

## Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

The Believer's Assurance of God's Abiding Love

Message given by Dr. Bernhard Kaiser in Spanish language at 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Council of Christian Churches in Puerto Montt (Chile) in January 2020

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*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)*

*The Lord has appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. (Jeremiah 31:3)*

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Let us start with the older one of these words. Jeremiah had to face persecution among the apostate people of Israel. It was in the years before Jerusalem was defeated and many Jews were and led into the Babylonian exile by Nebuchadrezzar. As much as Jeremiah had to criticize the people of God because of their sins and their apostasy, so much could he speak about the everlasting love of God. God would chastise his people, but for the time after the exile he promised: "I will be the God of all the families of Israel and they shall be my people." (Jer 31:1). This is a remembrance of the great promise, which God had already given to Abraham and which he reiterated on Mount Sinai: "I am the Lord, thy God." The unfaithfulness of God's people could not nullify the faithfulness of God, as Paul says: "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself" (2Tim 2,13).

God's promises continued to be valid, although Israel did not take care of them, yes, although Israel went astray and followed other gods and cults. God had made a covenant with his people. He gave his promises in a legal form. God's covenant is the leading motive in his program of salvation. It is always the same covenant since the time of Abraham up until now. The blessing which God had promised to Abraham should include all nations, for we read: "... in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen 12:3), and Paul says: "So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham" (Gal 3:9) "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal 3:14).

So we should at first speak about this covenant, which God has established with his people.

## 1. The Covenant

The simple fact that God has made a covenant with man shows the condescension of God. Allah, the idol of the Muslims, is so far away, so high, so sublime that it is unable to get in contact with man, except that Mohammed claims that Allah has spoken through him. Man is just called to submit himself to the prescriptions of the Koran. In modern naturalism, man has apotheosized nature, but nature does not speak. It is simply there. You cannot build up a personal relationship to nature. According to the Scriptures, man is able and called to investigate and to use the created reality. But nature can never become man's companion nor is it able to guarantee man's survival. Neither can man save nature, because God, the creator, sustains and preserves created reality by his word. Consequently, man cannot rely upon created things with respect to his life on earth and to the final aim of his life.

Presently, man is generally tempted by secular hedonism. Sweet life, wellness, luxury, good relationships, positive feelings and life without problems are the aim which man is pursuing. All this reflects the fact that man loves himself. But created things cannot replace personal love. They seem to promise well-being, they can bind one's heart and may lead man to spend one's life to get them, but they cannot replace the loving God.

God himself in his love towards fallen man has made his own efforts to lead man to eternal bliss, to a new creation, or, as Peter says, "to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven" (1Pt 1:4). In order that we may understand what his purpose is and that we may be sure that this kind of salvation is legal and safe, God has established his covenant with his people.

The covenant is a legal relationship. God is the sovereign, and although he could show forth his wrath against fallen mankind and leave mankind in eternal perdition without doing anything illegal, he in his mercy and lovingkindness commits himself to man by showing forth: I am the Lord, thy God. By that, he became the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By these words, he introduced himself to Moses and revealed himself as the I AM THAT I AM. By these words, he introduced himself to his people at Mount Sinai. So it was the privilege of Israel to know God, the only and almighty God, who had created heaven and earth and who was going to lead, to defend and to bless his people of the old covenant. And, finally, Jesus came and introduced himself by his I am sayings, that he is the good shepherd, the way, the truth and the life and still more.

The covenant is characterized by stability and perpetuity. Looking at the Israel's unfaithfulness and God's wrath, the prophet Isaiah nevertheless is called to say: "For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee." (Is 54:10).

God's love has in particular been revealed in the New Covenant. "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my

people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:33-34). We cannot go into details about the interpretation of these sayings. But the marrow of the new covenant is that the people of God will know the Lord and that God will forgive the sins of his people.

