

Confessing Christians do not simply allow themselves to be misled!

Thoughts on the Present Political Developments

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With this paper I would like to point out the growing political confusion of people who see themselves as confessing Christians. How do they position themselves politically? How do they handle the growing populism and nationalism? How can we learn from history? I'm not talking about the question of a political right or left but about the question of how a confessing Christian can derive his political and social convictions from an understanding of the kingdom of God.

I realize that on the one hand I was only able to dedicate limited time for research into my sources and that therefore my line of reasoning arises from a mixture of knowledge and subjective perception. I am also aware that a historical comparison is only partially applicable. At the same time, it is impressive how many historical correlations there are between the first third of the 20th century and our present time. Even more surprising is the similarity between the reactions of many confessing Christians to the challenges of those times and of ours. The hope that the complex challenges of our times could be handled with simple and absolute answers and by blaming a certain people group or party landscape has led many confessing Christians to turn to nationalist and populist parties and their slogans.

It appears that even confessing Christians need an *enemy stereotype*¹ to affirm their own identity. In the evangelical world, that might be the "non-Pentecostals" for the Pentecostals. There are also *enemy stereotypes* of the Roman Catholics, *enemy stereotypes* of the historical churches in general or *enemy stereotypes* of free churches and communities. Those who have a scapegoat do not have to examine themselves. Many people believe they can find their identity through the *enemy stereotype*. Because of this, we Christians do not primarily ask which thinking and acting corresponds to a kingdom-of-God mindset, but instead ask ourselves whose words contain correlation with our own personal convictions, especially the moral and ethical ones. And, we are usually more concerned with rhetoric than with subsequent practice or implementation by these people or parties.

So much of this reminds us today of the Weimar Republic. The economic future is uncertain. There is talk that the younger generation will receive only small pension payments or perhaps none at all. The general mood seems to be that life is determined by injustice. The fear of losing their jobs is one of the greatest fears of the German, Austrian and Swiss. What the power of the *entente*, the injustice of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, was back then is what the European Union (EU) represents to many today. What is seen in Switzerland today as the *Classe Politique*, representatives of the existing political class that must be replaced, is just how the Weimar Republic was seen in Germany back then: something that needed to be replaced by a younger, solution-oriented movement, either the communists or the

¹ The German term, *Feindbild*, refers to a simplistic characterization of a person, group or entity as an enemy or a threat. (Note from the translator.)

national-socialists. The streams of refugees are triggering great fears today, the fear of losing identity and safety. Today's growing globalization and digitalization threaten jobs. The challenges must be faced by something. Back then the Jewish people were accused of exerting a disproportionate influence on economic power, of manipulating the financial world and of shaping culture. And, since the world back then gave room to this *enemy stereotype* of "The Jews", it led to a persecution of the Jews and the holocaust without anyone opposing it. In the widest sense, we are reminded of such behavior by the reactions against the Muslim people today. Nationalist and populist speeches warn against the Islamization of the West, and they fight *Muslims* politically. Confessing Christians do not see the migration primarily as a chance to share their faith with these people, but as a threat to their own faith and culture.

The culprits and persons responsible for the many diverse challenges are found all too quickly: they are the Muslims, the foreigners, the EU and the old, obsolete parties. The states —according to these populist, nationalist voices— need political change that their own groups and parties can supply with their simplistic solutions, and thus they give hope even to confessing Christians.

Mostly, they follow the same pattern: they simplify complex problems; they describe solutions that are easy to understand; they create *enemy stereotypes*; they aren't so exact with the facts; they blame the same people again and again; they often pretend to be religious; they claim to protect the culture of the country and say they would guard the country's values and history from foreigners, people of other faiths and outside powers (like the EU). Their wording is usually more or less aggressive. Sometimes they portray themselves as a messiah on a mission. They see themselves as saviors of the nation, a nation that is threatened by all other parties, by the EU and by foreigners.

The procedure is rather easy to recognize. They are flattering to the soul of the people, and it is understandable that many people are easily fooled by these simplified portrayals. However, it is very hard to understand how confessing Christians can allow themselves to be captivated by the propaganda and seduction of populists and nationalists. Even worse, often immoral behavior and demeaning words about foreigners, people groups or about the opposite sex are excused or downplayed, and no one seems to recognize that these parties rarely, or never, have the good of the "ordinary citizen" in mind but simply seek to build up their own power.

It's worthwhile visiting the "Third Reich and Propaganda" Department of the German Historical Museum in Berlin. There are posters and propaganda there that one could confuse with the posters and propaganda of today's populist and nationalist movements.

Unfortunately, "super-spiritual" speeches and "prophecies" from confessing Christians are often brought in to underline and confirm God's favor upon these populists and nationalists. That indeed reminds us in so many ways of the time and demise of the Weimar Republic.

What alternatives do confessing Christians have?

