

OWNING CITIZENSHIP— THE CHURCH IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN THE WORLD¹

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THE CONCERN FOR THE SUFFERING NEIGHBOR

It is said that Dr Martin Luther had been quite troubled when he realized the revolutionary impact of his Ninety-five Theses. I actually just wanted to provoke a theological debate, he must have explained later, almost apologetically. Luther was surprised by the power of these ninety-five sentences and, in retrospect, may have even wondered about his naivety at having nailed the theses for disputation to the door of a church, and therefore in a public space. Initially, he had wanted to restrict the debate to a few academics only. We know what followed: within a few days after 31 October 1517 his Ninety-five Theses transcended the originally intended boundaries of a theological academic debate. Ordinary people took ownership of them—read them, debated and distributed them and even further developed his ideas. Luther's theological reflections had irrupted into the public space and his Ninety-five Theses became what today is known as “public theology.” A theology in the public space that addresses the questions and dilemmas of the human family, offering insights based on what it knows and holds to be true because of faith.

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An exhaustive analysis of the reasons that led to this remarkable public reception would take too long. However, there is one specific reason that I would like to mention, because I believe it speaks directly to the topic of this essay. According to my interpretation, the ability of the Ninety-five Theses to connect with people and the social debate at the time was related to Luther's profound pastoral motivation, his diaconal concern—a concern for the suffering neighbor—which inspired him to offer the theses for disputation.

Luther had already much earlier set forth the theological insights of the Ninety-five Theses. Therefore, for those who had listened to him before there was nothing really new in what he was writing. Yet, the almost revolutionary newness of what he had to say, and how these thoughts resonated with people on the streets and in the villages, only surfaced and became so dramatically relevant when these theological insights associated themselves with a deep and passionate care for the neighbor. The Ninety-five Theses were written out of concern, care and pain: Luther had observed that people relied on false securities for which they spent money that they did not actually have. Because of what he saw, he felt compelled to write, to argue, to challenge and to propose alternatives. The message of justification by faith alone, which he offered with the Ninety-five Theses, was a quasi-dormant insight, until it was associated with the loving care for those suffering spiritually and materially, which enticed this message out into the public.

I recognize a feature here that I have seen replicated in many churches of different denominations around the world: their ability to position themselves in the public space goes hand in hand with their loving engagement with the world and the people. The relevance of their message is tested in their ability to listen, to see, to touch, to accompany and to discern and then to offer their own insights out of the rich and deep treasures of faith. It is the love for the neighbor that ushers theological insights and treasures into the public, sometimes by gently kissing awake these insights and treasures from a peaceful, sometimes even complacent, sleep.

This overall dynamic that moves the church's theology and praxis out into the public space captures a fundamental dimension of the Christian faith. This is so because this movement toward the world follows the movement that God initiated by choosing the incarnation in Jesus Christ as the way in which to reveal to humanity and the entire creation who God is all about. God offered that first step, moving out of the realm of untouchability, out of the space of "apartheid," and entering with profound compassion into the joys and sufferings, the hopes and pains of this world. In Jesus Christ God celebrated the joy of a wedding in Cana, ensuring that there would be enough wine for all. In Jesus Christ God went through the torture and the humiliating death on the cross, thus making sure that every dimension of human life, even the most cruel and painful experience, would carry the promise of God's presence.

Despite this clear message that comes from God's revelation in Jesus Christ, I perceive that something seems to have happened to the common understanding about God, often putting God so distant, often picturing God as motionless, often assuming such numbness in God. God's radical movement toward creation and compassionate approach to human beings as shown in Jesus Christ speak quite a different language. If God so compassionately faced the world—can churches afford to turn their back on it? If God became so daringly involved in all dimensions of life—can churches afford to stay away and lean back? Certainly not. Because of their faith, churches are caught in that divine tide that moves them into the world. The public space, therefore, is the only natural place for the church to be.

