have had little effect if they had been only soloists, without having at their sides those on whom they could rely and who took pains to seek the same thing in harmony with them to give the whole thing its proper resonance and volume. Comander, a native of Maienfeld, was fortunate enough to study at the Latin School in St. Gall from 1496 along with Vadian, who was a local reformer of that time, and then from 1502 with Zwingli at the University of Basel. Both were lifelong friends of Comander and when Zwingli died in 1531, Comander transferred his respect to Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger. The friendship¹ rested on the confidence that each of them said and dared what was right in his reformatory

* We would express our sincere gratitude to Rev John Seawright who translated this article from the original German.

¹ Cf. W. Jenny, 'Johannes Comander. Zwinglis Freund in Graubünden', in: *Kirchenbote Zürich* 1957, 88, cf. further: O. Farner, *Huldrych Zwingli*, Vol. 4, Zürich 1960, 61.

understanding and practice, and it stood the test in Comander's readiness to follow them on their way, to affirm on his own account what was to be heard and learnt with them, and to echo it in his own province. The unique thing about Comander was that he didn't have to be unique. For what would the Reformation have been, what would Church history have been, if there hadn't always been such figures?

Thus Comander became the reformer of Graubünden. The Chur Council called him to the local Martinskirche in 1523 in the same year that Zwingli helped the Reformation in Zürich to ultimate success through the two great disputations. That also spurred on Comander to reforming zeal². As a result of this there was also a disputation in Graubünden that took place on 7 - 9 January, 1526, in the Upper Rhein town of Ilanz. At this, Comander came to the fore as the spokesman of the Reformation in his country³. Indeed forty 'preachers' from the Federation made common cause with him. But, unlike in Zürich, Comander came up against such opposition from Roman theologians that they almost prevented the disputation by constant procedural questions⁴. Only on the last day of the proceedings did Comander get a hearing for his 18 theses, which he had prepared in two weeks. Comander got his name into the record

² On 14.1.1525 Zwingli wrote to the Three Federations (Z VIII, 287f.) 'Since the Pope has "raped and obscured" the Word of God, but now the truth can no more be held back, may the Land open to the "Word of God" and not prevent those who truly and earnestly preach the holy, infallible Word of God such as in particular the esteemed and faith-filled Johannes Comander, teacher of the praiseworthy town of Chur, who has been known to me from his youth as proper and diligent.'

³ Cf. W. Jenny, Johannes Comander. *Lebensgeschichte des Reformators der Stadt Chur*, Vol. 1, Zürich 1969, 149 - 155.

⁴ The arguments for not entering upon the disputation piled up to such an extent that it was plain that it was a matter of delaying tactics: first they should wait for the promised Reform Council; the delegates from Zurich should leave the room, as also should the lay members, because they wouldn't understand anything about the matter anyway, etc..

of Church history by his speech about the first of these theses. He succeeded in formulating in *one* proposition a basic principle of the Reformed branch of the Reformation, which met with approval beyond Graubünden and beyond its own time.

The proposition reads: “The Christian Church is born of the word of God; it should abide in the same and not listen to the voice of any stranger.”⁵ This sentence is from Comander's study of Zwingli's writings. The latter had written in his 'Christian Answer' in 1524 to Bishop Hugo of Constance: “That is the Christian Church which only hears the word of God... as John 10 clearly teaches... that the sheep do not follow strangers nor know their voice but only the true shepherd.”⁶ The picture from John 10 moulds the expression: because the Church is the flock of the Good Shepherd to whom it belongs, it listens to him and follows him, him *alone* and not the voice of a stranger, to whom the sheep do not belong and who entices them out of their belonging to Christ, thereby exposing them to deadly powers⁷. In the light of the clerical Church's confusion of itself with Christ, the picture spoke with freshness. Comander's definition of the Church “born of the word of God” is linked to the text (also important to Luther⁸) in James; he has given us birth

⁵ The original Swiss-German version in S. Hofmeister (Title in Note. 10) and, with somewhat different spelling, in H. Bullinger, *Reformationsgeschichte*, J.J. Hottinger/H.H. Vögeli, Bd. 1, Frauenfeld 1838, 315. Latin in P.D.R. de Porta, *Historia Reformationi Ecclesiarum Raeticarum*, Chur 1771, I.1, 115 reads as follows: Vera Christi Ecclesia ex verbo Dei est genita, eademque in illo manere debet, nec cujusquam alieni vocem audire.

⁶ H. Zwingli, Z III, 168, 6 - 10.

⁷ G.W. Locher, ‘The Voice of the Shepherd’, in *Oskar Farner. Erinnerungen* (Zwingli Bücherei 68), Zürich 1954, 111 – 115 names a similar text of Zwingli in his ‘Adversus Hieronymum Emserum antibolon’ (1524) in the German version which Zwingli incorporated in 1525 into his ‘Commentarius de vera et falsa religione’, Latin: Z III, 749.

⁸ M. Luther, *Resolutionen zur Leipziger Disputation*: Ecclesia enim creatura est Evangelii, sicut ait Jacobus [1,18]., WA 2, 430. Perhaps

according to his will by the word of truth (1.18). The Reformation doctrine of the Church as *creatura verbi* derives from this. It states that the Church owes its existence only and always purely to the fact that it has experienced the creative Word of God and is always obligated to hear it alone and to hear it again and again⁹. Contrary to the popular saying of Augustine that the Church is the mother of the faithful, here the word of God is understood to be the mother of the Church.

