

# **FRIEDRICH WILHELM HOPF**

## **AND THE APPLICATION OF GOD'S WORD TO THIS TIME AND WORLD**

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*(by Werner Klän)*

### *0. Introductory Remarks*

Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (May 31, 1910 – July 19, 1982) stemmed from a confessional Lutheran church in northern Hesse in Germany. His forebears in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had fought for the freedom of the church from political domination, and at the same time they had advocated the integrity of the Lutheran territorial church they belonged to, in terms of confessional identity. This heritage determined him, being the grandnephew of the brothers August and Wilhelm Vilmar who had been the leaders of the confessional movement in Hesse, to become a protagonist of the freedom of the church in his time and day, i. e. from the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to its seventies. As a pastor and theological advisor to the Lutheran bishop of the Bavarian church in the thirties and forties, as mission director of the Bleckmar Mission, now Mission of Lutheran Churches in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, he felt deeply obligated to the tenet of “applying God’s word to this time and world”, like August Vilmar, his granduncle once had put it. This axiom is closely linked to the concept of the “Kingdom of Christ”.

This concept understands Christ to be the King and Lord not only in the spiritual realm, but also to be the Ruler in this earthly world. From these presuppositions, Hopf concluded that Christianity and especially its clergy were commissioned and even mandated to position themselves over against issues seemingly belonging to areas “outside” the church. Hopf’s theological character – often misinterpreted to be some kind of contumacy – was thoroughly shaped by this conviction: The Church’s Lord is at the same time, the King of the world, that is to say, not just the world to come but this present world. It can be demonstrated that this paradigm was decisive for positions taken by Hopf in the time of the German “church struggle” during the “Third Reich” (1933-1945), as well as in his confessional conflicts after the foundation of the Evangelical (= Protestant) Church in Germany (since 1948); and the same holds true for his attitudes towards the apartheid system (and the issue of human rights in general) and the responsibility he thought the Church was meant to assume in this regard.

Nevertheless, Hopf’s basic convictions were subject to certain modifications, though not to fundamental alterations. I remember Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, already advanced in years, one night telling me: “Brother Klän, it is true, we opposed the Nazi system, and we fought for the freedom of the church; but do you know, what has come to my mind the other day? We did not stand up for the Jews!” This he thought to have been one of the defaults of his life, and even if it was unconsciously committed, he confessed it as a sin. And Hopf himself did not shy away from drawing conclusions that shaped his personal attitudes and made him try to influence the course of the Mission of Lutheran Churches during the last years of his office as the mission director.

Even during the German “church struggle” when the so-called National-Socialist Party tried to take over the control in the church(es) in order to streamline them along the principles of its

racist ideology, the answers that Hopf had found to the basic concepts of the Church, its peculiarity, and its independence, used to steer his decisions. They would remain constitutive in his struggle for preserving confessional Lutheran identity of his congregation over against tendencies of unionism in the ecclesiastical developments that took place in Germany after the Second World War. Those answers then were applicable to the occurrences of the last decades of the apartheid era; by linking his experience from the times of an ecclesiastical opposition against a totalitarian political system to the events to his deep-rooted belief in the essential independence of the Church from whatever kind of earthly, or civil power and to his firm conviction that the Lutheran church(es) have to proclaim the immutable will of God at all times and all over, Hopf became a prominent opponent of the apartheid ideology, and a sedulous fighter for the inviolability of human dignity on behalf of the church. It does not take much to understand that in this way, Hopf and his attitudes toward contemporary issues were not acknowledged with applause in many a regard, neither in the times of the totalitarian Nazi regime, nor in the restorative climate after the Second World War, not to mention within the wider spectrum of conservative confessional Lutheranism. In spite of all this, Hopf is a highly estimable and important representative of an exceptional and, at the same time, seminal and promising theological way of thinking, and acting.

