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On Political Ethics as the Basis of a Global Evangelical Consensus

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I The Necessity of a Global Consensus in Questions of Political Ethics

When the message of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus Christ reaches us, it confronts us with the call of God that commands us to repent (Mt. 3:2). God wants to redeem us in Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit. When this message reaches us and leads us to believe in Christ (Jn. 1:12), God changes our lives and makes us into 'new creatures' (2 Cor. 5:17). He makes us his disciples (Mt. 10). He reconciles us with himself and gives us the message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-21). Jesus Christ has therefore called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt. 5:13-16). Our witness should reach all people on this earth—it should be in

our churches and congregations as well as in our societies and nations (Mt. 28:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:9). This witness should deeply permeate our lost and chaotic world. Through our witness in word and deed, people far and near, from our own countries and other countries should experience and come to know the goodness of the triune God both as Creator and Sustainer and as Redeemer and Judge of the world. We Christians are both *witnesses* and *instruments* of the triune God acting in the world and acting to redeem. God wants to use not only our words, but also our thinking and actions and our whole lives for his ministry. This is the task of the global church of Jesus Christ.

In our pluralistic and globalized world we are becoming more and more aware of the imminent *global* dimension of our witness and ministry in a special way. What a single individual or group or people does can be spread across the whole world by TV news and the Internet in seconds. The postmod-

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ern world brings us many dangers, but it also opens up to us tremendous opportunities and extends the scope of our tasks and responsibilities as witnesses to and servants of Jesus Christ. Perhaps more than ever before we are quickly becoming aware of how closely we are connected to one another. The world has become a giant net. Global awareness dominates thinking everywhere. In all possible areas of post-modern society things are done increasingly on the global scale. The same is also true of politics. Surely more clearly, we notice today, than ever before, how decisions that people make can have desirable as well as undesirable consequences for many other people as well.

In this context the question of how the Christian faith affects the political involvement of Christians worldwide constitutes one of the most urgent topics we must discuss within the scope of the WEA. Why? Several observations should be made here:

a) In the age of globalization, if global organizations such as the WEA do not want to fall prey to the processes of postmodern fragmentation and become politically irrelevant on the global scale, they must work towards global unity perhaps more than ever before.

b) To achieve an assured unity between the churches, fellowships, groups, and individuals who identify with the WEA worldwide, it is not enough just to work on common statements regarding doctrine or cooperation in practical tasks, but also to promote common views on ethical questions, including political-ethical questions.

c) An effort for an international dis-

cussion of political questions within the WEA is therefore important and urgent today because political circumstances form the socio-political, economic, and ideological background of our understanding of many theological and practical questions. Time and again in the past decades, political questions have created tension, misunderstanding, mutual accusation and so on in many countries on the local, regional, and international level. This has been true to the extent that now the question of whether or not work should be done on forming an international consensus in the area of *political ethics* has become acute.

d) The treatment of this topic within the framework of the WEA is pressing also, because today enormous differences in the interpretation of international political relationships dominate the ethical-political views of Christians in some countries of the so-called First World and countries of the so-called Two-Thirds World. Such differences between wealthier and poorer countries expose a tender spot in evangelical North-South international relationships which must be dealt with.¹

1 Cf., e.g., C. René Padilla and Lindy Scott, *Terrorism and the War in Iraq: A Christian Word from Latin America* (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2004). Which problem are we talking about exactly? If you consider, on the one hand, that, according to statistics, 80% of the evangelical branch of American Protestantism was in favour of the U.S. War in Iraq (p.12), and, on the other hand, the absolute majority of Latin American Protestant Christians, including evangelical circles, clearly were against this war (p.11-26), then there are, even within Evangelicalism, almost insurmountable differences in the attitudes with regard to the topic, 'war on Iraq'.

e) This means that it is not enough today in discussing political questions to treat only local or regional topics, or to limit ourselves to the inner ethical-political problems of our own countries, because only a global approach would really be effective.

f) Achieving a global, evangelical consensus on the foundation of an evangelical socio-political ethic would, in my opinion, improve the health of North-South relations between Christians within the scope of the WEA because these are very burdened today by many events of recent world history.

g) A worldwide consensus on political ethics could give tremendous political power to our Christian witness and our mutual ministry, especially in view of the global growth of new religious movements and world religions, as well as the growth of all possible forms of political fundamentalism.²

h) Global consensus and international evangelical cooperation in questions of political ethics could help in that certain ethical-political problems seen in all our countries could be tackled on a wider, international level and balanced growth and corresponding development could be promoted.

i) Political-ethical questions also form, in my opinion, a field in which, despite, among others, theological and philosophical differences, cooperation even with other international organizations—such as, for example, the World Council of Churches—could be possible in some respects; in fact, depending on the place, in some countries, inter-religious cooperation would be not only conceivable, but also necessary.³

Based upon all these observations, we cannot, in my view, simply limit ourselves in this consultation to investigating the correlation between faith in providence and political involvement. I will therefore attempt to give also some ideas for an honest, international, brotherly dialogue on some background topics of Christian political ethics based on theological reflections from the context of Latin America.

