

"Faithful discipleship" and "criticism of the church" - a contradiction?

Who hasn't felt this way? One has certain experiences in the life of faith and also expectations of the Church, perhaps expects certain changes - and nothing happens. Often one is referred to the "official doctrinal statements" or, in administrative matters, to the statutes of the church, and last but not least, one is sometimes appealed to for "faithful discipleship".

But is a critical attitude toward the church, or even a critical discussion of the doctrinal statements, in general contradiction to the gospel of Jesus?

Jesus, even as the Son of God, was first of all a Jew. Many in his time addressed him as a "rabbi," a teacher in the Jewish faith. The evangelist Matthew (who was himself the evangelist who reports most strongly from the perspective of the Jewish faith) quotes Jesus as saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill." (Matt. 5:17). From this we can conclude that Jesus very much saw himself as part of the Jewish people and thus was rooted in the Jewish faith, in the Law. But did he therefore let himself be prevented from criticizing the clergy of his time, "his church" for some things? On the contrary, he always sought critical, open and honest discussion, debate and clear language. This can easily be seen in a few striking examples.

The Sabbath was and is sacred to the Jewish people. Jesus was reproached for healing on the Sabbath. The evangelist Luke reports about what Jesus answered to the reproach of the ruler of a synagogue: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you untie his ox or donkey from the manger on the Sabbath and lead it to the watering place?" (Luke 13, verse 15). So he was arguing with the ruler about the interpretation and scope of the commandment "You shall keep holy the holiday"!

Nicodemus, a contemporary of Jesus, was a Pharisee and thus intimately familiar with the doctrinal teachings of the Jewish faith. In a late-night conversation (incidentally, something quite common at the time in the late evening and not necessarily clandestine, as he is sometimes accused of doing), Jesus said to him, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." A basically radical (new) statement, because the Jews believed they could be justified before God by fulfilling the Law. So he was arguing with the Pharisee about fundamentals of faith that shook the understanding of the time about the relationship between God and man.

Jesus was deliberately drawn into the condemnation of a woman who had been convicted of adultery. The scribes and the Pharisees challengingly ask him, "Master, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Moses commanded us in the Law to stone such women. What do you say?" (John 8, verses 4 and 5). The law of Moses was clear in its consequence, and yet Jesus did not shy away from this dispute and content dispute with the clergy of his time and made his (new) attitude unmistakably clear through the commandment of love and the sinfulness of all people.

This also continued to the sacrificial death of Jesus and his resurrection in the still young Christian church. In almost every letter of the apostle Paul we can read that there were different doctrinal views and basic attitudes in the early Christian churches, with which the

believers and the apostles had to deal with and that they also accepted the challenge that came with it. This is most clearly seen in the Epistle to the Galatians, where Paul describes a heated argument between himself and Peter (Cephas): "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I resisted him to his face, because he had put himself in the wrong.

For before some of James came, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those of the circumcision. And with him also the rest of the Jews pretended, so that even Barnabas was deceived to pretend with them. But when I saw that they did not act rightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas publicly in the presence of all: If thou, being a Jew, livest Gentile, and not Jewish, why dost thou compel the Gentiles to live Jewish?". So there was a fierce dispute about living together in the churches according to the gospel of Jesus Christ!

At that time, the dispute was over the valid (dietary) laws for the believers! As Chief Apostle Schneider recently stated: The Christians of the early Church had to endure so many conflicts due to the enormous cultural differences between Gentiles and Jews - and should we not be able to bridge some of these differences today in our enlightened times? Heterosexuals must learn to understand homosexuals as equal Christians, with all rights and all duties - in some places still an issue of dispute.

Men must recognize women as fully equal, not only in teaching, but in all tasks and offices - the church is still struggling with this. Skin color, origin, orientations of all kinds must no longer play a role, as long as everyone represents the core statements of the unalterable gospel without compromise - in the online media you can see that even this is not easy for everyone.

Jesus said of himself, "I am the light of the world." (John 8, verse 12). But then he also said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." (Matth. 5, verse 14). This makes it clear: It is a matter of carrying the light of the Gospel further, especially in our present time and with the same openness to necessary changes as Jesus himself exemplified.

Faithful discipleship and criticism of the church - is that a contradiction?

Quite the contrary: to address deficiencies in today's Church - both in administrative matters and in doctrinal statements - is neither "nest-fouling" nor "unnecessary"; no, it is even indispensable in order to reach the goal of faith - namely, to become similar to Jesus Christ. Because not only in the early church were the demands and reality of the church sometimes far apart, but equally so today. This requires open communication at eye level with the faithful and the ability to address and resolve conflicts. Both are fields of learning - for believers and church alike.

Jesus himself exemplified and practiced this in the above-mentioned encounters and discussions - he involved the believers of his time in the discussion about the principles and contents of faith!