I see the notion of the "citizenship" of the church, which I use in the title of my essay, as originating in this theological perspective. I owe the concept of citizenship to the Chilean Pentecostal theologian, Juan Sepúlveda, who describes the transition of evangelical Christians in my home country, Chile, from being a politically, socially and religiously marginalized people to becoming full citizens with all rights and duties in the social and political fabric of the country. *From Pilgrims to Citizens*² is the revealing title of his book. It traces in a wonderful way the process of political transformation that needed to happen so that churches could claim their citizenship.

But the book also describes the process of the theological transformation that the churches themselves had to undergo regarding their self-understanding, so that they would actually want to step out from the margins and claim their citizenship. The church's citizenship is first and foremost a matter of its theological identity and self-understanding. As the church understands itself as being part of God's eternal and permanent movement towards creation and all human beings, thus it is sent into the public and acquires citizenship. Herein lies the root of its citizenship—regardless of the ways in which this is later expressed in legislation, or the relationship of a given church to the state, or the size or age of a church. Regardless also of its gravitas in a given society.

As a Lutheran Christian from an insignificant, small church I was blessed to have been brought up in a church that understood its citizenship during very difficult times. This was not due to its size, nor its social and political weight, or consensus around the difficult questions of human rights violations, but out of its sense of being called into God's compassionate movement into the world. I was blessed enough to have grown up in a church that took the suffering and pain in my country as an occasion for renewed scrutiny of God's call to the church in its own context.

² Juan Sepúlveda, *De peregrinos a ciudadanos. Breve historia del cristianismo evangélico en Chile* (Chile: Fundación Konrad Adenauer, 1999).

A church does not have to be in a majority situation in order to undertake such scrutiny. Nor does it have to look back at centuries of existence, or enjoy a privileged relationship with the state. This was true for my church, back in Chile, and this is true for congregations, parishes and churches around the world. Their citizenship is based on the fundamental question at the core of every church, What does God want the church to be? How does it continue to participate in God's deep compassion for human beings and God's zeal for justice? How does it carry and express the message of God's love to every single human being in word and deed, today and here?

Secularization, multiculturalism, religious pluralism and declining membership—these challenges and changes should not constitute obstacles to a renewed and sustained reflection on and discernment of the church's call into God's mission. Rather, it should provide an opportunity to define how the church claims its citizenship anew, and how it defines its presence in the public space. It is not a matter of size, age, weight or cultural alignment; ultimately it is a question of its missiological self-understanding.

FAITH-BASED PERSPECTIVES ON CURRENT CRISES

In the following, I shall look at the contribution that the church makes to that space with reference to Martin Luther's theological insight that God's favor can be neither achieved nor bought; it is a free gift out of God's love (justification by faith alone). This insight is in itself not novel but, rather, a dormant treasure.

I believe that the church draws on these very treasures—whether dormant or not—when it engages in the public space. The distinctiveness of what the church can offer in the public space is rooted in the fact that its voice and witness are based on faith. It is a faith-based perspective and contribution and a witness based on faith in the Triune God. No church should shy away from that identity. Rather, it should offer it with joy and humility to the shared public space, where indeed other voices with different insights and perspectives will also be heard. It requires an effort, though, so that these insights, rooted in faith and put into words through theological reflection, are adequately communicated. These remain two distinct categories: the preaching on Sunday morning, and the participation in the public discourse.

This faith-based perspective is very much sought after today as communities, nations and the human family at large deal with current trends, challenges and even major threats. It is an acknowledgement that such current challenges as climate change and the financial crisis require an interdisciplinary approach in order to be addressed appropriately. The financial crisis, for instance, has for quite some time been an expression of a

disturbance that goes far beyond the technicalities of borrowing and lending. It is an expression of the limits of an ideology, neoliberal thinking and its underlying value system, a deeply disturbing approach to relationships with the neighbor and with the entire creation and an understanding of freedom that no longer seems to be accountable. Is it a surprise then that the question of regulation remains the biggest stumbling block to any change in the financial industry? It is evident: regulation would imply accountability.

The financial and ecological crises are two sides of the same coin since they are an expression of the same fundamental problem: the human family intends to live on resources that do not exist. Financially and ecologically, the current lifestyles—at least of an important section of societies in this world—are unsustainable.

