

“I hear a language, I had not known” (Ps 81:5)

Finding Words and Discovering the Future of the Church¹

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Problems of the Church are always problems of its language. All too often, churches are stuck in their language, remain seated in the coziness of their lingual comfort zones, and live in the idea that they “have” the Gospel and should only think about ways of “distributing” it to those “outside.” This fundamental mistake of a misunderstood concept of “Communication of the Gospel” is analyzed in the paper. The alternative is Luther’s search for a “nova sprach” (new language) or – as it might be called – a dynamic linguistic Emmaus-way of the Church, which expects the event of the Gospel in the dialectics of inside and outside, old and new, tradition and innovation, ritual and creativity.

Too busy... Or: Stuck in our Linguistic Comfort Zone

“*Church Underway*” – a symposium like the one in Prague, April 13th, 2021, remembering two great Practical theologians of Charles University, Josef Smolík, and Pavel Filipi, is, in my view, something like a necessary interruption in busy and exhausting times. We work in times of a global crisis, we react to the demands of a virus and its mutations – and somehow, we are all very busy. We are busy in our (German) churches asking ourselves what is responsible for teaching and pastoral care, if and how we can worship in physical co-presence, and what services we can celebrate in the digital world.² We have to react – and we know that whatever

1 The following text is a slightly revised version of a lecture delivered at the Symposium “Church Underway: Visions and Perspectives for Navigating the 21st Century”, organized by the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague on Tuesday, April 13th, 2021. I am very grateful for the invitation to deliver a lecture at the Symposium and for the chance to publish it here.

2 Cf. Alexander Deeg, Es wird nicht mehr sein wie vorher: Überlegungen zum Gottesdienstfeiern in Zeiten der Corona-Pandemie und danach, *Pastoraltheologie* 109 (2020), 417–435; id., „Solches tut ...“ – Sieben Thesen zur Abendmahlfeier in Corona-Zeiten, *Pastoraltheologie* 110 (2021), 123–138.

we do and however we decide, there will be people who are not satisfied with what we do.³

We are busy. 75 years ago, German theologian Wolfgang Trillhaas described the problem of pastors in the times in the immediate aftermath of World War II:

The states of emergency are growing. And what follows is that people don't have time anymore – which is deadly for all clerical/sacred things. To have “time” is nothing that can be counted by having a look at our watches. It is about calm, inner concentration and silence, prayer. There is no pastoral and spiritual care without having time, but only care; there is no dialogue without having time, but only ephemeral listening. Without having time, there is no preaching, but only talking.⁴

Especially in times of crisis, we need – according to Trillhaas – *time* to reflect, to pray, be silent – and escape our deeply ground-in language, with which we just continue *talking* without *preaching*.

At least in German churches, I realize a complex combination of various activities, some helplessness and perplexity, and fear – especially fear of losing influence and relevance. In summer 2019, the University of Freiburg published a study showing that by 2060 the number of church members of the two so-called “big” churches, the Catholic and the Protestant Church, will only be half of what it is today.⁵ In the years before, especially in the times of the Celebration of 500 Years of Reformation, churches wanted to show, how important they are for the functioning of our society – and then, in the first real crisis after the anniversary, in the Coronapandemic, they were not even judged to be “relevant for the system of our society” (“systemrelevant”). This was a humiliation and led to an even acce-

3 Cf. Alexander Deeg, Gottesdienst in ‚Corona-Zeiten‘ oder: Drei Variationen zum Thema *Präsenz*, *Evangelische Theologie* 81 (2021), 136–151.

4 This is my own English translation of the German text, which reads: “Die Notstände wachsen uns über den Kopf. Und dann tritt die Folge ein, die für alle geistlichen Dinge tödlich ist: man hat keine Zeit. „Zeithaben“ bemißt sich freilich nicht nach der Uhr. Es ist eine Sache der äußeren Ruhe, der inneren Sammlung und Stille, des Gebets. Ohne dieses Zeithaben gibt es keine Seelsorge, höchstens Fürsorge; ohne dieses Zeithaben gibt es keine Zwiesprache, höchstens flüchtiges Hinhören. Ohne dieses Zeithaben gibt es keine Predigt, höchstens ein Reden.” Wolfgang Trillhaas, Einleitung zum ersten Heft der Göttinger Predigtmeditationen, published again in: *Göttinger Predigtmeditationen* 75 (2020/21), 6–8, 6.