A substantial disputation in Ilanz¹⁰ concentrated on this first thesis, which Comander substantiated with many scriptural texts. Abbot Theodul Schlegel of St. Luzi, the spokesman of the Roman side, appealed on the other hand to Matthew 16:18: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church." Comander answered: "No, that rock is *Christ*." For this he appealed to Isaiah 28:16 and 1 Peter 2:4 - 6, to the promise of Daniel 2:44 f., to Matthew 21:42, Luke 20:17f. and 1 Corinthians 10:4. In Matthew 16 itself, a distinction has to be made between Petrus and Petra in order that not Peter, but

Comander also referred to Augustine: *Ecclesia verbo Dei generatur.*, quoted in: M. Luther, *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*. 1539, WA 50, 630, 18.

⁹ The transcript of the First Zürich Disputation gave the practical meaning of this: We may not constantly preach from the pulpit what seems good to us without a basis in divine Scripture, Z I, 467, 15f.

¹⁰ The one report of the Disputation is: *Acta und Handlung des Gesprächs/ so von allen Priesteren der Tryen Pündten im MDXXVI jar, uff Montag vnd Zynstag noch der hyligen III künigen tag zuo Inlantz im Grawen Pundt/ uss Ansehung der Pundtsherren geschehen/ Durch Sebastianum Hofmeyster von Schaffhusen verzeychnet*. See the abridged rendering: Sebastian Hofmeisters *Akten zum Religionsgespräch* in Ilanz, neu hg. zur Galliciusfeier 1904, von den Religiös-Freisinnigen Vereinigungen des Kt. Graubünden und der Stadt Chur, Chur 1904. A linguistically altered rendering is found in: J.C. Füsslin, *Beiträge zur Erläuterung der Kirchen- und Reformationgeschichte des Schweizerlandes*, Bd. 1, 1741, 361-382 and a Latin rendering in de Porta, a.a.O.117-124. Vgl.auch: Emil Camenisch, *Bundner Reformationgeschichte*, Chur 1920, 36-48; Bernd Moeller, *Zwinglis Disputationen*, ZS f. *Rechtsgesch.*, 60 (1974), 267-272.

that which he confesses, “Jesus Christ”, is the foundation apart from which no one can lay another. The Abbot and the Bishop's curate argued that Matthew 16:18 must actually read: “You are Peter *upon whom* I will build my Church...” Comander replied that if Christ had wanted to build upon a man, then he would have said that. But what he said was, “You are Peter, a firm man, and on the rock which makes you firm I will build the Church.” The one who said, “Cursed is he who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm” (Jeremiah 17:5) did not want to build the Church on men. The rock on which the Church is built cannot be any human being - as indeed also the liturgical hymn says: “Who is the rock apart from our God?” In the concept “rock” (Petra) there is certainly an allusion to Petrus in such a way that he is told that he stands fast only in faith and in confession. But the rock on which the Church stands, such that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, cannot be the Peter characterised by human frailty, for whose threatened faith Jesus had to pray. It can be no other than Christ, the Messiah, the ground of salvation, as Peter himself earlier confessed. The Abbot replied that the Greek word “Petrus” is in Latin “Petra” and in German ‘rock.’ Sebastian Hofmeister from Schaffhausen contradicted this (although he was not allowed to speak publicly) saying that the abbot was not sufficiently qualified in Greek and was confusing the word “Petra” with the name “Petrus”. In the disputation, all sides knew that the Roman side was only contesting the sentence, ‘the Church is gathered by the word and remains in it alone’, because it saw the tradition of the Church, its rites, and indeed papal power threatened by it.

Then the abbot opened a new line of discussion. He wanted to have clarified what “true Christian” Church meant and asked if sinners also belonged to the Church. Comander answered with the parable Matthew 13:47 – 50, that only those who believe in Christ and in whom there is living faith and pure obedience towards God's commandments belong to the Church. Because they, in spite of all imperfection, have been accepted for Christ's sake, there is no condemnation for them (Romans 8:1). At the Last Judgment they would be separated from those who have only feigned faith. For God knows his own (2 Timothy 2:19). The abbot contradicted this with a parable he had invented himself - not only he who “believes” there is a king of France, but only he who does something for him

can expect a reward from him. Comander countered that the parable shows no notion of the faith that depends on God's grace. The abbot knows neither what true faith is nor what good works are nor even who God is. For no one can be beneficent towards God because he himself is the source of all beneficence. Master Thomas of Tinzen intervened here: hadn't Christ thrown the sinners out of his (!) synagogue? Comander replied that according to Matthew 18:15 - 17 those who do not listen to brotherly exhortation despise the Church. Jesus chased such people out of the Temple.

At this the abbot interposed anew: 'What then is the voice of the shepherd?' Comander answered that according to John 10 that is not obscure. Jesus says that he himself is the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. So his voice, which his sheep are to follow, cannot be anything other than his teaching, the rule of faith and of life for all who belong to the Church. At that point, canon Bartholomaeus Castelmur joined in, saying that one must also hear what is not treated in the Gospels, as 2 Thessalonians 2:15 indicates: "Hold fast to the traditions which have not only been handed down in writing but which also have been received by you orally." Comander responded that of course one must hold fast to the traditions, that is to say, to those that definitely come from the apostles. But not all are apostolic that are presented under the apostolic name. When they agree with the (apostolic) word then they have their authority from this word, otherwise they are superfluous. Paul did not propound orally any other doctrines than what he had written. That is why he could insist that they hold fast the teaching that he had proclaimed to them orally and confirmed in writing. This is where the rule of Christ applies, expressed in Matthew 12:30: "Whoever is not with me and gathers is against me and scatters." It follows from this that every doctrine either agrees with God's word or it doesn't; there is no third option. If the traditions agree with the word, then they have basis in scripture; if they are opposed to it then they are to be discarded. For the Holy Spirit cannot teach people anything contradictory. Romans 15:18 demonstrates that the apostle taught nothing besides what he could confess to having received from Christ.