### *1. Hopf's Concept of the Church*

The starting point for defining the Church is AC VII: It is “the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered”. These are the only marks of the Church. That is why the external form or organisation is not essential to the Church's being. Nevertheless, the unity in doctrine or doctrinal unanimity is a necessary prerequisite for identifying the Church. The confessional stance in terms of what the AC labels the “magnus consensus”, as laid down in the Lutheran confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is therefore inevitably imperative to establish, execute, and preserve church fellowship. In addition an assessment is required on how the Lutheran church relates to the Church Catholic or Una Sancta. It is the Una Sancta that the promise of continued existence belongs to whereas territorial churches or imperial churches are not addressed by such a promise. However it has to be maintained that a confessional Lutheran church displays the Church Catholic because and insofar as the Gospel is taught and the sacraments are administered according to the doctrine of Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. Yet the Lutheran church as such is not identical to the Una Sancta.

On the basis of these fundamental regulations, we will discover a great ecumenical openness in Hopf's notions about the Church. Even in church bodies that do not agree with the Lutheran doctrine, the Holy Spirit may work beatific faith, when and where it pleases God (AC V). Therefore, a fraternal solidarity is possible and acceptable between churches that have esteem for the Holy Scripture and acknowledge it as the sole basis for the proclamation and the life of the Church. Transcending the confessional boundaries between Lutheran and Reformed churches will only be feasible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is fallacious however to think of superseding the lack of doctrinal unanimity by a conjoint attitude in conflicts. These ideas as developed in the German church struggle of the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we will demonstrate, will enable Hopf to form alliances across the traditional ecclesiastical boundaries when it comes to opposing the apartheid ideology and policy on theological grounds.

## 2. *The Validity of the Lutheran Confessions*

Hopf understands the Lutheran confessions to be gift and duty at the same time. Their validity lies in the fact that they prove to be an appropriate expression of scriptural teaching. The Scripture is the sole authority for what prevails in the Church; so the confessional writings have to be subordinated to Scripture as well. But the Church does respond to God's word by its confessions which then have to demonstrate to be in unison with Scripture. The fundamental standard for the interpretation of Scripture is, according to Hopf, the doctrine of justification.

Consequently, the confessions form the secondary norm of all doctrine in the church. Beyond the notion of being the appropriate exposition of the biblical gospel, the confessions serve as antecedent consensus in matters of evangelical doctrine that may be discovered and agreed upon by later-born and future generations whenever they will find there the divine truth of eternal salvation. Beyond this, the confessions are meaningful in terms of ecumenical responsibility. For they claim to confess and reiterate scriptural truth that stipulates acknowledgement and reception by the Church Catholic. That is why the confessions fulfil the task of defining the realm of pure doctrine in the church, and of determining what may demand prevalence in the Church and its life. The confessions are thus a manifestation of the church's stance as a whole and in general, not just of single Christians. In another regard, the confessions function as means to identify and define the unity of the church and in the church: It is the confessional unity, therefore, that makes the church the church, that is to say, unanimity in preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, and in prayer. It would be erroneous, on the other hand, to build the unity of the church on different grounds than these, be it people, nation, race, or state.

The external constitution and condition of the church is of secondary degree, but it must not be in contradiction to the gospel. The rejection of false, i. e. counter-scriptural teaching and the separation from churches that do teach differently is consequentially part and parcel of this approach. Doctrinal rejections or condemnations do not only serve to preserving the purity of the church's doctrine but have to have an eye for the one who is captured by erroneous opinions. In rejecting false teaching, elements of spiritual guidance and pastoral care are at work because eternal salvation is at stake. In this connection, heresy and heterodoxy have to be identified as real contradiction to the gospel message, not just some kind of misunderstanding. But in case that heresy is proclaimed publicly it has to be contradicted openly as well and to be denounced as heterodox. Given a constant and continual adherence to heresy separations become inevitable in order to retain the purity of the church's proclamation.