The following questions must be considered: How can Evangelical Christians from the First and from the Two-Thirds Worlds talk about political questions in a theologically healthy, honest, and brotherly way? How can existing tensions be overcome? How can we have a healthy, international, Christian culture of dialogue in which our Christian faith helps us to hear what brothers and sisters from other countries are saying with respect to the political situation in our own countries and their international conse-

2 A specific example is the discussion about the war in Iraq: cf. Lindy Scott, 'The War in Iraq: The Latin American Churches Speak Out', in Padilla and Scott, *Terrorism and the War in Iraq*, p. 26: 'The invasion of Iraq by the United States and England has raised great interest again in political ethics and the role of churches in modern societies. Latin American churches have begun making their voices heard. Their pronouncements are making a contribution to the ethical debate needed in our contemporary world.'

3 The fight against world hunger or against AIDS in Africa or even worldwide could, for example, be a joint inter-religious concern so that an interreligious dialogue is, in my view, definitely necessary in treating socio-political questions.

quences? How do we as Christians deal with the political evils of our own countries and of other countries? How do we deal with political differences of opinion and differing political options among ourselves? How do we handle critical-prophetic questions in the area of the foreign policies of our countries?

If we, as the WEA, want to formulate an internationally valid statement, we must somehow take into careful consideration the existing North-South and East-West tensions and help our brothers and sisters worldwide to achieve an honest, humble, and healthy international culture of dialogue on political matters. If we seek only a minimal amount of international consensus within the WEA and thus do not tackle this difficult topic in an honest, Christian manner, this can, in my view, lead to failure in the search for a wider, international consensus.

In Latin America, José Mígues Bonino has recently emphasized the necessity of finding a 'joint ethical awareness', or a 'universal ethical consensus'.⁴ This means consensus between Christians and people of all kinds of other religious views. Bonino recognizes, for example, that with ethical positions in today's societies, the use of certain values such as 'justice' occurs from very different ideological, religious, utopian and ideological perspectives. Even 'non-religious' worldviews and their values are regarded in the same way as religion is with Christians.

This is something that must be taken into account. Bonino quotes Clifford Geertz's distinction between 'thick description' and 'thin description' and talks about 'minimal consensus' and 'maximal meaning' (Spanish, 'significados máximos'). The *minimal consensus* should serve to create common laws for all of society. In practice, laws are often the result of this 'minimal consensus'. When it is a matter of applying the law to everyday life, each person will act according to his own worldview and its special motives. That is, he will put into practice what is binding as minimal consensus in its *maximal meaning* only according to his own worldview.

Because of this, our political involvement as Christians cannot be about introducing the breadth of our particular Christian motives and interpretations, but about working on minimal consensus. To this extent, Bonino speaks of a maximal and a minimal morality. In Argentina, cooperation was achieved even by people of different worldviews in a pluralistic society with respect to concrete mutual goals and the definition of common ethical concerns regarding human rights.⁵

A joint intra-evangelical statement can thus serve as a guideline for Christians and churches in our countries. It can also encourage them to perceive more acutely the political challenges in their countries and help them to speak and act with clear biblical-theological and ethical criteria. It can even exercise a preventive and corrective function with respect to worldwide political

4 José Mígues Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político. La participación de los evangélicos en la política en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 1999), p. 19.

5 José M. Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, pp. 43-45.

evils which have been caused partly by evangelical Christians.

II Evangelical Political Involvement—Observations From History

When one asks today about the relationship between Christian faith and political involvement, we can see from the history of Protestant Christians from the Reformation until today that this topic has been examined many times.

Protestant Christians of all periods of time, whether consciously or unconsciously, have given testimony to their belief in the providence of God, as well as holding a definite view of the current political situation. There will, however, be differences regarding views on both providence and political involvement between various Christian Groups. In their discussion of these two topics even Protestant Christians will be under the influence of the respective spirit of the age. One can think, for example, of the period of the Enlightenment, of the Industrial Revolution, or of today's globalization.

Moreover, there is no other way possible. For faith in God's providence, whatever its strength, determines to a great degree our Christian attitude (whether positive or negative) towards this world, including its culture, philosophy, science, technology, law, institutions and politics. The same is also true with regard to our political attitudes. Because we as individuals and as Christian churches always live in a certain socio-political setting, our action in society always says something about our political attitudes.

European political theology (Johann Baptist Metz) and South American liberation theology have long since pointed this out in a very critical way—even if it was also done in a one-sided and overly critical way. They emphasized, for example, that all Christian or church action inevitably carries political weight so that there is no neutral or apolitical action, and that this action, moreover, either promotes the current political *status quo* or intends to change it. There is no such thing as a third way.

