

Respecting the world, engaging in the world: basic principles of Lutheran ethics

Bernd Oberdorfer

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Oberdorfer, Bernd. 2020. "Respecting the world, engaging in the world: basic principles of Lutheran ethics." In *Churches and moral discernment, volume 1: learning from traditions*, edited by Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy, 57–69. Geneva: World Council of Churches (WCC).

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-and-moral-discernment-i>.

7. Respecting the World, Engaging in the World: Basic Principles of Lutheran Ethics

Bernd Oberdorfer

How do Lutheran churches practise moral discernment? How do they implement moral reflection within the inner life of the church? How do they contribute to the moral orientation of church members? How do they participate in the public ethical discourse in a pluralistic society? To scrutinize these questions, I would like to start with a short outline of the Lutheran Reformers' vision of earthly life, their emphasis on the religious dignity of worldly functions as being "vocations," and their new assignment of the church's position in the social world. Then in the middle sections, I will highlight "law and gospel" and the doctrine of the "two realms" as basic principles of Lutheran ethics. I will then exemplify Luther's dealing with issues of social ethics by discussing his highly contested statements on the Peasants' War. This contribution ends with some concluding remarks on the setting and processes of moral discernment in (especially German) Lutheran churches today.¹

Upgrading or Secularizing the World? Controversial Discussions about the Reformation's Impact on Society and Culture²

Discussions on the impact of Reformation theology on society have always been controversial if not ambiguous. For instance, from its very beginning the Reformation was subject to the critique that its emphasis on justification through faith alone rendered human acts irrelevant, underestimated ethics, reduced persons to passive recipients, and thus destroyed human dignity by no longer requiring that people be responsible for their acts. At the same time, it has been

1. Sections 1–4 are a revised version of my paper "Law and Gospel and Two Realms: Lutheran Distinctions Revisited," in *Global Perspectives on the Reformation: Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics*, ed. Anne Burghardt and Simone Sinn (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 31–41.

2. See Bernd Oberdorfer, "Aus der Klausur ins 'normale Leben': Reformatorische Leitbildtransformationen," in *Reformation heute, Bd. 5: Menschenbilder und Lebenswirklichkeiten*, ed. Bernd Oberdorfer and Eva Matthes (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 32–44.

pointed out that the Reformation enhanced the prestige of secular life. For instance, the Reformers abolished the distinction between “clergy” and “laity,” claiming that one status or rank in Christianity is based on common baptism. They therefore declined a “two-tiered ethics,” which restricted the “normal” Christian to the ten commandments, whereas monks and clergy, the “perfect” Christians, were dignified by additionally observing the *consilia evangelica*, the “evangelical counsels,” that is, poverty, chastity, and obedience. Luther insisted that every Christian is liberated and challenged to practise love in everyday life, be it in the church or in the secular world. This resulted in a new esteem of the worldly professions, which were now also regarded as “vocations.”

As to its historical effect, this new assessment of social life was and still is judged in very different ways. On the one hand, it has been noted that the theological quasi “upgrading” of the worldly professions implied an expansion of the “sphere of holiness.” Therefore, it has been remarked that while the Reformers closed down the cloisters, they turned the whole world into a monastery. On the other hand, exactly the same phenomenon has been interpreted as an important step toward secularization. This can be meant critically as well as affirmatively. Critics such as Charles Taylor³ have emphasized that by evening out the difference between clergy and laity and abolishing many forms of religious life (e.g., monastic vows, relics, processions, pilgrimage, and veneration of saints) the Reformers sobered up the world, eliminated the specific sphere of religion, and made religion increasingly invisible because it diffused into society and eventually was indistinguishable from it. Others insist that secularization established a world in which religion would find its proper place, precisely because it lost its comprehensive authority and only retained responsibility for its own, intrinsically religious affairs, and that the Reformation played a significant role in this process. Thus, they claim, secularization should be appreciated by religion itself because it helped to give God what is God’s and Caesar what is Caesar’s.

As to the ethical implications of the Reformers’ theology, it can be clearly seen that their emphasis on *distinguishing* church and world did not intend to withdraw Christians from worldly life. Certainly, in its historical origins, the Reformation started with a critique: first, of the profanation of the church and its perversion into an institution with worldly structures, interests, and purposes; and, second, of the monetization of salvation evident in the selling of indulgences. From the beginning, thus, the Reformation fought against the confusion between and combination of religion and economics or politics. Reformation meant returning the church to its primary and proper form and function of spreading the gospel, which the Reformers felt to be obscured by this blending

3. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

of religion and politics. Yet, by distinguishing the church from the “world,” the Reformers did not want to isolate church from “world” but rather to enable the church again to serve the “world.” Reformation, moreover, implied the diagnosis of crisis in society and the intention to reform society. Luther was convinced his Reformation of the church would result in a reform of society.