## 3. *Confessional Accountability*

Hopf joined the German church struggle in 1933 when the German Evangelical Church was founded. In a first phase, he was aiming at moulding this church body, in spite of its unionist tendencies into a "confessing" church. For he thought, that the independence of the territorial churches, including their confessional direction, might be maintained. This sight soon proved to be wrong. When the vast majority of the German church leaders, on January 27, 1934 subordinated to the "Reichsbischof", a staunch National Socialist and infamous "German Christian", a turnaround in Hopf's attitude towards the German Evangelical Church can be observed. Being an association of churches exhibiting different confessional profiles, it cannot be labelled a "church" at all when applying the standards of AC VII. Because unanimity in

confessing the faith is a constitutive factor for a church to be a church, the German Evangelical Church can be regarded, at the utmost, as an alliance or federation of churches. Hopf is thoroughly convinced that resistance over against this national, trans-confessional church body is mandatory and imperative.

From this point of view, Hopf considered it possible to participate in the struggle of the “Confessing Church” against the German-Christian state church. But when the famous Barmen Theological Declaration, drafted by Karl Barth, Hans Asmussen and Hermann Sasse (who was a close friend of Hopf’s) and officially accepted by a synodical convention of the Confessing church in May 1934, was being promulgated as a “new confession”, Hopf and Sasse disapproved openly of this strategy. For the synodical convention meeting in Barmen was a merger of representatives from Lutheran, Calvinist, and Unionist churches all over Germany and as such, according to Sasse’s and Hopf’s views, was not entitled to speak on behalf of the Lutheran church. Additionally Hopf deplored that the Barmen Theological Declaration had chosen the constitution of the German Evangelical Church of 1933 as its legal basis – a fundamental, but from a confessional Lutheran perspective at the same time, fatal decision. Nonetheless Hopf sees himself in the position to appreciate that the Barmen Theological Declaration at least tries to withstand the German-Christian destruction of Christian doctrine and faith; in this its benefits and limitations are to be found. Assuming, on the other hand, that the Barmen Theological declaration were introduced and accepted as a new, additional confession, this would include the danger of diminishing the relevance and importance of the historical confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For in this case, a unionist, trans-confessional document were imposed above those confessional writings that up to now had secured the confessional and ecclesiastical identity of the Lutheran church(es). For this reason Hopf disapproved the endeavours of making the Barmen Theological Declaration a common confession of the “Confessing Church” which indeed consisted of churches adhering to different confessional positions. Instead he was eager to sustain confessional Lutheran identity on the basis of the Book of Concord.

Hopf saw a new dimension established when the Confession Church in Prussia decided to count the Barmen Theological Declaration among the confessional writings that the ordinands were meant to obligate and subscribe to. This he regarded to be an alteration of the confessional basis, because in this way the Barmen Theological Declaration was elevated to be the decisive authority in matters of doctrine or heresy. As a consequence to this, the differences between Lutheran and Reformed/Calvinist doctrines are no longer seen to be church-divisive, and open communion between Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unionists is regarded legitimate. To Hopf, this procedure results in an abrogation of the AC as the confessional basis of the Lutheran congregations and churches. Here he saw no alternative to enter in a serious and fundamental objection and critique.

#### 4. *The Church vis-à-vis the Worldly Authorities*

The freedom of the Lutheran church as a confessional church, even in contrast to the “Confessing Church”, was, in the first place, the goal that Hopf wanted to achieve in the German church struggle of the thirties and forties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By no means is it acceptable that the church and its unity be built on the grounds of political or national axioms. Rather has the Church to proclaim God’s revelation before and over against the people and the state and its authorities. In the thirties, Hopf was still far from making demands on human rights or freedom of expression. Only now and then, and in between the lines, we will find critical remarks to the National Socialist regime. Hopf stipulates that clear cut boundaries

have to be drawn between the state and its areas of influence, and the Church and its responsibilities. A totalitarian state would endanger the freedom of the Church in any case. In general, he is opposed to any kind of state church system, because it abandons the self-government of the Church and leads to the abolition of genuine church order. In contrast to this concept he claims that only the Church itself may, by means of her self-government, secure the freedom of the pure proclamation of the gospel and the scriptural administration of the sacraments. Especially of importance to him in this regard is the distinction between secular and ecclesiastical authority. The state church system is particularly dangerous in a situation when the state is based on secular principles and does no longer see itself dependent on a God-given mandate. Hopf does in this phase of his life not yet advocate political resistance to the "Third Reich" as such, but he underscores the sole reign of Christ. This tenet includes the perspective that even those in power in the secular world have to submit to God's order and law.