5 Cf. https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/projektion-2060-ekd-vdd-factsheet-2019.pdf [06.08.2021].

lerated „„activity of communication. Churches wanted to show that they are still there and that they are helpful.

It seems to me that one of the themes of Josef Smolík, Josef Hromádka, and others is of new relevance for our churches in Germany: What is Church like in a post-Constantinian era, in which Church has lost all its privileges and in which Church is no longer automatically connected with the state's system but has to learn anew what it might mean when Paul appealed to the brothers and sisters in Rome not to be “conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2)?

Already in the last years, we were more and more driven out of our ecclesial comfort zones, as the number of church members declined, and especially in my Eastern German context, we face the results of forty years of forced secularism in the German Democratic Republic. But still, our Church taxes increased over the last years. So “crisis” is still a relative dimension in our German churches.

I will approach our Church's crisis from a perspective that may seem like a side issue or marginal problem: the question of language. Which language do churches, do church officials, do pastors, do church members use in their communication. How do they, *how* do we communicate?

My thesis is that we are often stuck in some kind of *lingual comfort zone*, and Church's problem is a language problem. On the one hand, it is mirrored in its language, and on the other hand, the language churches use produces and reproduces our Church's specific problem again and again.

In recent years, quite a few people from “outside” analyzed and criticized Church's language. I just mention two popular books: Erik Flügge, working as a communication consultant, criticizes a church that is dying of its language – a language, which is old, repetitious, somehow stuck in conventions and clichés, and far away from everyday life experiences.⁶ And the two journalists Feddersen and Gessler speak about an anemic church language – and refer to some of the same problems.⁷

Of course, these are generalizations. And this critique is somehow unfair, as it does not consider many attempts of pastors and preachers to

6 Cf. Erik Flügge, *Der Jargon der Betroffenheit. Wie die Kirche an ihrer Sprache verreckt*, München: Kösel-Verlag, 2016.

7 Cf. Jan Feddersen – Philipp Gessler, *Phrase unser: Die blutleere Sprache der Kirche*, München: Claudius Verlag, 2020.

work on their preaching and find a new language. But in two aspects, I would agree that these critiques are correct and helpful:

1. First of all, there is some conventionality of Church's language. It is some kind of a specific sociolect, which is typical for churches – and which is a question not only of semantics but also of syntax and speech melody/intonation.
2. Secondly, there is a deeper theological dimension. We are – as Martin Luther said in his well-known phrase – simultaneously justified and sinner. According to Paul, this also means: Christian identity is in a peculiar situation “between” the old world we are still in, and God's new world. We – says Paul – already died with Christ, but only hope to be resurrected with him (Rom 6:3–5). In this “in-between world,” our language is part of the old age, of the principalities and powers that hold this old age captive (and Trillhaas might say that all our breathless activity is part of the structures of this old age!).⁸ This existence “in-between” means for Martin Luther that we are and have to be on our constant way towards a new language – searching for it, longing for it, praying for it, hoping for it.

In a sermon on the fourth Sunday of Advent, 22.12.1532, Martin Luther preached on 1Cor 15 and recognized that Paul – by trying to find words for the resurrection of Christ – deconstructs the old language and finds a new one, a new metaphor. We say: someone died. But Paul does not say “died” but says: “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable” (1Cor 15:42). He speaks about “sowing” and not dying. And this new language changes everything:

Sed apud nos Christianos kentlich und gengig sey sprach, quod non heisse gestorben, begraben, sed auff himlich deudsch und recht geseet. Sic deus, Angeli loquantur, et Christiani sollen die zungen anders schaben et oculos leuchtern, quia est nova sprach in Paulo.⁹

8 Cf. especially the works of US-American homiletician Charles Campbell and his South-African colleague Johan Cilliers: Campbell – Cilliers, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco (TX): Baylor University Press, 2012.

