

Speech in Honour of the Launch of “Christianity: Fundamental Teachings”

Bishop Thomas, World Evangelical Alliance

Dear All Holiness Bartholomew, respected friend, from whom I have learned immensely,

Dear Excellencies Archbishop Bekciyan, Metropolitan Cetin, Mons. Tuerrablanca, dear Behnan (Dr Konutgan), as highest representatives of your churches and communities in Turkey,

Dear fellow bishops in God’s church,

Dear worthy pastors and leaders of God’s flock in Turkey,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This is a very emotional moment for me, as I followed the project from its beginning and prayed for it often. And it is immense and undeserved honour that you have invited me for the launch of your book and I thank for the trust in me, proven by this gracious act.

Each time I visit his All Holiness, as he knows, I visit the Hagia Sophia Church first, remembering the glory of Christianity in this marvellous city. Turkey has been the site of some of the most important councils of bishops. Together with neighbour countries like Syria, Armenia and Greece, it represents the part of the world where the church grew from infancy to adulthood—from a small seed to a very large tree reaching out to all people, to use an image that Jesus once used. With this new book, Christians in Turkey are once again taking the lead, and following its publication in Turkish two years ago, they are now making their splendid efforts available for all churches worldwide.

This is a very emotional moment for Protestants and Evangelicals in Turkey and their friends around the world. A dream has become true – and not in a comfortable situation, but in one where churches struggle on all kinds of fronts. The Armenian Patriarchate, where we are located at this moment, by its very name reminds us of a history of martyrdom and difficulties, as does the Syriac Orthodox Church even in present times. The churches in Turkey are not well-funded institutions with large academic institutions that can afford to have theologians study together for years, but they love Jesus and Holy Scripture!

Protestants and Evangelicals in Turkey are a small group and rather new in the country. They know that they owe the close collaboration revealed by this book to the friendliness and openness of historic churches, which have been present here for nearly 2,000 years. These historic churches are our spiritual grandfathers. They have borne the torch of faith through the centuries.

On behalf of the 600 million Protestants who belong to the World Evangelical Alliance, I would like to thank you, the heads and leaders of those churches, for your gratefulness and good example towards your spiritual grandchildren.

When I explained the project to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, on my visit to him for his birthday in December, he was thrilled. But he was not astonished when he heard who was involved! How much the Christian world has changed in our time was demonstrated when Pope Francis visited His All Holiness in 2014 here in this city and bowed to him when greeting him. The Christian faith is not about rivalry and power, but about service and respecting others, following the model of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

This book, which looks so tiny and yet may become a model to Christianity worldwide, is so great because of the motivation behind it. No verses in Holy Scripture that came from the mouth of the Son of God better describe this motivation than John 17:18–23, taken from the prayer of Jesus Christ as the eternal high priest to His and our Father in heaven:

“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me — so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

In its unity, the church mirrors the unity of Father and Son. Its unity preaches loud and clear to the world. But the opposite is also true: disunity and a cacophony of Christian messages to the world hinder the spread of the good news.

It is not coincidental that all great ecumenical movements in history sought unity for the sake of Christian mission. This was true of the World Evangelical Alliance when it united Protestant churches in 1846, just as it was true of the World Council of Churches in 1948 uniting Protestant, Orthodox and Oriental churches. The predecessors of His All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarchs of the 20th century, have called clearly upon the world's churches to come together, to present one Christ and one faith as a common witness to an unbelieving world.

Followers of non-Christian religions around us should receive the complete, essential gospel, the fundamental teachings of Christianity – but not twenty or so different versions of Christianity.

We cannot expect non-Christians to become first-class theologians, able to describe and understand the different versions of the Christian faith and then choose one of them, before they even understand the gospel. Non-Christians should come to know the one Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and the one faith that brings salvation through the death of Jesus. They should hear revelation from the one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There is room for earnest study of the details of theology after one is already an earnest church member. There is room for the leaders of our churches to engage with each other, to learn from each other, and to express our disagreements based on a solid study of our

differences. But when we are witnessing to unbelievers, that is the wrong time and place for theological struggles.

The churches in Turkey have taken the lead with their book, *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*. All the churches together have presented 100 pages, about our God, our Saviour, our faith, the Church and Christian morals, on which we all agree. They do not act as if we have no differences among us, but they make it amply clear that the one salvation offered by Jesus Christ is the same for all.

This work was not done by church leaders and theologians who had become liberal and no longer cared for the Word of God and for our traditions, or by people who were willing to relativize the truth and settle for just finding the smallest common denominator. Rather, it was the other way around. Earnest church leaders and theologians, steeped in their traditions and with great knowledge of church history (including the history and theology of other Christian traditions), have spelled out 100 pages of truth that belong to all of us together, knowing that in the end, the deepest truth that exists is Jesus Christ himself who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

This is not to downplay theological differences. There is a need for serious theological debate. *For Christians, unity follows from the truth, not from cheap compromises*. Speaking for Protestants, meaningful unity includes studying more thoroughly the rich inheritance of the older and historic churches. I am glad that in the last decades, Protestants and Evangelicals have started to study the church fathers in depth and to publish their works, with the 29 thick volumes of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* being the most visible example. As the World Evangelical Alliance, we are doing much in defence of our discriminated brothers and sisters of the Orthodox Church and the seven Oriental churches. Along the way, we are learning a lot from them.

In 2011 the Catholic Church (the Vatican), the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance signed a document called "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World". The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church and others were very heavily involved in the development of this text within the team from the World Council of Churches. This was the first-ever document signed by representatives of approximately 90% of Christianity globally. And it starts with these words: "Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings."

The Turkish churches have shown the Christian Church worldwide that it is possible to carry out this mission in unity. Out of deep love for their fellow citizens, they have shown that unity – spelled out in 100 pages of fundamental Christianity – is more important than anything else, so that the prayer of Jesus "that the world might believe" may be fulfilled.

Bishop Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, Associate Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance and Chair of its Theological Commission, member of the Faith and Order Commission of

the World Council of Churches, Chair of the Advisory Board of the Central Council of Oriental Christians in Germany

With Bishop Nikolay Nedelchev, Goodwill Ambassador of the World Evangelical Alliance to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and liaison to the Orthodox Churches

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