##### 5. *Hopf's Confessional Conflicts After World War II*

After World War II, the issue of church fellowship came on the agenda of the protestant, including the Lutheran churches in Germany. To Hopf, it is imperative, that church fellowship and full communion may only be possible, legitimate and therefore can only come into being and be practised on the basis of common confessional grounds. Differences in matters of doctrine, notably in central and crucial articles such as the Sacrament of the Altar, are divisive. Therefore it is unthinkable a thought for Hopf, that a merger would be formed out of Lutheran and Calvinist churches as long as and because the differences in doctrine and the doctrinal condemnations following from these differences have not been overcome. Heresy is not to be tolerated within the church, and if churches maintain or introduce teachings that are in contradiction to the scriptural record, separation must proceed.

Hopf had repeatedly produced these arguments during the German church struggle in the thirties, and he saw himself coerced to reiterate them when in 1948 the Evangelical Church in Germany was established. For this church body was, on the one hand side, regarded to bear the succession in law to the German Evangelical Church of 1933, but in addition to that, it presented itself, at least from Hopf's point of view, as a replication of the old unionist church pattern dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That was when Lutherans and Calvinists were forced together into new, "united" church bodies with remarkable support and pressure on the side of the King and the state authorities, although the disagreement in matters of doctrine had neither been concluded nor resolved. The chief problem that Hopf, and along with him, Hermann Sasse, saw was the claim of the Evangelical Church in Germany to be a church, and at the same time to affirm that indeed it was nothing but a federation of churches, i. e., not a church in the strict sense. Hopf declared this to be contradictory in itself, but in fact he identified this ecclesiastical entity to be a church, and a unionist one.

Although these Lutheran territorial churches had formed the "United Evangelical Church of Germany" in 1947, in order to strengthen their impact on church life and on society in Germany, all of them joined the "Evangelical Church in Germany" on the basis of a common constitution. Hopf therefore blamed them of having lost their confessional Lutheran character. For he considered them to submit to a constitution and church order, namely that of the Evangelical Church in Germany, that in Hopf's perception, stood in plain contradiction to the confessional basis as laid down in the Lutheran Confessions. Moreover, he suspected that the prominent rank that had been ascribed to the Barmen Theological Declaration in the course of the negotiations that finally led to the foundation of the Evangelical Church in Germany,

would make it appear a new, trans-confessional confession that abrogated the Lutheran Confessions as the legal basis of the Lutheran territorial churches and, to say the least, diminished their church-binding validity and ecclesiastical liability. Through exhausting conflicts, he eventually led his congregation in the town of Mühlhausen/Bavaria into a “free”, or independent form of ecclesiastical existence apart from the Bavarian territorial church.

As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, Hopf was descendant of a family that belonged to one of the smaller independent confessional Lutheran churches that had emerged in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of opposition over against the unionist church politics in their various lands. He knew all about the historical backgrounds of these developments, and was well aware of the problems these churches had to face from within as well as from without. Deploring the lack of unity in the ranks of these independent confessional Lutheran churches, he ambitiously worked for the unification of these churches. It has to be noticed that by publishing a Lutheran journal (*Lutherische Blätter*) over decades, and in his activities as the director of the Bleckmar Mission (now: Mission of Lutheran Churches/MLC), he contributed to a high degree to the fusion of the various independent Lutheran churches in Germany into the Independent Evangelical Lutheran church (SELK), in 1972. The guiding principle, again, for these endeavours, was Hopf’s deep-rooted conviction that church fellowship was legitimate only on the basis of a common understanding of scripture according to the Lutheran confessions. But equally it was self-evident to him, especially with regard to the loss of Lutheran identity in the Lutheran territorial churches, that the confessional Lutheran churches by joining into one single church body, made sure – humanly speaking - that their voice be heard more clearly, and their positions be taken more seriously.

