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The Church is not a mega-NGO, but lives out the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

(Bonn, 26.04.2025) In his Easter message 2025, Archbishop Thomas Paul Schirmacher, emphasized, that the resurrection of Jesus makes the difference between the Church and a mega-NGO. In the first sentence he states: “The resurrection of Jesus Christ marks the difference between a church as a humanitarian mega-NGO in this world, in which people want to bring about good, and a church as the outflow of what only God is and can do.”

He also emphasizes the close relation between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the so-called Great Commission, to preach the Gospel everywhere. One cannot have the one without the other.



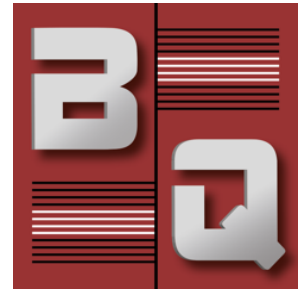
Thomas Paul Schirmacher, 2019 © BQ/Martin Warnecke

The Easter message 2025 by Archbishop Schirmacher: The Resurrection of Jesus and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:17–20) – In preparation for the Anniversary Year 2033

The resurrection of Jesus Christ marks the difference between a church as a humanitarian mega-NGO in this world, in which people want to bring about good, and a church as the outflow of what only God is and can do. For behind the resurrection is the infinite creative power of God that alone makes life out of nothing possible, the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, who already put the Word of God into practice in the creation of the world and the creation of man, creates both the new life in the resurrection and thus eternal life, as well as the Church as the community of those who believe in eternal life.

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Titus Vogt (ViSdP)
Vorderer Kamp 52a, 25479 Ellerau
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Fax: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 07
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1. “But some doubted ...”

In Mt 28:5–7, the angel tells the women at the tomb that Jesus has risen from the dead and that they will meet him in Galilee. The eleven disciples then go to the meeting place in Galilee (Mt 28:16). They worship Jesus, but some have their doubts (Mt 28:17). What a strange group! Certainly not the avant-garde with whom you can reach the whole world, not the people you want to empower with the greatest conceivable mission in history.

Mt 28:5–7 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

Mt 28:16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

Mt 28:18–20 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The path from the resurrection to the missionary mandate to reach the whole world therefore does not lead via the apostles or the genius or exemplary nature of any human being, but via the enthronement of Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18), not “to you.” The “therefore” only follows from this: “Therefore go into all the world.” The incredible boldness of the Great Commission does not result from the special nature of the eleven disciples, but from Jesus’ authority, which derives from his being raised from the dead.

The resurrected Jesus Christ alone is the guarantor for the fulfilment of the Great Commission, not his followers, nor all of them together as the church or body of Christ. Jesus Christ justifies the world mission with the fact that he now has “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18) and that he is with his church forever (Mt 28:20).

2. The Great Commission is prophecy and empowerment

The Great Commission is therefore not just a command, or rather an authorisation, it is above all a promise, even a prophecy. Jesus himself will ensure that all nations become disciples, because—as Jesus says—“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18), and the New Testament prophecies, “The nations will hope in his name” (Mt 12:21; similarly Rom 15:12). God is no respecter of persons; “for this we labour and fight for, because we hope in a living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10).

The resurrection therefore not only creates the gospel and redemption—without the resurrection, Jesus’ crucifixion would have remained without consequences—but the

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resurrection also creates the conditions for the most gigantic mission that humans have ever received. It applies to all peoples, nations, ethnicities, cultures, languages and dialects, as the fulfilment in the prophetic vision of the apostle John makes clear: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes and with palm branches in their hands, shouting with a loud voice: Salvation is with him who sits on the throne, our God, and with the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9–10; similarly Rev 5:9–10; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15).

At the same time, Revelation is the continuation and fulfilment of the sublime prophecies of the Old Testament book of Daniel (especially Dan 2; Dan 7).

The spiritual success of world mission as a result of the invisible reign of Jesus Christ has been guaranteed by Jesus and does not rest on human activities or the state of the churches. The spiritual success of world mission authenticates the reign of Jesus.

3. The resurrection is the gospel

The resurrection is the core of the gospel. Let's look at two examples of how the apostle Paul presents and explains this.

In his letter to the Ephesians (1:18–23), Paul makes it unmistakably clear that the infinite power of God becomes a transforming force for every believer through the resurrection of Jesus and that the body of Christ is something special only because the living Christ is its head.

Eph 1 (18) I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, (19): and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, (20) which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, (21) far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (22) And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, (23) which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul presents the gospel in detail and defends it against criticism. When Paul introduces himself at the beginning of the letter to the Romans (Rom 1:1–5), he makes it clear that the gospel is inextricably linked to the fact that Jesus is true man and true God and that this is expressed in the triumph of Jesus' resurrection. On one hand, Jesus is man, born “of the descendants of David according to the flesh”; on the other hand, he is the “Son of God ... according to the Spirit of holiness ... through the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:3–4). The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the central authentication of Jesus and the starting point of the gospel.