There followed the appearance of one Christian Berre, a seminary teacher, who dramatically asked the question: 'Aren't the Church Fathers to be listened to since the Holy Spirit spoke by them?! Comander's youthful companion, Philipp Gallicius from the Engadin, who was later a pastor in Chur and author of the Rätisch Confession, answered that the voice of the Holy Spirit is not heard from them except that it sounds forth from truly Christian teachers. But that is only recognised by the infallible rule of the Holy Spirit out of the books of Holy Scripture, which men wrote on the inspiration of the Spirit of God. This is how one is to test if the spirits are from God. Those who speak from the Spirit cannot do other than the Scripture shows, because the words of God cannot be taken out of the form in which they were once put. Sensing the threat of a division between Old believers and evangelicals, Peter Bard Padrun from Vaz, wearing a sword "like an executioner", now spoke up with an argument which could have brought in the civil authorities in those days: a branch cut off from the olive tree produces no fruit without unrest. Comander answered him that it was not the faith founded on the gospel that created unrest but behaviour contrary to the gospel, like that of the rapacious harlot - priests.

Padrun's objection let slip the cause of the disputation. It was not really a discussion about faith. It was an interrogation of someone suspected of being a heretic. Around Christmas 1525, in the Federal Assembly, the abbot had in fact accused the new evangelical preachers of heresy and sedition and had called for the power of the state to be used against them. When Comander was summoned before them and volunteered to prove his teaching from Holy Scripture, the Federal Assembly began the disputation and delegated two political assessors from each of the three Federations to judge it. And it was also because this delegation could not appear for the whole time in Ilanz that the Roman representatives at first delayed there and finally ended the discussion inconclusively. Nonetheless, after the Roman side saw that they could not equal Comander's knowledge of the scriptures and that the abbot kept on interrupting, the conversation was simply broken off and Comander declared shortly that he had not been convicted of false teaching.

His appearance made such an impression upon the Federal Assembly that at its meeting in Ilanz¹¹ on 25 June, 1526, it gave the towns of his territory freedom to espouse either the Roman or the evangelical faith and prohibited contempt for the other party. At the same time, it fixed as a yardstick to which all sides were to hold the old and proven criterion for peacemaking: the unadulterated proclamation of the Gospel and the courageous and truthful preaching of the divine Word in scripture¹². This criterion, which opened the door to the Reformation and which the Roman side tried in vain to oppose, was strikingly expressed in Ilanz by the fact that two delegates from Zurich, the reformer from Schaffhausen, who was at the time a preacher in Zürich, Sebastian Hofmeister, and the Greek teacher, Johann Jacob Amman from Zürich, had brought with them to the disputation a Hebrew and a Greek Bible.

2. From the first Ilanz Thesis to the first Thesis of the Bern Disputation (January 1528)

The first thesis of Ilanz shone out beyond the date of its origin. It did this on the strength of its content. For it was understood on all sides that if this thesis was valid then what followed also stood: 1. The Church owes its entire existence to the “Word of God” alone; 2. This Word is identical to the voice of the Good Shepherd of John 10; 3. The Church stands or falls by whether it listens to his voice. In the figure of Matthew 16 it is the rock on which alone the Church is founded; 4. The Church is the true “Christian Church” when it is the flock of sinners pardoned by Christ and called to the obedience of faith; 5. This Word of God is documented authoritatively in the Holy Scripture of both testaments, which on the strength of the Word of God documented in it has the authority of the Holy Spirit; 6. The Church that is founded on this Word of God is bound to abide with this Word and not to listen to the voice of a “stranger” either by placing its own tradition alongside the scripture or by

¹¹ Z VIII, 672: Letter from Comander to Zwingli.

¹² Camenisch, 60. cf. *Handbuch der Bündner Geschichte*, Vol. 2, Chur 2000.

laying on men arbitrarily devised commandments alongside the obedience of faith; 7. The Church that is founded on the Word of God does not provoke “unrest”, i.e. it does not deliberately create a new Church alongside the one Church, but rather renews the one Church, which is corrupt through listening to the voice of a “stranger”. These implications of the first thesis of Ilanz must be understood in order to understand its radiating power.

This thesis got two further chances in Graubünden. The first came of all in the preparation for a further disputation planned by the Federal Assembly for Easter Monday 1531 in Chur. Nothing is known about its execution¹³. The intention was to overcome “discord and contradictory interpretation in the proclamation of the Word of God”. It was laid down that “no other scripture than that of the New and Old Testament, which is called biblical and is the Word of God” would be valid as a yardstick for assessing the various opinions in the proceedings. The 12 theses constructed for this go back again to Comander and largely match those of Ilanz. Above them stood as a motto: “To the honour of God and his holy Word” and below them, “To God be praise and honour in eternity. Amen.” The first of these theses is accordingly: “The Holy Christian Church is born of the Word of God; it is to abide in the same and not listen to the voice of a stranger.”¹⁴

On a second occasion, the thesis was at the sharp edge of the disputation in Süs in the Engadin on 29 December, 1537 - 4 January 1538¹⁵. The cause of this was an exceedingly heated dispute in the Engadin, which was pursued almost to the point of fatal blows. It concerned the baptism of a dying baby. The evangelical majority with its insistence on a duly administered baptism stood between the Roman practice of emergency baptism seen as

¹³ F. von Jecklin, ‘Beitrag zur bündnerischen Reformationsgeschichte’, in: *Anzeiger für schweiz. Geschichte*. NF 1898-1901, 242-246 first published the relevant text and illuminated the proceedings.

¹⁴ A.a.O., 245.

¹⁵ Cf. Camenisch, *Bündner Reformationsgeschichte*, a.a.O., 81 - 93.

necessary for salvation and the baptism of the Baptists that was seen as in no way necessary to salvation. The evangelicals won a victory in advance through this because the political assessors determined that the Bible alone should be the evidence for the proceedings and laid down a precise order for the disputation. As a result Philipp Gallicius, who had already made an appearance in Ilanz, rose to speak first. He gave an exposition of the first thesis of Ilanz that was as thorough as it was unambiguous. This turned out to be so convincing that the thesis was not discussed and was accepted as the basis for all further points of controversy.

