

# Keynote: Church and Culture

## Church and Culture

### The Devastating Effects of the Progressive Socio-Political Ideology and Cultural Trends on the Church with Special Attention to Recent Events in Finland

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On the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, Dr. Päivi Räsänen—a Finnish Member of Parliament—and I were summoned to the Helsinki District Court. I had been charged as the editor in chief for publishing and distributing on our website a pamphlet written by Dr. Räsänen: *Male and Female He Made Them — Homosexual Relationships Challenge the Christian Concept of Humanity*. The description of my alleged offence was as follows:

*Juhana Pohjola has made and maintained available to the public opinions and allegations*

*defaming and insulting homosexuals as a group on the basis of their sexual orientation.*

After six hours in the court room, at 4:15 p.m. the prosecutor asked me the final question: Do you follow the Finnish law or the words of the Bible? This court case has drawn enormous attention both in Finland and internationally. It has been covered in major western and especially Christian news media. Many church leaders from various denomination have addressed this case, including 48 confessional Lutheran church bodies from

around the world who signed a document drafted by the International Lutheran Council: *“A Protest and Call for Religious Freedom in Finland.”*

For the first time in Finland, a Member of Parliament and a Lutheran bishop are charged with hate crimes concerning religious speech. This case deals with fundamental rights of freedom of speech and religion, and how they relate to non-discrimination acts. Even on the European level, there has not been a case like this before where the state is prosecuting individual citizens for their religious speech. Our case can therefore give a precedent verdict for future cases. The burning question is that, if this can happen in free democratic Finland which is known for its rule of law, what example does it give to many totalitarian governments.

In my opinion, this case has touched so many because they feel the same cultural pressure in their own circumstances. Many have expressed the following thought: Today you are in Court; tomorrow it might be our turn.

### **Two views on homosexuality, marriage, and human dignity**

In 2003, I asked Dr. Räsänen to write a pamphlet on homosexuality and marriage because it was a hot topic both in the society and in the established Lutheran church. I wanted to teach our members how we should address this question biblically, culturally, and pastorally.

During recent decades, many church bodies have been divided between two views on homosexuality. Conservatives teach that, according to natural law and the revealed Word of God, homosexual acts are unnatural and sinful, and cannot be identified with the complementary union of Christian marriage. Then there is the opposite view. Many theologians try either to make the claim that the New Testament and Apostle Paul reject only exploitative homosexual relationships but not mutual and caring relationships, or that same sex marriage should be allowed based on hermeneutics of love and tolerance.

While heated and divisive theological debate was taking place on the upper floors many had

not seen that the foundations of the house were already falling apart. The issue has not only been homosexuality and same sex marriage but also the nature of marriage itself. We can discern also two opposing views of marriage (see the 2012 book *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*). The traditional conjugal view of marriage is a comprehensive, corporal, emotional, and spiritual bond for procreation in lifelong fidelity. This vision has impacted our civilization, legislation, society, and culture. This view is shared by many non-Christian cultures but we as Christians can further formulate that marriage is instituted by God as a complementary, caring, and lifelong union between one man and one woman with the intention for them to be fruitful and raise a family.

The other revisionist view, which has become the prevailing view, sees marriage as, in essence, a loving emotional bond. In this romantic union and shared domestic life, partners seek emotional and sexual fulfillment, and remain together as long as they find it pleasing. This concept does not necessarily include procreation and a larger family. In fact, this model of marriage can logically be applied to various unions of same or different sexes (gay marriage), between two persons or several (polygamy), and even between adults and children (paedophilia). We see how polyamorous relationships and the acceptance of polygamy are now coming to the public agenda of church bodies as well.

Although we oppose same sex marriage and do not regard it as an extension of the institution of marriage but a redefinition of it, we must look deeper. Since the 1960's, the sexual revolution has brought—with its new technologies of birth control, abortion, antibiotics, and mass media—the waves of promiscuity, premarital cohabitation, the acceptance and usage of pornography, no-fault divorce, and low birth rates. When the traditional concept of marriage had already changed in the wider culture, it was only a matter of time that same-sex marriage would come to the table and pass through civic legislation and church constitutions.