Rom 1 (1) Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, (2) the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures (3) regarding his Son, *who as to his human nature was a*

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descendant of David, (4) and *who through the Spirit of holiness* was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (5) Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

As friendly and respectful as we Christians should be towards all people (1 Pet 3:14–17) and as much as we emphasise the human dignity of all people, *our trademark is the risen Son of God Jesus Christ and his authority*, which means that the Church of Jesus Christ alone has a right to exist as the Church of the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, i.e. as a missionary Church.

4. Jesus prepared his disciples for the resurrection, the Great Commission and Pentecost from the very beginning

Let us therefore look back at why Jesus turned to the “twelve” or his now only eleven disciples or apostles in Mt 28:18–20:

Jesus chose the twelve disciples/apostles specifically to prepare them for their task of world mission.

Jesus chose the apostles “that they might be with him and that he might send them out” (Mk 3:13–16). Their intensive training in living and working together with Jesus was therefore aimed from the very beginning at the Great Commission and the independent sending out of the disciples. The training of the disciples as missionaries by living and working for several years with the missionary par excellence, Jesus Christ, did not happen randomly and by chance, but obviously according to a conscious plan by Jesus. This is particularly clear from the facts that (1) Jesus first preaches alone, (2) then preaches while his disciples watch, (3) finally allows his disciples to preach while he observes, (4) then sends his disciples out alone for a short time and then talks about what happened, and only after all that (5) sends them out completely alone (whereby he naturally remains with them as the exalted Lord, Mt 28:20). The disciples then began to do the same with other Christians. The first, temporary sending out is reported in Mt 10:1–11:1; Mk 6:7–13; Lk 9:1–6. Jesus “sent [them] out” (Mt 10:5) and “began to send them out two by two” (Mk 6:7).

Jesus' most important concern between his resurrection and his ascension was world mission.

All four evangelists pass on different types of missionary justifications and missionary commands for the time between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension as the commissioning of Jesus' disciples for world mission (above all Mt 28:16–20; Mk 16:15–20; Jn 20:11–21:24, especially 20:21–23; Lk 24:13–53, especially 24:44–49; Acts 1:4–11).

Jesus' various statements on world mission show that during this time Jesus proclaimed in ever new forms the world mission made possible by his vicarious sacrifice on the cross and the resurrection from the dead by his Father in heaven as the most important result of his suffering, death and resurrection.

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5. Christians always have the whole world in view by virtue of their office

Christians are therefore citizens of the world! Christians always have the whole world in mind, never *just* their own family, their own people, their own language, their own state, nor even their own wing of world Christianity. They do not believe in a tribal deity but in the Creator, who created the whole world and all nations and wants to redeem them all (Gen 1:1; Jn 3:16; Mt 28:18–20; Rev 4:11; 21:1). Nor do they belong to a private club with narrow-minded concerns but to the international church of Jesus, which is not bound to any language, people, culture, social class, age, gender or anything else that separates people (Rom 1:14; Eph 1:13–14; Rev 5:9–10; 21:24–25). And they belong to the church, which has been given a mission that is unimaginably greater and more international: “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:18).

Christians want to “save” every single soul, every personality (indeed, the whole world), empower them and encourage them to live a truly worthy life, both invisibly and visibly! Their perspective is the most private there is, and at the same time the most public. It is about the relationship of the individual to God and the relationship of the whole world to God. It is about the individual’s very private dialogue with God and the global Church of Jesus, which worships God communally and publicly. It is about the relationship with the next fellow human being in a very concrete way and about the relationship with all fellow human beings.

Even if personal salvation is the first and foremost goal of the mission, this does not mean that there should be no further-reaching goals; on the contrary, all further-reaching goals gain their significance from here. Inner transformation is followed by outer transformation; the transformation of the individual is followed by the transformation of ever larger communities.

The Great Commission according to Matthew (Mt 28:18–20) includes the call to make all people “learners” (disciples). The first step involves a personal approach and conversion, as baptism in the name of the triune God can be performed only with individuals, but no one can perform it privately on their own, as it is performed on them by members of Jesus’ existing church. Nevertheless, it is precisely in this way that whole “nations” are ultimately to be won, so that a high percentage of Christians in a nation does not contradict personal conversion to God.

Moreover, personal conversion to God is not the end point, but the starting point of a personal renewal and a renewal and transformation of family, church, economy, state and society, as all people are to become “learners” (disciples). As Jesus calls on his disciples to “teach them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20), the Great Commission ends with the call to impart the entire spectrum of biblical ethics. This changes and transforms the individual, their everyday life and their environment, as well as overcoming sinful structures and visible injustice in the long term.

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