9 WA 36,644.

In a rough English translation:

But among us Christians, we use a language, which does not say “died,” “buried,” but in a heavenly German language and veraciously “sown.” So does God and so do the angels speak, and Christians should shape their tongues differently and open their eyes, as this is the nova sprach [the new language] in Paul.

It is all about shaping the tongues differently to find the way to a new perception of reality. This is what Luther and the other reformers tried to do when they translated the Bible, and this is what they tried to do in their enthusiastic rediscovery of the sermon.

Especially as we are so busy, there is the danger that we remain in our old world and our old language, which stabilizes hierarchies and power structures, which builds a wall between us (the Church) and the others (the world), which reproduces a sociolect and prevents us from doing what Church is called to do: to go out, to leave the comfort zone and to learn to speak a “heavenly language.”

Gregory Orr wrote:¹⁰

River inside the river.
World within the world.
All we have is words
To reveal the rose
That the rose obscures.

Gregory Orr’s poem is – of course – open in its interpretation. I see in it the power of words – to reveal and to obscure, to help people to see *and* to hinder them.

Transferred to what churches do, it is essential to note that language is not just some aspect of our work and duty, but it is what Church is about. The Church is a phenomenon of communication, and communication is bound to language. So Church reform is always a reform of language. In other words: Church reform means discovering a new language that is somehow there and given – a “gift” by God – and which is not (only) the result of my abilities, creativities, or (worse) marketing efforts.¹¹

¹⁰ Gregory Orr, *River inside the River: Three Lyric Sequences*, New York et al.: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013, 124.

¹¹ Actually, there were quite a lot of theologians who tried to find new ways and who connected the Church’s problem with a problem of language. I just mention Dietrich

The Problem of the “Communication of the Gospel”, the “Event of the Gospel,” and the Emmaus-Way of the Church

The term “communication of the Gospel,” in German: “Kommunikation des Evangeliums” is very prominent in German churches and Practical Theology.¹² German Practical Theologian and Church Reformer Ernst Lange (1927–1974) prominently introduced the term. Communication of the Gospel was a dynamic program for Church Reform in the 1960s. It not only substituted the term “Proclamation of the Gospel,” which was dominant in the Word-of-God-Theology, but also stood for a broader movement of reform in many aspects of church life. The main idea was to overcome the traditional model of an ordained pastor proclaiming truths of faith from the pulpit to a listening congregation who has nothing to say. It was to overcome the repetition of the “correct” dogmatic formula that had very little or nothing to do with the everyday life of people, with everyday problems, with faith experiences, or experiences of doubt. Proclamation stood for the repetition of conventionality and for the transformation of preaching into some ritual (which might at its best stabilize people in a particular security or identity system but is far from being an authentic expression of belief and doubt, faith and questions).

So the dynamic program of “Communication of the Gospel” meant to find new ways of integrating people in a *dialogical* communication. Dialogical sermons were delivered in many churches; sermons as discussions and dialogues. Participation was (like in Catholicism at the same time) one of the main ideas in worship – participation of different people with their distinct voices. Groups were installed to help the pastors prepare the sermons, and not only pastors delivered sermons, but also “lay people.” It was discovered that “Communication of the Gospel” takes place in many different ways and forms: in the media, in schools, kindergartens, and elders’ homes, in grassroots-movements etc. This was the time, when e.g. Josef Smolík wrote about Church in a secularized world, about a Church with-

Bonhoeffer, who stressed the importance of a non-religious interpretation and was rediscovered (among others) by Josef Smolík in many of his writings.

12 Cf. Michael Domsgen – Bernd Schröder (eds.), *Kommunikation des Evangeliums. Leitbegriff der Praktischen Theologie*, Arbeiten zur Praktischen Theologie 57, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014.

out privileges, and about the overcoming of the Constantine Era in church history.