Christians live in another reality, no matter whether they have a Protestant, Roman Catholic or free church background. This is the reality of the kingdom of God. Jesus was neither a capitalist nor a socialist. He cannot be claimed either by the right or by the left. Interestingly, Jesus never took a position in regard to the Roman power of occupation, to unrighteous authorities or to the king. He was the representative of the Father in Heaven and, therefore, of the kingdom of God, where any and all form of injustice is overcome. Through His death and resurrection He has opened the door to this kingdom for all mankind. Christians live in the tension of the kingdom already breaking in to this world that began with Jesus Christ's first coming and the fullness of the kingdom at His return. It is in this time of tension, the tension between the in-breaking of the kingdom into this world on a smaller scale and the glorious manifestation of the kingdom of God in all its fullness, that we live today. Dr. Felix Christ, an assistant to Professor Oscar Cullmann, suggested the term "Taseology" for Cullmann's theological approach to his thinking on the kingdom of God, that is, the approach of "tension" instead of a simple doctrine of eschatology. We live in this tension, which means that we as non-citizens of this world (Hebrews 13:14), as the Bible says, represent the values, concerns and mindset of the kingdom of God in this world. And, we do this as servants not as rulers. Also, we do not simply wait for the end, nor do we simply give ourselves over to this "evil" time. Instead, we represent the kingdom of God in all aspects of human life to the best of our knowledge and conscience and thereby do what we perceive to be the will of God in the situation. As we form our convictions, we do not look for the largest common denominator in politics, economics or society, but remain obligated to King Jesus. Oscar Cullmann writes the following about the ethical consequences of an understanding of the *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation story) based on the kingdom of God:

"Our understanding of the salvation story must protect us from drawing two erroneous conclusions from the fact that the frame { 'secular' history or, if you prefer: the evil world} is God's will. On the one hand, we cannot allow ourselves to be misled into deriving our standards from the frame instead of the fine line {in the sense of the kingdom of God as explained above}, because it is upon this very frame that these standards are to be applied. On the other hand, we cannot allow our knowledge of the "not yet" or of the covering of human sin in God's salvation plan to become an excuse for ethical compromise. On the contrary, our behavior is to be inspired by the "already" —the "already" of the anticipated final victory in Christ. The knowledge of the "already" connected with the knowledge of the "not yet" can only affect our ethics in that it strengthens our awareness of serving as delegated coworkers in the fulfillment of the plan of salvation and it thereby influences our ethical decisions."

From: Oscar Cullmann. *Heil als Geschichte* (Salvation as History). p. 312.

According to this understanding, the plumb line for the development of our opinions on all aspects of life, whether personal, economic or political, is to be the coming kingdom of God. I believe that the kingdom-of-God orientation helps Christians to gain a differentiated and Jesus-like view on most of today's social, economic, political and cultural positions and to resist the temptations of the nationalist and populist streams.

I will address three current topics:

1) The refugee and foreigner question:

One of the most radical consequences of the Gospel was that it gave even the so-called gentiles access to the promises of the people of Israel. We can recognize the peak of this development in Paul's words in Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This often led to different conflicts in the early Christian communities, as we can see from the questions about circumcision or the communion table. Paul's numerous letters and treatment of related issues show just how important the question of this new unity was for early Christianity. The point I am making is this: the excluding self-identity of Jewish believers toward gentiles was thereby brought to an end. From that point on, everyone was seen as a potential brother or sister. The commandment to love our enemies also precluded any polemical demonization of people groups. Even the despised occupiers that mistreated the Jewish people, the Romans, were to be treated with love in order to win them as brothers and sisters if at all possible. Moreover, the *enemy stereotype* of the heretical Samaritans was also destroyed by Jesus. Through His loving and compassionate treatment of the excluded and rejected and His teaching in relation to this, He fulfilled the promise to Abraham of becoming a blessing to the peoples, and He did so in such a practical way that we can also aspire to. Thus, as we follow Jesus, we will also fulfill the commandments of Leviticus 19:33-34:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

The practical compassion that Jesus demonstrated in His life as an example to us also became a part of the lifestyle of the early Christians. This is even mentioned in the 4th century by Emperor Julian. He wanted to revoke the privileges that Christians enjoyed under Constantine and campaigned for a resurgence of the Greco-Roman cults and Hellenism. He employed imperial resources in order to establish the Hellenic temples as a distribution place to provide for foreigners and the poor. In a letter to the pagan high priest he complains that the "Hellenic thing" wasn't advancing properly. He rebukes the Hellenic priests for letting themselves be outdone in neighborly love by the Christians that were becoming more and more well-liked because of their acts of charity:

It is a disgrace if there is not a single Jew who needs to look for help, while the godless Galileans [the Christians] not only feed their own but also our people, and our own people do not receive the help they need from us...

From: Wes, Berthold (ed.): *Julian Briefe* (Julian Letters). Munich 1973. Letter 39.

In other letters, Julian complains that Christianity could only spread because the Christians took such loving care of strangers and used every opportunity to do good works:

Since, I believe, it got to the point where the poor were ignored and neglected by our priests, the godless Galileans [= Christians] realized this and concentrated on the practice of neighborly love...and through their so-called agape, their hospitality and their willingness to share the table...they mislead many to abandon the (Hellenic) gods.
From: Wes, Berthold (ed.): *Julian Briefe* (Julian Letters). Munich 1973. Letter 48.

