

Laudatio for Dr. James Bultema by Dr. Meiken Buchholz

FTH Religious Freedom Awards Ceremony, 27 January 2026

Dear Dr. Bultema, dear guests,

Today, we have the privilege of honoring a scholar whose academic work is inseparable from a lifetime of commitment to Turkey and Turkish Protestant churches. Dr. Bultema receives this award for his PhD dissertation “**Free Enough to Grow: The Turkish Protestant Movement, 1961-2016**” —

It is an outstanding work marked not only by academic rigor, but by the depth of insight that only long-term engagement can provide. For more than forty years, he has lived and worked in Turkey, learning its languages, cultures, and social realities from within.

Bultema’s dissertation is based on more than one hundred qualitative interviews with key figures from the missionary movement and leaders of Protestant churches in Turkey. This unique body of oral history is of lasting historical value and gives voice to individuals who, despite persecution, actively participated in the formation of a Turkish Protestant church.

The documentation of the early history of the Turkish Protestant movement is combined with a careful analysis of the conditions that shaped and sustained its development. A central contribution of this work is its strong focus on religious freedom—an aspect that, as Dr. Bultema rightly notes, has often been neglected in missiological studies of emerging churches.

We are speaking of a church that has grown in a context of severely restricted religious freedom and at considerable personal cost. Bultema characterizes this context by the maxim “*To be a Turk is to be a Muslim.*” As a result, Christianity is often perceived as a challenge to the unity of family and society, and a betrayal to the Turkish nation.

Despite two hundred years of Protestant missionary work, it was not until around 1970 that a Turkish Protestant movement began to develop. By 2016, it had grown to more than 6,000 believers in over 160 congregations. Since 2009, most of them have been united within the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey.

I would like to briefly highlight three key insights from Bultemas research that extend well beyond the Turkish context. To this end, I will look at the three parts of **the term Turkish Protestant Church.**

First, *Turkish*. Members of this church understand themselves as ethnic Turks. By their very existence, they challenge the maxim “*To be a Turk is to be a Muslim.*” In this context, Dr. Bultema highlights the importance of the 1961 Turkish Constitution, which introduced religious freedom as a civil right and for the first time framed religion as an individual choice. At the same time, Bultema shows that religious freedom has always been more theoretical than real, and how it has been weakened by constitutional changes.

Nevertheless, he argues that understanding religious freedom as a civil right represents a decisive turning point for the emergence of a national Turkish church. Religious freedom that is limited to certain minorities is not sufficient. This point is clearly demonstrated by Bultema's work.

Only when Religious Freedom is recognized as the natural right of every Turkish citizen does the possibility of a genuinely Turkish church emerge. Instead of hiding shamefully for doing something illegal, Turkish Christian converts can rightfully affirm one another that they act legally by becoming Christians, gathering as a church, and sharing their faith —and that they, too, are loyal, morally integer Turkish citizens. Dr. Bultema offers valuable insight into the importance of developing such a Turkish-Christian identity for a healthy Christian church — even if the civil right to religious freedom does not prevent harassment, arrests, and attacks in practice.

Second, *Protestant*. Dr. Bultema shows how the gradual development of a shared theological Protestant identity interacted with legal openings, eventually leading to the establishment of a recognized umbrella organization in 2009—an important step in strengthening collective Turkish Christian identity.

Third, *Church*. This term emphasizes that these communities are neither sects, nor marginal religious groups. Rather, Turkish converts understand themselves as part of the worldwide Protestant church and as equal representatives of Christianity alongside the historic churches in Turkey.

At first glance, the dissertation's title, "*Free Enough to Grow*," might suggest a proof for a positive status quo of religious freedom in Turkey today. Such a reading, however, would miss the point. Dr. Bultema shows rather how Turkish Christians boldly navigated the spaces of religious freedom available to them – often at great personal cost. It should be noted that the empirical material extends only until 2014. Unfortunately, many of these spaces of freedom have since been restricted again, even before they were fully realized in practice.

Dr. Bultema's work reminds us that the denial of religious freedom as a civil right does not only involve physical persecution and legal discrimination; often it also denies believers their national identity, labels them as traitors, and therefore constitutes an attack on their moral identity.

Thank you, Dr. Bultema for bringing the voices of the young Turkish Protestant Church into the academic discourse on religious freedom.