Reformation meant distinction. But distinction did not mean separation or isolation. On the contrary, it meant identifying differences in order to establish relations. The most famous distinctions with reference to ethics developed during the Lutheran Reformation are the distinction between “law and gospel” and the “two realms.” In the following, I would like to show that both are intended to identify the church in its specific function, including its relations to the “world.” Moreover, they are supposed to display the real dignity of the “world” in light of the gospel, and to indicate basic guidelines for a Christian way of dealing with it.

Law and Gospel

Whereas the distinction between the two realms marks the outward threshold of the church as it were, distinguishing law and gospel defines the church’s inner identity. For Luther, this distinction seemed so crucial that he wrote, “Therefore, whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.”⁴ For Luther, the confusion between law and gospel was at the root of the Roman as well as the Anabaptist fallacy. According to him, the Roman church made the gospel a law by demanding human works as a prerequisite for salvation – but also by offering the ordinary people affordable ways to fulfil God’s demand (because this made salvation look as if it were for sale). According to Luther, the Anabaptists converted the gospel into a legal code for the Christian community, thus turning salvation into a human action. In his famous autobiographical retrospective of 1545,⁵ Luther recalled how he had suffered, knowing that he could never be righteous before the righteous God, until he understood that true righteousness “lives by a gift of God, namely by faith,”⁶ in other words: not law but gospel.

From this basic insight follows a veritable spate of consequences, for the church as well as for how Christians perceived society. First, given that salvation

4. Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians, 1535,” in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 115.

5. See Martin Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 34. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia, Pa.: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 323–38.

6. *Ibid.*, 337.

is a pure gift, it cannot and need not be merited or bought. This implied a critique of the medieval system of repentance, which made absolution dependent on acts of contrition beforehand and satisfaction after. Furthermore, it included a critique of the church imposing new rules, such as fasting, on Christians without biblical legitimation while claiming them to be indispensable for eternal salvation. Thus, to concentrate on the preaching of the gospel required a restructuring of the church itself. As to the content of the preaching, it also required a new emphasis on freedom, because preaching the gospel means communicating salvation as a free gift that liberates Christians from the stressful pressure of having to be agents of their own salvation.

Yet, to distinguish law and gospel does not mean to eliminate the law. Actually, within the Lutheran movement, certain theologians, the “Antinomists,” claimed that for Christians the law has lost its relevance. But Luther strongly objected to this idea. The law would only be superfluous if we already lived in a state of perfection. We still live in a state of transition in which our certainty of being saved is always at risk of getting lost because of the lacking evidence of salvation. Thus we often fall back into our old life. We are “justified and sinners at the same time” (*simul iustus ac peccator*). Therefore we are still in need of the law in its, as Lutheran dogmatics puts it, “theological use” (*usus theologicus* or *usus elencticus*). Here the law does not function as a way of salvation but as a way to salvation. It is a reminder of our lacking perfection. It is a mirror that shows us we still do not comply with God’s will and are not able to overcome our inability ourselves. The law gives us a realistic, disenchanting picture of ourselves. We are neither what we ought to be nor what we wish to be, and we cannot make ourselves what we ought and wish to be either. The law leads us into a salutary desperation.

“Salutary desperation,” to be sure, does not mean pleasure in feeling pain or, even worse, God’s pleasure in causing pain. The desperation is not salutary in itself, only insofar as it directs the hope to the gospel. The law, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, was “our disciplinarian until Christ came” (Gal. 3:24). In other words, the law is salutary because it cuts off all human-made ways to salvation, leaving only the way God chose by sending his son.