## 6. *Conflicts over Hopf’s Statements on Apartheid in South Africa*

Interestingly, and in many a way even surprisingly, Hopf in criticizing the apartheid system, chose as his starting point the unity of the Church as given in Christ and as described in AC VII. We may easily judge that his argumentation was consistent in itself from the beginning of his theological career up to his retirement as the director of the Bleckmar Mission, and even beyond. The unity of the Church becomes manifest for all to see in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. That is why a division at the altar, between Christians of the same belief, who, on a common confessional basis, find themselves in church fellowship and full communion, is intolerable and unacceptable. Hopf plainly refuses the notion that, in the context of apartheid, one might support the idea of separation at the altar.

Volker Stolle, Hopf’s successor as director of the Bleckmar Mission in the seventies and eighties of the previous century, and my former colleague at Lutheran Theological Seminary Oberursel, has, at the occasion of the Symposium on Apartheid held at Lutheran Theological Seminary Oberursel in November 2011, reported unmistakably: “In the light of the Sharpeville-Massacres in 1960 Hopf judged that: ‘If I am not completely mistaken, the question that concerns us here in South Africa, in this country with its increasingly harsh racial discrepancies, now and in the future, for *both* black and white members of the one holy Christian church, is to recognize clearly the way ahead for the people of Jesus Christ in this world, to witness explicitly and to go *forward* unwaveringly, truly free of *all* powers of this world, inwardly independent of all worldly programmes, undaunted despite all threats.’”

On various occasions Hopf complained about the disability to communicate and dialogue between “white” and “black” churches and their members. In contrast to this, he emphasized the possibility of practising fellowship in worship among churches of the same confessional

stance, including altar- and pulpit fellowship and inter-communion. This, he was certain, was evident even if these churches and Christians were forced by legislation to exist in separate congregations. In this attitude, he was very close to positions taken e.g. by Christaan Frederick Beyers-Naudé.

As Volker Stolle has shown, “Hopf renewed his call [sc. in early 1968] as a reaction to further restrictive measures of the South African government: ‘The longer this goes on, the less we can simply ignore the need for a clear statement on the side of the Lutheran Church concerning the political and social problems in South Africa. We do not intend in any way to interfere in the politics of a country, in which only a few of our missionaries have citizenship, while most of them remain ‘guests and strangers’. Indeed, in recent times they do not receive permission to enter the country for permanent residency and must apply annually for the extension of their visas.’ Hopf sees his demand as being God’s call: ‘In the long term we cannot be involved responsibly in missionary work and in building up the church, without taking a stand on questions and decisions which demand a proclamation from the church, clearly applying God’s word.’ He emphasized the task of the missionary congregations at home: ‘We in Germany have reason to express our brotherly encouragement in this situation, combined with our prayers.’”

According to Stolle, “the [Bleckmar] Mission Board decided in May 1969, after lengthy consultation over the position taken by other churches and particularly over the Message to the People of South Africa by the SACC in the previous year that: ‘We cannot and will not allow ourselves to become either the aggressors or the apologists of the South African government, if we only say what we must say about the unity of the church in every area of Christian life regardless of all differences.’ Despite everything Hopf, however, insisted [...] in June (1969): ‘I only want to say, that taking part in the great struggle for a Lutheran witness in South Africa is part of the theological work of our Mission here at home and also of our responsibility for spiritual welfare. A witness which, if God gives his grace, could lead us to closer relations with those who live for the same commitment despite the existing church separation.’”

It can be shown, due to the research done by Volker Stolle, the “[t]he Soweto-uprisings in 1976 and the following resettlements caused by increased severity in the homeland policy, affected the LCSA considerably, particularly in connection with the so called independence of Bantustan Bophuthatswana, since many congregations were broken up. This caused an intensified discussion about the approach to apartheid in the Mission in which Hopf stated ‘that not only great differences, but also deepest antitheses and a more or less unbridgeable chasms have been revealed concerning the description and the assessment of many of the events.’

