

IV. An Unauthorized Interview with Walter J. Hollenweger

If you want to know about European Pentecostalism, you need to hear about Walter Hollenweger. Even though he is technically no longer a member of a Pentecostal church or denomination, he has dialogued and struggled with many aspects of European Pentecostalism. You be the judge of the validity of his testimony.

The following interview has never taken place, it is fictional but based on my knowledge of Walter Hollenweger and his writings. Consequently you will not find this text published anywhere, it will be for your hearing and learning pleasure only.

Professor Hollenweger, thank you for kindly consenting to this interview. You are known as an author of numerous books on Pentecostalism, as a systematic theologian and as a playwright and preacher. How did it all start?

Oh, it sounds like you want to hear the unedited version. Are you ready for a long story? My father was a steward of a British Ocean liner based in Antwerp, Belgium. My mother was a maid to an affluent family. There I was born in 1927. My parents and I returned to Switzerland at the beginning of the great depression in 1929. You see, they fired foreigners first. So we returned to a poor part of Zurich, where I went to school. We were members of the Swiss Reformed church, and I went to...

Excuse me for interrupting, but were you not a Pentecostal from the beginning?

Well, Mr. Plüss, if you hadn't interrupted me, you would know the answer to that question by now. For I was just about to tell you that I went to Sunday school in the Reformed church, but I told my mother that it was hard to understand anything there, because we were about 400 children and they made a great deal of noise. I asked her if I could go to Sunday school somewhere else, for I wanted to hear what the pastor had to say. As providence wanted it, she had heard about this Pentecostal group that was having church and Sunday school at the City Center. So I went there. First I had to sit through the sermon. I did not understand much because it was preached in High German. After that, Sunday school was taught. There I began to hear the captivating Bible stories about Abraham, Jericho and so on. After Sunday school, I had to walk home. It took me about an hour, but I was eager to learn. You know, the irony is that many Protestants complain that Pentecostal church services are too noisy, but I tell you there was more discipline in the Pentecostal Sunday school class than in the Reformed one!

There was little to read at home, we had only a one-page daily newspaper, my schoolbooks and the Bible, so I began to read and know the Bible. Eventually I became a full member of the Swiss Pentecostal Mission.

O.K. sir, you became a Pentecostal Christian, but that does not yet explain why you began your ministry in a Pentecostal church.

As a matter of fact, I was good in school, I enjoyed mathematics and especially the languages. After school I began my training as a banker. At the same time, I was involved in the youth group of our church. At just about the time when the bankers wanted to promote me to a better job as a stock dealer, I felt the call to the full-time ministry. It was related to my baptism in the Holy Spirit on that memorable evening one Monday following Pentecost. I prayed to God saying, „If you really want to have me, if you want such a stubborn person like me, then I will give it a try.“ Shortly after that the pastor came by, laid hands on me, and then the fire came. I never experienced this before or again, God had captivated me. I was caught, there was no way of back tracking. This experience influenced my life, my ministry, and my theology.

So you gave up serving mammon and where did you get your theological training?

To be fair, many Pentecostals have benefited from the advice of good bankers, I don't believe you can simply say that they serve mammon. It surely depends on your attitude and what you do with it. But your question as to my ministerial training is a better one. Erica, my wife-to-be and I went to IBTI, International Bible Training Institute in Burgess Hill, England. It was one of the first Bible schools I knew of. There I followed the lessons, but the problem was the subject matter was taught well but too slowly, I wanted to learn more and more quickly. So I went to the principal and he said that I could read the books that were in the library, if I felt I needed extra education. So I did; - after three months I had read every book in that library. So I guess you understand that I went back home after the first year of Bible school. One fringe benefit was that I had brushed up my English.

Back in Zurich you continued working in the church?

Yes, I became youth pastor and evangelist. It was a great time. Youth work was flourishing and we really had revival. On Sundays we had evening meetings. We called the people from the street and invited them to the meetings.

Is it true that more people came to listen to you in the evening than during the pastor's morning service?