In recent years, German Practical Theologian Christian Grethlein structures his whole Practical Theology around this term in a compelling way.¹³ But at the same time, “Communication of the Gospel” became a problematic and dysfunctional term in many contexts and might actually lead to the opposite of what it once intended. The main problem seems to be a shift that sees the “Gospel” as the *object* of communication. In many reflections on Church’s duty, the term is used precisely in this sense: We somehow “have” the Gospel – and our question is, how to communicate it to different people in different social milieus and via various media. Especially the months of the Corona crisis showed the immense popularity of a reduced way of using the term “Communication of the Gospel.” There is a “Gospel,” and as we can’t communicate it in classical forms, we have to do it in different media.

This reduction may lead to one of our Church’s biggest problems – and throws us back to times before the establishment of the formula “Communication of the Gospel.” There are two main aspects of this problem: (1) It creates an inside-outside dualism: Here, inside the Church, are those who know the Gospel – and somewhere outside, there is a growing number of people to whom it must be communicated (as they may not have heard about it before or may wish to listen to it anew). New authority structures are established (and paradoxically, again pastors enter into a central role). (2) It makes the Gospel static and transforms it into a set of convictions and beliefs. It loses its dynamic – and its personality. The Gospel is – in a Protestant definition – nothing else than Jesus Christ himself, whose salvific presence is experienced whenever and wherever the Holy Spirit wills.

This is why I would suggest to stop using the formula at least for a while and speak alternatively about the “Event of the Gospel” which can be expected and experienced in different communicative settings and arrangements – in “classical,” ritual worship services as well as in a dialogue with someone for whom church is a strange gathering of strange people and who (like many people in our secularized Western countries) forgot what they may have forgotten when they lost or left religion long ago. We

13 Cf. Christian Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2012.

will find new words – and we will discover Church’s future *and a new language in these events of the Gospel.*

Expecting the Gospel means longing for a *nova sprach*, escaping the conventionalities and expecting Christ somewhere out there (as he said himself in Matthew 25). Because – again: Christ is not confined to a church building and institution, but is present in the world – another perspective Josef Smolík stressed in many of his papers. He writes: “The Christian congregation can never be a society closed towards the world if it lives from the coming Lord and His promises.”¹⁴

There are manifold “constellations” in which we expect the Gospel again and again – constellations which are more or less closely related to the official Church and its institution: a shared Holy Communion via Zoom, a social media (Instagram) pastor and her communication, a Pope of Rome finding completely new forms amid the pandemic and praying alone on St. Peter’s Square in Rome,¹⁵ groups of youths sitting together and talking about “God and the world,” churches which are open for homeless people during cold winter days and nights, etc.

Expecting the Gospel – this does not mean that we have to try to find the “right” language “for” different people (as we would have to in a rhetoric of persuasion), but it is about finding language *with* other and different people – in the threshold and in-between-spaces of communication.

There are different Biblical narratives that could form a paradigm for this communication. Of course, Abraham, who leaves everything he has and starts his way with God and with a promise, but nothing else (Gen 12:1–4). He is a permanent paradigm for leaving our ecclesial comfort zones and being on the way.

Another paradigm could be the Exodus and the people of Israel wandering in the desert – not in Egypt anymore, but not yet in the Promised Land. Josef Smolík used this metaphor in a paper from 1970 speaking

14 “Die Gemeinde kann nie eine der Welt gegenüber geschlossene Gesellschaft sein, solange sie von dem kommenden Herrn, von seinen Verheißungen lebt.” – Josef Smolík, *Die Exoduscemeinde*, in: idem, *Erbe im Heute. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Praktischen Theologie und Ökumenik, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982, 133–137, 134f.

15 Cf. also Tomáš Halík, *Die Zeit der leeren Kirchen. Von der Krise zur Vertiefung des Glaubens*, aus dem Tschechischen von Markéta Barth unter Mitarbeit von Benedikt Barth, Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 2021, 13.

about the “Exodus-Church” (Die Exodusgemeinde). He writes: “The Church is a wandering church. It does not turn around its axis but moves forward in all its deeds – towards a new future, towards the coming of the Lord.”¹⁶

