1. Introductory remarks: Being in transition from training to ministry

The Convocation of the Senate of Serampore College marks for many of you the end of the period of studies in a theological seminary. We pause a moment in order to highlight the transition from theological training in an academic atmosphere and with academic standards, and the move – at least for the most of you who graduate now – into the ministry of your respective church. In reflecting for myself how to address this moment of transition in a Convocation speech, I felt puzzled. Should we look back to the academic training and formulate some general remarks to theological education in India? That would not make much sense, because it’s all over now anyhow and there is no chance to correct anything. Should I look forward and make some comments on the ministry that most of you are going to take up in the near future? That would be more suitable, even though perhaps not quite appropriate if I as a German come up with interpretations and recommendations towards the role, task and identity and the challenges of a pastor or priest in the Indian context. I therefore thought to mark this moment in your educational and professional career by pondering for some moments on the connection and links of the academic theological training and the pastoral ministry. The question I would like to place before us is therefore quite simple: How does theological reflection as we have experienced and exercised it in the seminary may in future still inform and influence my pastoral ministry? Or, to put it in a slightly different wording: How and in which way is a pastor, somebody involved in pastoral ministry, also someone living out a theological existence?

While formulating those questions I hurry up to add – just in order to avoid misunderstandings - that I am certainly aware that theological education in India is not simply an academic affair. Reflection and action in interaction give a specific contextual Indian character to the curriculum. Moreover, I am not suggesting either that only academically trained people such as we have become now are involved in theologizing. To do theology is a vital and necessary task of the whole people of

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1 For the profile of and for discussions on theological education in Asia cf. now the collection of interesting material in: Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism, ed.by Hope Antone/Wati Longchar/Hyunju Bae/Huang Po Ho/Dietrich Werner (Regnum Studies in Global Christianity), Oxford 2014. – There is a nice formulation regarding the specific character of theological studies by David Tracy quoted by H. S. Wilson in his article on “Theological Education and Ecumenical Challenges in Asia”, loc. cit., p. 625-633, p. 625: “Of all the disciplines, theology is that one where action and thought, academy and church, faith and reason, the community of inquiry and the community of commitment and faith are most explicitly and systematically brought together.” – Regarding theological studies in catholic circles in India cf. Georg Evers, Kirche und Katholizismus seit 1945: Vol. 5: Die Länder Asiens (Ferdinand Schöningh), Paderborn/München/Wien/Zürich 2003, p. 361ff.
God, even though everybody should be thankful that there are people who have gained special knowledge and theological competence. (By the way: “Theological competence” is in our church in Northern Germany the first prerequisite for the ability to be taken in as a pastoral candidate after the academic education at the university).

But what do I mean with the two notions mentioned in the title of this paper: “Theological Existence” and “Pastoral Ministry”? Let me start with some kind of definition or at least explanations of where these wordings come from and how I want to use them.

2. Theological Existence and Pastoral Ministry – some explanatory remarks at the outset

It is quite clear that I can speak here on “Pastoral Ministry neither in totally general terms nor in a more contextual setting. There are different theological conceptions in different denominations; and is would not be easy – and perhaps even not too interesting – to compare discussions on pastoral ministry and the role and function of a pastor in Germany and in India. There are lots of discussions, and search for new orientations for the pastoral ministry. And there is a lot of questioning among pastors themselves of how to understand and perform their ministry and how to function well in relation to the expectations of the people in the congregation, the public and even in response to the standards they have set for themselves. I may briefly summarize what one can read in a book on “Practical Theology” that was recently published in Germany on the debates about identity issues in relation to the service of a pastor. In Germany and in the Western world, it says, we have today an identity crisis in regard to the profession of a pastor, may it be a male or female one. It is still true, of course, that the office of a pastor in the Protestant tradition has – in continuation of the shift in the time of the reformation – an orientation towards the congregation and the importance of communication with people. This rather, even though not exclusively functional understanding of the ministry of a pastor is – rightly so – regarded as quite different from Catholic tradition where the priest is perceived not simply as a functionary within the congregation, but as an representative of the divine realm in this world. Nevertheless, it continues, “we observe an overlapping of historical development and current challenges that give room for very multi-faceted formations of the profession of a pastor: There are still, if not so many, scholarly persons who sit in their studies in the hours of the evening to ponder about historical and theological questions; there are dogmatically armed proclaimers of the Christian truth; there are high-church clerics wearing clerical shirts and other clerical garments besides feminist women pastors, spiritual companions along with managers etc. Common is still the tendency to withdraw towards and into the realm of the (local) congregation”.

In addition one could add to those models a perception that sees the pastor as a kind of community worker or social activist, even though this image is in Germany not so strong anymore as it used to be up to the 1990ties.