The covenant as a legal relationship also shows that God’s relationship to man is lawful. God does not do something wrong, when he forgives sins. Much more, he gives a legal basis to this relationship by doing everything to correspond to his righteousness. When he presents his covenant to us in Jesus Christ by his word and sacrament, he tells us that Christ has fulfilled all the demands of his holy law and that consequently, his salvation has got a solid, lawful ground. Hebrews 8:8-13 clearly shows that in Christ the new covenant has been established, and the author explicitly refers to the prophecy of Jeremiah. It is of utter importance that Christ both by his life as well as by his death has fulfilled all requirements of God’s law. Through his active obedience, he has lived his life without sin, and by taking upon himself the sins of the world, he died under the wrath of God, who punished our sins in him. Christ both in his life and his death acted as our representative. What he did, he did on our behalf, because we were unable to achieve what he did: living a sinless life and carry the punishment for our sins. That’s why we should speak about his vicarious death, which is not only the great expression of God’s love, but also the legal ground of the covenant of grace. God does not do something wrong, if he forgives our sins. He himself has provided the ground of his forgiveness.

The new covenant reveals the knowledge of God in a far broader way than the Old Testament. It does not only speak about grace and forgiveness, but it reveals the reality of our reconciliation. It shows God’s grace as well as the forgiveness of sins in a far clearer form than the old covenant. It also shows that the fulfillment of the promise refers to the new creation and that resurrection, a new and incorruptible body, is the gate through which the believer will enter the new world. Isaiah says: “The word of our God shall stand for ever” (Is 40:8). So the promise of the covenant is valid still and particularly on the other side, in the world to come.

## **2. The Love of Christ**

Paul says: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8). By that, we can see that the love of God is unconditional. God does not expect man to do something to become worthy of love. Neither does God love man because he has created him in his image and because he thus has got quasi divine dignity. He does not love man, because he needs him to be God. He does not love man, because he wants to live in company with man. On the contrary, man is a sinner; man has fallen away from God, and it is man’s nature to revolt against God. Man – I am now speaking about

ourselves – much more deserves eternal punishment. He deserves to be cut off from life. And in fact, through Adam's sin, man has already been sentenced to death.

It is only because of God's mercy with sinful man, that man can be saved. It is God's free decision. God is not obliged to do save us; nothing compels him to turn to man in love. Now, we should not speak about God's love in psychological terms, as if God felt sympathy with his enemies or as if he were enriched by our presence. No, salvation is entirely undeserved; we do not give any reason to become his beloved children. Salvation is by grace alone. Thus, the love of God exists particularly therein that he bears us, who are sinful folks, in his mercy. That is tolerance at its best.

God by that not only wants to show his mercy, but also the riches of his glory. Paul says: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory" (Rom 9:22-23). Here we can see the leading motive of God for his lovingkindness: It is to make known the riches of his glory.

All this excludes any human contribution to one's salvation, just as we read: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom 9:15-16). God's love to the sinner is unconditional.

This becomes visible particularly by the fact that Christ has died for us and thus reconciled us with God long before we could do anything, in fact, long before we came to be. When we were born, let's say in the forties, fifties or sixties of the last century if we look at the older ones among us, Christ had already saved us nearly two thousand years earlier. He has saved us without our contribution, without our consent, without our conversion, without our decision. But with our sins, because God has made him to be sin for us, he imputed all our sins upon Christ, "that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2Cor 5:20). Our salvation, our righteousness is thus fully accomplished in Christ.

A famous saying of the Roman Catholic teacher Thomas Aquinas runs: God does not justify us without us (*Deus nos non sine nobis iustificat*). He wants to stress by that, that without man's consent and without man's application to the grace of God, man cannot be saved. But Paul apparently teaches the contrary. Christ has reconciled us to the father without our cooperation. Our conversion, our commitment to Christi cannot add anything to the work of Christ.

God knew and knows that his program of salvation will be successful. He is going to assign the righteousness of Christ to the people whom he has foreordained to become his children. But what does he do to convey his salvation to his people? Although man spiritually is like a stone or a dead stump, he nevertheless is a living being. Now, what happens, if God wants an individual human being to be saved? First of all, he brings him the gospel, that Christ has done

everything. Second, God through the Holy Spirit opens up man's heart so that this particular man can understand what the Gospel says, just like Lydia, the lady who was present when Paul was preaching the gospel in Philippi. The Lord opened her heart, "that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul" (Acts 16:15). We can see the result of what God had done with her: She paid attention to what Paul was preaching. Paul did not call her to make a decision, neither did she decide to believe in Jesus. She did not look at herself, she did not analyze her feelings, but she was fixing upon the word preached. That is the attitude of faith, and thus by faith she was saved. Although she willfully heard what Paul was saying and although in her heart she assented to the things preached and although she finally trusted in what she had heard, it was God's work in her heart. She did not produce faith out of her own, but she relied upon the promises of the Gospel. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17).