And so the theses of Ilanz really only gained significance when they served as the pattern for the 10 theses of the Bern disputation of the 6. - 26. January 1528 which were formulated by the preachers Franz Kolb and Berthold Haller of Bern¹⁶. This was one of the mightiest demonstrations of Protestantism at the Imperial Diet in Augsburg (1530)¹⁷. All the clergy of the state of Bern appeared there as well as the ones from Zurich with Zwingli, the ones from Basel with Oecolampadius and the ones from St. Gall with Vadian at their head, and in addition Bucer and Capito from Strasbourg as well as Ambrosius Blaurer from Constance along with other South Germans. A respectable Roman minority was also represented. However, the bishops of Basel, Constance, Wallis, and Lausanne

¹⁶ The Theses together with the report of the Disputation were first printed in: *Handlung oder Acta gehaltner Disputation zuo Bern in Üchtland*, Bern 1528. With regard to the Disputation the following sources are important: Johann Stumpf, *Chronica von Leben und Werken des Ulrich Zwingli*, Zürich ²1932, 113ff.; H. Bullinger, *Reformationsgeschichte*, a.a.O., 426 - 446. The text of the Theses is also in: E.F.K. Müller, *Die reformierten Bekenntnisschriften*, Leipzig 1903, 30f. A theological reflection on the Disputation is given by: K. Lindt, 'Der theologische Gehalt der Berner Disputation', in: *Gedenkschrift zur Vierhundertjahrfeier der Berner Kirchenreformation*, Bern 1928, 303-344.

¹⁷ Thus G.W. Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte*, Göttingen 1979, 276.

stayed away. Bass saw the result of the disputation as already decided because the council had laid down in advance the condition that arguments could only be conducted on the basis of Holy Scripture. That is why Bibles in the original languages lay on the table in the middle of the gathering, and why every day of the sitting was opened with the same prayer, "That God would grant the correct, true understanding of his holy word."¹⁸

The first thesis of Bern repeats the first from Ilanz. Here too there was no need to be original; one could agree gratefully with what had already been excellently said elsewhere. But the Bernese did not merely quote. They handled with freedom what they had taken over and made two improvements to the Ilanz principle. One is that the imperative in the second half of the sentence - corresponding to the wording of John 10:4f. 27 - is turned into an indicative: the Church that is born of the Word of God not only *should, but does, abide* in him and does not *hear* the voice of a stranger. This makes the statement stronger. The Church which is born of the Word of God, which lives from the life that God gives it, and into which God calls it, and not from what it can create itself, does what to it is self-explanatory and what alone it must do when it remains in the Word of God. To avoid this, to listen to a strange voice, would be, on the contrary, an impossible possibility. A Church which does not really live by the Word of God is stillborn - it is not merely a Church which thinks wrongly, it is not a Church at all. It would only become the Church if it were born anew, regenerated. The second change is the insertion of a relative clause: the holy Christian Church, "*whose one head (is) Christ,*" is born of the Word of God. By this, the picture of the Good Shepherd and his sheep is linked with that of the head and its body. This makes it clear that the Holy Scripture is the Word of God because in it the voice of the living Christ is heard, which decides everything. And by this "Word of God" and "Christ" are brought into a reciprocal relationship so that both of two things can be said: the Church which has Christ as its head lives only from *the Word of God* and lives from it by abiding in it and letting itself be ruled by it. The Church that is born from

¹⁸ O. Farner, *Huldrych Zwingli*, Vol. 4, Zürich 1960, 273.

the Word of God has therefore *Christ* alone as its head; it is his property, his body. By belonging to him, it listens to him and obeys him.

The Bern discussion about this first thesis lasted more than twelve days. Berchthold Haller opened it with a prayer, as a sign that even theological wrestling to find out divine truth is an act of divine service. It was that God might “send us his light and truth into our hearts so that we will all be led into a true knowledge of our most noble Jesus Christ, the crucified.” Then he clarified the thesis: according to the Scripture, the Church is the gathering “not of the cardinals, bishops and spiritual courtiers, but of those who trust God and believe through Christ.” He has promised to found it on the rock “which he is himself.” *Thus* he is its head, which means according to Isaiah 40:11 and Ezekiel 37:24, “a prince and leader and master... a regent and protector of his bride, the Church.” Because he is its head, all its salvation is in Christ. And because it is the gathering of the faithful, it is born of that which bears faith, born of the “inner Word of God”, i.e. the word of faith,¹⁹ which is preached outwardly and in accordance with Scripture. As its members are illuminated, renewed and reborn by this word, as 1 Peter 1:3 and John 1:12 say so, it abides in him and no one can snatch it out of his hand nor admit the voice of a stranger.