I hesitate to add here references to Indian discussions on the role of the pastor or on the significance of theological education for the candidates here in India. The role as

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2 Christian Grethlein, Praktische Theologie (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG), Berlin/Boston 2012, p. 469.
3 Cf., for example, the presentation of the discussion on the identity of the pastoral service in Friedrich Wintzer and others, Praktische Theologie (Neukirchener Verlag), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1997, 5th Edition, p. 12ff.
social worker and social activist may be much more in the focus here, due to the particular context of oppression and injustice in the country. In passing I just may mention two other expectations that Indian students shared with me as their aspirations in former years when I still was teaching here in India. There was a frequent mentioning of the wish to become Christians “leaders”, a term very prevalent in evangelical circles and within the USA – not so much in use in Germany, for certain reasons -, and I remember vividly one student who told me once that he intended to become a famous and great “revival speaker”. Since I don’t remember who said that to me, I am not able to see whether his dream had come true.

When I in the following use the term “pastoral ministry” I think in very general terms of the ministry of a pastor - that is a person having been called into the service of the church for – as we say in my Lutheran tradition – the public preaching of the gospel and for administering the sacraments.

The other term I am using here is the term „Theological Existence“. This term used to be and still is very prominent in Germany. “Theological Existence Today!” was the title of a famous, yet also somewhat controversial pamphlet, that Karl Barth – in those days Professor of Theology in Bonn - published in July 1933. This was a time when the Nazi dictatorial regime was about to settle down in Germany and when there was much discussion in German Protestant churches on the stand that Christians should take in relation to the policies of the Hitler government. The Nazi regime was in those days very eager to get the church and its institutions under their control and to bring pastors and the leadership of the Church in line with the new nationalistic ideology. The German church, was the outspoken demand of the government, should hail the new regime and become an obedient servant of the political and ideological interests of the regime; as a decisively German church, it was stated, the church was supposed to become truly a church of German people exhibiting a German spirit and hailing the German nation, what among other things meant the exclusion of baptized Jews from the church.

Karl Barth begun his essay by mentioning that many of his former students and followers had approached him with the request and expectation that he should say something on the serious “ecclesial concerns and problems” that had irritated and disturbed so many people within the churches. The first thing he then stated in response was that he with his students and in his seminars and lectures would continue – “perhaps in a slightly lifted voice, but without any direct reference” to the problems in society and church - “to do theology and nothing but theology”– and this so “as if nothing has happened”.

Karl Barth´s pamphlet with these famous introductory remarks presented in those days in reality a heavy criticism against the theological negligence of the German church in relation to current issues. Even many church leaders welcomed the national enthusiasm and had fallen into a mood of excitement about the national uprising, so that one lost – in Barth´s view - direction and orientation for what the church would have to say in such a situation of an apparent emergence of a totalitarian regime in the country. In this situation, his essay was indeed a forceful plea for theological reflection and engagement in order to give direction to the Church of his days.

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We can see, however, that Barth was in reality of course not doing theology “as if nothing had happened”. He even sent his essay to Adolf Hitler, he later denied to take the oath of obedience towards the German “Führer”; Barth took a great interest in politics, and he even had been a member of the Social Democratic Party not willing to surrender this membership when the government urged him to do so. But his motives for his word towards the situation did not come simply from a political analysis, but from theological reasoning. His attitude then eventually lead, two years after the publication of his famous essay and one year after the famous Barmen Confession of May 1934, to Barth’s dismissal from his professorship and to his withdrawal to Switzerland.5

Nevertheless, the notion of doing theology “as if nothing had happened” and “without direct reference” to the situation in church and society, is somewhat strange and was even in those days not really helpful. In order to remind his contemporaries on the need and indispensability of theological reflection and reasoning for positioning the church in the public realm, Barth went too far. It was no wonder therefore that Karl Barth’s theological approach was later heavily criticised – in Germany as well as in India. I mention here just two critical voices that lead us to take up in some appreciation the title of Barth’s essay, but to develop our own theological reasoning in quite a different direction.

In Germany it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who later in prison criticised Barth, to whom Bonhoeffer actually felt very much indebted, for what he called “revelation positivism” (“Offenbarungspositivismus”). He charged Barth’s theology as coming down straight from heaven, framed in dogmatic statements and an inner-church language that did not have much, if at all, relation to the life experiences and life situations of people of that time. Bonhoeffer felt that this kind of theological positivism, so isolated from the context, had led only to a new form of “restauration”.6 And he added that the listeners of sermons, inspired by Barth’s theology, and readers of Barth’s extensive dogmatic elaborations simply had to swallowed Barth’s affirmations in somewhat indigestible pieces, whether they understand everything or not. “Eat, bird, or die!” became a famous verdict Bonhoeffer as to Barth’s theological approach; “whether it is the virgin birth, the trinity or whatever it might be, every piece of the doctrine is as important and as necessary as the other; thus one has to swallow everything or nothing. That is”, Bonhoeffer adds, “not biblical.”7

I am sure most of you know the critical response that was more than once being formulated in theological discourses in India to the theology of Karl Barth. I only refer here, as an example, to the so-called “Rethinking Group” of the 1930ties. The theologians of this group published the famous book “Rethinking Christianity in India” in 1938, just before the International Missionary Council’s World Conference at


Tambaram, Madras, “as an Indian reply to Hendrik Kraemer’s Barthian broadside The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World”. In that publication the Indian church was, as Robin Boyd wrote, “pilloried because of its subservience to ideas and forms imported wholesale from the West.”