Current attempts to address these global issues have been somewhat disappointing. It is becoming evident that national interests prevail, and that the fate of the global human family sometimes becomes hostage to election campaigns in particular sovereign states. The shared interests of the global human family are subjected to the national interests of some powerful countries. For me, the most pressing challenge today is the absence of both a mindset and the structures for a global citizenship and the requisite structures to address global issues in their global dimension.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) attempts to assume the citizenship of churches around the world in its global dimension. In 1947, different Lutheran churches came together and decided to exercise their global responsibility and for this purpose founded the LWF. At the time, the major call to these churches came from the plight of millions of refugees and displaced persons in Europe—a challenge that could not be addressed at the national level but required a different and global approach. Churches gathered in the LWF to give their citizenship an adequate structure in order to respond to the dramatic situation of refugees. But there was more that motivated them to do so: at the time, Lutheran churches felt compelled to become part of the immense task of reconciliation between peoples, nations and even churches that were experiencing fragmentation, deep suspicion and even hostility as a consequence of the devastating Second World War.

This architecture that our forefathers and foremothers designed in order to express the responsible citizenship of churches at a global level is neither obsolete nor outdated. On the contrary, the ability of churches to connect globally is required with the same urgency. Our current times are paradoxical: never before in history has there been a time of such wealth of resources and means to communicate with people, communities, nations and churches across the globe. Yet, these enhanced means of communication do not appear to have improved communication per se. On the contrary, the easy availability of means of communication sometimes even seems to have triggered helplessness, if not

fragmentation, in communication. Whether one looks at societies, nations, cultures, religions or churches, there appears to be an overall mood of withdrawal into safe comfort zones, reflecting a refusal to deal with the complexity of alternative identities and the challenging reality of overwhelming diversity. Or even worse: wanting to ban or eradicate, sometimes even violently, what is different.

I believe that today the citizenship of churches in this world calls for resistance against this mood and to develop “counter-cyclical” attitudes to this tendency of withdrawal and fragmentation, both locally and globally. The faith-based nature of churches calls them today into the public space as bridge builders and strong advocates for peace with justice.

In the final part of my presentation, I shall refer to the two global challenges mentioned earlier: the financial and ecological crises as two sides of the same coin. How do churches come in here? Is the discussion not too specific, too complex? Are even members of parliament in European countries not often helpless as they have to deal, sometimes overnight, with highly complicated matters? Do they not already acknowledge that they increasingly feel dependent on experts and lobbies in order to exert their duties?

I believe that what is required today are interdisciplinary discussions and that the churches and religions should be part of these discussion, bringing their own distinctive voice into the conversation while being ready to understand what other disciplines know and have developed.

For example, the LWF manages a refugee camp complex in Dadaab, Kenya, which has time and again been given considerable media attention. Close to 360,000 refugees still live in the camps and funding has not always been easy. In 2012, for instance, the LWF received information from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that funding had dramatically declined and that schools needed to be shut down. As a result, 165,000 youth and children were deprived of their right to education. At the same time, impressive safety nets were being set up in order to stabilize the financial industry in Europe which had failed because of irresponsible risk taking, leaving the vulnerable neighbor, near or far, totally unprotected. Failed fundraising for some few million US dollars in order to respond to the right of education for refugee children and youth, yet a successful boost to the tune of several billion US dollars to the different stabilizing mechanisms required by a collapsing financial industry?

Highly specialized expertise is needed in order to address the complexities of the financial crisis, and tough decisions need to be taken. But what are the ethical framework and the value system that will inform decision making? Or is the value system increasingly defined by the urgency of decisions to be taken regarding the financial crisis?

Religious communities need to be part of this conversation. They owe their own, distinct contribution to that conversation. It is one that largely

transcends the realm of the economy, and touches on the very question of how the human family intends and agrees to live together in this one world that we all share. It is a conversation about how the human family intends to express its agreement that every human being has inalienable rights that cannot and must not be violated, even in exceptionally challenging situations. It is a conversation about whether there is still consensus that vulnerable populations, although living at the margins, should remain a central concern.