The Bern Father Confessor, Alexius Grat, raises an objection to this, saying that the word “only” is to be contested in relation to Christ as the **only** head of the Church, because it is not found in Scripture. And there are also other heads of the Church, Peter and his successors. To this, Haller and Bucer say that in Scripture, the apostles are called servants and not heads. For they are not the ones who make us alive; they preach the good news of him who alone can and does do that. Their “binding and loosing” (Matthew 16, 19)

¹⁹ The “inner word” is not to be understood here in the spiritualists’ sense, but means that the Word of God made known authoritatively in the Scripture is not identical with the word of Scripture, but is identical with the Word of God which makes itself present in the Holy Spirit, a living word because it creates faith, and which gives reality to the preached word “in us”.

is the preaching of him who alone can forgive sins. The Augustinian Provincial, Conrad Träger objected that if there were not also in the Church a visible head, certainly under Christ, there would be no longer a Church; it would fall apart into groups of various opinions and aspirations, as the Reformation clearly demonstrated. Träger drew from this the conclusion that it is not simply that the Church without God's word is dead; rather, men without the Church are dead. So the counter-thesis runs: the holy Christian Church has the spirit of Christ and therefore adjudicates in what is truth; whoever does not hear its voice is to it a stranger. Here the Church is not the gathering of those who believe in Christ alone but is constituted by the clergy, who, as and with Christ, faces the faithful as its guarantee of salvation. And that is expressed when it is said that not only the Scripture is normative, but also, along with that, the official word and the tradition of the Church. Accordingly the "Church", i.e. the official Church, does not stand *under* the Word of God that bears the gathering of the faithful; it *possesses* the Spirit and has Christ and the word in itself so that it (the church) cannot any longer be measured by it. Rather, it assesses and passes judgment on the faith and on the understanding of the Scriptures and of Christ. The official Church bears the incarnate Word in itself. Accordingly, one must hear it for one's salvation and one hears the voice of a stranger if one does not hear it. The evangelicals rejected this: Christ is not so "in-bodied" in the Church that its visible head is identical with Christ, and that its Word can take the place of Christ, but the Church is Christ "in-bodied" in such a way that He alone is salvation for it, and it itself is not salvation, and all in such a way that not it itself, but in it the Word of God in Scripture, is to be heard, and all words in the Church are to be "judged", i.e. assessed, by this. The alternative pointed up here is as fundamental as can be.²⁰

²⁰ K. Lindt, *Der theologische Gehalt*, 325f. interprets the passage in this way: "The Reformed Church does not believe in intrinsic powers that it can administer as in something eternal and divine, but it believes in the power of the Holy Spirit from whom it has come and by whom it is carried and led but who stands at all times above it, whose presence it must always

But the evangelical side now had to face up to the Roman Catholic objection: what is it, if it is not the Episcopal-Papal teaching Office, that guarantees that it really is *God's* word that the Church produces? Is it the Holy Scripture? But it is so lacking in clarity that everyone can read it differently. That is the reason for that disunity among Protestants that destroys the Church. It alone cannot be the yardstick for Church teaching and preaching. Bucer now referred to the *Spirit*, which the Church does not simply possess, not even some member in it, nor any exalted figure in it, but that must be bestowed on all in it. But he it is who writes upon the heart the preached and written word, illuminating it and making it certain. The Catholic counter question was: "Where is this Spirit of which it boasts, by whom it says it understands Scripture?" The question touches the Achilles' heel of Evangelical theology. When all is said and done, it can only say that it is a matter of hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd and not that of a stranger, in the expectation that God himself will see to that. That the community really *hears* this voice and so *abides* in God's word is something it can never do itself - no more than one can bring about one's own birth. Just so, the Church "is *born* of God's word". That can in fact only happen by this voice causing itself to be heard. This happening is the Holy Spirit. The Evangelical Church must not be ashamed of the fact that precisely at the point at which the Roman Church gives prominence to the papal teaching Office, it stands with empty hands and can only point to what is greater, to God's Spirit who makes the Word of God as the voice of the Good Shepherd clear and unambiguous. Here too the alternative is clear: "either the Church is ruled spiritually by the living Christ, or it is itself the one who has the power to bind and loose and is then ruled by the Pope."²¹

This first thesis is expanded by a further nine theses which sit more loosely to the formulation of Ilanz. Theses 2 and 3 are important: they clarify what is to be understood by the "Word of God". It is

seek and ask for anew, who makes himself known to it, not in its being, but in the witness of Scripture."

²¹ Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation*, a.a.O., 278.

command and it is Word of grace, and it thus excludes both pagan secularisation and pious works righteousness. To put both theses together: just as the call to obedience to God's commandment does not exclude our complete dependence on God's grace, so God's grace does not exclude his claim upon our whole life. Thesis two: "The Church of Christ does not make Law and Commandments without God's word. For this reason all human precepts bind us no more than to the extent that they are founded on and commanded by the divine Word."²² That is an interpretation of Acts 5, 29: "one should obey God more than men." So we also have to *obey* God. His Word not only offers but also commands. And his command has precedence over every other command. This excludes an identification of the divine command with the rule of human and even Church rulers and orders such as Lutheran theology propounded in the twentieth century. The idea is also excluded that one should obey God and *not* men as if obligatory "human precepts" had simply been lifted by the divine command. But the rights of such precepts depends upon their not contradicting the divine command and being in accordance with and founded on it.

Thesis 3: "Christ is our only wisdom, righteousness, redemption and payment for the sin of all the world. For this reason, to acknowledge any other meriting of salvation and satisfaction for sin is a denial of Christ."²³ The beginning of the sentence quotes 1 Corinthians 1:30,

²² The corresponding second thesis of Ilanz reads (according to Hofmeister's report): "The Church of Christ does not make law without the Word of God, but it hears what Christ the husband has imposed and commanded..." Cf. Bullinger, *Reformationgeschichte*, I, 315.