In my view, there could also be another Biblical paradigm, and we could speak of the promising Emmaus-way of the Church – thus making use of one of the most encouraging stories about being on the way the Bible tells us.¹⁷ Another great theologian from Prague, Tomáš Halík, uses this story to find perspectives for a Church that is a pilgrim and on its way.¹⁸ Two disciples leave the center, the place of the institutionalized religion, the Temple, and the hierarchy, the power of interpretation. They are on their way, talking with one another. It is interesting that they cognitively “know” everything which can be known. They heard the Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus. But the “correct” words did not change their lives. It is the meeting with a stranger which starts to change everything. It is their openness for a dialogue, which begins with a question of the stranger and continues with their narration about everything that happened and fills their hearts. What Jesus does, is impressive: “Beginning with Mose and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:27). A stranger becomes the interpreter, a stranger on the way confronts the disciples with interpretation – which they do not understand at this very moment. But later, we learn that somehow their hearts burnt within them when they were on the road. But they are so puzzled and so stuck in their “old world” that they do not recognize the one they are talking about.

Just a side-mark: Sometimes it may be the other way round as well: Disciples may be on their way being so busy, having fallen so deeply in love with themselves and Church’s institutionality that they are very well aware that it is Jesus who is there – and their only wish is to get rid of him. Fyodor Dostoevski told this story in his famous parable of the Grand Inquisitor: The Grand Inquisitor – after having arrested Jesus – turns to him and says: “Is it Thou? Thou?” but receiving no answer, he adds at

16 “Die Gemeinde ist eine wandernde Gemeinde. Sie dreht sich nicht um ihre eigene Achse, sondern mit allen ihren Aktionen bewegt sie sich vorwärts, einer neuen Zukunft, der Parusie des Herrn entgegen.” – Smolík, *Die Exodusgemeinde*, 134.

17 Another one could be Acts 8:26–39 [Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch].

18 Cf. Tomáš Halík, *Die Zeit der leeren Kirchen*, 153–160, esp. 159. Cf. also idem, *Theater für Engel. Das Leben als religiöses Experiment*, aus dem Tschechischen von Markéta Barth unter Mitarbeit von Benedikt Barth, Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 2019, 14, and esp. 53–64.

once. ‘Don’t answer; be silent. What canst Thou say, indeed? I know too well what Thou wouldst say. And Thou hast no right to add anything to what Thou hadst said of old. Why, then, art Thou come to hinder us? For Thou hast come to hinder us, and Thou knowest that.’¹⁹ Jesus comes to hinder the Church, and this is why the Grand Inquisitor has to get rid of a God who interferes and disturbs the Church in the way it administers the Gospel and communicates it (perfectly without him!).

But “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (V. 16). What they experience then is a revelation and interruption: “When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight” (V. 30f.). It was kind of a ritual, liturgical reenactment of the Last Supper – and during this ritual, their eyes were opened. The Church on its way may discover Christ who is there – in a stranger on the way, in bread and wine, in a shared meal, in celebrating worship.

An Emmaus way of the Church: leaving the city, meeting strangers, starting conversations. Addressing our concerns (and not “offering what we have”), listening, not trying to persuade others and to produce sense or create meaning; staying together, eating, drinking with the others ... and suddenly realizing that it is Christ whom we meet.²⁰

What is interesting to note here, is the dialectics of old and new, of Biblical texts and current interpretations, of ritual and new perceptions, which I discover in the Emmaus story and which seems important whenever we talk about visions and perspectives for a church on the Emmaus way.

“Nova sprach” and the New Song – or:

The Dialectics of Old and New

“I hear a language, I had not known...” (Ps 81:5). It is disputed in Old Testament studies what actually “happens” in Ps 81. Hans-Joachim Kraus assumes

19 Quoted according to: <https://www.ccel.org/d/dostoevsky/karamozov/htm/book05/chapter05.html> [06.08.2021].

20 I think that this is pretty much what Josef Smolik meant already many decades ago when he spoke about a prophetic Christianity which is dialogically on its way. He stressed that the aim of dialogue should never be to strengthen Christianity’s influence on this world, but should be a real dialogue between Christians and others; cf. Josef Smolik, *Die prophetische Aufgabe der Kirche*, Evangelische Zeitstimmen 56, Hamburg: Reich, 1971, esp. 28.

that the Psalm takes us into the cult of the Temple – and suggests that amidst the Psalm, there is an interruption – and the prophet reminds the congregation of God’s acting in the history of His people and of God’s disappointment with His people. A new language interrupting the cult – and Kraus writes: “Die Gemeinde wird in eine Begegnung mit dem in seinem Worte gegenwärtigen Gott hineingerissen.”²¹ In English: “The congregation is disruptively taken into an encounter with God who is present in His word.”