But besides this “negative function,” the law has also a positive one, which makes it relevant to social ethics. The Lutheran Reformers called it the *usus politicus*, the “political use” of the law. This use refers to the order of society. The Reformers were convinced that it is part of God’s will to preserve and sustain God’s creation and to keep culture as well as nature, and thus also human societies, in good order. God’s law provides orientation for individual and social life and God introduced institutions to establish, maintain, and safeguard the

social order based on the law. With reference to Romans 1–3, the Reformers regarded the law as being universal and thus as the binding authority for every human being. Whereas the Jews had the privilege to receive the law in a written form, all other people have the same law inscribed in their hearts. Luther therefore saw himself entitled to change the text of the Decalogue for use in his “Small Catechism.” He emended all allusions to the specific context of Old Testament Israel and replaced it with general terms, such as “holiday” instead of “Sabbath.” Of course, “law” then only entailed those parts of the Torah that did not particularly refer to the certain cultic practices but, rather, were applicable to universal ethics.

Evidently, the law can have this “political” function only because it is not the gospel. It only orientates the exterior life but does not (and is not entitled to) touch the soul. It has neither the competence nor the responsibility for spreading the gospel. The law in this use is valid not exclusively for Christians, but for every human being. Luther therefore sometimes polemically reminded the Christian nobility that the Turkish sultans apparently governed their state better than they did.

With the *usus politicus* of the law, we have already touched on the other basic distinction of the Lutheran Reformation – the “two realms.”

The “Two Realms” or “Regiments”

Remarkably enough, the term *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* (doctrine of the two realms) stems from not earlier than 20th century. It was critically introduced by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth. Barth claimed that the distinction between God’s realm (or Christ’s) and the worldly realm resulted in (or even aimed at) the church’s withdrawal from the world. By ascribing autonomy to the worldly spheres of politics, economy or culture, the Lutheran tradition, in Barth’s view, diminished the “reign of Christ” (*Königsherrschaft Christi*), which extended to the whole cosmos. Thus, it participated in the idea of modernity, which Barth interpreted as a process of emancipation from God.

In any case, this is a caricature of the Reformers’ intentions. The distinction between the two realms was not meant to qualify God’s caring attitude toward the world. Although the term *realm* might suggest a spatial separation of two different spaces that are situated side by side and have nothing in common, the alternative (and more appropriate) terminology of the two regiments (*zwei Regimente*) shows that the distinction identifies two different ways in which God governs God’s one world, or the two different ways in which God cares for God’s one world: on the one hand by revealing and spreading God’s *euangelion*; on

the other, by establishing a stable order that warrants peace in social life. Luther calls the first one God's "proper work" (*opus proprium*) because spreading the gospel purely expresses God's very essence, which is love. The second one is God's "extrinsic work" (*opus alienum*) because it is only necessary for external reasons, namely human sin that causes disorder and destruction in society. It is the political authority's God-given duty then to fight disorder and to establish, organize and safeguard a stable and peaceful order of human beings' external life. Of course this is also motivated by God's love because it is part of God's *conservatio mundi* (conservation of the world): God does not leave us alone with the mess that we have created ourselves. But it is not a direct expression of God's love, for the authorities must have the competence and ability to oblige people to obey the rules or to use force in order to overcome violence. This does not always look like an act of love.

From the distinction of the two realms, also, follows a spate of consequences, both for the church and the world. For the church this implies a critique of any attempt to foster the spreading of the gospel by means of external coercion. The famous words of Augsburg Confession, article 28, namely that the bishops should preach the gospel *sine vi humana, sed verbo*, "without human force, but rather through God's word alone," exactly describe the character of the church's *opus proprium*: convincing, not coercing. The Reformers trusted in the convincing power of God's word itself. We may wonder why this did not immediately lead to the idea of religious freedom and tolerance and may recall the acts of intolerance and religious coercion that the Reformers were able and willing to perform: the expulsion of Karlstadt, the persecution of the "Anabaptists," the uninhibited polemics against the Jews, to name but a few.

Seen from today's perspective, this is an obvious self-contradiction. However, I believe that in these cases the Reformers did not argue with the *opus proprium* but with the *opus alienum*. They thought that the propagation of alternative interpretations of the gospel (not to speak of heresies) would confuse the people and lead to controversial debates that could jeopardize peace in society. So they considered it to be a part of the state's responsibility to protect the citizens from this confusion. Unlike today, in the 16th century the peaceful coexistence of people of different religious backgrounds seemed impossible. Moreover, the legal system had also not yet been truly disconnected from religion and therefore heresy: for example, contesting the doctrine of the Trinity or the baptism of children constituted a crime that had to be prosecuted. The *sine vi humana sed verbo* unfolded its full potential only centuries after the Reformation.