Liberation theologians of the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America gave, for example, Christians of all churches the choice—either the capitalist system or the socialist system which was making headway then. All so-called political neutrality was very sharply criticized because it only confirmed the existing political *status quo*—which, of course, was interpreted as the wrong political option by liberation theologians from their understanding of the Kingdom of God. They affirmed that the socialist system corresponded more to the Kingdom of God than the capitalist, and therefore they chose a political, ethical, and Protestant option for the poor against structurally-ingrained poverty.⁶ According to their own understanding, liberation theologians presented a political hermeneutic of the gospel.⁷

⁶ For a more detailed exposition see Schwambach, *Rechtfertigungsgeschehen und Befreiungsprozess. Die Eschatologien von Martin Luther und Leonardo Boff im Kritischen Gespräch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), pp. 170-175.

⁷ This is how Gustavo Gutiérrez, explains it in his famous book *Teología de la liberación*, 1969 (*Theology of Liberation*).

The demand for political involvement brought the socio-political conflict of that time into many churches, including the Protestants. The political option or the particular party affiliation or party option of individual Christians was practically raised to the level of an act of confession. In this way, the political events and ideas of the past became in many ways matters of salvation and ruin, of sin and grace. One can imagine that the discussions of that not so distant past in the churches of Latin America were often heated and very emotional. In certain areas, a deep chasm arose between liberation theologians and evangelical Christians, and in other areas a kind of 'evangelical liberation theology' developed. Looking at the whole, a deeper awareness of political responsibility also entered the evangelical arena through these discussions.

Even if we cannot agree with the radical views of Latin American liberation theology at that time, discussion about it still raises the question of if and to what extent *the mixture of politics and religion, or, the religious overload of political options does not continue to present a problem to be treated worldwide*.

When we try to study the history of the involvement of Protestant, and today evangelical, Christians, then we quickly notice that Protestant Christians ever since the Reformation have always had to deal with political questions and challenges and, in fact, dealt with them in many ways. Countless examples from history could be mentioned here. That Protestant Christians have been apolitical can, in my opinion, be clearly assumed as a wrong starting point. Protestantism—and

this is true throughout the different fellowships and denominations—has, since its beginning, made a big effort to found schools and colleges. The advance of cultural development as well as the path to democracy in western countries cannot be imagined without the influence of Protestant thinking.

While part of the modern theory of democracy has clear rationalistic Enlightenment-era roots, the other part of its source is the western, Christian tradition. The separation between church and state has clear roots in different developments of Protestant theologies and has shaped in different ways the history of many western countries, depending on whether they stood historically more under the influence of Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, or other Protestant movements.

Today, generally accepted democratic principles, such as religious liberty or freedom of conscience, the right of private ownership, freedom of the press, human dignity, national sovereignty, government tolerance with respect to the religious options of its citizens, societal and political pluralism are only some examples of the common heritage of Evangelical Christians as well. The fight for political 'freedom' has unmistakable Protestant roots, even when we encounter the idea of freedom in the modern age in a secularized form.

Although Protestantism did not directly invent capitalism, Protestant ideas have always contributed to its rise and worldwide development. Social and economic development in many of our countries is also, among many factors, due to Protestant politi-

cal influence. National history, American in particular, gives us a wealth of examples of how Protestant Christians have worked hard to form society according to Christian values and principles. The different human rights declarations can in no way be viewed in a one-sided way as the heritage of the French Revolution; they also have very definite Christian, indeed, Protestant roots, as the first declarations from the U.S. show. It is a profound Christian, in fact, Protestant awareness that originally appeared in them.⁸ The idea that Protestant Christians should lead a simple lifestyle can clearly be found quite early in Reformation history and did not begin in modern times with the Lausanne conference.

The same is true for the emphasis on the necessity of social justice. That Protestant Christians owe people not only the gospel for the soul, but also practical help in all possible forms of human and societal difficulties, was always understood. One thinks here of the time of the revivalist movements in the Industrial Revolution. From the 17th to the 20th centuries, testimony is found to the many ways, and the many places in different countries, in which Protestant Christians took in the poor, worked for social justice, provided education, helped the unemployed and groups of the population suppressed and marginalized by poverty, treated the sick, created trade unions, founded political parties, fought for better laws and for social reforms at all possible levels of government. A prime example

of this is William Booth of the Salvation Army with his motto of 'soup, soap, and salvation'.

There are, therefore, countless examples and testimonies from each of these centuries,⁹ which we evangelical Christians today should not forget as they are a part of the greater history of Protestantism and of our fathers in the faith and of our own denominations. So, anyone today who talks about the 'political involvement' of Protestant Christians should not speak of it as if it had no history. We have a rich heritage that can constantly inspire and motivate us in many ways. But, this also means *that global evangelicalism today should not make decisions in these questions without an awareness of history and should not simply disconnect itself from the history of Protestantism*. For better or worse, the worldwide evangelical movement is in some way a part of it. The *ahistorical thinking* of some of our churches must also be overcome.

However, the history of Christianity does not show us only positive things with respect to the political activity of Protestant Christians. The reality of human sin has left behind a clear, embarrassing, and terrible trail even in the political involvement of Protestant Christians. Religion and politics have all too often been mixed in a disastrous way. The Thirty-Years' War shows

⁸ Cf. José Mígues Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, p. 47-72.

