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Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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International Institute for Religious Freedom welcomes Cape Town Commitment

Sauer commends The Lausanne Movement for timely statements

(Bonn, 31.01.2011) The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (Cape Town, 16-25 October 2010) brought together 4,200 evangelical leaders from 198 countries. On 28 January 2011 it issued *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*, emanating from the congress. The extensive document of 56 pages length contains two parts: The Cape Town Confession of Faith and the Cape Town Call to Action.

BQ has interviewed Dr. Christof Sauer, Cape Town, South Africa, a Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) on the statement. The Cape Town based scholar participated in the congress. On the request of WEA, which was a co-sponsor of the event, Sauer had earlier commented on a preliminary draft of the first part. He was also invited by the Statement Working Group to submit draft sections for the call to action emanating from the work of the IIRF. He had previously attended the Second Lausanne Congress in Manila in 1989 and the Forum 2004 in Pattaya as a contributor to the issue group "The persecuted church." At the Cape Town Congress the IIRF distributed an issue of its *International Journal for Religious Freedom* dedicated to the topic "mission and persecution" as well as a new book on "Suffering, persecution and martyrdom."

BQ: Dr. Sauer, what is your first impression of the Cape Town Commitment?

Christof Sauer: It is a brilliant idea to frame the first part, the Cape Town Confession of Faith, in terms of love. This section under the heading "For the Lord we love" has seized the opportunity to declare ourselves, how we pursue the ultimate goal of mission – the glory of God. Not by might, power, or violence, but by love. It is timely and necessary to do so from a biblical perspective in a context where adherents of various other religions and worldviews are borrowing biblical quotes and terminology about love, and interpret them in their own way. These interpretations are at best half truths. And they are often used to pressure Christians to forsake their witness and mission and even diaconal and social work, humanitarian or emergency help in other religious contexts. Such interpretations of love and peace are used to object to conversions to Christ, as disruptions of communal harmony, or as too dangerous and costly, to which people may not be exposed for the sake of love.

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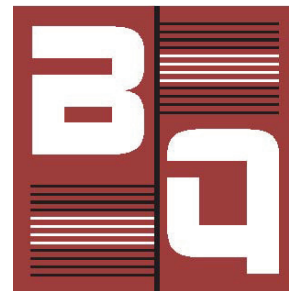
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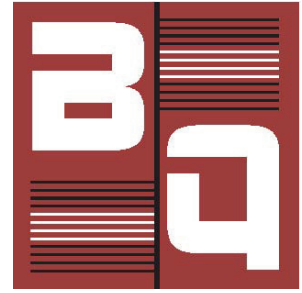
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BQ: What about the second part, the Cape Town Call to Action?

CS: This is the result of one of the most extensive global “listening processes” in Christian history. I think the statement captures quite well major challenges facing the Church today with the six key issues it identified: Bearing witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic, globalized world; building the peace of Christ in our divided and broken world; living the love of Christ among people of other faiths; discerning the will of Christ for world evangelization; calling the church of Christ back to humility, integrity and simplicity; and partnering in the body of Christ for unity in mission. It is very important to link doctrinal statements with practical instructions and to do so in a manner that can be broadly accepted by Christians.

BQ: What caught your eye about the tone of the statement?

CS: I was impressed with the irenic tone of the Cape Town Commitment. This becomes evident for example in the careful treatment of the theology of prosperity. While its errors are decisively condemned the truths it contains were maintained. All that in a tone that strives to maintain unity. The statement exemplifies Lausanne’s principle of “breadth within boundaries” by distinguishing primary truths on which unity is needed and secondary issues where Christians disagree in their interpretation on how Christians should live according to the Bible, for example on the role of women and men in preaching and church leadership.

BQ: Now, from a perspective of religious freedom advocacy and your efforts towards a theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom, where does the relevance of this statement lie?

CS: In my assessment, the Cape Town Commitment, among the broad and global Christian statements to date, is the one which most extensively considers three issues at the heart of the work of IIRF: the expression of an explicit and high ethical standard for any sharing of one’s faith, the need to integrate suffering, persecution and martyrdom into our theology of mission, and the endorsement of religious freedom advocacy in its relationship to Christian witness. In some of these respects the Cape Town Commitment is much stronger or detailed than the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 and the Manila Manifesto of 1989. The issue of suffering and persecution in relation to mission had been dealt with more as a pragmatic or strategic issue earlier rather than finding its way into the theological argument. The concern of the chairperson of the Cape Town Statement Working Group, Dr. Chris Wright, to emphasize humility, integrity, and simplicity was very conducive now.

BQ: You highlighted a section about “ethical mission” ...

CS: This section succeeds in distinguishing evangelism as a persuasive rational argument and a gentle open invitation from unworthy proselytism that tries to compel others to become “one of us.” There is a commitment to be “scrupulously ethical” in evangelism, which is to be marked by “gentleness and respect, keeping a clear

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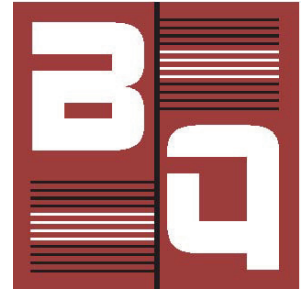
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conscience.” Among those actions clearly denounced and rejected are the promotion of lies and caricatures about other faiths, the incitement of racist prejudice, hatred and fear, as well as the path of violence and revenge. Beyond these very helpful statements, there is a need to spell out in more detail what this means in practice as well as some of the finer issues that are debated publicly. This might be achieved by an ethics code for mission which the WEA is busy preparing.

BQ: Why did you mention a theology of suffering?

CS: I think the tendency in earlier years to overemphasize a pragmatic and managerial approach to mission, which was so focused on success that it tended to neglect that the victory of Christ came by the way of the cross and defeat, has been overcome at the Cape Town Congress. The Cape Town Commitment clearly anchored in its theological foundations what the “love of our neighbors as ourselves” means when facing hatred, slander, persecution, violence, and murder with a Christ-like response. It also clearly expressed how the love of the people of God calls for solidarity with those persecuted and suffering for Christ, and even the need for the rest of the church to learn some important lessons from the suffering church. What I did not sufficiently find is repentance over a lack of support of the persecuted, reflection on the complexities surrounding persecution, and the challenge to rethink mission theology from that perspective, as well as the call for churches to equip themselves for persecution and the need to anchor the topic in theological and missionary training. These aspects are expressed in great detail in the *Bad Urach Statement* “Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission,” which was the result of consultation in 2009 and was issued only shortly before the Cape Town Congress.

BQ: How do you assess the statements made about religious freedom?

CS: The section “Love works for religious freedom for all people” is laying some essential foundations such as the compatibility of defending religious freedom and the willingness to suffer for Christ. It also emphasizes the necessity to pursue religious freedom for all people independent of their religious belief, distinguishing it from an acceptance of their beliefs. In addition it portrays Christians as good citizens who seek the welfare of the nation where they live, while giving higher loyalty to God in case of conflict with government “that asks what God forbids or prohibits what God demands.” What is not sufficiently reflected in the Cape Town Commitment is the foundation of religious freedom in the image of God concept, the variety of possible and acceptable responses to persecution, any reference to secular human rights statements, and the willingness to collaborate with others across religious boundaries in that regards.

BQ: What do you think will be the significance of the Cape Town Commitment in the long term?

CS: Beyond the personal networking that occurred at the conference, I think the Commitment might become the element with the longest lasting effect. The Lausanne

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