The charge over against Barth was here, as later by many other Indian theologians, his insistence on not taking the context in account in his theological reflection, and – moreover – for not acknowledging any positive reality in the world of religions. Because he denied any idea of an “Anknüpfungspunkt” (“point of contact”) to cultures and religions, his theology became regarded as a theology developed and shaped in an ivory tower.

But one may ask now why I did dwell so extensively on Karl Barth, if there is at the end a rather negative judgement on his theology? One reason is that I still very much appreciate his notion of “theological existence” that I think is a very vital reminder of the need for any minister and the church at large to continuously get involved in theological reflection and reasoning. Along with Karl Barth – who has found many followers at this point – I would affirm that theology is a critical and necessary function of the Church, providing orientation for the Church and its ministry in the world. Another reason is – perhaps that is a personal confession – that I still like, once in a while, to read Karl Barth as a kind of “antidote” against the forgetfulness of the church and its pastors of theology. And finally – this is the main point – I wanted to present this theological methodology as a background for my own reflection on the interaction of theology and ministry that moves into a different direction than Barth’s approach.

3. The Apostle Paul as theologian and minister of Jesus Christ – a model for theological existence and pastoral ministry

In search for a more adequate model for exploring the interrelationship of theology and ministry, I would like to turn to the St. Paul and his letters. There are several reasons why Paul would provide an excellent illustration for our deliberations. I mention just some of them:

In the first place, Paul calls himself quite often a “minister” or being in the “service” of Jesus Christ or of the congregations or of the gospel. It may be that this terminology is not so familiar to us, because the different translations of the New Testament in English – as well as in German or in any vernacular language – use different English terms for Greek words that literally should be translated with “servant” or “minister”, “service” or “ministry”.

The Greek words in question here are on the one hand the words “diakonia”, “diakonos”, and “diakonein” that are used quite frequently by the apostle Paul for a reflection on his ministry. Another Greek word that also is used in relation to Paul’s ministry is the word “doulos”, usually translated with “slave” or “servant”.

The original meaning of the Greek word “diakonia” is actually “to serve at the table”; due to this relation to food and service the word later – and that was already the case in the New Testament – was used to describe, as “diakonia”, the social service rendered to poor people within the church as well as to people outside the church. Already in Paul’s letters we find the beginning of this kind of usage, even though the

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term “diakonia” is in Paul’s language primarily used for the description of the ministry of Paul as an apostle and ambassador of Christ. The New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament therefore translates quite frequently the word very correctly with the term “ministry”. To give at this stage just one example I would like to refer to Rom. 11:13 where Paul says, that he as “an apostle to the Gentiles” “I glorify my ministry”.

The term “diakonos”, relating to the person who carries out the ministry, is often rightly so translated with “minister”, sometimes also with “servant” and in a few times with some other circumscriptions. When we read in English translations that Paul calls himself “minister” or “servant” – for example in Rom. 1:1 or Phil. 1:1 or in 2. Cor. 11:23 – we have in the Greek original usually either the word “diakonos” (“servant”) or even the much stronger word “doulos” (“slave”). I don’t want to go into too many details, but for those who like statistics I would like to mention that the word field around “diakonia” – that is “ministry” or “service” – appears in the NT 34 times; out of these there are alone 22 references found within the Pauline letters. The word “diakonos” appears in the whole of the NT 29 times, and within the Pauline letters alone 21 times. The word family is particularly used in 2. Corinthians – a letter in which Paul reflects much about his ministry. We can summarize that even though the words have also in the Pauline letters sometimes different meanings, it is quite adequate to say that the terminology around the word family “ministry” and “minister” are very prominent in Paul’s writings.

In relation to a second reason for referring to Paul I don’t need to argue so much. It is well known and accepted that Paul has been one of the very great theologians if the Christian history. Instead of referring to a number of scholars who affirm this assessment, I refer here only to a more recently published book on “New Testament Theology”. Udo Schnelle writes: “Paul was without doubt the outstanding missionary and theological thinker of early Christianity.” And the caption, Schnelle gave to his section on Pauline theology reads: “Paul: Missionary and Thinker”.

But there is a third reason to take Paul as a model: The apostle Paul, the ambassador or minister of Jesus Christ, is neither a theologian of the West nor of the Indian context. He is a theologian of the very early Christianity, and therefore a reference and resource for us that goes back and lies beyond theological schools of the West or the East. Paul is a figure of the time when Christianity was still young and fresh, and when the Christian faith was in the very formative period, searching and finding its way to different people of different cultures. Therefore it may be quite interesting and inspiring to look at Paul’s interaction between theological reflection and the ministerial performance. It is true, of course, that the ministry of a missionary is not quite the same as the ministry of a pastor, but I think we can still make very interesting observations that help us to orient us today for our ministry in the church. And even though am very well aware that there are often different interpretations of Paul’s theology and that it therefore may be very relative if I say that Paul is beyond our different theological schools and contextual approaches. But nevertheless do we encounter in Paul’s writings a companion in theological and ministerial existence who is worth to be listened to.

