



***Facing the Big Questions That Divide or Unite:
Toward a Re-launch of Theology and Eschatology in the Middle East***

Opening words to the Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, the Mayor of Bethlehem, and the guests of the international conference "Christ at the Checkpoint – Hope in the Midst of Conflict," March 5, 2012, Intercontinental Hotel, Bethlehem:

Dear Prime Minister, dear Mayor, Excellencies, and honored guests:

First of all, I must apologize that I don't have a jacket, and I have to tell you . . . *[looking at someone who offers him his jacket]* -- I have one at my hotel -- so I have to tell you why I don't have one. On the invitation of the Mufti of Jerusalem and the director of Waqf, together with my wife Christine, who is among us, and is a professor of Islamic studies in our home country Germany, we visited the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. You know that they built a new mosque on the left side of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and a lot of material was taken out and put on trucks. We had the chance today to poke through the leftovers, together with the senior archaeologist. I still have a lot of dirt on my shoes and my trousers because I came directly from those excavations to Bethlehem, and I didn't have time to go to the hotel to clean up and get my jacket.

Going through all those stones and dirt, we found pieces of metal and bones and all kinds of stuff. I really was amazed at what has happened in this small part of the world during several thousand years. We found things from the Stone Age through the ancient ages of the beginning of Jewish monotheism; we found things from the Roman times, which means from New Testament times. We found stuff from the Persians and from the Ottoman Empire. I even found a modern Israeli bullet that was shot there, and I was allowed to take it home. What a small country: nations have come from all geographic directions to capture it! There has been war and peace, prosperity and poverty. It is not only a land of conflict today, but it has been a land of conflict for

many, many centuries. Many peoples, many nations have come here to fight with each other, and they have not cared about the people who originally lived here. Several huge world empires have just used the land.

We have the topic “Christ at the Checkpoints” [pointing to the banner behind him]. Christianity is not a religion for summer vacation. It is not a religion for nice meditation when everything else is fine. But Christianity is *the* religion, is *the* faith within conflict; it is the faith that gives hope in tribulation. If everything is going well, if everything is nice, you do not need Jesus as Savior and King; he said that he did not come to the healthy, but to the sick. He came in the middle of conflict, he became part of a central conflict, and he learned what suffering means. In the end he was killed not only as a result of a conflict, but to overcome the evil behind all conflicts, by suffering in our place and forgiving sin. We know, because of him, how much the struggles for life – physical and spiritual -- are at the center of everything we are. You can see in the beginning of Romans 5 (vv. 1-2) that the center of Christian faith is the fact that we have hope and joy in the midst of tribulation. I think this is very important for Christians here in the Holy Land, in the Palestinian Territories, and in Israel alike.

I’m proud that the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is so well represented here at this conference, not least, of course, by the chair of our international board, who will be speaking. He is a very busy man, and it is very special that he is here. We have five people from the leadership of WEA here¹ to show you that you are not alone in this world and that we approve of your efforts to bring Christians from different theologies, denominations, languages, ethnicities, and nations to discuss hot topics, which we would often rather discuss within our own circles only. I would like to emphasize, that among those five is the “WEA Ambassador to the Holy Land” living in Jerusalem and the Director of WEA Peace and Reconciliation Initiative, who often visits the Holy Land, proving that WEA also is institutionally involved here.

Sometimes in the middle of Christianity you think that there are theological problems you cannot solve and positions that are too old and fixed to be changed and overcome. And your topic is not only the political situation but also how far it relates to theological questions inside Christianity. You know that within Christianity there is as big a split over the Holy Land as there is in the political world. You have friends and foes; you have people who never talk to each other because they have different opinions about the future of the people or state of Israel and the role of the Palestinian Authority.

¹ Dr Sang-Book David Kim, Korea, Chair of the International Council of WEA; Harm Tees, Jerusalem, WEA Ambassador to the Holy Land; Steve Tollestrup, New Zealand, Director of WEA Peace and Reconciliation Initiative; Dr Christine Schirrmacher, Germany, Director, International Institute for Islamic Studies of WEA; Dr Thomas Schirrmacher, Chair of the Theological Commission of WEA and its Human Rights Spokesman.

