

Christian Lawyers advocating justice

From 4th to 6th of May 2012, the German Christian lawyers organisation “Christ und Jurist” hosted a congress with about 180 participants in Frankfurt devoted to the topic of “Gerechtigkeit”. Distinguished speakers shed light on the idea of “Gerechtigkeit”, the German word encompassing, as became clear in the course of the congress, notions of both justice and righteousness.

In opening the congress, “Christ und Jurist” chairman Patrick Menges quoted the verse from 1 Peter 2:24 “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.” How lawyers can live for righteousness was fleshed out by three impressive personal reports: South African advocate Dieter M. Achtzehn spoke about his work for human rights in Ruanda with International Justice Mission, Latchezar Popov reported on his work at the Rule of Law Institute in Sofia, and, lastly, German senior judge Peter Gegenwart gave insights into his daily work in the administration of justice.

On Saturday, Prof Lutz Simon, chairman of Frankfurt Chamber of Lawyers, gave an overview over the history of the idea of “Gerechtigkeit”. His speech culminated in the equation of Gerechtigkeit and love, as shown by Jesus in his interpretation of the Mosaic laws given in the Sermon on the Mount and in other situations such as towards the adulteress in John 8. “Only love can bring forth true justice”, Simon said. He thus appealed to Christian lawyers to show their colours in society.



Dr Patrick Menges, Prof Herbert Landau

Prof Herbert Landau, judge in the Federal Constitutional Court, spoke about the rule of law (“Rechtsstaat”) and the relationship of law and justice. He emphasised the importance of human dignity as a value prior to the legal order and advocated a “Gerechtigkeitsstaat” rather than a “Rechtsstaat”.

Prof Hans-Joachim Eckstein introduced the audience to a biblical understanding of “Gerechtigkeit”, as given by the Old Testament, by Paul and the Gospel of Matthew. He stressed that the Hebrew notion of “Gerechtigkeit” is never absolute but always relational, i.e. directed towards someone, to God or other people. “Gerechtigkeit” may be defined as the behaviour adequate to the specific relationship. With the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18) Eckstein pointed out that “Gerechtigkeit” as given by God admounds to justification and mercy rather than law and condemnation. It is only in response to this “Gerechtigkeit” that Jesus asks us to exhibit a righteousness better than the Pharisees (Mt 5,20), which Eckstein deemed “more realistic than some other seemingly rational modern approaches to advocate a just society”.

Workshops for discussion of the practical responses to questions of “Gerechtigkeit”, alongside with a splendidly witty and encouraging performance by comedian Johannes Warth on Saturday night, completed the programme. The congress was concluded with a festive interdenominational service on Sunday.

The network “Christ und Jurist”, founded in 1997, brings together almost 700 Christian lawyers from all over Germany. For more information see www.christ-jurist.de.