⁹ The best overview in Portuguese can be found in Robinson Cavalcanti, *Cristianismo & Política. Teoria Bíblica e Prática Histórica*. 2. ed. (Niterói: Vinde; São Paulo: CPPC 1988). Cavalcanti is a former member of the Theological Commission of the WEA, where he also was active in a theological study unit on 'ethics and society'.

how Protestant Christians fought and killed one another. Historic denominations that have been placed in a secure position by their respective governments (e.g., Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians) often had intolerant attitudes towards other Protestant groups. Quite often those groups, which arose as 'independent churches', were persecuted by the former, as were for example, the Anabaptists.

Broad secularization processes were sanctioned by changes in Protestant doctrine. The strong individualism of western societies has Christian, especially Protestant, roots. The same can be said for the overestimation of private capital or private property. Large and small wars were and are still fought by politicians who are members of Protestant churches. Even in Protestant-led governments, moral scandals, corruption, and the suppression of minorities can be found. Many countries were explored and exploited by Protestant and Catholic colonial powers and even today, there is still often a prevalent ethnocentric colonialistic attitude. The large Protestant missionary initiatives of the 18th and 19th centuries often mixed the gospel with western culture, looked down on ethnic minorities and violated human rights.

The influence of the colonial powers was not only positive, but, in many ways, negative and oppressive. There are many examples here that could be given. Yet it is our concern to show that we evangelicals today cannot just simply opt out of the negative side of the history of Protestant Christianity regarding politics. *Even the Evangelical movement and the churches and move-*

*ments that are indebted to it have definite roots in this history.*¹⁰

These negative examples also serve as a warning to us, as a call for repentance before God and change for us as individuals and nations. *The Word of God in the Scriptures teaches us about the on-going reality of sin even in born-again Christians; history confirms this as well with regard to the attitude of Christians in political matters.* An evangelical standpoint on politics must, therefore, constantly take into consideration the theological aspects with regard to creation, humanity's fallen nature, and sin so that it does not digress into utopian or unrealistic idealism. Protestant understanding of political involvement should be characterized (and guided) neither by a sense of pessimism from theological standpoints regarding creation and anthropology nor by a kind of optimism, but by a balanced *realism*.

Finally, when you attempt to get a short historical overview of our topic, you notice that there are some difficulties in the evangelical movement regarding 'political involvement' which must also continue to be worked on today with a view to overcoming them. Some of these may be mentioned as follows:

a) We must examine carefully whether the all too strong and one-sided emphasis on individual salvation to the detriment of the diaconal and social service activity of Christians in evangelical circles has, in fact, been already overcome. The rise of the *Social Gospel* movement had the worldwide effect that many evangelicals

¹⁰ Cf. Cavalcanti, *Cristianismo & Política*, pp. 115-150.

developed a polemical, intimate, and individualistic understanding of salvation.¹¹ Since the Lausanne Congress (1974), much work has been done on overcoming this one-sided understanding.

The concept of 'integral mission', which René Padilla strongly introduced into the discussion, has established itself both in the worldwide evangelical movement and even far beyond. And yet it remains to be asked if the practice of evangelical Christians and churches really fits this understanding, particularly in political questions, or if this has only remained in 'theory'. Has this great biblical vision also become action? Do not our Protestant churches still remain without any firm position regarding political questions?¹²

b) The continuously renewed call to social-political involvement by Protestant and evangelical Christians has, on the other hand, led to the dedication of many in many countries and in many ways to societal problems and even politics. These are surely positive results stemming from the many publications and worldwide discussions, especially since Lausanne I.¹³

But, today there are also several critical analyses that show that some instances of evangelical political involvement have become problematic, particularly in the past few years. Biblical-theological understanding is

unclear or completely lacking. Instead, problems can be found even among some evangelical politicians and among certain Protestant church groups in several places of the world, such as the application of biblical literalism in the understanding of what 'law' is, corruption scandals of evangelical politicians and in so-called 'Protestant' political parties, suppression and even persecution of groups of people who think differently, different forms of social injustice, lack of democracy and the abuse of human rights.¹⁴

This shows that there is still a great need for discussion even among us as evangelicals and that the question of the 'ethical criteria' of political action has not yet been treated adequately. It could be that our standpoints, whatever their differing contexts, must be more definitely founded on ethical criteria.

III Impetus for Discussion of a Consensus-Building Evangelical Political Ethic

Reflection on political ethics from an evangelical perspective must dare to tackle certain specific topics if it really wants to work hard on getting an international consensus and not just remain ineffectively superficial. In doing so, it must deal with the background to ethi-

11 Cavalcanti, *Cristianismo & Política*, pp. 142-144.

12 Cf. Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, p. 11.

13 Cf. José M. Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, p. 9.

14 Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Paul Freston, 'Evangelicals and Politics in the Third World', in David P. Gushee (Ed.), *Christians and Politics: Beyond the Culture Wars* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, pp. 11-13.

cal-political issues. Presumably, even so consensus cannot be reached. Yet, the following suggested questions are aimed to stimulate us to further reflection and show us the complexity of some problems which our ethical-political reflection must confront today.