Also here, we find a dialectical interwovenness of “old” and “new.” In the Emmaus-story the new word of the resurrected Christ on the disciples’ way to Emmaus is a retelling of the prophets and the scriptures, and the new word happens in a reenactment of the Last Supper with the disciples. Luke points to the practices of his readers. It is what they usually do when they gather: they read the Scriptures, they eat and drink and do this in remembrance of Jesus Christ. To hear the new word means here to continue to do what congregations usually do – full of expectance that something new may happen, which is not *our* “new” word, but which means hearing a language I had not known.

The main point is not the content, which is conveyed, but the *encounter*.²² And precisely this is why we have to keep on the way, to keep moving and expecting. Martin Luther says (in my own English translation):

A Christian is never in the state of “having become,” but always in the process of becoming. [...] Therefore: Whoever is a Christian is surely not a Christian. This is to say: Whoever thinks that he already became a Christian is nothing. We are moving towards heaven, but we are not in heaven yet. And as the person who thinks that he is already in heaven will never get there, so is the person who moves towards heaven, already in it. [...] The sum is: You have to grow and continue, but never stand still and relax in your security. [...] Woe to the person who is already completely renewed, as this person has not started yet to be renewed at all. [...]²³

21 Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen*, Bd. 2, BK.AT XV/2, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, ²1961, 567.

22 Cf. Christian Lehnert, *Ins Innere hinaus. Von den Engeln und Mächten*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020.

23 Martin Luther on Mt 13:45f., quoted according to Erwin Mühlhaupt (ed.), *D. Martin Luthers Evangelienauslegungen*, Bd. 2: *Das Matthäusevangelium (Matthäus 3–25)*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ⁴1973, 488. In German: “Ein Christ steht nicht im Worden Sein, sondern im Werden, denn Christus spricht zu ihm bittet, suchet, klopfet an, es heißt nicht ihr habts, ihr habts gefunden, ihr seid hereingekommen, sondern bittet, suchet, klopfet an. Darum, wer ein Christ ist, der ist kein Christ, d. h. wer da meint er sei schon ein Christ geworden, der ist nichts. Denn wir ziehen zum

There is a danger whenever we talk about a new word and a new language: the danger of transforming it into a task we have. And to implement a “task force” which helps us to “translate” the Gospel into the language of the people. And again, we would find ourselves in the problem of the “in-and-out-dynamics” and the problem of a fixation of the Gospel to a set of words, to a certain content. We would not leave our “incurvation in ourselves,” as Martin Luther describes “sin” and “sinful existence.” We would not overcome the incurvation in our language, our conventions.

There is a dialectics, which might lead us into expectancy and fluidity. We can only remain on the way – ready to leave “Egypt,” our institutions, our privileges, our stability, our securities again and again – and expecting the Promised Land, which is not a new form or institution we build and create and establish, but something radically new which remains our hope and our vision.

Some years ago, I made a striking observation when I read the book of Revelation.²⁴ John sees God’s new world, and in the book of Revelation, we become witnesses of a new song which is sung accompanied by extraordinary instruments – the harps of God (Rev 15:2).

² And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. ³ And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!

Himmel, wir sind aber noch nicht im Himmel. Und gleich wie der niemals in den Himmel kommt, der da meint er sei schon drin, so ist auch wiederum der bereits im Himmel, der nach dem Himmel zieht, denn Gott siehet ihn an als wäre er schon darin. Summa summarum: Wachsen und zunehmen muss man, nicht stehen bleiben und in Sicherheit erschlaffen. [...] Weh dem, der schon ganz erneuert ist, [...] denn bei dem hat die Erneuerung ohne Zweifel noch gar nicht angefangen und er hat noch nie geschmeckt, was es heißt ein Christ zu sein. Denn wer begonnen hat, ein Christ zu sein, der meint nicht er sei schon einer, sondern möchte nur gerne ein Christ werden.”