As to the world, it is crucial to recognize that the Reformers distinguished between the two realms or regiments but were not dualistic: they did not regard

the *civitas terrena* as *civitas diaboli*. Of course, Luther in particular, reckoned with the power of the devil. In his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” he even called him “this world’s prince,” adding that “on earth is not his equal.” This, however, does not mean that the world is a sphere beyond God’s power that Christians have to flee. The Lutheran Reformation did not support escapism or “quietism” as has often been argued. On the contrary, this world continues to be governed by God, and God limits the devil’s power by making rules and creating institutions to safeguard the good order of the social world. Therefore Christians are entitled and even obliged to participate in the duty of maintaining the social order. This is clearly expressed in article 16 of the Augsburg Confession:

Concerning civic affairs they teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God and that Christians are permitted to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take an oath when required by magistrates, to take a wife, to be given in marriage.⁷

The confession explicitly condemns first “the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil offices,”⁸ and second “those who locate evangelical perfection not in the fear of God and in faith but in abandoning civil responsibilities”⁹ (addressed to the claim that monastic life constitutes the perfect form of Christian life). Repeatedly, the confession insists that the gospel aims at “justice of the heart” and does not demand an alternative lifestyle that competes with (and retreats from) the “civil ordinances” such as state or family.

The confession almost inconspicuously hints at the Reformers’ theological assessment of civic life. It is condensed in the word “love.” The gospel itself – as the confession puts it – “requires . . . the exercise of love in these ordinances.” “Civic affairs,” in other words, are the place where (and not beyond which) Christians are to exercise love of neighbour. To engage in civic affairs, thus, is a matter of Christian love. This does not only mean that Christians are requested to practise love also when dealing with civic affairs. Rather, it implies that civic affairs are institutions of love themselves because God established them to give

7. “The Augsburg Confession – Latin Text – Article XVI: Civic Affairs,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2000), 49.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

social life a stable order that frames and structures people's peaceful lives. This is why Lutherans have always emphasized loyalty to the state's authority and institutions. It is well known that this has been criticized as "Lutheran authoritarianism," which has led Lutherans to long-term heteronomy. As a result, Lutheran churches were dependent on the state and prevented from developing or fostering a culture of civil society. Historically, we must admit that there is some truth to this, particularly in Germany. From a more systematic perspective, I see considerable potential in the idea that human well-being requires stable institutions (or institutions of stability) and that loyalty to these institutions – taking responsibility for their maintenance and further development – is an expression of Christian love.

This idea has, of course, to be adapted to the structures and standards of modern society. When article 16 of Augsburg Confession states, "Consequently, Christians owe obedience to their magistrates and laws,"¹⁰ we need to consider what this implies today in light of the structures of modern societies. These, according to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann,¹¹ are no longer hierarchical and mono-centered but "functionally differentiated"; and within them, the political system is much more participatory than it was in the 16th century. Obeying the magistrates may rather mean being loyal to the procedures of democratic decision-making (e.g., accepting the results of elections, being willing to stand for office). The confession also mentions the law. Obeying the law today might include defending "the right to have rights"¹² (namely, the civil or human rights that are incorporated into many constitutions) and fighting corruption and other illegal forms of taking advantage.

It is essential to see that the confession does not demand unconditional "obedience to their magistrates and laws." Repeatedly, it speaks of "just punishment" or "just wars" and of "lawful civil ordinances"; and thus, by implementing the category of justice, it indicates that not every law and magistrate may be regarded as the "good works of God." Explicitly, moreover, after the phrase, "Christians owe obedience to their magistrates and laws," it adds, "except when commanded to sin. For then they owe greater obedience to God than to human beings (Acts 5 [:29])."¹³

Luther was very hesitant with this restriction. To him, the order in itself was such a blessing that he was willing to prefer a bad order to the chaos that protests

10. *Ibid.*, 51

11. See Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984).

12. Hannah Arendt, Imperialism, part 2 of *The Origins of Imperialism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich [1951] 1968), 177.

13. "Augsburg Confession," 51.

and rebellions were likely to cause. In case of necessary resistance, he therefore preferred passive martyrdom to active opposition. But this has remained a matter of debate within the Lutheran tradition. In any case, qualifying obedience indicates an “anti-totalitarian impulse” that fits very well with the distinction of the “two realms.” The “realm of the world” is not the sphere of perfection and absolute decisions, but the sphere of imperfection and preferences.