1. Politics and Ethics

Politics is a legitimate subject of general ethics and, in this respect, is also a matter for Christian ethics as well. First of all, it is important that we remain aware that we, as theologians, are not experts in government, law or social politics. Strictly speaking, we are amateurs in political matters and we are dependent on experts and their special studies. And yet we should not mislead ourselves about the fact that, in our complex, plural and global world, even political experts today have only a limited view. This means that, more than ever before, we should not have a static understanding of what politics is actually about.

Politics is the art of what is possible in a rapidly-changing world. All politics is discretionary, a matter of judgement, an art. Biblically and theologically speaking, it has the task of securing the progression of public life in a chaotic world with as peaceful a means as possible. For neither the expert nor we as Christians have the right formula for correct political decisions. We will find ourselves in the situation again and again where we can hardly judge what is or was right or wrong. History is very complex and, for this reason, it can repeatedly surprise us. This makes us modest and careful to avoid hasty ethical judgements. For us as Christians, decisions on political issues must still

be understood as the art of Christian discernment in the sense of Romans 12:1-2. We can therefore have neither a purely negative attitude towards political topics nor an uncritical accommodation to the schemes of this world, for it is a task that must be undertaken responsibly (see Romans 12:4-8).¹⁵

It is also important that we remember constantly that the arena of political involvement is very different from other activities. It is not limited to the national government, but includes individual state governments, counties and cities, churches, schools and universities, industries, trade, business, political parties, trade unions, and particular groups within the population. Throughout all of these there are complex networks of different relationships. Politics works, therefore, to form public life at all these levels. In doing so it is constantly influenced by different cultural, ideological, and economic interests that are often divergent. Because of this, the task is always that of balancing different demands and ideals.

Moreover, it always has to do with 'change', that is, with the change of social needs, political figures, ideas, and historic situations. Politics begins where people consciously want these changes, where they either support change or hinder it, and where they try somehow to influence the course of things. For this reason, there is no politics without a vision for the future, and without the attempt to form society

¹⁵ Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, p. 33.

according to a certain view or vision for the future. Because history, at least until the Second Coming of Christ, does not come to an end, there is also a further future behind the immediate future.

In this perspective, politics always has a dual limitation in relation to its ends and its means. With respect to its ends, it should make possible a common future, that is, not pursue its own interests, group, partial or private. With respect to the means, it should remain limited to peaceful means. It must guarantee free expression in word and in written form, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, free association of and dialogue between individuals, it must balance different interests through compromise.

The fact that we experience politics practically as a complex, dark world of unethical fighting between group and personal interests or perhaps as a power struggle using non-peaceful means, shows us exceptionally clearly as evangelical Christians how politics should, in fact, be focused on ethics, particularly in situations of tension. A person involved in politics should be continually seeking the good and the just for all, however difficult this may be.¹⁶

In summary, in their political involvement evangelical Christians should constantly recognize the complexity of politics, with the main goal of acting according to clear Christian eth-

ical standards on all levels of activity. Superficial sweeping judgements about political situations should be avoided. We are not helped in this either by purely fundamentalist casuistry, or by a purely situational-ethics position, or by a purely deontological approach, or by a purely teleological ethic. Utilitarian values also prove themselves to be limited in scope and very often unjust. Rather, each ethical norm must be strictly related to the specific situation and carefully examined to discover its real effectiveness.

2. The Christian View of the Modern State

One basic difficulty in gaining a worldwide consensus on questions of political ethics is that our churches come from very different theological traditions. There are the so-called historic churches as well as the older and newer independent churches. The theological presuppositions they all start out from in their views of government are very different. For some, government may be viewed more positively, but for others, more negatively. Older views of governmental authority and its power that go back to the Lutheran and Reformed theological traditions and influence many of our churches even today may neither be disregarded on the one hand nor overestimated on the other. They should be a firm point of reference for our ethical thinking as we find in these traditions mature theological reflection which is based on the positive and negative experiences of several centuries.

Luther's distinction between two dominions is certainly the most important and, throughout the centuries

¹⁶ Cf. Wolfgang Trillhaas, *Ethik* 3rd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1970), pp. 410-420, whom I have mostly followed in this section.

until today, the most discussed example. Even when today these traditions can be maintained only with certain reservations, they still contain theological concerns that can hardly be ignored. On the other hand, one cannot overlook the fact that the Reformers and their descendants had no clearly defined doctrine of government and that their convictions in many ways presuppose a *societas christiana* that is no longer a given. Our modern democratic state has become a secular state which stands over against the churches, either in a well-meaning, indifferent, or a somewhat forced position of tolerance.

