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WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Department of Theological Concerns

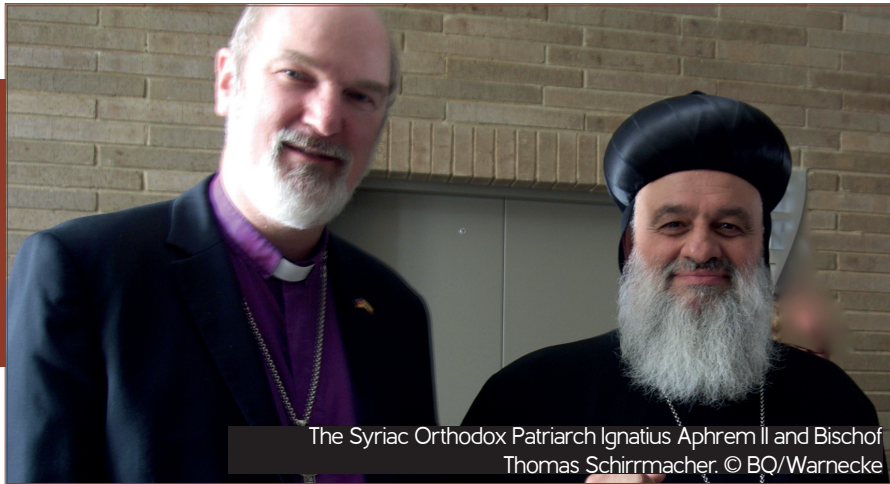
BULLETIN

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Thomas Schirrmacher

Peter's Second Pentecost

*Global Gathering of the Global
Christian Forum, Bogota, April 23-27, 2018*



Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Schirrmacher, PhD, ThD, DD, serves the World Evangelical Alliance as Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns (Theology, Theological Education, Intra-faith Relations, Interfaith Relations, Religious Freedom, Global Scholars) and as Chair of the Theological Commission. As President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights he regularly testifies in the parliaments and courts in Europe and the Americas, the OSCE and the UN in Geneva and New York. He has authored and edited 102 books, his newest including 'Fundamentalism', 'Racism', 'Human Rights', 'Suppressed Women', and 'Human Trafficking'. Bishop Schirrmacher earned four doctorates in ecumenical theology, in cultural anthropology, in ethics, and in the

sociology of religion and received two honorary doctorates from the USA and India. He is Distinguished Professor of Global Ethics and International Development at William Carey University in Shillong (Meghalaya, India), extraordinary professor of the sociology of religion at the state University of the West in Timisoara (Romania) and director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo, Brasilia). He is professor of social ethics as well as president of Martin Bucer European Theological Seminary and Research Institutes (with branches in Berlin, Bielefeld, Bonn, Chemnitz, Hamburg, Innsbruck, Istanbul, Izmir, Linz, Munich, Pforzheim, Prague, Sao Paulo, Tirana, Zurich).

Take up the challenge of 'Mutual Love' urges Global Christian Forum

(Bonn, 03.07.2018) Christians are called to take up together the challenges of peace, unity, and costly discipleship the Global Christian Forum has said in a 27 April closing message to the churches of the world sent from Bogotá, Colombia.

The Forum, which connects the broadest range of global Christianity, held its third Global Gathering in the Colombian capital from 23-27 April, under the theme 'Let mutual love continue' (Heb 13:1). It brought together the widest variety of Christian traditions, with 251 church leaders from nearly every stream of global Christianity and 55 nations.

Against the backdrop of growing division in the world, the 'meeting itself became a message' of careful listening and respectful engagement across barriers of old enmities and historic separations.

In recognition of the churches of the host nation, the message said participants "have listened to, and been inspired by, witnesses working for peace. We pray that the peace process may continue in Colombia and bring hope and reconciliation to those who are suffering and struggling."

Participation in the Global Gathering included delegations from the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity), the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance together with those of many other Christian World Communions and international Christian organisations.

Secretary of the GCF, Revd Dr Larry Miller, said participants repeatedly affirmed the Forum as an indispensable instrument for promoting Christian unity and engaging in conversation on the challenges Christian communities world-wide face today.

"The existence of the GCF as a place where churches and church leaders who are often strangers to each other to come together in 'mutual love' is a realisation of the shared yearning for healing in the wounded body of Christ."

At the close of the Global Gathering, leaders of confessional bodies commented on the role and value of the GCF within the wide world of global church relationships.



Thomas Schirmacher during his speech (with plenary). (© BQ/Warnecke).



Thomas Schirmacher with African delegates and the upcoming secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Casely Essamuah, and his wife. (© BQ/Warnecke).

Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said, "This gathering is the third in a series. It has been a moment of tremendously improved relationships between all the participants, which reflects a new era of collaboration among the churches.

"I think the Global Christian Forum has shown that we do have a way forward, which is that we must not use our differences to stay apart and refuse collaboration. We need to see them as a certain contribution of richness to the whole Christian mission in the world," Farrell said.



The upcoming secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Casely Essamuah, his wife, Thomas Schirmacher, and his daughter. (© BQ/Warnecke).



Lorena Rios, the Colombian governments spokeswoman on religious freedom, Edgar Castano, President of the Evangelical Alliance of Columbia (Confederación Evangélica de Colombia), Thomas Schirmacher. (© BQ/Warnecke).

Pentecostal World Fellowship Vice Chairman, Revd Dr David Wells said, “As a result of the Pentecostal World Fellowship’s ongoing privilege of being at the table of the Global Christian Forum, deeper bonds of respect and love continue to develop with fellow Christians from other communions.

The Bogotá Gathering reinforced the PWF’s continuing commitment to participate in the Forum in a fully engaged manner while recognizing the hard work yet to be done.”

World Council of Churches Deputy General Secretary, Father Dr Ioan Sauca, said, “Through prayer and sharing, the Spirit has led us, during this global gathering, to greater mutual love and to the experience of a real though imperfect communion in Christ despite and beyond our persisting ecclesial divisions and estrangements. This means that the Global Christian Forum is fulfilling its original calling.

But the GCF will not have accomplished its mission unless we leave this global gathering firmly committed to encourage the churches we represent to walk together towards greater mutual love, mutual support and engagement in the struggles for reconciliation and just peace, starting in Colombia, extending through Latin America, and to the end of the earth.

Only in this way will the churches we represent be able to address what prevents us from fully manifesting the One Church that anticipates the one reign of justice and peace.”

According to World Evangelical Alliance Associate General Secretary, Dr Thomas Schirmacher, “Bogotá was the Global Christian Forum at its best! To hear in small groups the personal faith stories of high-ranking Christians from all confessions — a mark of the GCF — was moving and eye-opening.

At the same time, plenary presentations by the major expressions of Christianity on the future of ecumenical relations proved how much more friendly our relationships have become. We have matured to the point where we are more eager than ever to overcome major differences, yet without compromising our identities and Biblical convictions.

If the GCF did not exist, we would have to invent it today!” Bogotá also proved that it was the right decision of the World Evangelical Alliance to endorse the future of the GCF when last year we reviewed its 20 year history, Schirmacher said.

Peter's Second Pentecost

Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum, Bogota, April 23-27, 2018

*Plenary on the theme of the day April 24, 2018
„Let Mutual Love Continue: Relationships Old and New on the Journey“*

Presentation by the World Evangelical Alliance, Part Two

We have heard from Ruth (Padilla DeBorst) how the relationships between Paul, Philimon and Onesimus shaped a new category of personal relations. I want to extend this idea a step further and suggest that this story shows, that encounters and relationships also improve our theology and our worldview.

The five years I was involved with the development of the document „Christian Witness in a multi-religious World“, released 2011 by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), powerfully changed my life, and this not because I read a lot of books and papers around the topic, which I did, but because of longterm personal encounter with the other people involved in the project.

When I was introduced as a new member of the committee of the Global Christian Forum, the newsletter of the Forum wrote: „In terms of his personal journey Dr Schirmacher says that, coming from a very conservative evangelical background, “I would not even enter Catholic or Pentecostal churches ... I never expected that I one day would: * attend two Vatican synods, * help to work on close contacts between the World Council of Churches and the WEA and speak at the General Assembly of the WCC ... My change of heart came for several reasons, including my activities on behalf of persecuted churches. In 2005 we started the International Institute for Religious Freedom and I found myself defending people of ... all churches and confessions. Here I was sitting and praying for the protection for Christians, whom I still thought to be unbelievers. I was also changed through the joining of ‘spiritual experience and friendship’. Theology followed later and had the final decision: strange for a professor of Systematic Theology. But still it’s the truth. The years of diligent work around the globe changed my perception of the Catholic Church and