In the upper floors, we debate homosexuality while at the same time the foundations of the building of marriage and family are shaking. But the real problem goes much deeper than the sexual

revolution. For the earth itself has been quaking under the building! Ideological tectonic plates have shifted during the past 200 years and it has brought to the surface this question: what does it mean to be human? This is what we are facing in western societies, churches, and in the court room.

In his outstanding book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl F. Trueman claims that the real issue underlying what we are facing now in the West with Critical Race Theory, same-sex marriage, transgenderism, and the LGBTQ+ movement is the nature of human selfhood. He highlights the rise of the modern psychological man and the expressive individualism in society which have become therapeutic. In other words, when modernism declared that God was dead and there was no sacred order left in society (like an abiding natural law), then to be authentic and truly free meant getting rid of traditional (especially traditional Christian) moral and cultural norms like marriage, chastity, and family.

When there is no objective truth, no ultimate goal for life, and no common moral grounds, moral questions become only the matter of preferences and taste. The focus in postmodern radical individualism is the autonomous self, inner psychological life, subjective feelings and desires. The crucial question is about my self-determined identity, which must be accepted and recognized by the surrounding society.

What is this identity? Trueman explains that culturally in the West we have adopted the Freudian idea that human identity is really about sexual fulfillment. Feminist movements pushed that idea further: sexual identity can be detached not only from moral codes and traditional norms but also from biology. This has resulted in transgenderism and the separation of sex and gender, mind and body. Trueman claims that when we follow this ideological path further, we can find how the modern self was first psychologized, then sexualized, and finally politicized. The teachings of Marxist and new left philosophers were adopted into the view that history is a never-ending power struggle between oppressors and oppressed, and so all aspects of life are political. To be free is to be sexually liberated; to be happy is to be affirmed in that liberation.

Sexual identity is not only a private matter or a moral choice, but most of all a social, political, and juridical question in society. There is a loud cry for tolerance and inclusiveness. Those who feel oppressed, who feel victimized, whose sexual practices are not morally accepted or celebrated must have safe spaces and actual privileges. Oppression in western democratic societies is seen primarily not in economic terms but in psychological categories. So, the basic right is not to be offended or discriminated against with words in public discourse. That means that free speech—the hallmark of democratic societies—is not a political virtue but often seen as harmful because words can cause psychological damage. The line of thought goes like this: to have gay sex is a question of sexual identity, the question of identity is that of human dignity, and the question of human dignity is the center of society's political and legal system.

Let's go back to the courtroom and let me reflect on how this cultural big picture was seen during the trial. The state prosecutor claimed that “we are defaming and insulting homosexuals as a group on the basis of their sexual orientation.” But what did the pamphlet actually say? “According to the Christian concept of humanity, everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, is equal and of equal value.” How insulting and dehumanizing is this? In a Finnish courtroom nobody has ever been accused of depriving someone's human dignity when the texts and the witness of the accused explicitly confirm the human dignity of everyone!

This madness is impossible to understand unless we see it in its larger cultural framework: if you publicly judge gay sex (as unnatural, sinful, shameful), then you have deprived homosexual people of their identity—because personal identity is primarily sexual identity. That means you are degrading and dehumanizing them, which is in turn criminal hate speech!

That is why the prosecutor in the court room did not accept our distinction of person and action, human dignity and moral choices. She repudiated the phrase: “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” I quote her: “When homosexual acts are condemned, the whole person is condemned.” To morally criticize same-sex intercourse means dehumanising homosexuals.

This represents a totally different view not only on human sexuality but what human dignity is! We as Christian cannot accept completely opposite ideological grounds about what constitutes human identity. We may have many identities (nationality, tribe, family) but the foundation of human dignity is that every human being is an image of God. We have an innate human dignity and inherent equal value which is independent of our moral choices. Because of this inherent dignity, we can call people to be responsible for their moral acts, whether one is attracted to the same or opposite sex.