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And as a personal reference I still may add that St. Paul’s theology is for me, since the days of my doctoral dissertation on St. Paul’s understanding of the church, has been a continuous source of inspiration.

4. Theological Existence and Pastoral Ministry – Pauline Insights

If we now move into an exploration of the relationship of theology and ministry in Paul’s writings, there are three dimensions I would like to spell out. 1) The need of continuous appropriation of faith for myself; 2) the communication of the gospel with people within and outside the church; and 3) the ethos of a minister in the service of Jesus Christ.

4.1. Theological Existence and Pastoral Ministry – The need of continuous appropriation of faith for myself

A first area where theologizing plays a vital role in the ministry of the apostle Paul is the reflection on his own understanding of faith. Any minister of Christ needs the reflection and nourishment of one’s own faith and the growth within one’s own faith. Paul experienced – I guess much more than any one of us – a dramatic conversion; this set him on a total turn of his existence and lead his life in a new direction. But even though Paul used to emphasize on occasions that he received his gospel directly from the Lord, it is quite obvious that he also had to learn about his new faith, to think and reflect about it, to read about it, and to talk about it with other persons in order to be educated in faith and to grow in understanding and strength of the Christian commitment. The metaphoric talk of “infants in Christ”, “fed… with milk, not solid food” (1. Cor. 3:1f.) might even give a hint to the notion of different stages in faith.

This growing in faith has on the one hand intellectual and cognitive aspects. Faith has indeed to do with gaining knowledge and reflecting about the Biblical sources, liturgical materials, creeds that had been formulated in course of the history of the church. But since the kind of knowledge in question here is knowledge of God – God-knowledge – it is much more than or something very different from pure academic learning or educational exercise. Religious knowledge has an existential dimension; learning leads to transformation in life, to an impact on my total being, my longings as well as my commitment. I therefore like the slogan that ACTC here in Hyderabad has developed to describe its ministry: “Equipping Men & Women with Knowledge of God that leads to love of God.” God-knowledge does not only expand one’s brain, but touches also the heart and soul, the body and the relationships of a person. Theology, as an exercise of reflection, has a spiritual dimension; theology and spirituality are like sisters and brothers, for theology without spirituality remains a purely intellectual exercise as well as spirituality without theological reflection remains a vague and hazy thing.

This kind of continuous theological and spiritual engagement as a striving to grasp the reality of God for me and within my life, can perhaps be illustrated by St. Paul’s witness about his eagerness to continuously get to know Christ better and deeper. It is interesting that Paul and Timothy at the very outset of the letter to the Philippians in Phil 1:1 call themselves “servants of Christ” – we could again say “ministers of Christ”, even though here the Greek word “doulos” is used here, what actually is a
stronger word than “diakonos” –¹⁰, later in the letter the apostle writes as one who had earlier introduces himself as “servant of Christ”: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death…” (Phil. 3:10)

Paul, the “servant of Christ”, was a great theologian. He certainly read the Biblical writings for himself, pondering about their meaning and the application of the old words – his scriptures were the Old Testament writings – for his life and the community of faith of which he was part. He also read and transmitted the creeds and confessional formulas that were already formulated by sisters and brothers who had become Christians earlier than he. He sought to understand them for himself, reinterpreting them and relating them always, if necessary, to new experiences, insights, and life situations. The Holy Scriptures are certainly a treasure from where we have to lift up inspiration and orientation. But on the other hand one has to say that Christian faith and Christian confessions are not simply formulated and given once for all, so that they simply can be repeated, and that’s all. Christian faith needs the intellectual engagement; theology is not only reproduction of tradition, but also creative production. It is the continuous exercise to pull the Bible into my life, and to pull my life into the Bible.

I would like to give two examples for the illustration of this thought, one from Germany, the other one from India.

Ten years ago biblical scholars in Germany published a new translation of the Bible that is called: “The Bible in Just Language”.¹¹ This translation aimed at a “just” or “inclusive” language, following the criteria of “gender justice” (no male - centered language, not even for the names of God), “justice regarding the special, theologically motivated, relationship of Jews and Christians” (no wordings disregarding or discriminating Jews), and “social justice” (highlighting the social context and the social realities of the biblical world). Of course, this bible translation, even though it was developed and published by well-known biblical scholars, met with very controversial responses, particularly due to avoiding for the reference to God and God’s names and titles any notion of male gender; even the so-called so-called Tetragram in Hebrew with the capital letters YAHWE, in English translations usually rendered with “the LORD”, was replaced with words such as “the Eternal”, “the Heavenly” or other wordings that were not related to a male gender bias. This approach was meant to liberate the God-talk from male domination, and was also a reference to the Jewish custom in reverence before God to avoid the usage of the name of God.