In his papers on “Ethics,”¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer appropriately introduced the category of the “penultimate” to characterize the questions of worldly life, the sphere of ethical decisions. These “penultimate” questions do not determine the “ultimate” question of eternal salvation, but they have their own dignity precisely because of that. For the Christian faith, they are neither a field of indifference (anything goes) nor a space of permanent *status confessionis*. Worldly life is supposed to witness, express and reflect the faith of the “heart” through the “bodily” works of love. The sphere of “works” very seldom requires an exclusive “either/or.” Mostly it is a sphere of “more or less,” that means, it implies a spectrum of possibilities that are “more or less” appropriate expressions of Christian love. It cannot be decided in advance what is more and what is less. It depends on the context, which might also change. This idea is fundamental to Paul’s ethic: “everything is lawful, but not everything builds up,” and “test everything; hold fast to what is good.”¹⁵

What does this mean for political or ethical statements of the church? I would like to illustrate this by referring to one famous, highly controversial example of how Luther dealt with questions of social ethics: his notorious statements during the Peasants’ War.

Commenting on Politics: Luther on the Peasants’ War

Given that today the church is frequently advised to remain silent *in rebus politicis* because this is supposedly not its business, it is remarkable in itself that Luther commented on politics. Of course, he was a public figure, whose every statement was collected (see the *Tischreden*) and disseminated. Yet, he did not simply present his opinions as a “public intellectual” (as we would put it today), but deliberately as a theologian. Consistently, with his concept of the “two realms,” he did not claim the role of ultimate referee in matters of culture,

14. See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2005).

15. See Bernd Oberdorfer, “A New Life in Christ: Pauline Ethics, and its Lutheran Reception,” in *Pauline Hermeneutics: Exploring the “Power of the Gospel,”* LWF Studies 2016/3, ed. Eve-Marie Becker and Kenneth Mtata (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 159; 163.

politics, or economy. He emphasized that the church has no superior knowledge in these spheres. And he also made clear that the Bible does not offer concrete prescriptions for how to build a house, govern a state, educate children, run a business, etc. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to speak out on social conflicts and political crises. Of particular significance are his public statements during the Peasants' War of 1525.¹⁶

Luther felt impelled to comment for several reasons. First, the peasants relied on his reformatory idea of "Christian freedom" when demanding freedom from their lords. Thus, these lords could accuse him of being responsible for the riots. Second, the peasants derived their political and economic demands directly from the gospel. Third, they fought for their issue in a non-legal, violent way, disobeying the authorities and destabilizing the order of society. Therefore, although he regarded the peasants' complaints about being treated unjustly by their lords as mostly legitimate and supported many of their political demands, he believed that the peasants were wrong in at least two respects. They confused law and gospel by making the gospel law, and they disdained the rules and principles that are valid in God's worldly realm by violently rebelling against the authorities and changing order into chaos. So, on the one hand, he criticized the nobility for treating the peasants badly and strongly requested them to comply with the peasants' legitimate demands, while, on the other, he emphatically challenged them to stave off the rebellion with the harshest possible means. He even reminded them that they did God's work when using their swords against the rebelling peasants. In other words, he urged them to use force in the name of God.

We might tend to say, *si tacuisses* – if only you had remained silent. But even in these notorious, horrible, rude and almost blasphemous words we can still discover the Reformer's positive assessment of the world as a sphere of God's caring and conserving power. Luther's concern was to protect and to stabilize the social order essential for a peaceful life. He was convinced that in a world contaminated by sin it is sometimes necessary to use force. Yet, in contrast to his aggressive verbal outburst against the peasants, he strictly bound the use of force to the law and legitimacy. Some years later, in his 1532 series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, he explicitly stated that princes who start a war without a legitimate reason should be called "children of the devil" rather than "children of God," and he requested people who suffered injustice to go to court

16. See esp. Martin Luther, "Admonition to Peace Referring to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants' Union in Swabia," in *WA* 18, 291–334, *LW* vol. 46, 3–43; "Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants," in *WA* 18, 357–61, *LW*, vol. 46, 45–55; "Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants," in *WA* 18, 384–401, *LW* vol. 46, 57–85.

instead of taking revenge individually.¹⁷ In principle, this is consistent with his statements on the Peasants' War. He criticized the peasants for not following the path of the law to pursue their concern, and exclusively addressed the state authority to end the rebellion with force. However, by legitimizing unlimited force, he damaged his cause, and for centuries Lutherans have been confronted with the image of being devoted servants to the state, unable to raise a critical voice and to put limits to the authority of the state. It took centuries for Lutherans to clearly recognize that the concept of the "two realms" allowed them to support the emergence of a civil society that would resist the totalitarian excesses of the state.

