

Luther, Lutheranism, and Politics

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It is truly an honor for me to be here at your academy today, sharing my thoughts on this important topic. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

There are many pressing issues facing our world today. We are faced with economic crises, ongoing military conflicts, violence from non-state groups, the realities of climate change, freedom of religion, and global violence against women to name a few. These major issues are each deeply political; there are no clear or simple solutions. Because they are deeply political, issues like these engage all levels of the *polis*, the body of citizens for which particular governments provide order.

Governments and religion engage people at every level of their individual and collective lives. One enduring question for both politics and theology is how these systems interact with one another. Are they compatible with one another? Or are they destined to be in constant tension and conflict?

I will speak to these issues from my perspective as a Lutheran bishop and theologian who is also a Christian leader in the Middle East. Although Martin Luther was a German reformer who shaped the consciousness of Europe in his own time, the movements he inspired have become truly global. I interpret your invitation for me to speak today not just as expressing your desire to hear my thoughts on Luther's ideas in his context, but to hear from my context and from my experience as well.

I will speak today on Luther's theology of the two realms of government and the church, the challenges faced by Lutheran political ethics during World War II, and how these ideas shape my response to challenges facing the Middle East today.

When *Der Spiegel* interviewed me earlier this year, the first question was a challenge: "you are an evangelical Christian, but also son of Palestinian refugees who condemns Israel's settlement policy. There are critics who say that you were only 10 percent Christian, but 90 percent political. Is that true?"¹ I responded that, as a church leader, it is not my job to make politics. A church is only credible if it is committed to speak truth to power as the prophets did in the past.

There are at least two important sets of assumptions in this accusation. First is the assumption that all Christians in the Middle East are victims unable to freely speak their minds. This is of course not the case. Sometimes, we suffer for speaking out; but we suffer not just in our home countries but in some western contexts as well. If I do not speak out, I am called a coward; if I do speak out, I am called political.

¹ Annette Langer, "Palästinensische Christen: 'Gewaltakte verurteilen und Zweideutigkeit vermeiden'," *Spiegel Online*, 24 February 2014. Available online at <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/interview-mit-bischof-munib-younan-praesident-des-lutherischen-weltbundes-a-953998.html> (accessed 1 June 2014).

The second assumption in this accusation is more pervasive. It is the assumption that that “religious” and the “political” are entirely separate things. Specifically, the question assumed that Christianity was something separate from the political. From my understanding of both theology and citizenship, I do not accept this separation.

I come from a context where religion and politics cannot be separated. The Middle East is filled with religious significance and religious identification. This fact is rarely a sole cause of conflict. Separating politics and religion in neither wise nor desirable. Western scholars have now taken a few steps back from the “secularization thesis” which proclaimed that religion would inevitably shrink before the expansion of modernity.² Today, we understand that religion is a fact not only of the Middle East but of the entire world. Neglecting religion as a cultural force impoverishes all forms of governance in both domestic and foreign policy.³

Moreover, separating religious and political spheres does not ring true to my Lutheran theological tradition. Here, I do not speak for all Christians or all forms of Christianity. At the same time, I do not endorse any form of theocracy. Instead, I simply reiterate the tradition of Lutheran political thought that emerged in the crisis of the European reformations, a tradition that informs my approach to political engagement today.

Luther and Political Theory

The historical stature of Martin Luther and the arc of the reformation he initiated from the little town of Wittenberg have obscured many of his specific contributions. Whether we think of him as a renegade monk, a pastor, a preacher, or a polemicist, there can be no doubt that Luther’s work had profound political implications in his historical context. It is rare, however, even in these years as we prepare for the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran reformation, to think of Luther as a political theorist.

As one young Luther scholar has said, “For Luther political theory was no small task, no minor tangent to the gospel mission; matters of temporal government were vital to resolving the crisis of the sixteenth century.”⁴ In his dissertation, Carty argues that Luther, along with Machiavelli, though in a completely different way, worked to restore temporal government to a place of honor and purpose, apart from complete control by the church. To do so was to honor government as instituted by God for the wellbeing of God’s people.

Luther’s earliest full exposition of his political thinking came in 1520. After the publication of his “95 Theses” and the resulting wave of interest, some had begun charging Luther with being an antinomian who did not care for good order. If everyone was as free as Luther claimed, what would stop sin from taking over the lives of the people? Specifically, the princes were concerned with the prospect of local revolt. In response, Luther’s “Treatise on

² See Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

³ See, for instance, Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford, 1995).