²³ The corresponding theses in Ilanz, according to Hofmeister (cf. Bullinger, *Reformationgeschichte*, 316) read thus: Thesis 11: "Christ Jesus is a single high Priest of the New Testament, who lives for ever and who thus needs no replacement." Thesis 12: "This high Priest is our only Mediator between God the Father and his faithful ones." For this reason all other mediators and spokesmen are excluded. Thesis 13: "This our high Priest [made] a single, eternally continuing sacrifice. For this reason all other sin offerings [are] abolished, and this which once was sacrificed can never be repeated by any human being on account of its completeness."

but “sanctification” is not mentioned because it was discussed in thesis two and because here it is a matter of the pure grace of God that is not earned by our works, something underlined by an addition put together from Mark 10:45, John 1:29 and 1 John 2:2: (“payment for the sin of all the world”). Without detriment to what is to be said about Christian obedience, the confession of a merciful righteousness established in Christ excludes any works righteousness in which we even partially or subsequently could or would have to make a contribution to the “payment” for our sin. Just as a Church in which a priesthood wanted to continue the work of Christ would cease to be a Church of Christ, so also a Christian who wanted to complete by human work the mercy of God once and for all demonstrated by Christ, would deny Christ. He would thereby make known that Christ had not “done enough” for our redemption. By this he would change the grace of God in Christ into a limited love of God that was only for better people. He would thereby also consider it an uncertain grace, so that in what concerned our salvation we could not look conclusively to Christ alone but also to the improvements that would have to be identified in us. So theses 2 and 3 say that the same Word of God by which a man is completely forgiven, without his having to add anything, also binds this same man to God *completely* so that in his obedience he also has to look first to God - not to human commands, but also not to what he does himself, which always stands in need of forgiveness.

Bern opened itself only hesitatingly to the Reformation. It wasn't problems of doctrine but of Church practice (like the marriage of priests, breaking of fasts, contempt for the saints, criticism of the mass), which caused offence and division here, and that to such an extent that the council finally considered itself obliged to provide for clarification and peace by the appointment of the disputation. The remaining Bern theses take a position on questions of practice. This makes it clear that the reformation of the Church cannot simply be a renewal of doctrine and that a confession of the Church cannot merely be a doctrinal decision, but they have practical consequences. One cannot have renewed doctrine without also wanting to have concrete development and alterations of Church practice. On the other hand, the disputation in Bern rests on the realisation that constitutes the step from mere reforms to

reformation of the Church: behind the differences in all kinds of practical questions lies a fundamental theological dissent which is more urgently in need of clarification than those various particular practical questions. The primary difference with the papal Church is not over those practical questions which the Council of Bern considered controversial and in which it quickly sought unity, but primarily in the fundamental matter of what in fact Christ's Church means, and what the faith in God and in his grace is that has been assigned to it, and what obedience to his command is. And so the certainly necessary agreement in these individual questions is only to be found by *subordinating* them to the clarification of this basic question.

On this basic question, the first three theses explained what is fundamental. Only after this are the individual questions tackled. But this is done in such a way that their subordinate importance also comes to expression in that decisions in these are found on the basis of the strongest theological arguments, as a sign that occasionally it can be a matter of big decisions in little questions. Thus theses 4 and 5: Christ in his surrender on the cross is the most holy sacrifice of all - *as a result*, we should gratefully receive in the communion what was won there, so the mass as a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ is an abomination before God. Thesis 6: Christ is the one mediator and advocate between God and us - *as a result*, any veneration of saints in which others too are called upon as advocates is contrary to Scripture. *As a result*, according to thesis 7, the concept of purgatory and the redemption of the dead from this by Church mediators, is wrong. *As a result*, according to thesis 8, the veneration of images which makes God into something at our disposal is wrong. *As a result*, according to theses 9 and 10, the distinction between priests and laity expressed in the prohibition of marriage to priests "is made against God's word" and "without basis in scripture". "All to the honour of God and his only Word" is the rubric for the theses.²⁴ God and His holy words are all only rightly

²⁴ According to Hofmeister there stands under the Theses of Ilanz: "To God be praise and honour in eternity. Amen."

honoured when in the Church it is acknowledged in everything that Christ is its “only head”, as the first thesis enjoined.

3. The First Düsseldorf Thesis (1933)

In the disorientation that characterised the German Evangelical Churches at the beginning of the era of National Socialism and that made them inclined to accommodate themselves to the racially authoritarian regime, Reformed people first came forward with a “Theological Declaration on the Form of the Church”.²⁵ The 14 propositions of the “Düsseldorf Theses” of 20th May, 1933 do something astonishing in that they start in the first thesis with a quotation, citing the first thesis of Ilanz as it was expanded in 1528 in Bern. Since the Düsseldorf theses were largely written by Karl Barth²⁶, it will probably have been he who inserted this quotation into the text.

The Ilanz proposition was familiar to him because he had been dealing since 1923 with the reformatory symbolic writings of the Reformation. He understood the thesis as an intensification to the effect, “that apart from and beside and even contrary to the Holy Scripture, no authority for faith can come into consideration.”²⁷ For the Reformed, it is this *isolated* normative-ness of the Bible that is important as an image - as the only allowed and required earthly image! - of the isolated authority of God. To speak out where *in concreto* they hear God's voice and what in *concreto* they want to adhere to is, for them, an integrating component of confession.²⁸

²⁵ The Text in: J. Gauger, *Chronik der Kirchenwirren*, T. 1, Elberfeld 1934, 81; in K.D. Schmidt, *Die Bekenntnisse und grundsätzlichen Äußerungen zur Kirchenfrage des Jahres 1933*, Göttingen 1934, 149f.; and: W. Niesel, *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (1938), Zürich 1985, 325 - 328.

²⁶ Letter from Charlotte von Kirschbaum to Anna Barth-Sartorius on 21. 5. 1933.

²⁷ K. Barth, *Die Theologie der reformierten Bekenntnisschriften*, Zürich 1998, 82, cf. 118f.

²⁸ A.a.O. 80f.