Well, let's put it like this. I was gifted to communicate with the people. People liked to listen to the stories I told them and the way I explained the Bible message. Furthermore, as people heard that great things were happening, it was to be expected that quite a few would attend. As a matter of fact, we had to move to a bigger hall.

It was during that time that you and your wife married?

Yes, it was during those uncomplicated times that we married. Erica is sharp-witted, but not as emotional as I - a perfect match, and she has always been a faithful companion through the ups and downs of my career. I would argue with her and she would torpedo my ideas. I would tell her about my distress and we would pray together. I would get all excited and she would remind me to be just a bit more sober.

You are hinting at problems, how did it happen that you began to study theology at the University of Zurich?

I guess it began with the ending of Mark's Gospel.

With the ending of Mark's Gospel?

You seem more interested in interrupting me, than in hearing my answers to your questions. So - I noticed in my Bible (we were reading Zwingli's translation in the Pentecostal churches) that there was a little footnote at the end of Mark's Gospel saying that there was disagreement as to the proper ending of that Gospel. I wondered why, but no one at the church could really tell my why. So I went to a Reformed pastor who I knew as a Christian brother and asked him. He got red faced and said, „Oh don't believe in any of this, it's those unbelieving university professors that have smuggled this footnote into our Bible.“ This pastor should never have said this, for now I was really interested in what the university professors had to say. An honest question deserved an honest answer.

So you went to university?

Yes, Erica and I prayed a lot about this. Our friends were discouraging us, for they feared that we would lose our faith. But we came to the conclusion that it was God's will for me to go studying theology. In church I heard about the Holy Spirit and in class I learned about para-psychology. In church I witnessed divine healing and during the lectures I listened to Freudian psycho-analysis. Often I used what I had learned at university in my preaching. Here is an example of what I mean, I said, “This week I heard

Professor Conzelmann say that the healing stories in the Bible are legends, but I say to you, Jesus was concerned about the sick and he touched and healed them. You do not need to believe me. You may ask people in this church that have been healed from serious diseases.” Then I called some church members to come up to the stage and I interviewed them. I even announced publicly their address and telephone number (if they had one) and told the guests they could verify the facts for themselves. As it turned out, two detectives of the Zurich police actually did this. Of course, as I studied at the university I went through a time of readjustment too.

Well obviously you made it.

It wasn’t as obvious as you seem to say. I remember for instance my homiletics tutorial with Eduard Thurneysen, a close buddy of Karl Barth. Thurneysen was known for his homiletic skills, and after my tutorial he said to me, “Well Walter, what you just did is not a sermon, but a little theological essay.” I answered him, “What you want I could do before I studied theology.” And he replied, “Well, in that case you better learn to preach like the Pentecostals again.” His reply disappointed me, what was the use of studying theology if it did not serve the proclamation of the gospel?

I began ministering in Reformed churches. I remember my first assignment in a town near Lucerne. It was hard, I felt like I had lost the skill to communicate to the people. I guess I wanted to be too Reformed, perhaps even too academic. The people in church also showed me that I did a poor job. These and other experiences startled me. I wanted to know the reason why I was different now and what was significant about Pentecostalism.

So you set about writing your dissertation?

Set about is the right word. Professor Blanke from the University of Zurich encouraged me saying, “If you don’t write a thorough dissertation on worldwide Pentecostalism, no one else will do it. And that is how my *Handbuch der Pfingstbewegung* began, it ended up comprising ten volumes. It was and still is the largest work ever written on Pentecostalism with perhaps the exception of the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. I had to learn quite a few languages in order to write to Pentecostals in Latin America, Russia, India, Africa and so on. Letters traveled slowly in those days, we had no computers then, - and for that matter I still don’t have one -, the text had to be stenciled on wax paper in order to make multiple copies available.

What was the most important thing you learned by writing your dissertation?