Deeply affected by the events in Soweto Hopf asked: ‘What can we, as church and Mission, say about the terrible events in the light of our responsibility for our work in South Africa? For it must be quite clear to us all, that we cannot close our eyes or remain silent. A specific prayer for Southern Africa and its peoples as well as for the Christians there, should be part of every church service. It is vital that above all we must see clearly, recognize unequivocally and witness with a loud voice: what is happening now in South Africa and will probably continue to happen, is *the judgement of the holy and living God*.(...) This is God’s judgement over white and black. This is God’s judgement over the churches and their missionary work. This is God’s judgement over our service in this country and therefore over us, who are responsible for this work. We, too, must ask ourselves, what was not right? What have we neglected? Where, when and before whom have we been silent, when we should have

spoken? What must change in the future? Have we failed in prayer despite our love and great sacrifice? Are we guilty, directly or indirectly, of the lack of visible evidence for a real communion between white Christians and their black brothers and sisters?”

It has to be deplored, however, that the leaders of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) at that time did not agree with Hopf's analysis and the conclusions he drew from that. Rather those responsible tried to appease the conflicting positions, or to level out the opposing concepts. In South Africa, the missionaries in their vast majority criticized the positions taken by Hopf in the "Missionsblatt" harshly; in January 1977 they decided even to cease cooperating with the "Missionsblatt", blaming that the coverage of the Soweto events of 1976 was tending to spread hatred. Bishop Schulz who had visited Germany in fall 1976, was accused of aligning with the "leftist" press media; in some comments coming from FELSISA congregations, he was even labelled a "communist". The bishop of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, Dr. Gerhard Rost, on returning from a trip to South Africa he had made from March to May 1978 stated: "Obedience to God's commandment does not exclude, but rather includes, exposition and punishment of evident injustice by the church through God's law, indeed Christians may refuse to obey if they are forced to join in in such injustice. (...) It does, however, exclude the opposition of the church as a body to a government and quite certainly excludes all support of putsch or revolution. Above all it excludes all thought of calling people un-Christian because of their political conviction, denying them fellowship and shutting them out of the congregation. Our Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Germany and also our sister churches in South Africa, the black Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and the white Free Evangelical-Lutheran Synod in South Africa are founded on this obedience." It was an old understanding of Romans 13 that guided these attitudes, enforcing an obedience to the government even if it frankly supported, advocated, or advanced injustice.

Hopf saw his positions well in line with what he had always thought of the apartheid system; he also referred to a letter written to him by his old friend and comrade Hermann Sasse from the days of the German church struggle and the confessional conflicts after World War II saying, that "no Lutheran missionary may ever plead the cause of or defend apartheid!" But at the same time, in 1977 Hopf expressed his regret to not have been more outspoken on these issues in his public statements. Consequently, he marked five points he considered to be mandatory in terms on the responsibility the German church and the Bleckmar Mission bore:

"1. It lies in our responsibility to provide information, reports, clear statements (...) 2. As a result of our responsibility we must abstain from all false and therefore questionable 'neutrality' towards the events in Southern Africa (...); (for a Christian may) certainly not be identified with injustice and brutality (...) Whoever remains silent towards both parties puts himself in fact on the side of the ruling party (...) and) those who live and work as whites in the South Africa of today are seen as belonging to the ruling whites as long as they do not take a clear position in word and deed for the just concerns of the blacks and by so doing show clearly their distance to the ruling white class. (...) Since we support our emissaries (the missionaries) we are also responsible for their decisions. (...) 3. Our responsibility implies therefore an imperative 'one-sidedness'. (...) The Mission should be clearly on the side of the black Africans – as advocate and supporter, as comforter and adviser, but also as someone showing the path ahead and warning against aberration and confusion, not least through recognizing and confessing all guilt and on-going guilt of whites towards Africans. (...) 4. Our responsibility places us under a commitment to take on the task of detailed and specific prayer. (...) 5. The thought of tomorrow and the future of the church in Southern Africa must be decisive in our acceptance of responsibility – not in the sense of fear or precaution but for



those who come after us, who should not be restrained by false bonds nor tied to false segregation. For the future credibility of a young African church within its own people it is of far-reaching and profound importance, what witness black and white pastors were capable and prepared to give in given situations, but also where they remained silent.” His final question was left unresolved; “Must we not fear that in the face of urgent demand we will be called the 'silent confessional church' yet again, and be rejected as 'salt without savour'?”