The love of Christ is thus visible in the fact that he gave his life for us, that he has saved us, that he has thus reconciled us with God himself and that we undeservedly participate in the salvation.

I have spoken in terms of predestination, and one may be tempted to raise the question: Am I really foreordained to heir of salvation? We are not allowed to speculate on this subject. We should much more turn to what the Scriptures are clearly saying: That God wants "all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1Tim 2:4). Thus, each of us may derive and believe that God wants the salvation of each of us also. We should also hear the famous word of Jesus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). Please note that the love God leads us to faith in Christ.

### **3. More than conquerors**

What is the challenge for the Christian? What kind of problems does he have to face? Paul is giving a list of factors which may threaten the Christian: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword. We should be realist: Those of us who are living in western societies, under normal circumstances will not be threatened by death penalty. Maybe, that they will suffer poverty. Maybe, that they will have less income than the majority of people among which they are living. Their economic situation may be poor. But their life is not endangered by the society they are living in. This, however, is not the case in many other countries, where protestant Christianity is either forbidden or discriminated. As you know, in many muslim countries, becoming a Christian means to be threatened by death, if not by the state, then by one's kinship. We could adduce many examples of this kind. In muslim as well as in communist countries, being a Christian can be as dangerous as Paul puts it. Christians may lose their right to exist; they really may be "accounted as sheep for the slaughter". But nevertheless, also in open societies being a Christian may be the cause of discrimination. I would like to call your attention to two basic challenges:

(1) The resistance of the religious world

The gospel of grace is a message which provokes contradiction on the side of the religious ones. They are following their humanist pattern of thought and consider the relationship between God and man to be a recompense order: God recompenses man for his benevolence, for his decision for Christ or for his efforts in sanctification. Religious people would think that way. They are fond of the idea that man can manage his religious activities according to a given order.

The best example are the Jews in the Time of the New Testament. They tried to secure their salvation by their works. They considered the law of Moses to be the way to God. Paul says: "they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom 10:2). They did not understand that the law was given to them to uncover their sins and to show them that they were lost, in order that they would seek their righteousness in the promises of God and by faith.

Very similar is Roman Catholicism. It calls man to cooperate with God. God has saved mankind in Christ, but salvation is like a stock or a treasure under the jurisdiction of the Roman System. So you must first of all become a member of the Roman Church, you must accept its rules, you must participate in the sacraments, you must live a godly life, and if you fall in sin, you must confess it and get the absolution by the priest. You must thus live in full communion with the church and take heed of your religious everyday duties. Religious people who seriously practice their piety, are interested in works. They want to be addressed by what they can do, they want to be shown how they can manage their religious engagement.

Is there a great difference to evangelical Christianity? Does not the average evangelical think that he has become a Christian by inviting Jesus in his heart and by obeying to his commandments in everyday life? Does he not think that God blesses him for striving actively to live a holy life? Does he not consider that his relationship to God is a recompense order, too? Of course, he will say that everything is by grace and by faith and only through Christ, but basically he trusts in what he has done and what he is doing: in his decision for Christ and in his commitment to live a Christian life. Much more, because he thinks that he has invited Christ to come into his heart, he believes that Christ is within him, that he got divine life, divine power within himself, and thus he considers himself to be born again, to be a real Christian. He tries to find the reality of his Christian being within himself and thus looks to himself, he analyses his feelings, his affects, his motives and his performance in Christian living. But he thus no longer lives by faith, but by his works. And if he is honest, he will admit that whatever he does, is imperfect and does not cope with what God commands him to do.

If you tell him, that he cannot be born again by a human and imperfect decision, that being a Christian is not by one's will, but by the grace of God and by God's sovereign election, and if you tell him that all his efforts do not draw the blessing of God upon him, you will pull the rug out from under him. He will react offensive, he will blame that preacher or Christian for not taking seriously the commandments of the Bible. Thus, in the outcome, a preacher may lose his employment in a particular church, he may be forced to leave his ministry and look for another job. If he still lives by faith and trusts in the Lord, his fellow Christians may react with

envy and talk of him in a negative way. Perhaps they will avoid further contact with him, and the outcome is that this man has to suffer isolation, excommunication and negative reputation. But he will trust in the Lord that he is with him, that he loves him and that he provides whatever he will need.