So, we come to the question: “Do you follow the Finnish law or the words the Bible?” This was an awkward question because the Finnish constitution guarantees the freedom of religion! What the prosecutor was actually saying was this: *Accept my legal interpretation, my ideological framework, my definition of what human dignity means, and recant your biblical view of man as an image of God. Otherwise, you are a criminal and will be fined!*

On April 30, 2022, the Helsinki District court dropped all charges against us. According to the Court, the opinions and allegations made in the pamphlet are offensive but not criminal hate speech. However, the prosecutor took the case up to the Appeals Court, and so we will be summoned again in August 2023. The prosecutor makes the case that the District Court’s assessment of fundamental rights was incorrect. Too much weight was given to freedom of expression. So there is a pressure to expand the interpretation of non-discriminatory acts at the expense of freedom of speech and religion. This a clear outcome of a therapeutic society. Instead of safeguarding freedom of expression—even shocking and offending statements—one must have the freedom not to be offended. This cultural megatrend puts in jeopardy not only religious freedom, but academic and political debate as well.

We face now the question: How can the traditional view on human identity and value, rooted in natural law and biblical revelation, live in society together with a radical individualistic worldview, in which people are defined by their sexual identity and all moral judgements are seen as hateful and oppressive? If sexual minorities have been and still are in many countries treated unjustly, does it give

cause for an ideological campaign to make society a psychologically safe space by silencing those who hold to natural law and biblical revelation? How do we answer these cultural challenges?

## **Bearing the Cross**

First, we must be ready to bear the cross, which according to Dr. Martin Luther is the seventh sign of the Church.

Christians in the West have for a long time enjoyed the blessing of religious freedom and being in the majority, but are now facing a new situation in a post-Constantinian and even a post-Christian culture, in which Christian faith and values are no longer dominant and influential but instead ignored and increasingly regarded as problematic and even morally wrong. I have had to ask this question: I’m prosecuted, so am I persecuted? Is this an isolated case or the new normal?

The fact is that Christians are at this moment the most widely persecuted group of people in the world. When we look globally we see three main causes for Christian persecution (see the 2013 book *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*). The first cause is the political control of the people, as in Communist and post-Communist countries, in which Christians are placed under control and restrictions due to political and national interests. The second cause is the desire to preserve Hindu and Buddhist privilege, especially in Southern Asian countries where Christian minority groups are often seen as a threat to national and cultural unity. The third cause is radical Islam, which attacks Christians and churches in the Middle East and many countries on the African continent—for example, in Nigeria, South Sudan, and so on. We globally hear about beatings, killings, imprisonments, and more.

So, dear brothers, I’m very hesitant to use the word “persecution” for my modest trials. So far, Western societies have been spared from persecution, but conservative Christians have often faced hostility and pressure from the liberal majority in their church bodies. Now, however, we can discern some tendencies in the Western societies towards

a totalitarian mentality. In the words of the author, Rod Dreher, totalitarianism “is a state in which nothing can be permitted to exist that contradicts a society’s ruling ideology” (*Live Not by Lies*). Dreher speaks about a *soft* totalitarianism—not hard like in North Korea—in Western countries in which all aspects of life—media, business, education, culture, courts, military, and church bodies—are taken over by the same ideology or pseudo-religion that suffocates differing opinions and viewpoints. Finland is a free democracy, and I see no danger of totalitarianism on the political level. However, we see how anti-Christian gender ideology increasingly pushes faithful Christians in our societies into a marginalized situation, by controlling thought (school system), language (non-binary language) and speech (restrictions), and public discourse (media). This all happens with the help of so called tolerant and progressive church leaders. So, it is crucial that the rule of law and constitutional rights prevail as the last boundary, and are not hijacked by ideological agitators.

When writing about Christian persecution, the author Yesse Yow (*Standing Firm: A Christian Response to Hostility and Persecution*) identifies a fourfold progression, which is not carved in stone, but can nevertheless be helpful. The first step is *apathy*—indifference toward Christians and Church. This silence can be unintentional but also intentional and excluding (i.e., a conspiracy of silence). The second step is *hostility*, in which Christians and churches openly become the targets of negative attention in media, workplaces, and even the government. The third step is *opposition*, in which Christians encounter intimidation like threats and slander, interrogations, the restriction of their rights to gather for worship, the delegitimization of their teachings and publications, and social exclusion. The final step comes when hostility and opposition become *persecution*, as opposing forces attempt to eliminate Christians’ fundamental rights of freedom of religion and assembly. In this final step, gross violations of religious freedom occur through restrictions and prohibitions; church buildings are targeted, imprisonments occur, and physical threat is present.