However controversial the discussion about that translation was, my point here is to say that it was and is a meaningful attempt to appropriate the Biblical teaching in a

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¹⁰ It should be noted that in Phil. 1:1 Paul and Timothy as the sender of that letter are introduced as “douloi Christou Jesou” (in the NRSV translated as “servants of Christ Jesus”, but actually it should read “slaves of Christ Jesus”), whereas as addressees are mentioned generally “all saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” and in addition “the bishops and deacons” (epikopoi kai diakonoi) who are apparently office bearers within the congregation or church. While Paul earlier uses the word “diakonos” usually for a general description of his ministry, we find here in Philippians a later development of church structures that already know the office of bishops and deacons. Paul himself shifts here as well as in Romans 1:1 to the term “doulos”, in English usually translated with “servant”.

new time, for new people, for me. Many women particularly were very happy about
this translation, for it met their sentiments and helped them to get new perspectives
that aimed at overcoming the male-centeredness still so prevalent in the church and
in church-language.

As a second example I refer to the way of formulating for me and my fellow-people
my own statement of faith. This may happen in songs and bhajans, in poems and
lyrics, in music and in dance. I find it interesting that there emerged new expressions
of Christian creeds within the struggle of dalits for human dignity. Such statements,
as the following, are current forms of an appropriation of faith by and for people who
earlier were perhaps not able to express their own suffering and struggle with
Christian language of faith. Here is one of those confessional statements:

“We believe in Dalit Jesus
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
And was born among cattle, of a handmaid of God
He lived and ministered among the polluting people of Galilee
Rejecting social norms, accepted morals and taboos of pollution
He assumed the role of bonded slaves
In order to energise them with the vision of the kingdom
Because of his identification with the polluting people
He suffered, was crucified, died and was buried
Third day he rose again and ascended into heaven
Affirming a new future for all the crucified people
He will come again to vindicate the Dalits
and to judge their oppressors…”

I sum up so far: Theological existence is important, first of all, for myself and my own
life before God. The ministry of a pastor is a very demanding job. And yet, it is very
important not to neglect the dimension of theological reflection, spiritual nourishment
and the search for my own genuine identification with what I tell other people about
the Gospel. I need to remain aware of my own integrity in faith and in my theological
convictions, and I should not hesitate to address – if needed – my own doubts, pain
and afflictions. Martin Luther coined the famous statement that there are three things
that make a good theologian: In Latin the words are “oratio”, that is “prayer” and
means a prayerful life with reverence towards God and the knowledge of God;
“meditatio”, that is reflection, the pondering and thinking what the Christian faith
means to me and to the people around me; and “tentatio”, the experience of
“temptation” relating to affliction, pain and bitter moments in life that threaten to shake
the ground of my life. Theology, that was Luther’s conviction, is actually born out of
experiences such as Jona had while in the belly of the big fish, with all his anxiety
and agony, or from the experiences of Job struggle with the justice of God, or Jacob
fighting with God at the river Jabbok (Gen. 32:22ff.). Here, in such situations one may
discover afresh that theological existence is intellectual reflection in a spiritual

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12 Authorised by V. Devasahayam, quoted from Johannes Hoffmann, Exodus of the Broken People.
Dalits and Dalit Theology, published on his own in 1996, p. 141f.
13 For Luther’s understanding of theology and of being a theologian cf. the article on
„Theologieverständnis“ in: Das Luther-Lexikon, ed. by Volker Leppin and Gury Schneider-Ludorff
(Verlag Bückle & Böhm), Regensburg 2014, p. 679-681, with more literature.
dimension, intertwined with astonishment and amazement, bewilderment and perplexity, commitment and involvement, thankfulness towards God and open hands that at last only Godself can fill.

4.2. Theological Existence and Pastoral Ministry - Communication of the Gospel with people within and outside the church

A second area where theology is a very important and indispensable requirement for a minister of the church is the communication of the gospel, within and outside the church. We can here again refer to the Apostle Paul who often speaks of his “ministry” – with the Greek words “diakonia” or “diakonos” – of sharing the gospel with other people. Here are some examples, with translations taken from the NRSV:

- Apollos and Paul are “Gods servants, working together; you are God´s field, God´s building.” (1. Cor. 3,9)
- „God… has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant…“ (2. Cor. 3:6)
- Paul is given „the ministry of the Spirit“ and „the ministry of justification“ (2. Cor. 3:8f.)
- „God… has given us the ministry of reconciliation… So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us…“ (2. Cor. 5:18-20)

The dimension of pastoral ministry that is under consideration here is often referred to as “proclamation of the gospel” or “preaching of the gospel”. This terminology, very prominent also in Karl Barth´s theology, has certainly a basis in biblical language. And yet I rather like to speak here of communication of the gospel instead of preaching or proclaiming the gospel. “Proclamation” and “communication” are two very different things. The term “proclamation” relates only to one side of a communication process: To the one who voices a message that somebody is supposed to receive. There is certainly the expectation that the recipient of the message will respond positively to the message that was transmitted, but one does not pay much attention to the needs and the awareness of the one who is addressed. There may still be some attention towards the content of the message and the way the content is being transmitted, but it is the sender who formulates the message according to his or her understanding. The gospel being proclaimed in such a way, without awareness of the situation and context of the supposed receivers of the message, is almost understood as the voice in a loudspeaker at the railway station announcing that a train is going to come or being delayed. Sharing of the gospel, however, does not mean to provide information or making an announcement, but it requires an act of interaction of people and it therefore needs a dialogue between the sender and the receiver of a message.