⁴ Jarrett A. Carty, “Machiavelli, Luther, and the Reformation of Politics” (PhD diss., Notre Dame University, 2006), 159.

Good Works,” dedicated to Elector Frederick, Duke of Saxony, made, in Carty’s words, “obedience to temporal authorities an ethical act and a good work.”⁵

When Luther’s “Small Catechism” was published in 1529, he interpreted the Fourth Commandment—“Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.”—to mean that “We should fear and love God, so that we do not despise our parents or superiors, nor provoke them to anger, but honor, serve, obey, love and esteem them.”⁶ The “Treatise on Good Works” prefigures this simple explanation by stating, in conjunction with 1 Peter 2 and Romans 13 that “the third work of this Commandment is to obey the temporal authority.” This is true “even if the government does injustice.” This is because temporal authority “cannot harm the soul, but only the body and property; unless indeed it should try openly to compel us to do wrong against God or men.”⁷

Indeed, Luther is forthright in his desire that temporal power not only can but should harm the body. Temporal authority has a limiting function on the sinful impulses of humankind; while “all works and things are free to a Christian through his faith,” the “wicked men, always ready for sins ... must be must be constrained by spiritual and temporal laws, like wild horses and dogs.” Given the limited effects temporal authority can ultimately have on human wellbeing, we must “not resist the temporal power although it does wrong.” When it comes to “the spiritual power,” however, since it “does harm not only when it does wrong, but also when it neglects its duty and busies itself with other things” and has been “instituted for no other reason than to lead the people in faith to God.” While the temporal power should not be resisted, Christians should raise a shout if the spiritual authority “departs a hair's breadth from its own duty, not to say when it does the very opposite of its duty, as we now see it do every day.”⁸

Although Luther intended to mitigate the princes’ anxiety about revolt and revolution, he still needed to address the question of what comes of Christian responsibility if temporal authority becomes fully corrupt. In that situation, to what extent can it be obeyed? Likening such government to parents who “give some command contrary to God,” Luther counsels that “we must take hold of the first three Commandments and the First Table, and be certain that no man, neither bishop, nor pope, nor angel, may command or determine anything that is contrary to or hinders these three Commandments, or does not help them; and if they attempt such things, it is not valid and amounts to nothing; and we also sin if we follow and obey, or even tolerate such acts.” Things are more complicated when these abuses are carried out “in God’s name.” At that point, Luther says, we are “duty bound to resist in a proper way as much as we can. And here we must do like pious children whose parents have become insane.”⁹

In 1529, while writing his treatise “On War against the Turk,” Luther reflected back on the state of political theory when he started his reforming work a decade earlier. At that point, he says, “the most learned men ... regarded temporal government as a heathen, human, ungodly thing, as though it jeopardized salvation to be in the ranks of the rulers. This is how the

⁵ Ibid., 176.

⁶ Taken from Robert Kolb, et al, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

⁷ Martin Luther “Treatise on Good Works (1520)” *Luther’s Works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, American ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), 91.

⁸ Ibid., 36, 35, 133, 134.

⁹ Ibid., 89–90.

priests and monks drove kings and princes into the corner.”¹⁰ Luther’s use of the concept of “two realms” or “two regiments” to draw a distinction between temporal authority and spiritual authority was not meant to separate religion from politics or subordinate one to the other; both forms of government are part of God’s rule of the world. As Jarrett A. Carty has observed, “Luther saw in both the ecclesial and civil authorities of his day a failure to respect this role for temporal government.” To that end, Luther counseled high obedience to government unless it overstepped its bounds, not by moral failure or incompetence alone, but by a demonstrated abdication of its God-assigned role.

Bonhoeffer against His Contemporaries

Luther’s “two realms” thinking was developed in a time of immense crisis. Structures of governmental and religious authority appeared to be losing their legitimacy. The biblical commands of obedience to government and responsibility for faith demanded a dynamic and vibrant interpretation relevant to every level of social life, from popes and emperors to princes and peasants. In this context, the boundaries of ethical support for revolt and revolution needed to be clearly defined.

Intense debate about the “two realms” reemerged in the crisis facing German Christians in the 1930s and 1940s. As National Socialist ideology contributed to the formation of a totalitarian state, Luther’s categories were again found useful. With others, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Althaus were central figures in this debate.