There is at least growing hostility, even opposition in western countries towards those who “keep the

commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” How then should we face this hostility? I suggest four short points.

1. *Do not fear.* Fear is contagious. Fear causes more fear. We see that our court case has had a chilling effect on others. No matter what the final outcome of the court case is, people and Christians are more afraid to express their views publicly. Out of fear, many people (pastors, reporters, teachers, professors) now limit their own speech. This is self-censorship. Who wants to face the possibility of such a punitive court process? It is high time to use our freedom of speech. Use it or lose it! Freedom of speech serves everybody—especially those in the minority. We need to hear the words of the Lord. Do not be afraid! We are called to boldness in Christ! Courage is also contagious; courage breeds courage.

2. *Do not compromise.* Rod Dreher famously quotes the Russian author, A. Solzenitsyn, in the title of his book *Live Not by Lies*. There is a constant danger to adapt our language and practices to the surrounding culture and give up confessing the truth—to be silent, to make a deal for the sake of work possibilities and of peace. This is especially a temptation for bishops and church leaders, who serve the unity of church and represent their church in society. But we are called also in the public arena to confess the order of creation and other biblical truths. Let us pray to the Lord that we may be wise but not naïve, humble but not cowards, patient but not inactive, and firm but not unloving. St. Paul writes: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Timothy 4:16).

3. *Prepare your members.* At least in western Christendom, Christians have often become cozy and relaxed in this world. We have often adopted a therapeutic and feeling-based faith. G.K. Chesterton calls this a “Christianity without tears.” But in reality, the Christendom of the West is becoming a minority religion, just as it was in the pre-Constantine era. Jesus really means what he says: “Take up the cross and follow me.” We need to teach and prepare our members to understand that the Christian vocation often

means hardship and even suffering for the sake of Christ's name's, but that there is also joy and blessings hidden there—not because of the suffering but because our Lord Jesus is faithful and loving in the midst of our suffering.

4. *Support and pray for each other.* I am reminded of the words of the German theologian, Thomas Schirrmacher, who writes: "A Christian never lives without persecution. Either he is persecuted or he suffers with the fate of those who are persecuted." After all, if one member suffers, all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26). We should listen and learn from those brothers and sister who have gone through persecution. I feel privileged that our Lord has given so many Christians to pray for us in Finland. I'm thankful for the ILC and all the support we have received from Lutheran sister churches. I expect that in the future, the ILC will be needed ever more to share information, give voice to those member churches which face hostility and persecution, and to support them.

### **Incarnational Life with the Son of God**

The real issue is not the moral question of homosexuality in the top floor discussions, nor the shaking foundation of marriage, nor even the earthquake of what it means to be human. There is an even bigger problem: this earth has forgotten its place in the universe! We have, in Western countries, culturally-closed eyes. We have forgotten God the Creator and Ruler of all things, who will come to judge us all. The real battle is not only cultural, ethical, and legal but most of all theological and spiritual. As St. Paul writes, we fight against the spiritual forces of evil. Yes, we need to rediscover natural law and make arguments based on general revelation in the public arena. But we must go deeper. As the Christian Church, we have something that no one else can give: the Incarnate Son of God crucified for the sake of our sins and risen for our justification.

Many have pointed out that today we face a Neognostic heresy, which deny the good order of creation, separate mind and body, disregard human value from conception to death and reject

the biological realities. This Neognostic mindset is expressed in various ways with which we are all familiar. We see that when genders are blurred it becomes difficult to find a common definition for what a woman is. Transgenderism encourages teenagers to mutilate their bodies, because gender is considered a matter of social construction, of self-chosen identity rather than biology. As a result of the pornography industry, sexual life is detached from any bodily reality. Teenagers spend more time in the virtual world, which is a disembodied, fluid world, among other imaginary profiles, and less with real human contacts. We see pregnant mothers writing on their stomachs: "It is not human yet!" We see the rising euthanasia industry and the recycling of human corpses. The human body has no intrinsic value.