Moreover, the modern problem of government can be no longer adequately understood within the traditional relationships of authorities and those subject to them. Obedience to the governing authority is no longer the dominant problem of today's citizen, but rather it is a question of responsibility (or joint responsibility) for the success of public life on different levels. Today's political systems demand not so much obedience, as cooperation, deliberate effort, and raising of awareness. For the older doctrine of government authority, political order is a matter of preservation of power, resisting destructive forces opposed to it; the democratic view of the state takes a different view.¹⁷

The problems caused by a lack of hermeneutical reflection about the transfer of the principles of Lutheran theology were evident, for example, in Germany in the conflict between the so-called 'German Christians' and the

'Confessing Church'. If one holds fast only to the basic tenets of the traditional dogmas about submission to the governing authorities, they may, in my opinion, be understood as *regulative principles*, and they should then be useful to us in our task. For they say nothing about the form of government, the constitution, and rights. They accommodate to monarchies just as well as they do to democracies.

Another model that has had much influence in the Protestant world is the understanding of Karl Barth. The civil community (state) is seen as analogous to the Christian community. Both have a common origin and centre. The civil community is, on the one hand, outside the church, yet not outside the rule of Jesus Christ and is, therefore, also within the realm of his Kingdom. In accordance with this, Barth develops directly from Christian views and creedal statements foundational political statements.

Even this view, which gained worldwide importance in the twentieth century, cannot simply be accepted without reservation or critical inquiry in the context of today's Protestant ethics. Can one really just place our modern government into the Kingdom of Christ without any reservations? Can one just unveil basic tenets of the faith and translate them into political sanctions of dominant systems? 'Can one forget that the government is the world and its theological meaning must be directed toward the darkness and ambiguities of this worldliness that is closed and against the revelation of God in Christ in this age?'¹⁸

17 Trillhaas, *Ethik*, pp. 425-432.

18 Trillhaas, *Ethik*, p. 432.

For an evangelical view, these observations mean that however much we might like to describe the state as 'Christian', we cannot claim to be designing a *constructive* doctrine of government. Our theology of government and the state, which will look different even within the WEA, will probably have only a *regulative meaning and function*.¹⁹

a) There is no direct 'Ten Commandments' in favour of government. The Bible cannot be understood as 'a political or economic program'. However, this does not mean that we do not find anything in it about the topic of government.²⁰ The state is the domain of the unseen Creator who rules over all the world, that is, Jesus Christ as the mediator of creation. What government means theologically, it means for all people, not just for Christians. The 'worldliness' of the state has thus an indispensable theological significance.

This does not mean that we as Christians simply allow it to proceed according to its 'own autonomous laws'. To speak of the state as 'worldly' means that we cannot see how God, the Creator and Lord of the world, uses the government of the state. The state, according to Christian understanding, is the 'worldly' state.²¹ This means that the state and its order belong to areas that should be shaped by human cultural work and cooperation.

To this extent, the so-called 'cul-

tural mandate of God' (Gen. 1:26-28) also affects the organization of states. God gives this into the hands of humans so that they may deal with it responsibly. In this way, God involves people in this task as his servants. To this extent it is also a part of their cultural task that governments secure peace and order among members of their countries, shaping positive laws, regulating economic life according to law, equally protecting all citizens, distributing the social burdens equally among all members and groups, providing help for the socially weak; they should also take responsibility for the protection and care of religion, morality, education, art, science, and technology.

b) Protestant ethics should take careful notice of the different dimensions of the *modern* state—that is, the territory that belongs to it; every government claims sovereignty; every state lays claim to moral character within the scope of law, so that there always exists a certain idea of what is morally good; each state needs power to be able to enforce what is right (although this power is not to be confused with violence. It is more a moral power which has to do with the influence of the state); every state has a government that exercises power in the state, represents the state, and bears responsibility for it.

c) For Christians, the state is the area of God's dominion as Creator who keeps us in his providential care in a way hidden to us and leads us to his goal and his judgement as Judge. If one speaks of the reign of Jesus Christ in this context, then this must be understood as a part of the mediative Creator role of Jesus Christ; likewise, it must

19 Trillhaas, *Ethik*, p. 433.

20 Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, p. 32.

21 Trillhaas, *Ethik*, p. 434.

be understood in the sense of hidden activity in the world. In this 'worldliness' lies also the self-limitation of the state with respect to religion. Because this is so, every state and constitution that arises ultimately exists in the twilight between justice and injustice, and good and evil. This is true also in every respect of today's democracies and of all forms of government without exception. There is no state in our world whose origin and history is free from shadowy parts—theologically speaking, from the reality of sin. For evangelical ethics, this means that we should not just consider how the ruling system came to power, but how this power is used.

d) It is a basic tenet of faith in God's providence that he works to sustain the world in order even through the laws of government. The gospel is preached to people who live under all different kinds of government. This means that no preference can be given to one special form of government over against another. This can be seen clearly in Jesus' attitude and that of Paul and the other apostles (cf. Rom. 13:1-7).