Professor Blanke taught me first of all how to do exact historical research. I guess the most important thing I learned, besides how to do research, was the fact that there were many Pentecostals world wide that had their own history, I mean a history often independent of that of the North American or European Pentecostals and their missionary activities, but all these Pentecostals had a valid experience of the Spirit. There was a common bond in spite of various theological, liturgical, ethical, and political emphases and historical developments. This discovery, of course, really got me going.

Got you going where?

Well I ended up at the World Council of Churches as secretary of missions and evangelism. But what I meant was, got me going to learn more about the whys and hows of Pentecostalism.

Why is it that Pentecostals all around the world, with all their cultural diversity, still can communicate about the same basic experiences? The classical answer is that the Holy Spirit is being poured out on all flesh, and that this is why they have much in common. But you see, I have the impression that these classical Pentecostals only believe half of what they say. Meeting these fine Christians from all over the world, whether they belonged to the large Pentecostal denominations or to indigenous non-white Christian churches, or to some historic churches, convinced me that the Holy Spirit is far more powerful and generous as we commonly tend to grasp. We have a song in Switzerland that says, “Because God is great,

He likes to give big gifts, but alas, we people have such small hearts.” Or to put the matter in somewhat other words, I began to appreciate the Old Testament understanding of *ruach Yahweh*.

As to the how of Pentecostalism, I began, especially after I had moved to Birmingham, to realize how important the oral and physical aspects of Pentecostalism are. Of course, I grew up with the understanding that Pentecostals were people of testimonies and songs, that they believed in the power of physical healing, and that they expressed their faith and hope not only with their mind, but also with their bodies. But meeting Indian Pentecostals in Mexico or Nigerian Pentecostals of the Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim opened my mind, heart and senses to the Spirit’s work on a much larger scale than previously imagined. Or if we look at the Asian Pentecostals, of which I wish I knew more,...

You mention Asian Pentecostals...

Yes my friend, I am certain that we have just begun to listen to what Asian Pentecostals have to tell us. And I really mean it, they will have to tell us Westerners what and how God is doing marvelous things in their lands. This is not a task that theologians from the First World will be responsible for. I am eager to hear their stories, and I leave it at that for now.

Well in that case we better move on with your biography. Isn’t it somewhat surprising that a Pentecostal ends up as secretary for evangelism at the World Council of Churches?

Yes, only a few of my Pentecostal friends in Switzerland were confident that the Lord could use me at the WCC. The majority was convinced that I had fallen from grace. It was a pretty lonely battle in those days. But strangely enough, although the program was dictated by European and North American members of the historic churches, world membership was mostly constituted by evangelical type Christians. Today, fortunately things are changing, I was pleased to hear that at least 20 Pentecostals were official delegates at the 8th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe. As a matter of fact I am convinced that organizations like the WCC will eventually realize that their true friends are the Pentecostals.

I suppose the WCC also had misconceptions concerning Pentecostals.

Many did think that Pentecostals were something like fundamentalists, -only worse; that they had evangelism and eschatology on their mind and cared little about their social and political role in society. To point out to them that this is not the case, and that they were going to play and increasingly important role, was one of the fringe benefits of my work there. Belief in the power of the Holy Spirit does not exempt the believer from involvement in the here and now. On the contrary, it should sharpen our responsibility towards the manifestation of God’s kingdom here on earth.

Why did you leave your job at the WCC to become a Professor of missions at the University of Birmingham, - prestige?

No, I could have cared less for prestige, otherwise I would have stayed with my promising banking career, or I could have become the court theologian of the Swiss Pentecostal movement if I had refrained from asking uncomfortable questions. It was more an act of obedience to the gifts God had equipped me with that brought me to Birmingham. You see, I have always believed that the use of mental faculties is also a charism. Furthermore, I always felt more at home as a communicator than as an administrator. The fact that I went to Birmingham, rather than to the University of Bern, had to do with my impression that, although both places had promised me I could develop freely an alternative theology, I believed the people in Birmingham more.

So you moved to Birmingham. Any positive surprise?