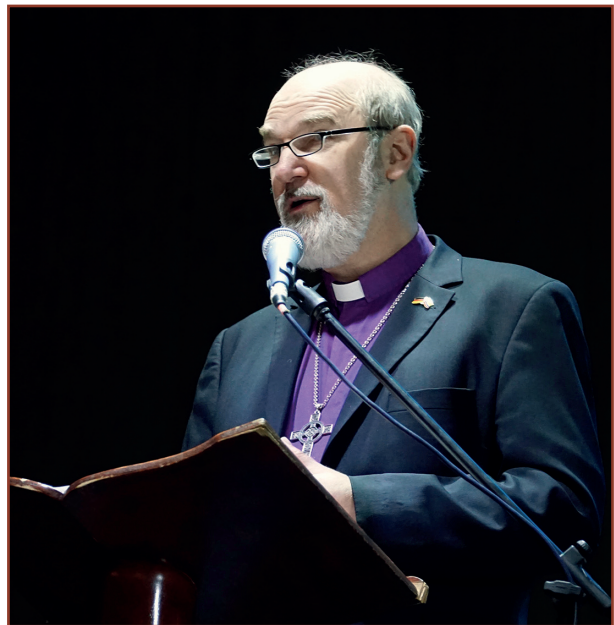
the World Council of Churches and made me a champion of the goals that are now central to the GCF.“

Some Evangelicals have taken issue with my statement that experience came first and theology followed. With this position, they said, I no longer could be the head of the theological concerns department of WEA. They also said it proves, that the Global Christian Forum waters down Biblical convictions and the strong endorsement for the Global Christian Forum by the WEA is wrong.

But in response I would ask: Is Evangelical or even Pentecostal theology with no experience possible, just as a pure academic exercise in comparing and judging theologies? Can we have a correct understanding of the Trinity without the life-changing experience of being loved by, and loving, the triune God? Is not our Evangelical and Pentecostal theology always a narrative theology?

The global gathering of the Global Christian Forum and the theme of the day give me the chance to prove from Scripture, that experience of how God acts in this world in the lives of other people and churches, that growing mutual relations, that experience is a good road to a sound theology.

By all means, Holy Scripture is God’s revelation and our highest authority. This is true for the Orthodox Church as much as for the Catholic Church, what we discuss is only, who may be the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, but not the nature of Scripture as such.



Thomas Schirmacher during his speech. (© BQ/Warnecke).



*Thomas Schirrmacher during his speech (with plenary).
(© BQ/Warnecke).*



Thomas Schirrmacher handing an IIRF book to Lorena Rios, the Colombian governments spokeswoman on religious freedom. (© BQ/Warnecke).

But the God, who gave Scripture to us, used experience to shape the theology of the authors of Scripture, why large part of Scripture are narrative, and he shapes our theology to the good by experiences and encounters. In other words, if you are firmly committed to the authority of Scripture, experience of how God acts through other people and churches is a good road to a sound theology.

Job's theology did not become upgraded through the endless theoretical discussions with his friends. Only through his life's experience – ugly and painful as it was – did he reach the conclusion about God: "So far my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

Many prophets and leaders in the Old Testament testify to the fact that only real-life experience of and encounters with God—directly and through other people—enabled them to understand God and his will.

This is still true today. I know more people who started to think more favourably about Pentecostals because they experienced healing or other wonders for themselves or others than people who were swayed by heated discussions of Pentecostal systematic theology.

We know that pure, uninterpreted experience does not teach us anything by itself, and we surely do not accept experience as such as the highest authority in the church. By experience I also do not mean that we constantly adapt to cultural circumstances or to the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age. If you marry the Zeitgeist, you will be a widow or a widower soon anyway.

But often, personal experience and relationships with others can remove the haze in front of our eyes. Experience opens our minds to things that we perhaps could have known through intellectual research and discussion but do not realize because we have biases that cause us not to see what we do not want to see.

Often in the gospels, Jesus said something and it obviously was true, yet his disciples listening understood only much later what he meant, and always after some major event had happened or experience they made. The most famous example is that Jesus promised to rebuild the Temple in three days. Only after his resurrection did his followers understand that he was not referring to the Temple made of stone, but to himself (John 2:21-22).

The Apostolic Council of Acts 15:1–33 was about a very serious theological matter. The whole church met—the Apostles, elders, delegates from the churches and apostolic teams. The end result was summarised by the person presiding, James, who claimed that their conclusion must be true because it was in line with Scripture. But even though the interpreting and declaration of Scripture by the authorities was the council's final step, the theological discussion actually centred on reports of experiences. Peter, Paul and Barnabas won the day, so to speak, because of the many moving stories they told, arguing that God had decided the matter already by sending his Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, as they had witnessed it.



The Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II and Bishop Thomas Schirrmacher. (© BQ/Warnecke).



Dr Frank Hinkelmann, Secretary of the International Council of WEA, and Thomas Schirrmacher. (© BQ/Warnecke).

Acts tells us that Peter addressed those gathered as follows: “Brothers and sisters, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us” (Acts 15:7–8). And Acts adds: “The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them” (15:12).

Telling those stories was Christian and Biblical theology at its best, not some inferior method of theological argument!