The *content* of revelation, God's grace alone, cannot be separated from the fact that this content is given solely by the *revelation* of God. But how far has Scripture the authority to decide about truth and untruth of Christian doctrine? "The existence of the true Church, which from its origin is ever and again becoming true, and which according to the first principle of the Bern disputation knows itself to be born of the word of God, is one and the same with this setting of itself and speaking for itself, with the property of being known and being recognised as this one basis, with the *autopistis* of the Bible as the Word of God. It is not the Church that authenticates the Bible but the Bible that authenticates the Church by actually creating the Church of faith and obedience - itself."²⁹

In the same May in which the Düsseldorf theses came into being, an authorised committee of three was working - particularly during a conference from the 16 - 20 May in Loccum - on the draft for the reorganisation of the Evangelical Church into *one* Imperial Church under the leadership of *one* Imperial Bishop. At this, the subsequent Imperial Bishop, Ludwig Müller, also made an unscheduled appearance. The desire was to actualise "the reformatory confessions" as the Press saw in advance, "in the questions presented to us today".³⁰ In this, the parallel with one German Empire under one leader, Adolf Hitler, was absolutely deliberate. The German Christian movement³¹ demanded impetuously in its 10 theses of 6th May, 1933 that the unity of the Imperial Church be "the Church of German Christians, i.e. Christians of Aryan race."

²⁹ K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik* (1927), Zürich 1982, 462; similarly already in: K. Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten* 1922 - 1925, Zürich 1990, 531.

³⁰ Im *Zeitungsspiegel* of 12.5.1933, cit. According to: H. Stoevesandt, 'Anmerkungen', in K. Barth, *Theologische Existenz heute!* (1933), TEH 219, München 1984, 94f. According to Stoevesandt, (95) the next aim of the Düsseldorf Theses was the "fixing of the Reformed position on Church reorganisation - to be represented officially by H.A. Hesse - in the [Loccum] negotiations."

³¹ For what follows cf. J. Gauger, a.a.O., 77.

The Church led by the imperial bishop may be “neither the refuge of reaction [against the National Socialist Revolution] nor a democratic - parliamentary debating chamber.” The Young Reformers movement, which provided an opposition to the German Christians, said in its 11 theses of 12th May: “The reconstruction of the Evangelical Church of the German nation must be implemented as quickly as possible”, but not by means of elections which were renounced “as a democratic error now overcome”. “The exclusion of non-Aryans from the Church (!)” was indeed to be renounced. However, it was stated vaguely and ambivalently: “We demand that the evangelical Church fulfils its God-given task in a joyful ‘yes’ to the new German state and in full freedom from all political influence, and that it at the same time binds itself to the German people in unflinching service.”

In view of these efforts, the Düsseldorf Theses - and particularly the quotation in the first thesis - states that now, in the question of the form of the Church, the *status confessionis* is given; the Church is not free to give itself its form independently. It loses its peculiar freedom if it shapes itself from unspiritual interests and motives to conform itself to the structures, specifically of the national Führer-state. It is thereby no longer free to say vis-à-vis the State what is in its province. And all desire for “complete freedom from all political influence” then comes too late because it now means at best *securing* the Church from State interference in its domain instead of *maintaining* its confession of faith in the face of the State's clutches. The Church has its peculiar freedom only in commitment to its one head Jesus Christ; in that commitment which, in the same way as its message, also has to determine its order and form. In the situation of that time that is exactly what the quotation of the first Bern thesis says.

The fact that it is said in the form of a *quotation* means that the Church can only call itself a reforming Church in the heritage of such an understanding. The quotation points up that it is *questionable* that the Church may *justly* call itself such and that this question was far from being answered by the then popular phrase that the old confessions of course remained “untouched”. The first thesis was not, as a contemporary reproach had it, a word of the ‘self evaluation’ of the Reformed, but a “call to repentance and

vigilance” which made a demarcation “above all with respect to ourselves”, so that we do not treat the Church at our own discretion.³² In any event in the particular situation, thinking back on what was once said enabled a new commitment”. By this the Church recognised that it remains reforming only when it *says* again what the Reformers *said* and in such a way that it makes clear that the Christian Church cannot subordinate itself to any powers and demands of the time or of the world, even if that might seem very advantageous. Not only may it and should it not do that, it *cannot* do it. The place, which it might wish to give to this or that celebrity, is already occupied. To deny that would mean renouncing its own Church-ness, because it owes its entire existence to the one who occupies this place, and because every attempt to cede this place even partially to others would have to mean altogether to follow the voice of a *stranger*, a seducer [Ver-Führer] who would estrange it from itself. The place is occupied solely by the one whom the Church cannot seek for its head because he rather has sought out it and made it his Church.” The holy Christian Church, whose one head is Christ, is born of the Word of God; it remains in the same and does not hear the voice of a stranger.”

The subsequent Düsseldorf Theses are an exposition of these first ones.³³ The word from which the Church is “born” is spoken to us through the Holy Scriptures of both Testaments (Thesis 2) and is “our Lord Jesus Christ” (Thesis 3), who is the “Saviour of the world” and the “only Lord” of the Church. It is the Church chosen “from every nation” and called to eternal life (Thesis 4).³⁴ It lives “only” because its Lord “daily calls, carries, comforts and rules it anew” (Thesis 5). Thesis 12 links up matter-of-factly with this:

³² W. Kolffhaus, ‘Einige Fragen zu den Düsseldorfer Sätzen vom 26. [lies: 20.] Mai und der Versuch einer Antwort’, *RKZ* 83 (1933), 200.

³³ cf. Re what follows W. Kolffhaus, ‘Einige Gedanken zu den Düsseldorfer Sätzen’, *RKZ* 83 (1933), 189f.

³⁴ cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q. 54: Christ has “chosen for himself out of the entire human race a community for eternal life”; “out of all nations” then means: non-national Church!