It is striking to me how clearly Hopf, in one of his latest statements as the director of the Bleckmar Mission, emphasized that the apartheid ideology, the apartheid regime and the apartheid system in South Africa were a matter of *status confessionis*: “My third and last concern when retiring from the position of Director of the Bleckmar Mission – alongside that of the confessional position of our Mission and our striving towards an independent young church – is the responsibility we all carry for Christian witness in Southern Africa. Along with Lutherans all over the world I am convinced that we stand here in a real *status confessionis*. I am convinced that we are at the point where we must either confess or deny: we are experiencing a situation where our Lord Jesus Christ demands that we either confess him or deny him.”

#### 8. Results

There cannot be any doubt that Hopf in reactivating the theological concept of the “Kingdom of Christ” as he had inherited it from his theological and familial forebears in northern Hesse in Germany, found a way to develop a sound and solid position against the ideology and policy of apartheid without betraying his confessional Lutheran stance. While Christ gathers His Church from all nations, this very Church is obligated to give witness towards, moreover against the secular authorities engaging a prophetic ministry to the world. But this approach must not be confused with a political mandate of the Church, as though it was meant to set political parameters in order to resolve problems in state and society.

The theological background of this rationale is comprised in the differentiation between the “two kingdoms”, or two realms of God’s dominion in His Church and in this world. In refusing traditional interpretations of this doctrine, Hopf denies that Christians are allowed to adopt a quasi-“neutral” attitude towards secular affairs. As much as Church and state are different, and as much as they therefore have to be differentiated, it holds true that they do not have to interfere with the realm of each other mutually. Otherwise the Church is obligated to remind the state of its obligations and to admonish, reprove and reprimand the representatives by pointing to God’s will. As a consequence to this, the Church is commissioned to even and especially criticize violations of human rights committed by a given regime and to threaten it and its bearers with God’s judgment.

By saying so and pleading for the right of criticizing a government that obviously deviates from the God-given standards to provide at least welfare for His human beings, Hopf does not advocate the right of revolution, or the support of revolutionary actions through the Church. But he would concede that revolutionary developments might be regarded to be the effects of God’s judgment.

We can understand the position taken by Hopf against apartheid best, if we take into consideration that Hopf saw himself coerced to admit his failures and faults during the German church struggle. Here, he acknowledged that his actions in the thirties of the previous century had, for the most part, still been church centred – and he did so in spite of the fact that he had fought for the freedom of the church from being overwhelmed by powers alien to and outside of the church itself. This he thought to have been one of the defaults of his life,

and even if it was unconsciously committed, he confessed it as a sin. While in the thirties still cultivating the idea of the church and the state to be two separate realms, this concept changed in the course of his preoccupation with the apartheid paradigm. Now Hopf sees the church as a sentinel over against the state commissioned to remind those in charge of God's law and immutable will for humanity and obligated to threaten them with God's judgment and wrath. In his propositions made to the relationship between church and state, Hopf has found a way for the church neither to fall silent over against events and developments in state and society that are in contradiction to God's will and thus to burden itself with guilt, nor to become a political party in itself. I personally feel deeply indebted and committed to such an approach which I consider to be exemplary.

## 9. Conclusions

In order just to generalize some of the insights gained from studying Hopf's statements, comments and essays, it might be said that the Church is and remains obligated to be critical of her contemporary setting. Contemporary life also affects the Church and its members. One cannot deny that the Church is influenced and affected by worldly societal "trends" and tendencies. These movements do not only find expression "outside and around" the Church but also creep into the Church, as may be observed in the conflicts Hopf went through.

The Church therefore should critically deal with contemporary issues. When it does so, this demonstrates that it is aware that she is connected with her context. If its message is to be credible, the Church will speak what it has to say to the world outside of her doors, first to itself. The Church will also continually ask itself how well - or how poorly - it and its members conform to the divine standards, which it is obligated to proclaim. The Church, along with each of her members, must also admit and confess, personally and corporately, the misdeeds and failures which stand against the divine standards. This will not invalidate our credibility, but strengthen it, so long as we speak out of humility - which derives from recognition of our own failures, rather than with an attitude of arrogance.