I soon discovered that there was a thriving religious sub-culture in that large industrial city. Most officials in the Church of England had no idea where the immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa were worshipping. The English Presbyterian Church was not much better. Just imagine, they had no idea about

the spiritual needs of 200,000 people! To be frank, I don't think the white Pentecostals had much of an idea either.

I found wonderfully dynamic black Pentecostal churches, people celebrating God's victory in spite of poverty, unemployment, racism and prejudice. As a matter of fact, it is precisely with those Christians that I began a special study program and helped them to establish the *Centre for Black and White Partnership*. I found brothers and sisters that lived with a dignity given to them by their Lord, a beautiful dignity that was stronger than the hypocritical behavior of the establishment, a commitment that was stronger than denominational lines, a love that was embracing even a poor little professor from Switzerland.

If we will all meet in heaven one day, I have a pretty good idea that it will be the respectable university don that will wash the feet of the public bus driver, who, on Sundays, would turn into a bishop of his immigrant church, and not the other way around.

Any negative surprise?

Of course, there have been plenty of negative surprises. One especially keeps almost breaking my heart even today. It is not that universities are too scientific, as a matter of fact, it is important that they maintain a high sound scientific level, but it is the inability of classical academic education to focus on really relevant issues and to teach in an appropriate manner, in a way that people really are motivated to do something with their education. Look at the medical doctors when they start working in hospitals how helpless they act, look at the theologians that have university degrees but lack the ability to minister to their congregations. We have mastered to fill our students' brains with all kinds of stuff, but as soon as they have learned it, they are happy to forget it all again, because they have not been taught to use that knowledge constructively and practically, and their hearts have often been left empty.

Don't misunderstand me now. My students had to pass the same exams in Greek and contemporary theology, they had to learn about the Church Fathers, Bultmann and Tillich just the same, but they have also been allowed to sing and pray in the classroom. We had discussions what Martin Luther King would have done if he had lived in Birmingham to address the evils of racism and street violence. Furthermore, they did not object that one of their New Testament professors had publicly confessed to be an atheist, for they were not afraid to pray with him for the healing of his soul. Those black working class students worked hard, because they shared their stories of suffering, but also shared their hope in God's never failing love, and because they knew that in the end it would be important for them to learn well whatever they could learn.

This has been my big disappointment, that I have come up with alternative ways of teaching, ways of integrating learning and the realities of everyday life, but my efforts have not been heeded among my colleagues, at least not in the halls of Western learning.

If I am not mistaken you have spent much work during the 1980's writing plays and musicals. Is this part of your alternative teaching?

Mister Plüss, either you are asking a rhetorical question or else you are not really a Pentecostal. It is the testimonial tradition of Pentecostals that most aptly exemplifies the value of story telling. And it becomes even more interesting when you become part of the story yourself. So I began to write plays and musicals in order to challenge people not just to think about their faith, or lack of it, intellectually, but to reflect about it in the context of stories that mirror the realities of life. With that in mind I wrote a story about the charismatic conflict in the church of Corinth, a play about Michal, King David's first wife, the memoirs of a „once first lady“ so to speak, or, again, a requiem for Dietrich Bonhoeffer to mention just a few.

On what have you focused in the 90s?

Well as I said, you can tell a story, but it becomes even more interesting when you become part of the story. This has been my way of evangelizing. After all, does not God invite us to be part of His story. But let me explain what I mean by it. My efforts focused on the Reformed churches in Switzerland and the

Lutheran Churches in Germany. It first began with healing services and has moved on to the participation in religious plays.

I began to encourage church boards to introduce a worship service that included the anointing with oil and the laying on of hands accompanied with a small prayer. These were services that included the lay participation of about a dozen church members. Of course, as in every Protestant church there is a certain amount of volunteers with a traditional Christian background. But their help was not enough. So they had to look for others, people who perhaps hadn't gone to church for a long time. It was these that would be invited to participate in those services of anointing, people that perhaps had never prayed with someone for help or healing. People that were not sure they could pray the Lord's prayer properly. And precisely these people made most amazing experiences as they began to realize that the Spirit of God could do marvelous things even through their humble services and heal wounded hearts and touch afflicted bodies.