So too, we see in the daily life of the church liberal teachings that deny the incarnation of Christ and His bodily resurrection. We witness spiritualistic teachings all over Christendom; the gifts of the Holy Spirit are called upon, but not in a bodily and sacramental way. We find that after the isolation imposed by COVID-19, many continue to distance themselves from the communal life of congregation in favour of watching online. We see the pressure to open the office of the Holy Ministry to women, which is not only unbiblical but breaks the incarnational image of the bridegroom Christ with His bride congregation.

I could keep on going. But it all comes to the core of our faith: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). God is not somewhere far off, not an idea or abstraction, but an embodied reality in the manger and on the cross. We see the face of God in the Man, Jesus—true man, rational soul and human body united! What our time needs is not only cultural critique and a lament of how things have gone terribly wrong in our societies. We need to understand the cultural trends, but the answer cannot be found in merely addressing ideas and ideologies. Dr. Luther famously writes in the Large Catechism: "The Father gives us all creation, Christ all His works, and the Holy Spirit all His gifts" (LC II, 70). We are called to proclaim our Triune God, Creator and Redeemer and Sanctifier, who gives Himself and all His good gifts to us at the concrete altar and pulpit among concrete people.

I'm very thankful to the great Lutheran scholar, Dr. John Kleinig, for his latest book: *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body*. We need to rediscover the theology of body and incarnational Christian faith. This is the hopeful and life-giving answer that the culture of death and chaos needs to hear, see, and experience.

Many have asked me how and what we are doing in Finland in the midst of this court case. My answer is that we are ready to carry on this legal battle all the way to the top for the sake of freedom of speech and religion. Yes, we must analyze and address the cultural trends of our time and warn of antihuman and anti-Christian teachings. However, the real answer is not legal, cultural, or intellectual but instead spiritual.

Our faith is an embodied faith, located in the Christ Jesus, in His Words and gifts. The order of creation is material and good. The order of redemption is incarnational. The order of sanctification is sacramental and communal. We are called to teach our confirmands that they are created beautifully in unity of body and soul. We encourage our young adults to understand that marriage and family is a beautiful gift which embraces the unity in human nature; duality in the masculinity and femininity; and a permanent union meant to protect the triple bond of mother, father, and child, which reflects the equal and complementary loving union of the Holy Trinity. We proclaim that salvation has been brought to us by God and Man, Jesus Christ, and that His divine blood cleanses us of all our iniquities. It is sin that separates us from God and Christ Jesus, and His forgiveness is the only solution to this problem. Our true identity is a given gift: you are a baptized child of God in the Christian Church.

We gather in our congregations every Lord's Day to receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. We pray that Jesus Christ would continue to give us pastors, who are His ambassadors in the apostolic office. We remind our members that the Holy Spirit gathers us not only virtually but concretely, together in person in the same space to speak into our ears and to fill our eyes, mouths, and hearts with gifts from the cross and the treasures of the Christian tradition with its liturgy, hymns, and art. In an individualistic and broken culture,

we call lonely and lost people to a shared communal life in truth and in love. We are directed to show mercy and kindness to those who are in bodily need, spiritually lost, sexually broken, and deceived by surrounding ideologies. We are called to witness to truth not in theory but with our own voices and faces, and then be ready to pay personally the price. We are sent to encounter people holistically, both their intellect and their emotions, through teaching and intensive listening. We are called to pray for those who oppose us.

This is what we try to learn to do in our congregations in Finland. We have not chosen the time and place in which we live; but we have been given all the answers to the cultural challenges we face. Those answers are: An embodied God. Embodied humanity. Embodied grace. Embodied community. Embodied witness.

The topic for my lecture was: "Church and Culture: The Devastating Effects of Progressive Socio-Political Ideology and Cultural Trends in the Church, with Special Attention to Recent Events in Finland." With this complicated title, after nearly an hourlong lecture, after all the details of my Finnish legal battles, I want to summarize our common joy and challenge, gift and mission into one sentence: Embodied Church in a disembodied culture!

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