Let me use two examples to illustrate that we have to do here with very delicate matters that call for serious theological reflection:

Robert Schreiter narrated in his book “The New Catholicity” an incident that happened in Japan: When the catholic cathedral in Kyoto was built in the 1950s, stained glass windows were installed. One of them depicted St. George, a famous European saint of the Middle Ages portraying the saint while killing a dragon. This portrayal caused an uproar in Japan, because the dragon in East Asia is not a

symbol of evil, as in European and also in biblical mythology, but it is in East Asia a positive symbol for happiness and joy, and it is in Japan moreover a symbol for the emperor. “To have St. George slay the dragon in that setting was tantamount to saying that Christianity destroys Japaneseness.”

This is a fine example of an unsuccessful communication. There was a good intention on the side of the catholic missionaries who came from Europe. But because they did not engage at all with the cultural context and the symbolic world of the Japanese people, they completely failed to communicate that the Gospel is Good News for people, offering joy and new life.

A second example may underline the importance of getting acquainted with the context and the world of dreams, anxieties and aspirations of the people with whom one wants to share the Gospel of salvation and liberation. In the beginning of the twentieth century, “when a missionary couple begun work in North India as evangelists, the word quickly went around the village that they owned a cat. In this village, only witches kept cats, and they were used to snatch people’s souls while they were sleeping. Consequently, the strangers in the village had to be witches. The following morning, the male missionary gathered the men of the village together and addressed them through an interpreter, not knowing about the intense discussion that had gone on the night before. The missionary announced, ‘I have come to win your souls for Christ!’ The astonished look on the faces of the villagers assured the missionary that he had made his point effectively. The men, however, were wondering who this Christ was, and what he wanted with their souls!”

Communication of the Gospel requires communication skills, to be sure. But it also needs theological reasoning. A minister of Jesus Christ, who wants to communicate the gospel, must put himself or herself into a situation of a deep and serious dialogue with people about the gospel. In the encounter with different people, living in different settings of life, the minister must himself first discover afresh what the gospel in that situation actually is all about. We do not have the gospel at hand, so that we simply can distribute it to others, we have as ministers to reflect in interaction with people what the specific content of the Gospel is in a given situation. In other words: The gospel in its life-giving, liberating significance for people will emerge only within such an encounter.

For further illustration we can at this point relate to Paul’s famous statement about his attitude of communicating the Gospel to people of different cultures or even different religious affiliations or sentiments. In 1. Cor. 9:19ff. the apostle calls himself “a slave to all”, a notion that refers in this context to his being a minister who has been entrusted with sharing the gospel with all kinds of people. Even though, he says, “I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law… To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”

Leaving aside here a reference to the topic of “winning the many” – the game on numbers in religion is a special problem, particularly in the Indian context - it is

16 Loc. cit.
obvious here that Paul argues for a flexible approach to different audiences or addressees of the gospel. One should not regard this as a tactical attitude and an arbitrary slandering with the message of the gospel. What Paul states is rather that the gospel takes its meaning and content, its formulations, its signs and symbols, its metaphoric language – one can speak of God only in metaphors – not only from a given storage or reservoir of doctrinal formulas. The gospel, as Good News to various peoples in various cultures and various life conditions and circumstances needs to be communicated in different ways. This, however, is a very delicate theological task, calling for a minister who lives a theological existence and is therefore ready and able to reflect together with people on what the gospel might mean in their particular context. Theology, it becomes quite obvious at this point, is always contextual theology. Communication does not function only from one direction to another; it indeed is a process of interaction, of speaking and listening, of listening and speaking, of relating myself and my knowledge and understanding of the gospel, that is always limited, to people, and hear what they, the others, have to say to it and to contribute to it.

A minister of Jesus Christ thus needs in order to communicate effectively continuously theological awareness and the ability to theological discernment and judgement. Trying to systematize the Pauline approach to the theological flexibility in communication the gospel, we could make at least four distinctions in the relationship of gospel and cultures: 17:

1. Christian faith is *transcultural*: This means that certain essential aspects of Christian faith are universal; they are found everywhere in Christian churches: the relation to the scriptures, the notion of salvation and liberation, baptism and eucharist, worship and liturgical elements such as reading of the scriptures, confession of faith, Lord’s Prayer etc.