Later I began to encourage whole communities to get involved in religious plays. Imagine the small village of Krattigen in the Swiss mountains of, let's say, 900 inhabitants. As not much happens up there, the local minister manages to convince the schoolteacher and a few others to participate in a community effort. You set up a passion play with about 15 actors, 20 singers and 10 musicians. There will be hardly a family that will not be involved in one way or another. They have to practice the songs, setup the stage decoration, and study the script. Imagine if the retired army officer gets to play Pontius Pilate and the town major plays a Pharisee. Can you imagine the talk of the town? And what you cannot imagine is what happens when these people start studying their parts and, for the first time in their life, begin to think about what the Gospel message means to them personally. This is my way of doing dialogical evangelism, sincerely responding and dialoguing with the ideas that the un-churched participants come up with. Not just to tell others what they should believe, but to have people involved in discovering the Gospel for themselves.

Of the 900 hundred people, about 500 went to see the play. No, not everybody of those involved became committed Christians and church goers after the play was performed in that village, and again a couple times more for the neighboring villages that had gotten curious, because such news is exciting and travels fast. But some people did change, and the whole community had the opportunity to reflect on the message of God's grace.

Are you suggesting that Christians in other parts of the world should follow your example?

No, it might be a viable way in Western Europe, but it is not necessarily the right thing to do for people in Latin America or Asia. What I mean is that we in Western Europe are so affluent, we do not have famines, we have plenty of hospitals and doctors if something goes wrong physically, we have a large degree of political stability, if you are unemployed there is at least some state assistance, but in most parts of the Two-Thirds-World people have no securities, they are left alone to their fate or else they learn to depend on the mercy of God because some Christians have talked to them about the Gospel and care to help them. These people are able to tell stories that are just as meaningful or even more meaningful as my plays. They have suffered, they have been blessed - they have a testimony. Furthermore, they will be able to tell stories of ecumenical encounter and testimonies of social responsibility as they dialogue within their particular cultural context. They can celebrate spiritual revival that goes beyond accepting evangelical fundamentals.

Well then, How do you see the future of European Pentecostalism?

I have made projections as to the state of Pentecostalism in the past, and some say that I have been wrong. In the late sixties I extrapolated growth rates of world Pentecostalism, together with the knowledge I had at that time. I did this in order to tell Non-Pentecostals that they would be well advised to take up dialogue with the Pentecostal churches for they would become more important. I projected that in Europe growth would slow down considerably, whereas Pentecostalism would grow impressively in the developing countries. The trouble is, Pentecostalism grew much more than I have dreamed of. Even in Europe growth was stronger than I predicted. The rest of the story you know.

But, with Europe, and perhaps with the United States, we possibly have a problem. In Max Weber's terms it can be called the institutionalization or domestication of religion. European Pentecostalism has to face the phenomenon of its own upward mobility and social acceptability.

Please explain.

Although some early Pentecostal leaders were well trained and of middle to high social standing, the masses came from the working classes. Think of the miners and industrial workers in Northern England, the farmers in the south of Italy, the working class in the large European cities. Mostly people of no or little means, their only treasure was the knowledge and love of their Lord Jesus. The fact that God had assured them of His grace and called them by their name. The fact is that God had told them that they were no nobodies, but precious in His sight. These people started a new life, mended their ways and began to invest in their children's education rather than in alcohol, sex, gambling and tobacco. Now, three generations later, the life style of many Pentecostals has risen. God still calls them by their name, but they do not necessarily understand the existentialist implications, because their materialist standard is high. The transformation of a Christian's life in Switzerland, for instance, is now more of an emotional and/or intellectual one, less a matter of life and death in the literal sense.