This example might warn Lutherans to be cautious in their political statements. These statements are not straight from heaven. They are not automatically "prophetic voices." They are not *iure divino*. They are always at risk of eventually being proven to be false. They have to be continuously re-evaluated in light of the principles of Lutheran social ethics. These principles not only allow for but even require an active involvement of Lutherans and the Lutheran churches in the processes of developing a society, "in which justice dwells." The concept of the "two realms" does not prevent but rather encourages this involvement, precisely because Christians cannot save the world – they can merely engage with it.

Some Concluding Reflections on Moral Discernment in Lutheran Churches Today

What follows from this historical recollection of the Lutheran reformation for the current context of moral discernment in Lutheran churches? The first is that although the doctrine of the two realms encourages Christians to engage in building up a good and just order of society, it limits the church's competence to prescribe moral norms. This applies even more so in modern societies where church and state are separated and where the churches have lost the role of supreme referees of moral life – if they ever had it. Moreover, a distinction has to be made between, on the one hand, public statements of the church with reference to political, social, or economic issues and, on the other hand, internal church decision-making on moral issues that are relevant for the "*leiturgia, martyria* and *diakonia*" of the church itself and have impact on the church members' life.

17. See Bernd Oberdorfer, "How Do We Deal with a Challenging Text," in *To All the Nations. Lutheran Hermeneutics and the Gospel of Matthew*, LWF Studies 2015/2, ed. Kenneth Mtata and Craig Koester (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 75–88.

Regarding public statements, it has to be clarified (1) who is entitled to speak in the name of the church, and (2) whether and how these statements have a binding authority for the church members.

Who is entitled to speak? Official statements of the church on social issues have to be authorized by the church's governing bodies. In German Lutheran churches (*Landeskirchen*), for example, synods and bishops represent the church and therefore are entitled to raise the church's voice in the public sphere. On national level, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) mandates commissions of experts to prepare statements that – once accepted – are published by authority of the EKD council as being the leading church board. These statements, however, do not claim to be normative decisions but rather memorandums (*Denkschriften, Orientierungshilfen*) which develop and evaluate arguments and highlight aspects that, from a Protestant perspective, should be included in the public discourse. They mirror the internal pluralism in Protestant churches and, respecting this pluralism, aim to formulate a consensus based on common convictions.

Do these statements have a binding authority? These memorandums are not only addressed to the public but also to the church members themselves. They do not enforce a normative church position that has to be shared by any member but rather aim to foster the formation of the individuals' conscience to help them to orient themselves responsibly. Thus, they try to establish a common space of moral deliberation – a space that, of course, has limitations but that is wide enough not to preclude dissenting voices such as, for example, of those who are not being Christian any longer. In any case, the church members' participation in processes of political decision-making is not mediated by the church. The moral discernment of Christian individuals with respect to a social or political issue does not depend on the church's decisions on that issue. For example, a church member can vote in favour of opening shops on Sundays, even though the church has strongly opposed it in public statements.

Yet sometimes churches have to decide on moral issues that concern their own liturgical and congregational life. For example, should divorced men or women be allowed to marry again in a wedding service? Should the church offer wedding services for homosexual couples who already live in a civil marriage? Should people who deliberately left the church be given a church funeral? In questions like these, churches cannot abstain from deciding, although the discussion sometimes is (and remains) very controversial. Churches, in these cases, normally try to establish processes of open dialogues, engaging as many members as possible in order to find a consensus and excluding as few members as possible. This consensus, once found and decided upon by the church

governing boards, is binding for church officials like pastors or congregational councils. But even in these cases (especially regarding same-sex marriage) the church allows for individual dissent based on reasons of conscience.

This does not mean that the church does not stand for any norms or criteria of moral discernment with reference to individual and social life. Lutheran ethics is not an equivalent of “anything goes.” But these criteria or basic convictions are located on a more general level and include concepts like justice, love, and good order, which have to be adapted to concrete contexts. However, this adaptation, first, always refers to changing circumstances and therefore may change itself during history; second, it does not depend on the authority of church governing boards or persons but rather on the responsibility and conscience of any church member; and third, it makes space for a broad spectrum of concrete solutions instead of prescribing the “one and only” way.