This does not mean, however, that Christians should not give constructive criticism to the state or that they cannot work towards another form of government where they have fundamental problems and problems of conscience with a certain given order. More than this, this statement means that one must understand very seriously that the Kingdom of God does not come any closer to us when a change of government occurs and a new government order is introduced. Even when many of the desired improvements occur with a change of government, no new

order is free from the power of evil. In the same way it is also true that any new government does not fall away from the sustaining activity of God.²²

In a mysterious way, God's sustaining and providential activity includes all forms of government throughout the whole history of human sin. The Christian doctrine of sin and also Christian eschatology which reminds us that this world in its present form is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31), helped early Christianity and can also help us every today to maintain constantly a healthy scepticism regarding a basic improvement of the world order before

²² We have noticed this in very specific ways in Latin America in the conflict over liberation theology. In many ways, liberation theologians in the 70s and 80s appealed to Christian action in establishing a new socialistic economic system with the statement that this system would be closer to the Kingdom of God than the current capitalistic economic system, which was criticized as 'sinful and unjust'. While we in Brazil must also agree in many respects with this criticism of the capitalistic economic system, it proved to be an illusion that the transfer of power to the workers' party [PT—Partido dos Trabalhadores] by current president Lula would bring about a qualitative and noticeable improvement. Some improvements have certainly occurred, but in a short time there have been a series of corruption scandals that have involved key individuals of the current government again and again. These political experiences have contributed to a greater sobriety and to a healthy scepticism towards everything political in Brazil. The same could be observed in many ways within the scope of the fall of Communist eastern Europe after 1989.

the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.²³ This should lead us neither to a cosmological and anthropological pessimism nor hinder our political involvement, but, rather, contribute to the necessary biblical realism of our political involvement.

At any rate, there are, in my opinion, very few biblical-theological reasons for an anthropological and cosmological optimism in the sense of a naive or a well-thought out belief in progress. In any possible form of government, we will recognize how this world in its present form is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31). All of these limitations that, in my view, need to be considered from an evangelical political ethic, should lead us as Christians not to passive scepticism, but to active responsibility.

e) In view of the power of the state, our emphasis on the theological ethical aspects mean that, on the one hand, governments should be maintained, but on the other hand, we should be aware of their limits. In many ways, science and philosophy are superior to government. In transcendental matters, religion has the final word. The human conscience judges in many ways without taking external authorities into consideration. Strictly speaking, the authority of the state, therefore, has to do with the order of public life in a certain area. It is responsible for the order of the whole—a situation which includes all people. The more totalitarian the state is, the more

anonymous its authority becomes, as authority is based on the diverse networks of relationships within the state and between states.

3. The Relationship of the Christian Church to Politics

The relationship of the Christian church to politics is characterized today in many countries by repression and polarization. Political decisions and political conflicts today are theologized in theologically and ethically questionable ways so that one can speak of a *religionizing of political issues*. In many countries the topic of 'the political responsibility of the church' is already on the agenda. When I think of Latin America or of Germany, for example, the question of the political responsibility of the church is often articulated in criticism of the government. Often churches become controversial platforms for political opposition outside of parliaments. Politically involved representatives of Christian churches struggle for political influence. Christians argue among themselves with theological arguments about political and social decisions about which there can be opposing positions without any connection to the church. Spiritual authority is misused all too often for political purposes.

The pressure under which the Christian church finds it necessary to express itself either critically or in agreement with political-social matters in every age has, in many ways, led to the situation where the church has lost insight into her own task. On the other hand, there are certainly also countries in which Protestant Chris-

²³ In this context, one must also discuss our views of the question of a 'millennium reign of Christ' upon the earth (cf. Rev. 20), which could even be very controversial within the WEA.

tians—for ethnocentric-patriotic, ideological or even ‘justifiably Christian’ reasons—stand fundamentally behind the political decisions of their government.²⁴

On the one hand, in the Christian view the state may neither be viewed as a separate, independent entity, nor may it be viewed as something that has its own autonomous power or is a self-enclosed entity. Government is a part of God’s ordering activity in the world and is therefore from God just as much as it also stands under God’s sovereignty. On the other hand, the task of the church is defined by the witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. That church and politics become so often a topic of conflict in many countries has its cause, therefore, in the fact of the proclamation of Christ. The Kingdom of Christ is not of this world (John 18:36), and because, in fact, the Christian church is about repentance and election, faith and unbelief, obedience and disobedience, understanding and hardening of hearts, church and politics go separate ways when the gospel is preached. ‘For not everyone has faith’ (2 Thess. 3:2).