Now the churches in the West have three options, either they become more charismatic, by that I mean that they emphasize more the charismatic phenomena and subjective religious feelings, responding to the same needs that makes New Age and Esoterism so attractive in Western societies. Hence we have churches that emphasize the Toronto Blessing, or a Pensicola Touch, we have groups that stress the personal Word from God to the individual, we have congregations that spend a lot of money improving their worship services with first class music, different electronic gadgets, and an impressive stage management. These churches do attract people, and they do preach the Gospel, but they are also very susceptible to current fads. Sometimes I ask myself, will their members have developed sufficient roots to weather a future storm?

Another alternative is, of course, that they remain like the old fashioned Pentecostals of the second generation. Attacking the evils of modern society and celebrating their otherness as the faithful remnant of Israel. The trouble is, time has passed them by and they will dwindle into insignificance. They may talk a lot about the „millennium bug“, but they are not ready for the next century. The faithful Spirit of God will still bless them, but His true workforce is somewhere else.

I do see also a third possibility. If European Pentecostals, reconsider their roots, are stirred by the awareness of God's grace and power, and face the ethical imperatives of our days to tell the Good News, to reach out and touch people, spiritually and physically, to teach them well, to help them, to stand up prophetically, not against some petty issue discussed in church groups, but stand up prophetically to speak against injustice, moral decay and the political abuse of power....

I know, now I sound like Max Weber, but the point is, Pentecostalism could still be different from institutionalized religion, by living the power of Pentecost responsibly, in dialogue with others. As I said before, that would include learning from the un-churched people as well.

You mean by remembering the dangerous stories of the Bible, by upholding a true testimonial, critical and dialogical tradition, and by putting the challenging and unifying power of God's Spirit into tangible practice?

You said it.

You have been a preacher, a theologian, an ecumenist, a writer, a poet and a prophet. What would you want to say to the upcoming generation of Pentecostal ministers and theologians?

My first remark relates to the universities. It is encouraging to see how many Pentecostals aspire to important theological positions. I hope they will not make the mistake to be trapped in an academic setting that teaches with little relevance to the realities of our lives. Or, what would be equally disastrous, to teach

theology superficially, without the critical tools needed for a thorough, historical, interdisciplinary and intercultural approach.

My second remark relates to ecumenism. Progress in ecumenism, at least among the historic churches has been much too slow. I hope that the Pentecostal leaders of tomorrow realize today that ecumenical dialogue is vital for Christianity, it is the vision that Pentecostals need to take seriously.

My third and final remark relates to the Pentecostal movement itself. Historically, there can be no doubt that the movement understood itself as a denomination-transcending power. It would be tragic if the alliances with Evangelicals would blind Pentecostals of their original mission. It is impossible to reduce Pentecostalism to some sort of charismatic Evangelicalism.

But...

Yes but?

I never end a conversation with a remark, so let me tell you a story.

The Story of the Stork

Once upon a time many children were told that it was the stork that would carry little babies in a blanket wrapped around its beak to its future parents. Remember how Dumbo the elephant was brought to his mother in the animated Walt Disney film? But as time went by the children grew older and soon realized that the story of the stork was just a pretext.

Once upon a time the world was told that Switzerland was a neutral ally during World War II. And the Swiss were told that their national moral integrity was like a beacon of hope to all freedom-loving countries in those dark days of suffering and injustice. Then the almost unspeakable events of the Holocaust happened. Some helped Jews to hide or to escape the menace of National Socialism, some arranged themselves with the enemy.

After the war there were upright people that pointed their finger to acts of injustice. But their voices were not taken seriously. Their opinions were drowned. Those that had made deals in the banking and insurance business hoped that touchy issues would not be raised. Some hoped that the claims of the victims would be silenced by their own eventual death. But as the cold war ended, strategic and political considerations changed or became irrelevant. The veil of protection over Switzerland's past was lifted. So the Swiss had to learn that neutrality and moral integrity were for some a mere pretext.