In the words of Radikobo Ntsimane: "The church is clearly not innocent as far as apartheid and human rights violations are concerned. It must be stressed that it needs to confess to God and to the people that it has wronged". (A Mirage called Forgiveness, 1999, p. 25). And David Tswaedi, at the occasion of the Symposium on Apartheid, held at Lutheran Theological Seminary Oberursel last November, reminded us "that we all need to learn to the *art of listening to the voice of the weak and suffering*. Sometimes it is not easy to do that because the suffering might not be assertive, eloquent, and bold enough to express themselves that they would state their case [...]. Secondly, *we need to ask God to give us the skill of sensitivity* and of [not] jeopardizing the Gospel by not living it out, i.e., orthopraxy is not limited to the spiritual matters rather it touches the entire well being of God's people." (Apartheid in South Africa – its Impact on the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa).

Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf knew of the responsibility of the church, and the Lutheran church in particular, for its confessional stance, for the Church Catholic, and for God's world, proclaiming God's kingdom and dominion. He did not shy away from stipulating this very responsibility claiming to apply God's word to this time and day. This includes the option of demonstrating the relevance of the confessional Lutheran church(es), bound to Scripture and the witness of the Lutheran confessions, in proclaiming the "just and immutable will of God" (FC, SD, V, 17) for His world and its population, in a manner that is relevant to today. For this has been and remains the task of the Christian Church from the beginning.

From what I personally have learned in Lutheran theology and church history, the following is the foundational presupposition of “dealing with the past” as a Lutheran church and a Lutheran church historian - identifying myself as a sinner-saint, and in this regard, the Church, as Luther puts it, as “*maxima peccatrix*” – the “biggest sinner of all”, albeit in the perspective of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the realm of history, judgments have to be delivered to the best of one’s knowledge and in all conscience. In the realm of theology, the confession of sins, accompanied by the plea for condonation, understanding and forgiveness find their appropriate place.

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## **Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf:**

### **Lutheran Co-responsibility for Christian Witness in Southern Africa<sup>1</sup>**

Key-questions for Study Groups (at the LCSA Pastors' Convention 2012)

#### *Study Group 1 (p. 4 - 6)*

- a. How does Beyers-Naudé in 1976 describe the political situation in South Africa?
- b. How does Beyers-Naudé sketch the situation of Christians in South Africa?
- c. Which preconditions does he list for the credibility of the Christian witness?

#### *Study Group 2 (p. 6 [bottom] - 10 [head])*

- a. How does Hopf report on his personal experiences while travelling South Africa?
- b. How has Hopf talked about Lutheran unity during his travels to South Africa?
- c. On which grounds does Hopf criticize apartheid at the Lord's altar?

#### *Study Group 3 (p. 10 - 13 [middle])*

- a. Which are the specific questions asked by black Lutherans?
- b. How was the issue of independence seen by the black partners?
- c. How was the issue of Lutheran identity addressed by the black representatives?

#### *Study Group 4 (p. 19 - 22 [middle])*

- a. which were the expectations of black Lutheran churches towards their white counterparts?
- b. In which ways were the attitudes of the white Lutheran churches criticized?
- c. How did the white Lutherans (for the most part) react to this criticism?

#### *Study Group 5 (p. 25 - 28)*

- a. In which way does Hopf display the "traditional" doctrine of the "two kingdoms"?
- b. In which way does he re-interpret the doctrine of the "two kingdoms"?
- c. How does Hopf position himself towards the practice of fellowship at the altar?

#### *Study Group 6 (p. 33 – 36 [middle])*

- a. Which theological criteria does Hopf apply in identifying a "tyrant"?
- b. In which way does Hopf differentiate between "legal" and "illegal" measures of resistance?
- c. In which way might participation in a "just revolution" – at the outmost – be supported by Christians ?

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<sup>1</sup> Print-out of the English translation, 42 pages