(2) The resistance of the atheist world.

Another problem we have to face in the western world is public atheism. It starts with the theory of evolution, by which man hopes to explain the existence of the world without God. You know that this has become popular. The Christian, who believes in creation, is considered to be a fossil, a relic of a past age.

“There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” was the motto on 800 British buses. Richard Dawkins, a famous evolutionary biologist and atheist author supported that campaign. It shows that evolution is taken as an excuse for not believing in God. It opens the door for a life by which man independently determines what he is, what are his aims and what he is going to do. He thinks that there is no God by whom he will be called to responsibility. This type of thought has equipped itself by a seemingly scientific world view, while science is defined to explain the world without God and that the appeal to God is unscientific by definition. Thus a Christian who wants to do a job in natural sciences and believes in creation is soon taken as an heretic and will be excommunicated from the scientific community. But this is a minor problem.

Atheist humanism is propagating gender mainstreaming programs, it urges people to accept homosexuality, it considers the traditional dualist view of men and women to be repressive and a construct of a patriarchal society, it denies biological differences between men and women and teaches that “man” and “woman” are only different roles, which by nature are exchangeable.

We can see by these examples that humanism (1) denies created reality, the biological design of men and women, and that it (2) denies that the abuse of the created order is sin against the commandment of God. In this context, Christians are not blamed for living according to the commandments of God, but in some countries they can be blamed if they criticize humanist thought.

Furthermore, the Christian is tempted to follow the modern humanist image of man. It is the image which Sigmund Freud has developed, according to which man is driven basically by two irrational or subconscious drives: eros (sex) and thanatos (death or destruction). It means that man is not the master of his acts by consciousness or thoughtfulness, but these irrational drives. This type of thought has become omnipresent. You can see it in films, in pedagogics, in jurisdiction, in legislation, in our entire culture. Living in such a world, the Christian feels that he is tempted by his lusts. But, according to the scriptures, he will act in wisdom and resist. He will practice his sexuality within his matrimony and not outside of it.

Neither physical persecution nor social discrimination nor self-denial do lead to pleasant feelings. They do not convey fun. But on the other hand, Jesus said: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Mt 5,10-12). Now, how should we face these conflicts? What is the biblical way?

(1) In the conflict which the Christian has to face, he is first of all called to be patient, to suffer, to endure and to remain steadfast, whenever he is tempted to deny Christ, be it by words or deeds. He will trust in the Lord that he will secure his right, be it here or be it there. He is called to perceive his situation through by the eyes of faith. Thus he may suffer that he may be fined to pay a certain sum or to be put in jail. By faith, he will accept the isolation, and that other people do not greet him or avoid him. Paul shows forth this attitude by what he is writing to the Romans: "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom 5:3-5). Let me comment that the last verse does not speak about the love which the Christian has got towards God, as many exegetes put it, but on the contrary, it is the love of God towards us, of which the Holy Spirit assures us. The assurance of God's love towards us is the decisive factor which makes us become conquerors.

(2) We normally think that a conqueror is strong, successful and victorious. He defeats his enemies. This may be the case in this world, where military power is present and by which a military leader becomes the winner of the battle. In Christian life, it is different. Paul says that we are more than conquerors. Let us see, that Christ became the victor by being defeated, that is, being arrested, sentenced to death, crucified and finally buried. It was God himself, who woke him up and made him son of God in power and who gave him eternal glory with respect to our fallen world. In a similar way we also become more than conquerors. We already here are assured that discrimination or persecution are things of the world present. They will have an end. As we look to promises of God, we are assured in our hope and know, that Christ will do justice to us and that he will defeat also the devil and his influence. So, the strength of the conqueror consists in patience and hope, by which that, which affects us, becomes harmless.

(3) So we are called to live in this world as foreigners and sojourners, as Peter says: Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1Pt 2:11-12). That does not mean that we give up our houses and live in tents. Much more, we will use this world in due way, but we will not become dependant upon it. Finally, the unbelieving world will have to give testimony that a Christian has lived a

godly life, when they will be summoned to the great tribunal of Christ. It will be for the honour of the Christian and for dishonour of those who did evil to them.

Amen.