2. Christian faith is also *contextual*: Each particular culture gives its imprint on the expressions of Christian faith and the perception of the Gospel. There are already four Gospels in the New Testament that use very different language for the expressions of what salvation means to people – the kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels, the notion of life in St. John’s Gospel, the reference to justification or reconciliation in the letters of St. Paul; and there are very different descriptions and titles for who Jesus Christ is in Africa and in Asia and in other parts of the world; Jesus is the “Great Healer” or “Ancestor”, he is perceived as “Guru” or “Dalit”, he is a “Swami” or “the Enlightened One”. 18

3. Moreover, Christian faith is also in certain instances and situations *counter-cultural*, challenging cultural traditions, attitudes, or role models; the caste system in India is certainly one example, but many more could be mentioned. Christian faith, one has to affirm, stands against aspects of culture, because those features contradict Christian faith as well as general notions on human dignity.

4. And finally, Christian faith is also *cross-cultural*. When people of different cultures meet and learn to live together it usually happens that the exchange of cultures and the mutual influence on one another leads to transformation of cultures. In Germany,

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17 For the following cf. Christian Grethelein, loc. cit., p. 190f.
with the many refugees who come into our country, we just start to learn to live in multicultural settings and to search for a common culture that helps us to grow together in dignity and with mutual acceptance.

Communication of the gospel is thus a very complex matter. The “gospel” as content of communication is never a fixed set of doctrinal sentences, altogether independent of the concrete situation of communication. The exact – liberating or challenging meaning of the “gospel” will only be generated within the process of communication; the communication remains open, but it is hoped that it leads to a new disclosure of reality. This process of communication of the Gospel needs then people, ministers, who are trained in the art of theological discernment and who understand their ministry in relation to a theological existence – as people who, like Paul the great communicator of the Gospel, seek to engage with people in order to discover for themselves and for and with the people in various contexts ever afresh what a wonderful and liberating message the gospel of Jesus Christ can and will mean for different people.

4.3. Theological Existence and Pastoral Ministry – The ethos of a minister in the service of Jesus Christ

In pondering on Paul and his theological reflection on Christian ministry I need to refer eventually to a third area of concern. Almost on every page of 2. Cor, we observe Paul to be involved in some kind of argument on the question what a Christian “minister” is all about. The reason for the interest in this issue is the appearance of other missionaries – rival missionaries, to be precise – in Corinth who claim to be true apostles, real missionaries, more faithful servants than Paul. And Paul, they charge, is not a good minister of Jesus Christ at all.

In 2. Cor. 11:21b-30 Paul presents a very hot-tempered, bitter and sarcastic counter-attack on the charges of his opponents who proudly seem to call themselves “ministers of Christ”. This section is usually called the “Fool´s Speech” (“Narrenrede”), for Paul presents himself here as a “fool”, boasting like the rival missionaries about his achievements. In reflecting and arguing about the character, the habits and basic attitudes of a “minister of Jesus Christ”, Paul employs here a rhetorical strategy in arguing his case over against his congregation. Any attempt to persuade people in an argument or speech in a controversial situation, so said the rhetorical doctrine of the day, had to employ elements of “logos”, that is reason and rationality, “pathos”, that is an appeal on the emotions of people, and “ethos”, what means he reference to the character of the person who speaks. Talking about the “ethos” of a “minister of Jesus Christ” is what Paul is doing here in 2. Cor. 10-13.

The term “ministers” – in Greek again “diakonoi”, in the NRSV translated with “ministers” – is in this section indeed a key word. Paul begins his apology or defense in saying:

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19 Christian Grethlein, loc. cit., p. 156f.
20 For definitions and a short glance at rhetorical rules and the importance of logos, pathos and ethos. cf. the article: Rhetorik, in: RGG, 4 Edition, Vol. 7, p. 492-500. The more recent commentaries often bring excellent analyses of the rhetoric style that Paul is exhibiting and applying; cf. for example the commentary of Thomas Schmeller, Der Zweite Brief an die Korinther (2Kor 7,5-13,13), EKK VIII/2 (Neukirchener Theologie/Patmos Verlag), Neukirchen-Vluyn/Ostfildern 2015, passim.
“But whatever anyone dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are the ministers (diakonoi) of Christ? I am talking like a madman – I am a better one…” (2. Cor. 11:21b-23a).

It is quite obvious that we encounter here different concepts of what Christian ministry is all about. What we can gather from Paul’s polemic against his opponents let them appear as missionaries of Jewish background who called themselves “apostles”.\(^{21}\) They took pride in their origin from Judaism. Apparently the title “apostle” and also “ministers of Christ” were given a honorific meaning, underscoring the esteemed position and air of dignity that surrounded these missionaries. They seem to have been bold and powerful in their preaching, eloquent and superficial. They thought of themselves as fully equipped with the powers of the Holy Spirit, able to speak in tongues and having ecstatic visions. They were so powerful that they could perform miracles such as casting out of demons and healing the sick in support to their preaching. Paul’s polemic pictures their attitudes as triumphalistic, bold, aggressive, authoritarian, even rude, as the following example from his attacks betray:

“For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my same, I must say, we were too weak for that!” (2. Cor. 11,20f.)

No wonder that money also played a certain role. The other missionaries expected payment for their preaching and service, while Paul was working with his own hands. For the other missionaries, exactly this non-acceptance of money on the side of Paul showed that he was not a true apostle: He did not even dare to take – that was the charge – the proper reward for what he had to offer to the Corinthians.