As citizens of the kingdom of God that follow Jesus, we cannot view people from other cultures or people that are fleeing war and terror as enemies or scapegoats. On the contrary, our trust in the in-breaking of the kingdom of God leads us to view our encounter with them as an opportunity for charity and for helping them see the kingdom of God in our behavior towards them.

2) The poverty and job question:

To Jesus it was clear that God is our absolute Provider. Therefore, He taught his followers not to worry. The birds of the sky and the lilies of the field were to be an example for us in this regard. Jesus lived and preached an economy based on generosity. The practical effect of His open-handed dealing with forgiveness and teaching, as well as with food and care-giving, is seen in this brief description of the young community of Jesus-followers in Acts 2:44-47:

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

In the economy of generosity that springs from the Father's being and characterizes the kingdom of God, there is no need for anyone to fear poverty. As a follower of Jesus, my privileges become my responsibility towards my neighbor who is experiencing need. In this way, the logic of the kingdom of God is made visible through my behavior. Where we are willing to share in this manner, we, and the people around us, will always have enough. The question of poverty is therefore more a question of sharing than of having. As followers of Jesus and citizens of the kingdom of God, we can bring the reality of the overabundant provision of God into this world and be light and salt. It's not about how much we have, but how much we are willing to share. Thus, in this world ruled by lack because everyone only looks out for themselves, we can reveal the logic of the kingdom of God through our willingness to share and thus make the kingdom accessible to people.

That the growing digitalization has brought job insecurity along with it is understandable. Here we need wise and innovative approaches to overcome this challenge at a political and economic level. But, what certainly has no place in the kingdom of God is to exacerbate such insecurities and exploit people's fears to advance one's own political interests. If the kingdom of God and the love of God are our guiding principles, then using fear as means to forge political views is highly

questionable. Perfect love casts out all fear. That does not mean that a Jesus-follower is not permitted to feel afraid. But it does mean that they should not allow this fear to become the basis for their convictions.

As we look through the lenses of the tension of the in-breaking, but not yet fulfilled, kingdom of God, we are to seek the welfare of all mankind and not just that of our own people. This renders the question of job availability even more complex, but it protects us from solutions that are simplistic and solely focused on the welfare of our own nation. In the end, it reminds us that we are only dependent upon God and not on a growing economy. God is our Provider, and not the dollar, the euro, or the francs, nor is it the IMF or the GDP, but our loving Father in heaven who has created everyone and loves each one equally. The confessing Christian does not allow fears to influence his political position but rests instead upon the promises of God.

3) The question of nationalism and *enemy stereotypes* (who is to blame?):

Much of what I described above about the refugee and foreigner question could be added here as well. What is crucial to me at this point is this: the "already" orientation of the kingdom of God leads us to no longer define our identity primarily as Swiss, German or European, but as citizens of the coming kingdom of God. For the author of the 1st Epistle of Peter this also meant that despite being surrounded by a fallen world, we are to behave according to the standards of the kingdom of God. We read in 1st Peter 2:11-12:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Here the author emphasizes that the recipients are only aliens and strangers in this world. He reminds them that their primary identity is not to be derived from this world. The author of the Epistle to the Ephesians stresses the same thing in Eph. 2:19:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household.

All forms of nationalism establish an identity that—in Cullman's language— stems from the frame and not from the coming kingdom of God. Nevertheless, patriotism and nationalism should not be confused. I, too, am happy when the Swiss national team wins, I love eating *Schabziger* cheese and *Cervelat* sausage, and I even enjoy listening to music featuring the Swiss accordion *Schwyzerörgeli*. However, I do not turn this patriotism into the focus of my political convictions or my worldview. The ideal that I strive for and use to gauge my convictions, attitudes and behavior is the kingdom of God.

At this point I would like to elaborate on a thought from above: the Jews at the time of Jesus had a specific idea of what the Messiah would do when he came. He would

drive out the Romans and re-establish David's empire in all its political grandeur and thereby provide peace and freedom to the Jews. Jesus of Nazareth did not fit into this mold of Jewish expectations at all. He made it clear that the real enemy weren't the Romans, but sin and death, in other words, people's separation from God.

From the perspective of the kingdom of God it is clear, therefore, that people, groups or persons of another faith can never be viewed as enemies. They are always beloved people created by God to whom we, as Jesus-followers living according to the kingdom of God, owe love and care.

When we look at the challenges of our time through the lenses of the kingdom of God, we never see looming catastrophes or the threat of the end of the world. Instead, we live in the hope of the in-breaking kingdom of God: we don't see threats in people that are fleeing or come from a different culture, but the opportunity for charity and witness.

When we look at the uncertain economic situation we don't see a reason to ensure our own economic interests but God's provision that He wants to channel to others through us.

We don't see ourselves primarily as Germans, Swiss or Austrians, but as citizens and heirs to the in-breaking kingdom of God.

The kingdom-of-God orientation protects us from helplessness and inspires us to keep our attitudes, our thinking and our behavior rooted in faith, hope and love.

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