24 Cf. Alexander Deeg, *Das neue Lied und die alten Worte. Plädoyer für eine Erneuerung liturgischen Betens aus der Sprache der Bibel*, *Deutsches Pfarrerberblatt* 107 (2007), 640–645.

⁴Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

The *new* song is a song of Moses and the Lamb – and is nothing else than a combination of traditional words sung in a new context. It is a collage of Biblical verses – as can be seen in the following table:²⁵

3b	Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!	Ps 111:2 Ps 139:14
3c	Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!	Ps 145:17 Dtn 32:4; Jer 10:7
4a	Who will not fear, o Lord, and glorify your name?	Jer 10:7 Ps 106:47
4b-d	For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.	Isa 2:1-5; Mi 4:6-8 Ps 98:9

In some parts of my German ecclesial context, there is something that I would call hypertrophy of “reform.” We had it in the years of the celebration of the commemoration of Reformation. Still, we find it nowadays, when financial pressure is all around, and churches have to reform their structures. From those responsible for the institution and for those who are critical about the institution we hear reform programs. Of course, we have to react, but we have to be careful not to accomplish our own projects and use the “Gospel” (we somehow seem to know and to have) as the program for this reform. Josef Smolík, in his paper on the prophetic call of the church, reminds theologians and church leaders that the Gospel as eschatological message of the Kingdom of God is the constant relativization and critique of all programs (“Das Evangelium als die eschatologische Bot-

²⁵ Cf. Hubert Ritt, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Neue Echter Bibel, Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1986, 79f; Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Regensburger Neues Testament, Regensburg: Pustet, 1997, 342-345; Jürgen Roloff, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, ZBK.NT 18, Zürich: TVZ Theologischer Verlag, 1984, 158f. – What we observe here, is also true for the new songs in Luke’s Gospel, the so-called *cantica*, the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55), the *Benedictus* (Lk 1:68-79), and the *Nunc dimittis* (Lk 2:29-32). New words are found by using and recombining the old.

schaft vom Reiche Gottes ist die Relativierung und permanente Kritik aller Programme.”)²⁶

A group of cultural scientists (primarily younger scholars) try to find a suitable term for the condition in which we live. Since 2009, they speak about “Metamodernity” and do not call it a new epoch, but much more modestly a “structure of feeling.” Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen write:

Whereas the postmodern “Holiday from History” [...] amounted to the sensibility that the dialectic came to a standstill in the mediatized and commoditized comfort zones of the Global North, the current historical moment evokes the sense that the dialectic is once more in motion or, indeed, as is its unstable nature, in constant oscillation, continuously overcoming and undermining hitherto fixed or consolidated positions.²⁷

It is a situation of fluidity – maybe even strengthened by the crisis we live in. There will be a new language, yes, but only in the dialectics of old and new. And so, we might need a *metamodern Practical Theology*. It is important to live in the dialectics of inside and outside, old and new, tradition and innovation, ritual and creativity.

Complaint, silence, and the voices of the others

Klagezeit Leipzig as one example

In order not to be too abstract, I want to talk about a project in my hometown Leipzig in the first weeks of 2021. In Christmas time 2020, a group of pastors, priests, and theologians had the feeling that church communication is on the way to losing its relevance, mainly because it wanted to be particularly relevant. Quite a paradoxical situation! In times of crisis, churches wanted to be helpful, to offer comfort, to tell people that “God is with us in the crisis,” and that the Christmas event is just about showing, how God is with us. This is undoubtedly not wrong, but many people outside the churches felt that this is some reproduction of empty classical for-

²⁶ Smolík, *Die prophetische Aufgabe*, 29.