In Galatians 2:11, Paul wrote, “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.” Paul added a lengthy explanation of why Peter was wrong, indicating that God accepts people from all nations simply by faith (Gal 2:11–19).

Was this the same Peter who heard the original oral version of the Great Commission out of Jesus’ mouth? Was this the Peter who preached in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost? Was this the Peter in whom Jesus invested so much time in personal encounters and extra lessons, last but not least calling him to shepherd his sheep (John 21:15–21)?

Like all the disciples, Peter learned from the living Word of God himself that the Great Commission is to all nations (Mt 28:18–20) and that the power of the Holy Spirit would come upon them so that they would be witnesses “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:9). God used the emerging leader of the church,

Peter, more than anybody else when Pentecost occurred, as he had the privilege of preaching that day and being the first herald of the new age that had come.

Yet despite all his learning and all his correct words, Peter did not believe this deep in his heart. He still believed in the separation of Jews and Gentiles.

How did God convince Peter? By presenting him with a new volume of systematic theology written by Paul? By compiling all statements from Jesus as well as from the Old Testament prophets that are relevant to the topic and overwhelmingly prove, that all people from all nations and languages will enter the kingdom of God? Or even better, did God give him a well-prepared, systematic lecture with 9 convincing arguments directly from heaven?

Well, you all know, God did reveal himself directly to Peter, but not in the way we theologians would have chosen. He used a dream that contained a shocking example and applied it to the upcoming encounter with Cornelius. He had Cornelius wait for Peter so that Peter could see with his own eyes and have a first-hand experience of ... true theology.

Read carefully the whole story of Cornelius in Acts 10 tonight. How much effort did God put into shaping Peter’s theology through this experience! He corrected Peter’s wrong views, but in a way that changed his life forever and he could and would witness to for the rest of his life.

Only after what I like to call “Peter’s second Pentecost” did Peter grasp the theology of the first Pentecost.

After the conversion of Cornelius, he declared, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34–35) and: “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:47).

Of course those examples relate directly to what we are doing here in Bogota. Listen-ing to the faith stories of other Christian leaders, young and old, male and female, of is one of the marks of the Global Christian Forum. These sharing times are not just to give more people a chance to say something. They are as much and deep a theological en-counter as the superb messages delivered by people like Ruth (Padilla DeBorst), who spoke before me.

I hope that those from older churches seize the opportunity here to listen to people from newer churches. I hope those coming from newer churches open their ears wide for the faith stories of people from older churches, as their churches may be long-established but their stories are not old! Take as an example my friend, His Holiness Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, who represents a church, that originated where Christianity originated, and goes back to the first century, yet his message and words are up to date and spiritually speak to our churches today.

Let me address my Evangelical and Pentecostal friends more directly. In Scripture, Jesus speaks two judgements that I pray will not be spoken over

us. While on earth, he de-scribed a Pharisee (the closest thing to an Evangelical in the Jewish world – ask me about it if you question this!) who came to the Temple and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like the others” (Lk 18:11). This statement was opposed to the “evan-gel,” after which ‘evangelical’ is named, the gospel, which was captured in the other man’s prayer: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk 18:13).

The second judgement comes from the risen Lord in his letter to the church at Laodicea: “You say, ‘I am rich ... and do not need anything.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Rev 3:17).

Our high view of Scripture should not keep us from being always willing to learn more (Rom 12,1-2). The Holy Spirit has many ways to teach us sound theology, not just the classroom. If we listen, we will often hear profound truths spoken and lived in places where we did not expect it.

If Scripture is God’s Word, then we should follow Scripture when it teaches us that we often understand God’s deepest thoughts not just by quoting them, but through life-changing encounters and experiences.

Thanks be to the Triune God that he did not just leave us a holy book inspired by the Holy Spirit and revealing Jesus as Saviour to us, but that he sent the Holy Spirit himself into us, to understand this book and its divine author. Thank God that he uses multiple means to help us more deeply understand His revelation, put it into practice in our lives, and grow all the more in love for our Father in Heaven, our Saviour Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.



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World Evangelical Alliance
Department of Theological Concerns
Thomas Schirrmacher, ASG
Friedrichstrasse 38
53111 Bonn | Germany
Fax +49 228 9650389

World Evangelical Alliance
Church Street Station
P.O. Box 3402, New York
NY 10008-3402, USA
+1 212 233 3046
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Department of Theological Concerns Head:
Bishop Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Personal Assistant:

Martin Warnecke

Contact: Martin.Warnecke.TS@iirf.eu | +49 163 759 0726

The department is part of
World Evangelical Alliance, CEO:

Secretary General Bishop Efraim Tendero (Philippines)

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