Once upon a time the churches were told that theology was too difficult for the common believer to understand, and was therefore only relevant to a few technicians of the "Word". Some protested and said, "We too have a right to explain to each other the stories we read, and to assess the testimonies we hear." But these people were quickly silenced and told they could not simplify such important matters and that they did not have the necessary tools to unlock the mysteries of theology.

The deans and dons, the dictators of academic privileges hoped that, given time, it would become common knowledge that it would be sufficient for specialists to talk to each other. They hoped that the ordinary believers would resign themselves to uncritical teachings of a few fanciful discussions that the mass media would dish up for the entertainment of the masses.

But the times of the stable *status quo* changed, the big universities ran into financial trouble and they could no longer afford to maintain an apparatus for their own sake. Suddenly people began to question the meaning of theology - was it just a pretext?

One day people from all walks of life began to demonstrate in the large university cities, in Paris, in Oxford, at Yale, in Pretoria, in Seoul and Baguio. They were shouting, "What good is it that we pay taxes for education? Let us close the philosophy and theology faculties if they don't serve a common purpose. Let's fire the history professors and the philologists."

At the same time also the people in the slums of Sao Paulo, Mexico City and Johannesburg, even the poor in the barrios of Manila went to the streets to chant and dance to the tune: "We love our God, we love our faith! What is it that you are hiding, what is it.. what is it that you are hiding?"

And so it happened that the university deans, the philosophers and theologians, the men of academic might came together to fathom a possible way out of this dilemma. They all made serious faces, their eyes looked tired and only a few helpless remarks came across their lips. "How can we tell them that it isn't so easy?"

A woman that had brought them coffee overheard that phrase and simply said, "Are you afraid because it isn't easy? What about my daughter that needs medical attention that I cannot afford. Is that easy? Have you ever thought about the hard times my sister went through since her husband left her alone with four children? We are not afraid about things that aren't easy. We have learned to look reality into its face."

There was silence.

A theology professor gained his composure and said, "Well my dear lady, you and many others have hard times, so we did not want to burden you any more, with difficult speeches when you go to church..."

The woman interrupted saying, "Yes I do go to church and in my prayers I can talk to God about everything that is so hard to understand. And you know what? I have learned to live with God and the difficult questions. That's why I am not afraid to ask difficult questions about my faith. God and I have an understanding and I welcome the smallest progress I make. My faith has grown strong whenever I had to struggle in my mind, when I had to fight for the hope in my heart, even my body was strengthened when love did conquer."

The academicians were somewhat disturbed, for they had nothing to retort. So the woman continued. "And the best thing of all is that God is present in all of this - through the power of his Spirit. Have you ever experienced the power of his leading: the way He meets needs, the way He answers doubts, the way He instills hope?"

At that point the woman had to sit down, because she had drained herself of her energies with that impassioned speech.

The professors felt ill at ease. For one reason, because they thought, „We are not talking about the same thing.“ They were thinking about the intricacies of textual criticism, she was apparently talking about the difficulties of social contract. But at the same time, in the back of their thoughts, they also understood her.

Again the woman broke the eerie silence saying, "I understand, I do not know Greek or what ever other language you need to know if you want to read the old Bible. I also understand that we need you to tell us what you discovered when you do your studies. But at the same time, we can offer you some help too. We have learned to pray and believe in the hardest of circumstances. We both owe each other something. You owe us your explanations, we owe you our stories."

With that, the woman stood up, took the plate, picked up the ash trays filled with twisted cigarette butts and fatigued ashes, and left the room.

What do you think, what happened as a result of this encounter?

- Did the professors sigh and retreat to the *status quo ante*?
- Did the professors invite the lady back for more discussions and start a program for interested people to get academic training called "Give them a chance!"?
- Did the people demonstrating on the streets start an alternative study program with the help of sponsors?
- Did you as a hearer of this story start asking questions, dangerous or provocative questions?

If you ask me, I believe it is time that we begin to do theology without assuming that people only understand tales of the stork, we are called to be theologians and ministers that reckon with the vital power of God's Spirit and the truth that sets us free. Good theology will always serve the communication and implementation of the Gospel.