²⁷ Cf. Robin van den Akker – Timotheus Vermeulen, Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism, in: Robin van den Akker – Alison Gibbons – Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, Radical Cultural Studies, London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, 1–19, 6.

mula, some repetition of Church's conventionality. "You don't have to listen to it anymore because you already know what churches will say." I quote from an Internet blog which is quite typical for many critical voices. Giannina Wedde from Berlin writes:²⁸

We see "Insta-stories, Zoom-meditations, blogs, videos, letters, and postcards, in which we read: Don't be afraid, a child is born for you. There is light in the darkness. Of course, this has always been a main element of the Christmas story. But in these times, it is a strangely generalized mantra, a repetition of a (magic) formula of forced fearlessness. [...] It is as if churches don't have other ideas in a destabilized world, lost normality and growing uncertainties than proclaiming an asserted salvation out of despair, an asserted love against egocentrism, and an asserted certainty in the face of a haunting loss of perspectives – just because the calendar tells them to do so."²⁹

Churches wanted to be helpful, but it was pretty often just a repetition of conventionality. Our questions in Leipzig were: Is there a space for com in what we do? For asking God about what is happening here? For maybe even accusing him of not helping? For reminding him of his promises as many, many Psalms in the Bible do? We felt that there is a treasure of Biblical words, Biblical images we do not use.

In addition, we realized that we do not know what people feel these days; we do not give different people the chance to utter their voices. To with the churches in Leipzig (Catholic and Protestant), we created a liturgical form, which is not spectacular but could serve as an example of what I mean when I am talking about finding a new language.

We called it "Klagezeit Leipzig" – a time for complaint in Leipzig.³⁰ We created a liturgy that consists of listening – silence – prayer. First of all, we wanted to listen to two different people in every Klagezeit, sharing their

28 Cf. <https://www.klanggebet.de/vita/> [28.03.2021].

29 The original German text reads: Wir sehen derzeit "Insta-Stories, Zoomandachten, Blogs, Videos, Briefe und Karten, in denen es heißt: Fürchtet Euch nicht, ein Kind ist Euch geboren. Ein Licht strahlt in der Dunkelheit. Das ist und war immer ein Hauptbestandteil der Weihnachtsgeschichte. Aber in diesen Zeiten ist es ein seltsam generalisiertes Mantra geworden, eine repetitive (Zauber-)Formel erzwungener Furchtlosigkeit [...]. Als fiele den Kirchen angesichts einer sich destabilisierenden Welt, zu tiefst in Frage gestellter Normalität und sich mehrender Ungewissheiten nichts anderes ein, als kalendertreu eine behauptete Rettung über bestehende Not, eine behauptete Liebe über entlarvte Egozentrik und eine behauptete Gewissheit über nagende Perspektivlosigkeit zu rufen."

30 Cf. www.klagezeit-leipzig.de.

complaints and their life experiences in these exhausting times with us. Then there was a time of silence after listening to their voices, followed by a short ritual prayer, a Kyrie eleison. In the weeks of our Klagezeit, we heard the voices of artists who have not been able to perform for months, parents who are losing their energy and power after months of home-schooling, people struck by the virus and suffering from its long-time-effects, doctors fighting for their patients, the mayor of Leipzig dealing as a politician with difficult questions everyday, a student, a carer for elderly people etc.

We also listened to a Biblical Psalm in every Klagezeit, and gave people a chance to insert their complaints into a wall we built up in the Church. It was also possible to participate via live stream and send a complaint.

What is important: We did not want to “interpret” the complaints or reintegrate them in a fixed language frame. In short: there was no sermon, which would always be in danger of relativizing what people say. We wanted to listen to the experiences of people, hear their language and listen to Biblical words. No answer to the crisis, but a liturgy *in* the crisis – and an attempt to rediscover the old language of the Bible as a new language, a *nova sprach*.

Our “Klagezeit” is surely not a “perfect liturgy”, but for me, it is at least an attempt to open the doors of the Church for different people with different experiences and to express a longing for hope (and not trying to distribute hope). It is an example from Leipzig. But preparing this lecture and reading some texts from Prague and from Practical Theologians from Charles University, I am convinced that it might be much better and much more fruitful to listen to voices from Prague, to Josef Smolík, Pavel Filipi, and many others.

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