“The spiritual leader [Führer] of the Church is solely Jesus Christ its heavenly king who lives on earth by his Spirit in everyone who stands in obedience to his commission in his Spirit in the Church.” It follows from this *first* that the Church testifies to Christ as this “spiritual leader”, that human beings in it *cannot* be or have a “leader” but that the Church is led on the earthly plane - according to Reformed tradition - by a fourfold service (Theses 6 - 10), whose holders have no authority of their own but only that which is founded on the “free grace of the Lord of the Church”. Thesis 11 specifies them as preachers (for the proclamation of the word), teachers (for instruction and examination of the purity of the proclamation), elders (to oversee order, teaching, and Church life) and deacons (for the care of those in need, “whoever they might be”). *Secondly*: because the “rule” of Christ excludes the rules of human beings in the Church, it allows them only “Mutual *Service*” (Thesis 14).³⁵ The latter thesis is a free quotation from the first principle of the Huguenot Church Order of 1559: “Que nulle église ne pourra pretendre principauté ou domination sur l'autre”.³⁶ This was a proposition which the Emden Church Order of “Churches under the Cross” of 1571³⁷ for its part put at the top of its order in strengthened form, as a witness given by the Church Order in face of political tyranny surrounding it.

The Düsseldorf Theses in their contemporary interpretation of the first Bern thesis of 1528 had a strange fate. They did not indeed unite the Reformed; they only gave rise to a *feeling* of commonality and so couldn't really help towards a common struggle. This feeling

³⁵ That is taken up in the Barmen Theological Declaration of May, 1934: Thesis 3: “The Christian Church is the community of brothers in which Jesus Christ .. is active as its Lord. It has to demonstrate with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order... that it is his possession alone.” And Thesis 4: “The different offices in the Church establish no command of some over others, but the practice of the service entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole community.”

³⁶ Niesel, a.a.O. 75.

³⁷ A.a.O. 279.

stood in danger of only covering over and aggravating existing differences in attitude to the events of the time and their significance for the task of the Church and its proclamation. "The cohesive pressure in the group was still big enough to push aside differences of opinion. And so among the theses were found the names of Karl Barth beside Otto Weber who at that time already and still belonged to the German Christians, Wilhelm Goeters and Wilhelm Langenohl, who were seen as sympathisers with the German Christians, together with Wilhelm Niesel and Alfred de Quervain who at that time belonged to the inner core of the confessing Church.³⁸ If the German Christian signatories had understood the quotation of the Bern thesis, then they would have had to have understood that with their interpretation they stood outside the Church. Nonetheless, the Second Free Reform Synod in Siegen from the 26th to 28th March 1935, which was now marching along the line of the Confessing Church, still made these theses its own and thus gave them official character.³⁹ However the fact that some German Christian Reformed did not let themselves be diverted from their mistaken way showed that the Düsseldorf Declaration "signified only a first draft whose consequences were not taken in by everyone at the time."⁴⁰

So what was said with the quotation in the Düsseldorf Theses had to be said once more differently and anew so that the necessary confession of the Church in the present became *unmistakable* - as

³⁸ S. Lekebusch, *Die Reformierten im Kirchenkampf. Das Ringen des Reformierten Bundes, des Coetus Reformierter Prediger und der Reformierten Landeskirche Hannover um den reformierten Kirche in der Reichskirche*, Köln 1994, 41. According to Stoevesandt, a.a.O. 95 Barth wrote a week after the finishing of the Theses to W. Goeters: "Sadly, sadly for me, too, the joy in our Reformed unity which I really felt last Saturday has been thoroughly spoiled by the aftermath of our Düsseldorf Declaration."

³⁹ 'Zur Freien Reformierten Synode in Siegen vom 26. - 28. März 1935', ed. by K. Immer, 1935, 53.67f.

⁴⁰ Niesel, a.a.O., 326.

much in view of all the Church absolutely had to say as also in view of what in it absolutely had to be rejected. This happened in the first thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 31st May 1934.⁴¹ In its first part it quotes John 14:6, the word of Jesus as *the way, the truth and the life*, and verses 1 and 9 of the tenth Chapter of John's Gospel which was already programmatic in Ilanz. The talk at Bern of Christ as the one Head of the Church and the Word of God from which it is born are woven together in the positive thesis: "Jesus Christ as he is attested to in the Holy Scripture is the one word of God that we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death." The abiding in the word of which Ilanz speaks (cf. also John 6:56) is here unfolded as an action that includes three acts: hearing, trusting and obeying, which presupposes that the one word of God includes in itself at one and the same time a comforting promise and a commanding claim. At the same time, the permanence of the abiding is expressed in an allusion to the first article of the Heidelberg Catechism: that we "in life and death" belong to Jesus Christ. The fact that, for the Church, abiding in the Word of God means an abiding listening to this, and at the same time excludes listening to the "voice of a stranger", is intensified in the third part of the first Barmen thesis into the rejection of false teaching, "as though the Church could and had to recognise as the source of its proclamation outside and beyond this one word of God other events and powers, figures and truths as God's revelation." The first Barmen thesis is no quotation of the first thesis of Ilanz and Bern; it forms what was first confessed there in such a way that in the new situation it now itself *confesses*. It is also a didactic ploy for the productive transition of the Church with its traditional confession. The author of the first Barmen thesis, Karl Barth, explicitly noted that the propositions of 1526 or of 1528 respectively played the role of godfather in a form that pointed the way, when in 1963 he quoted the first Bern thesis word-for-word

⁴¹ cf. A. Burgsmüller/ R. Weth, *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung. Einführung und Dokumentation*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984, 34.

and remarked: “We incorporated that into the first proposition of the Barmen thesis in 1934.”⁴²

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⁴² K. Barth, Television Interview on WDR on 24.10.1963, not yet printed typed rendering. Cf. also G.W. Locher, *Die Stimme des Hirten*, a.a.O., 113: “This Confession, drawn up together by Lutherans, United and Reformed, with its reference to John 10, consciously represented the realisation and application of the opening of a resolution proposed by the Reformed side at the beginning of the Church Struggle.”