It has been said that “the concept of the two kingdoms nearly disappeared in the Reformation churches after Luther. It was occasionally used in neo-Lutheranism after 1900. Only after the beginning of the German Church Struggle in 1933 did the Lutheran churches make a confessional issue out of it.” Neo-Lutheran thinkers interpreted the two realms as completely separate, so that “the church is not allowed to obstruct worldly government.”¹¹ This interpretation can and should be judged against the lens of history as fundamentally irresponsible.¹² But, from the perspective articulated by Luther and expanded by Bonhoeffer, it is theologically inadequate. Although it accepted Luther’s elevated respect for the role of temporal government, it built too strong a barrier between temporal and spiritual authority. Bonhoeffer would address both the ethical failing of the neo-Lutheran separation of church and state by asserting the dogmatic commitment to the unity of Christ’s rule over all worldly authorities. To get at the depth of Bonhoeffer’s thought on these topics, I will address his essay on “State and Church” and then see how the concepts on that essay informed the development of his unfinished *Ethics*.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “On War against the Turk (1529),” *Luther’s Works, Vol. 46: The Christian in Society III*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, American ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 163.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6*, English edition, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 60 n48. Hereafter, *DBWE*.

¹² See Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Susannah Heschel and Robert P. Ericksen, eds., *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999). See also Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Indeed, especially when it comes to Christian approaches to Jews and Judaism, Luther himself should not escape scrutiny. See the important introductory essays in Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna, eds., *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

In his January 1933 essay “What is Church?,” Bonhoeffer argued that the church should recognize its limits, stand outside any political parties, and resist the “Christianization of politics.” He concludes that “nothing would be more destructive and detrimental for the Protestant church in the current situation than if . . . it unthinkingly let itself be used in party politics.”¹³ As the crisis went on, Bonhoeffer had many opportunities to consider the proper relationship between temporal and spiritual authority. In August 1939, following his second, shorter journey to the United States, Bonhoeffer wrote a long essay on church-state relations in that context. In “Protestantism without Reformation,” Bonhoeffer contrasts the European emphasis on “the dignity of the state, nowhere else more strongly emphasized than in the teaching of the Reformation,” with the American approach in which the “the state becomes merely the executive of the church.” Bonhoeffer sees the acclaimed separation of church and state in the U.S. context as wholly unrelated to any “doctrine of two offices or the two kingdoms that were ordered by God to remain until the end of the world.”¹⁴ The church’s role in American society is due, instead, to spiritualist-enthusiast excess; the oppositional stance engendered by the structural confusion leaves Bonhoeffer looking for a more faithful approach.

The unfinished manuscripts that make up Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* show his efforts to articulate a unified theological foundation for worldly responsibility. Participating “in the indivisible whole of God’s reality is the meaning of the Christian question about the good” since “in Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other.” The Christian, therefore, will “never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.” With this assertion of the world unified in Christ, Bonhoeffer seeks to correct the traditional Christian notion “that two realms bump against each other: one divine, holy supernatural and Christian; the other worldly, profane, natural, and unchristian.” In this tradition, “Reality as a whole splits into two parts, and the concern of ethics becomes the right relation of both parts to each other.” The result of this false thinking is found in the “pseudo-Lutheranism” of Bonhoeffer’s contemporaries for whom “the autonomy of the orders of this world is proclaimed against the law of Christ.”¹⁵

In continuity with Luther’s own unification of the two realms, Bonhoeffer suggests that Christian polemics must seek “better worldliness” rather than asserting “a static and self-serving realm. Only in this sense of a polemical unity can Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms be used. That was probably its original meaning.” Thus, Bonhoeffer can be seen as holding to Luther’s use of the “two realms” but within the fundamental unity in Christ. Therefore, “the Christian is no longer the person of eternal conflict. As reality is one in Christ, so the person who belongs to this Christ-reality is also a whole.”¹⁶ His essay, “The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates” expands further on this theme of unity: “The commandment of God revealed in Jesus Christ embraces in its unity all of human life.... This commandment encounters us concretely in four different forms that find their unity only in the commandment itself, namely, in the church, marriage and family, culture, and government.”¹⁷

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “What is Church? (1933), in *DBWE*, vol. 3, 265, 266.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without Reformation (1939),” *DBWE* 15, 452. Notice the agreement with Carty’s interpretation of Luther.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, *DBWE* 6, 53, 55, 55–6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60, 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

Bonhoeffer's paper in *State and Church*, written in 1941 while he was developing the *Ethics*, focuses more specifically on modes of engagement between spiritual and temporal authority. His approach begins by rejecting theological consideration of the "state" itself. Since the "state" is a modern concept unknown to ancient or medieval thought, "the concept of government" Bonhoeffer goes on to consider "includes no definitive form of commonwealth, no definitive form of the state. Government is the power set in place by God to exercise worldly rule with divine authority." In this 1941 essay, one can sense Bonhoeffer building on his critique of American distortions of church-state relations, applying those critiques to his European context. While in 1939 he rejected the American tendency to allow the church to be the sole cultural force, he notes in 1941 that "where the state becomes the fulfillment of all spheres of human life and culture, it forfeits its true dignity, its specific authority as government."¹⁸ A totalitarian dominated by either a religious or secular ideology, has no dignity.