Your conference wants to bring them all together to discuss their differences. You have welcomed Messianic Jews from Israel, Arab Christians from Gaza, Christians who are not involved in politics and others who are, Evangelicals and mainline church theologians, and anybody willing to engage in peaceful and open discussion.

I want to give you just one example why it nevertheless makes sense to have hope for a re-launch of theology and to be convinced that things can change toward the good and toward greater solid and sound unity. In 2006 the Vatican, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Evangelical Alliance, that together represent about 95% of the world's Christians, sat together to discuss mission, conversion, and anti-conversion laws. We had never sat together before and surely not with a hot topic at hand – but here we sat together. Our topic was – though this is not your topic for the moment – anti-conversion laws worldwide. And we wanted to discuss how far mission, presenting one's own faith, is part of religious freedom, is part of our identity, and where the boundaries are. Where, by doing mission, by presenting our own faith to others, do we start to hurt the dignity of other people by using force against them, by bribing them, by cheating them, by using means which destroy the human rights of others? Where is the boundary of my human right to pass on my faith to others; where is the border, where is the line where this starts to destroy the human rights, the dignity of others? This is a very, very complicated problem. The three bodies had never talked to each other on a topic about which we had very different opinions 30 years ago. And I tell you, for 5 years we were discussing and negotiating – theologians, experts, and high-ranking church leaders from all over the world were involved, and we thought we could not make it because it is very, very difficult if you reopen theological battles of the past. But the end result was tremendously good, an historic document on the ethics of mission and religious conversion.²

If we say, let's start our conversation from scratch, and when we do it in eschatology, when we do it in everything that has to do with Israel, the Jews, with the Holy Land, with Islam, with the future of the world (I am speaking, of course, as an evangelical, knowing the wide range of positions among our ranks and knowing how many of our people see this as the centre of their faith, the future that comes.), you think you have started a journey without any end in sight. But we urgently need to organize open-minded discussion if we want to achieve progress.

When the Apostles and the churches met in the Apostolic Council in the first century as reported in Acts 15, they did not each start with the 'truth,' expecting their opponents

² The reference here and below is to the document, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, which was jointly issued by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Vatican's Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) on June 28, 2011, in Geneva.

to convert, but they were open to share their experiences and views, and they listened to those of the other apostles and missionaries, searching for the truth as a common conclusion at the end.

I remember that in June 2011, not even a year ago, we sat in the World Council of Churches; on the platform were Cardinal Tauran speaking on behalf of the Pope; the General Secretary of the WCC, representing protestant, orthodox, and oriental churches; and the General Secretary of the WEA, representing about 600 million evangelicals; and I had the privilege of opening all of this. I really could not believe that after 5 years, things had totally changed. The new unity on this topic among Christians really changed things.

And this is what I hope, what I pray for this conference: that by reopening battles, theological battles, by starting discussions anew (which always means that in the beginning you think you might make things even worse because you really have to discuss; you cannot bypass the topic), that this will not lead to further strife, to fueling fights, but really to finding a common way to human rights, to religious freedom, and to peace.

Some weeks ago we visited the border between North Korea and South Korea together with some UN officers, who explained the situation there. Before that I visited Cyprus, a country split by a wall going through the capital. I come from Germany, and now I'm here, and we visited the wall around here. So somehow I am more and more becoming a specialist for *walls*. I should write a book with pictures of walls dividing countries or people. But coming from Germany, I also have the experience that walls can be overcome; and churches praying and offering forums for discussion played a vital role in it.

Walls are a sign everywhere that people do not live in peace with each other. We are not talking about a dead peace but a peace in dignity, respecting human rights. WEA is willing to do everything to cooperate with other Christians -- and all people of good will -- for peace and for human rights, and that includes the Christians in the Palestinian Territories and the government of the Palestinian Authority, as well as the government of Israel. And I hope that this conference does not add to strife but rather to peace.

Paul commands us to pray for everyone in authority (1 Timothy 2:2-3) so that they might search for peace. And so we as Christians especially pray for you, as the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, that God may reveal himself to you, bless you, guide you, and strengthen you to search for peace in a world full of war and checkpoints.