The political involvement of Christians is motivated by *love* (Rom. 13:8–10). This means that Christians live in this world, help in shaping it politically on all possible levels, and yet know that they do not have permanent residence here on this earth and that their

citizenship is in heaven (Philp. 3:20f; Heb. 13:14; 2 Pet 3:12f).²⁵ Seen from this view, even evangelical political ethics must have as its starting point the position that *all political involvement must be relativized eschatologically* and must be viewed from the perspective of Pauline eschatology (1 Cor. 7:29–31). Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s distinction between the *last* and the *next to last things* aptly describes this idea. The same is true for the Reformers’ distinction between the Kingdom of God *on the right* and *on the left* (Luther), despite all of the attempts to reinterpret or misinterpret this. The Christian church stands critically, therefore, against any ‘Christianizing’ of political parties, systems, or individuals and sees in this the seeds of idolatry (cf. 1 Sam. 8:9; 1 Kgs. 21, and particularly 20:25f).

In its stance towards the state, the church has the following functions, according to Mígues Bonino:

a) inspiration or education: ‘The religions are the realms of socialization and making individuals aware of life values.’ Their task is to work on ‘a maximal morality’, which can base itself upon the minimal consensus of society;

b) a critical function that one can also call a ‘prophetic function’;

c) the defence of the neglected and marginalized groups of society, or the ‘option for the poor’ in the biblical sense;

24 An example for this seems to be the U.S. For more information on ethnocentrism, cf. Lindy Scott, ‘Materialism and Ethnocentric Patriotism: Twin idolatries’ in Padilla and Scott, *Terrorism and the war in Iraq*, pp. 107–150.

25 Cf. Reinhard Slenczka, ‘Kirche und Politik’ in Reinhard Slenczka, *Neues und Altes. Ausgewählte Aufsätze, Vorträge und Gutachten*. Ed. by Albrecht I. Herzog., Vol. 1. (Neudettersau: Freimund-Verlag, 1999), pp. 389–395.

d) when laws are unjust, it has the moral duty to denounce these in the proper fashion and try to change or abolish them through the given public and legal avenues. Direct civil disobedience (cf. Acts 4:19) should be practised only as the *ultima ratio*, when all other attempts have failed.²⁶

The greatest temptation of the Christian church and of politically involved Christians today lies in taking their eyes off their essential character and their mission and confusing them with political or ideological objectives. This temptation can, in some situations, be seen in different forms, for example:

a) *The temptation to place or functionalize political power in the service of the Christian church.* This is talking about the use of political power to gain privileges, special conditions, or to do good things for the church.

b) *The illusion that we believers are above corruption,* that is, the illusion that we are less susceptible to all kinds of political sins or corruption. This would show disregard for the Christian understanding of sin;

c) *the temptation to believe that honesty and good intentions alone will bring about a successful political life.*²⁷

Nikolaj Berdjaev (1874-1948), a Russian philosopher who went from Marxism to Christianity, describes the political temptation of the church of Jesus Christ in the following way: "The spirit of the bourgeoisie then gains the upper hand among Christians when the

earthly city is confused with the celestial and when Christians no longer experience themselves as pilgrims in the world."²⁸

4. Concerning the Goals of Political Involvement by Christians

With respect to the goals of political activism of Christians, the most important points are mentioned in many ways again by very different writers. Among ourselves, there may be a broad consensus about these goals and how they may be implemented in particular cases, depending on the context and the country.

The following general goals of political action can be mentioned here by way of example, although many of them are linked: Social justice; the preservation of all forms of life and the concern for the protection of creation; the enforcement of human rights; the dignity and the welfare of all people, including the material, cultural, and political conditions that lend themselves to human development; political and religious freedom, order in society; peace, cooperation between different groups of society and nations.

These goals are the common property of different worldviews and they are accordingly fulfilled in different ways. They sum up the common concerns of both Christians and non-Christians, and so constitute an arena where Christians can cooperate with non-

²⁶ Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, pp. 45-48.

²⁷ Cf. Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, pp. 14-15.

²⁸ Nikolaj A. Berdjaev, *Carstvo Bozje i carstvo kesarja* (Putj 1, 1925), p. 52, quoted by Slenczka, 'Kirche und Politik', p. 397.

Christians in certain situations in their political involvement. However, one necessary—and critical—aspect of these concepts, using Bonino's idea of 'maximal meaning', is the necessity for a foundation of interpretative principles based on biblical theology, which would then distinguish them from other worldviews.

The Christian doctrines of creation, sin, Christology, and eschatology will then form the most important theological framework of this critical usage. The historical background of these concepts must always be considered, not just in the West. From the standpoint of biblical theology, these concepts must, in addition, be understood more in the sense of dynamic relational concepts than static principles in the strict sense of the word. In this, how the poor are treated can be seen as a measuring rod of a just understanding of societal relationships and goals.²⁹

IV Concluding Remarks

The ideas given above serve first to stimulate us in reflecting critically on these matters. They lead us to many questions and present many problems to us. They also show a complete way toward reaching a global evangelical consensus in political ethics. Yet, above all, they encourage us to discuss and invite us to pursue theologically consistent political action. I believe that if we Christians from all continents leave political polarizations behind us and set out to have an honest dialogue with one another in which we treat our political options as well as the strengths and weaknesses of our governments in a humble and sober manner, then consensus may in fact be possible. May God grant us the grace we need and the favourable time!

²⁹ Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político*, p. 29.

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