Bonhoeffer cleaves closely to Luther's thoughts on the dignity of government. Temporal government is a reality "given to us not as an idea or as a task but as reality." Indeed, as they do the proper work assigned by God to temporal authority, "Persons in government are God's 'liturgists,' servants, vicarious representatives." Despite the proper distinctions of their proper spheres of work, both the church and government serve the God's purposes in Christ: "Government is established for the sake of Christ. It serves Christ, and thereby it also serves his church." Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer clarifies that "The reign of Christ over all government certainly in no way implies the reign of the church over government." Given the God-given dignity of government, Christians are bound to obey "up to the point where the government forces them into direct violation of the divine commandment, thus until government overtly acts contrary to its divine task and thereby forfeits its divine claim."¹⁹

Bonhoeffer then seeks to clarify the ways the two spheres of temporal and spiritual authority fruitfully interact with one another. Both church and government have claims on the other and responsibilities toward one another. While government claims obedience from the church, "the church is what leads government to an understanding of itself." The church in this way can act as a guardian of temporal authority. Moreover, if "government explicitly or actually stands against the church, the time can come when the church, while not relinquishing its claim, nevertheless no longer wastes its words." Bonhoeffer insists that when government "inquires after its own task," it "remains religiously neutral." In this neutrality, government does not engage in "suppression of worship" but "safeguards any worship that does not undermine the governmental office" and ensures that "no antagonism that would endanger national order arises out of the diversity of forms of worship." In delineating the political responsibility of the church, Bonhoeffer calls the church "to make government aware of its failures and mistakes that necessarily threaten its governmental office. If the word of the church is in principle not accepted, then all that is left to it is enough political responsibility to establish and preserve at least among its own members the order of outward justice no longer present in the polis, thereby serving the government in its own way."²⁰

As to what political arrangement is best, Bonhoeffer says that, theologically speaking, "the question concerning the form of the state is always secondary." The importance of

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Theological Position Paper on State and Church," in *DBWE* 16, 504, 508.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 513, 521, 517.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 522, 523, 525.

government is in its practical functioning, not in its form: “As long as the government fulfills its task, the form under which it does so is not essential, at least for the church.” We are left to consider “the relatively best form of the state” rather than any political pronouncement in absolute terms.²¹ One is to judge a particular governmental form or practice not by static principles but by its promotion of the wellbeing of the people and, in specifically Christian theological terms, its relative service to God’s purposes.

Lutheran Political Theory and the Contemporary Middle East

The Middle East is experiencing a time of intense turmoil and change. The revolutions and uprisings that began in early 2011 are now rarely referred to as the “Arab Spring.” It is quite sad to see that extremism—much of it associating itself with religion—has taken hold in many places. We must not forget, however, that this moment began with a yearning for dignity.

Extremism has found an easy path in the Middle East. The success of extremist options is due to several failures over the past decades of life in the region. First, we have seen the failure of several ideologies to provide for the flourishing of human communities in the Middle East following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. We have seen the failure of pan-Arabism, the failure of Communist ideologies, and the failure of democratic ideologies as well. These failures have led to the longevity of several dictators and presidents who were able to act like kings. The Middle East continues to search for models of good governance. Second, extremism is fueled by the failure of Arab leaders to find a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Israel has won several consecutive wars against Arab neighbors, and those leaders are too content with the status quo. But this is not the will of the people. Finally, we know that political life in the Middle East has been harmed by near-constant manipulation and intervention by outside powers. Such manipulation has diminished the sense of political agency, especially among Arab youth. Many therefore feel that they can reclaim their dignity through Islamism and extremism.