These “ministers of Christ” seemed to have competed with one another, and for that purpose they carried so-called “letter of recommendation” around (Paul had already touched on this theme several times earlier in 2. Cor.; cf. particularly chapter 3). Those letters contained descriptions and catalogues of their spiritual gifts and accomplishments, so praising their mighty deeds to the congregations. With those letters from congregations they wold move around as itinerant missionaries, commending themselves and their services.

From all we can gather, the dominant self-understanding of these missionaries must have been that of power and strength; they regarded themselves as powerful “servants of (the powerful and triumphant) Christ.”

It is most interesting how Paul now responds to all those charges. In 2. Cor. 11:21ff. – the beginning of this section was already quoted – Paul dares to make a comparison between him and the other “ministers of Christ”: “Are they ministers of Christ?”, he asked, and he then adds: “I am talking like a madman – I am a better one…” (2. Cor. 11:23). He then presents his own catalogue of achievements and accomplishments as a minister of Jesus Christ. However, he does not listen his spiritual deeds and talents, Paul presents a long lists of his sufferings, of pain, experiences of persecution, tribulations, afflictions, his agony and even his apparent

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\(^{21}\) For a discussion on the particular identity, the origin and theological convictions of Paul’s opponents cf. the analytical explorations in current commentaries of 2. Cor.
failures. From the point of view of his adversaries, Paul should have been ashamed that God has allowed these things to happen to him.

And yet, the point Paul wants to make here is that the true minister of Christ stands there where the suffering and crucified Christ stands. The true minister is representing the crucified Lord in this world – and not a Christ who is an aggressive conqueror and a glorious victor, crushing people to the ground.

Here we encounter again a deep theological reflection on the character of what pastoral or Christian ministry is all about. Paul’s deep theological reflection leads him to spell out criteria that inform the character of Christian ministry. The encounter with and the acknowledgement of Christ as the one who identifies with the suffering people in this world, leads Paul to a perception of his ministry as a service in deep solidarity with the suffering people – the people longing and searching for liberation, freedom and justice. When Paul lists his sufferings for the sake of Christ and closes his catalogue in speaking about his “daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches” (2. Cor. 11:28b), he says something about his commitment and the character of his service. And when he still adds: “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?” (2. Cor. 11:29), then he makes it very clear that his theological existence leads him to a perception and performance of his ministry that followed the footsteps of Christ.

Theological existence, reflection on the question who Jesus Christ is for us today, leads Paul – and hopefully us – to a perception of ministry that sides the poor and the downtrodden, that takes up solidarity with the people and seeks to foster liberation and freedom. “We do not proclaim ourselves”, Paul says in 2. Cor. 4:5; “we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves (doulos) for Jesus’ sake.”

I am sure it is neither required that we seek deliberately suffering and pain for and in our ministry. And it may simply be too much for us today to perceive ourselves as “slaves” for the people. But the point Paul wants to make is that the service attitude of a minister of Jesus Christ is informed by a theological vision that Jesus himself has voiced in relation to his own service and identification with the sufferings and needs of the people and for the disciples who want to follow Jesus and live a life that is in contrast to a society where people strife for power and influence, wealth and honor:

“You know”, Jesus is quoted in Mk. 10:42-45, “that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and heir great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (diakonos), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (doulos) of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served (diakonethenai) but to serve (diakonesai), and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Here we find expressed the ethos of a theological vision for Christian ministry. As Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” – here again the important word “doulos” occurs - (Phil. 2:7), so are the ministers of Jesus Christ supposed to follow this theological vision for the service of the people. Ministers of Christ are supposed to stand there where Jesus Christ placed himself: At the side of the downtrodden, the poor, the needy, the ones who strive for justice, righteousness and for human dignity.

4. Closing remarks
We mark today the moment of transition – the transition from academic education and scholarly exploration in theology towards taking up the ministry of a pastor in the church. It is important that you continue to maintain for and within your ministry the stimulus for theological reflection. This theological existence should inform your ministry – for yourself in an ever new exercise of searching for a theological-spiritual appropriation of faith; for the people with whom you want to communicate the gospel; and for Jesus Christ who as the crucified and risen Lord places you at the side of the suffering, the crucified people of India.

You will be ministers within your respective churches. I wish you that you – as very well trained theologians and as future ministers of Jesus Christ within your church – give a living and convincing answer to questions the Jesuit Indian theologian Samuel Rayan once has raised in relation to the churches in India:

“The fact is that we have a Church or many Churches in India, but do we have an Indian Church, a Church of India sprung from our own Indian experience of Jesus Christ, come in our flesh, dwelling in our midst and bearing our wounds? A Church developing from our own meeting with God in Christ and shaping for itself a social body and a symbol system out of our life and culture?”

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Hamburg, January 2016

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22 Samuel Rayan, The Ecclesiology at work in the Indian Church; in: Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology, ed. by Gerwin van Leeuwen (Asian Trading Corporation), Bangalore 184, p. 191-212, p. 196.