Finally, I shall look at the other side of the coin: the ecological crisis. I do so by recounting a brief story or telling observation from daily life: the way in which indigenous people in Latin America catch monkeys. Monkeys are fast and smart. They normally keep a safe distance from human beings and stay out of reach of their weapons. Hence it is not an easy task to catch them. But monkeys, too, have their weak points. In order to catch monkeys, indigenous people take a coconut and make little holes in it, just big enough so that monkeys can get their hands into the coconut. Then they put the most fragrant fruits into the coconut, the type of fruits that indigenous people know too well monkeys cannot resist. They attach the coconuts with ropes to the ground, and then wait. The monkeys will come down from the trees, attracted by the alluring fragrance of the fruits in the coconut, and will try by all means to get at the fruits. They carefully introduce their little hands into the coconut and grasp the fruits. Once they have the fruits in their grip, a reflex, an anxiety, kicks in, and they will keep their grip on the fruit, regardless of what happens. Yes, they will not loosen their grip when they try to get the fruit out of the coconut. Yet, the hole in the coconut only allows for an open hand to get in, but a fisted hand will not come out. Their grip thus becomes a deadly trap for the poor monkeys that do not let go of the fruits, even when the indigenous people approach to catch them.

This is how monkeys are caught in Latin America. How can they be so stupid?, one might be tempted to ask. But for most of us this is probably just an initial reaction because soon we realize not only the tragic situation, but also the painful analogy to the trap in which humanity finds itself today: the fisted hand. It is our ongoing attempt to secure survival, life and freedom, by grabbing, not realizing that we are at the juncture of history in which all of this—survival, life and freedom—can only be secured by opening the hand, by letting go.

The magnitude of the challenge requires enormous expertise so that it can be adequately challenged. Indeed, the ongoing development of technologies and alternatives that emit less CO₂ will be crucial. The ability to adapt of communities living in the fault lines of climate change will be vital. Yet, all of this does not make the urgency of the question regarding

lifestyles that more readily correspond to the available ecological resources any less urgent. This is a conversation that must go beyond the aspect of innovative technologies and address the very fundamental question about the way in which we understand ourselves in this world, and about human beings' relationships with the ecological fabric into which we are carefully woven. Similar to the "stupid" monkeys, we have to ask ourselves today whether we see space to move beyond the reflex of grabbing, and are able consciously to let go, thus realizing new dimensions of what it means to enjoy freedom.

THE GIFT OF FREEDOM AND THE ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE NEIGHBOR

I believe that churches, particularly those in the Lutheran tradition, have a treasure to share in this discussion. It is the clear insight that freedom, according to the traditional Lutheran understanding, is never to be understood as an absolute freedom. It is a freedom that finds its boundaries in the neighbor, particularly in the suffering and vulnerable neighbor. According to the Lutheran understanding, the gift of freedom, to be enjoyed by everybody, is framed by that accountability to the neighbor. It is therefore a freedom that does not understand the individual as an isolated being, but as placed in relationship to others. Can churches be a voice, helping the human family to realize that the time has come to move beyond a concept of freedom that knows no limits and is not accountable? Should churches today not go beyond the traditional theological understanding of freedom as bound to the neighbor, and introduce a much stronger ecological perspective into its discourse: a freedom not only accountable to the neighbor, but also to God's good creation, in our own language, or to the ecological system, or nature, in the language of others.

The participation of the church in the public space should never be understood as a one-way street, in which the church generously shares with others from its deep treasures of faith. It is a two-way street, in which churches also receive and learn, and need to be humble enough to do so, and are challenged and questioned, as they join those local and global conversations as an expression of the church's ongoing claim of citizenship. It is the participation in the public space under the sign of the cross. Never engaging with hegemonic pretensions, avoiding all theocratic tendencies, aware of the own ambivalence of both believers and the churches, yet joyfully bringing those treasures to the table, which we recognize because of our faith in the Triune God.