The crisis of government now facing the Middle East demands that local churches revisit their approaches to political engagement. Arab and Middle Eastern Christians are faced with a variety of challenges. The events of the so-called Arab Spring have affected the lives of all people in the region, Christians included. But the challenges did not begin with the first Egyptian revolution in 2011. Rather than focuses on Tahrir Square alone, the Arab Spring needs to be understood within a sweep of history stretching back at least as far as the end of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. Many modern Arab states have been oppositional in nature, holding back the religious impulses of many communities within their borders. The suppression of religious impulses led to unprecedented waves of religious fanaticism once dictatorial controls were removed. This wave of violence has disproportionately affected Christian communities. Now, we are seeing fanatical groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) now taking over portions of those countries in the name of God. But they serve a God who loves their ideological brand of Islam alone. All other communities—whether they are Shia, Christian, or politically moderate Sunnis—are potential victims. Lutheran reflections on the proper authority of church and government can help shape how all communities in the Middle East move forward toward a shared future.

²¹ Ibid., 525, 526–7.

In contrast to the theologically-informed Lutheran approach to government, some would give us the advice that we should in fact reject religion as the basis of our society. They assume that any emphasis on religion leads necessarily to conflict. I strongly disagree with this assumption. That path would lead to further suppression of religion with equally disastrous outcomes.

At first glance, any attempt to apply a Lutheran approach to Middle Eastern politics seems like little more than an academic exercise since it appears to be a move that ignores distinctions between European and Arab contexts. Moreover, Christians are numerical minorities in the Middle East. How can we expect that our theories will inform ongoing political discourse? My confidence is two-fold. First, I understand that both Luther and Bonhoeffer developed their ideas in the midst of extreme crisis while both were experiencing life as religious minorities. They were not developing their thoughts for present majorities alone. Second, they both framed their ideas based on theological commitment to the unity of God's rule over the world. This beginning-point is an important point of connection with Islamic theology and, potentially, political outlooks. Lutheran reflections on how spiritual and temporal authority interact can make real contributions toward the wellbeing of all communities and persons in the Middle East.

Although Christians are numerical minorities in the Middle East, we are woven into the fabric of our societies. At the same time, we do not seek to dominate or, as Bonhoeffer put it, "Christianize" our countries. Both Luther and Bonhoeffer acknowledged specifically that a government does not have to be explicitly Christian in order to fulfill God's purposes. In his own historical context, Luther recognized that Ottomans ("the Turk") could provide good government. What we demand is good governance that respects the wellbeing of the people including government that does not infringe on the ability of the people to worship God as they see fit, a principle clearly outlined by both Luther and Bonhoeffer.

While we do not want to "Christianize" politics, we seek to improve society through political engagement. Constitutional development is a central concern for the rebuilding of the Middle East. In that process, Arab Christians emphasize commitment to equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities under a constitution respecting human rights including gender justice, freedom of religion and expression and pluralism. At the same time, we seek to develop national constitutions which do not have the Bible or Sharia or Torah or Halacha as their main source of authority. Before the law, all religions are equal; we therefore seek freedom of religion and freedom of religious expression. We are in relationship with many Muslims who seek these same goals. In July 2013, following Egypt's second revolution, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Church, and Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmed El-Tayyeb, announced the Al-Azhar Document for Basic Freedoms. Even though some Churches in Egypt believe that the Al-Azhar Document does not go far enough in affirming a pluralistic society, it represents a crucial stride toward resolving sectarian tension in Egypt.

In Israel, by contrast, we are seeing several attempts to manipulate Christian identity. One law in the Israeli Knesset has passed a law saying that Christians are not Arabs as a justification for giving us more legal rights. In another case, some Palestinian Christians were promoting conscription into the Israeli military so they can gain rights. I am convinced that this is not the correct approach; we should rather seek equal citizenship by virtue of inherent equality, not mere acquiescence to any state.

As Christians in the Middle East contribute toward shaping governmental structures and choosing governmental leaders, we must keep in mind Bonhoeffer's clear reflection that, theologically speaking, no one form of government is to be preferred over another. Indeed, in this time when borders may be withdrawn, we must acknowledge that no modern state must necessarily continue to exist. We insist, though, that any changes to present orders be informed by what is best for all affected persons. The question we must ask is if any particular form of government has the best possibility of serving God's purposes or all of God's people. This is not a partisan concern and is not a concern for Christians alone. God rules over all of creation, both Christian and non-Christian. The benefit we seek is the benefit for all. In this time of religious fanaticism, our stance of open concern for the flourishing of all communities throughout the Middle East will enhance our relationships with persons in other religious communities who seek the same in God's name.

I am convinced that the Gospel calls Christians to the task of building up civil society. While some Christian individuals participate directly in political leadership, the churches build society collectively through our distinctive engagement through ministries of education, health, and culture. The educational heritage of the churches has provided the educational backbone of many Arab countries. Through education and community development, a well-informed citizenry can seek the best government for its time and place. It is our Christian responsibility to promote the rights of all persons, with a special focus on those who are most vulnerable or who cannot speak for themselves: the poor, the immigrant, the refugee, the occupied, and the oppressed. We seek justice in every situation, especially gender justice and matters of equal access to communal resources. In these matters, the church is called to raise its prophetic voice. In this work, we are called to respectfully but confidently engage government, giving our assent when it acts well and offering strenuous critique when it acts poorly, as we discern God's will for the world. As Bonhoeffer says, "the church is what leads government to an understanding of itself."

In the Middle East, this task of challenging temporal powers is most essential in Israel and Palestine. In that context, we engage not only local powers but the effects of global empires. Lutherans in Palestine and around the world remain committed to seeking a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel, based on the 1967 borders. We believe that Jerusalem should be shared by the three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and two nations—Palestinians and Israelis. We seek a viable political solution to resolve the right of return of refugees. Finally, all parties in this conflict must admit to their part in perpetuating the conflict and be willing to seek painful and honest reconciliation. Once the acknowledgement is there, then we can find solutions.

We strongly believe that Israeli settlements built on land confiscated during and following the 1967 war are *illegal*, not just inconvenient. Politicians and public figures have consistently observed that Israeli settlements on Palestinian land are a major obstacle to peace. Churches around the world have taken notice. Based on the initiatives of many churches within Europe, the European Union has taken the important and effective decision to clearly identify products made in Israeli settlements because they do not want to support any illegal economy. Please know that these Christians are not naïve and that they are serious in wanting the success of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. Let us be clear: these churches and the European Union are protesting the settlements alone, not the State of Israel as such. If settlements are indeed an obstacle to peace, their current status must be challenged.

If there is to be peace, Palestinians and Israelis must learn to share natural resources, especially water. The sharing of resources can be the foundation of economic growth and prosperity through further regional cooperation. What would this look like? It is self-evident that neither Israel nor Palestine can exist alone. While they can be independent states, they will be side by side, interdependently prospering through collaboration on resources and infrastructure development. If we truly honor the human dignity of every person in the region, then we must work to have regional cooperation.

Jerusalem should be a shared city for the two nations and the three Abrahamic religions; settlement activity should end; there should be a just political solution for Palestinian refugees; resources should be shared and regional cooperation should flourish. We continue to believe in these principles, but political realities do not often seem supportive of that vision. This is the reason I appeal to both Palestinians and Israelis to give peace based on justice a chance. While the present situation is very dangerous, peace based on justice is good for Palestinians and Israelis alike. When Pope Francis called Israeli and Palestinian leaders together for prayer—a gathering in which I participated—he challenged the dominant political logic surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We have had enough peace negotiations; we have had enough violence. But we have perhaps not worked through the power of prayer. Perhaps prayer can change the hearts and minds of leaders in the Middle East so they can hear the prophet Micah’s words: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6.8) It is my dream that Palestinians and Israelis will one day see the image of God in one other and accept each other’s humanity. Only then can they mutually recognize each other’s human, civil, religious and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land be the land of milk and honey for Palestinians and Israelis alike. I pray that this dream will be realized in my lifetime and that we will not wait for our children and grandchildren to taste this vision of peace.

The Lutheran tradition of respecting temporal power while calling them to account guides our engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the ongoing crises throughout the Middle East. We do not seek to “Christianize” either the region or work for the benefits of Christians alone. We do not hesitate, however, to evangelize politics so all forms of government may benefit from our values. With other religions, Arab Christians must find the resources within all faith traditions that promote the values of justice, peace, and acceptance of the other, lest present and future struggles for justice and equality devolve into battles motivated by religious extremism alone. We do not work together in spite of our unique faith traditions; we work together through the diversity of our traditions.

I believe that our role as Arab Christians is to be instruments of peace, brokers of justice, ministers of reconciliation, and apostles of love. In all of this, Middle Eastern Christians—including those of us in Palestine—can look to both Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as faithful witnesses who sought to discern God’s will for their times. These pastors did their best to draw from biblical interpretation and theological insight to address the political challenges of their times. Their insights—including the unity of the worldly and the spiritual—will prove helpful for Middle Eastern Christians as we navigate present and coming challenges. In the meantime, I ask your prayers for all in either religious authority governmental authority, that God would grant wisdom to do what is right in God’s sight for the sake of our common humanity.

May God bless you.