

Inaugural Speech by Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher February 27, 2021

Thank you very much. The World Evangelical Alliance is a very diverse movement. When in 1846 Anglican Priests and the Salvation Army started to work together, people thought that would not be possible. German Lutheran pastors and professors invited Methodists from the United States to preach the Gospel in Germany, that was unheard of. Today, we are even more diverse. We have become much more diverse confessionally, we have become much more diverse in ethnic questions, in language, in culture. We have churches in the Brazilian rainforest where they worship ten meters above the ground in high trees, and we have churches in skyscrapers in Malaysia where you have a church on the 20th floor of a high building.

What then is evangelical?

Well, I can tell you one thing: evangelicals never agreed on politics! And you can see this around the globe. We have countries, in which we have evangelical members in Parliament, on the government side and in the opposition. We did not agree on politics yesterday and we did not agree on politics in 1846. This is not the secret of the evangelical movement.

For me, to be evangelical, as the term “evangelical” describes, the enthusiasm for the DNA of Christianity. Yes, also the search of the DNA of Christianity. And I want to think a little bit about the question how this relates to the DNA of Christianity, if we call it “evangelical.”

To give you an example: we believe in the resurrection of Jesus and we believe in Pentecost where the Holy Spirit filled the believers, the members of the church. Now insofar someone questions the historicity and says “it did not happen” or “does not need to have happened in real history” - we [as evangelicals] stand for the historicity of our faith. Jesus did receive new life from His Father, the Holy Spirit did fall on the believers. And then some will say: “that is evangelical.” But we do not believe in this because we think of it as something confessional, something specific [only] we believe in. Rather, we think it’s the DNA of Christianity that we owe everything to what Jesus did and what the Holy Spirit does.

When it comes to the Bible, we are deeply convinced that the Bible is the confession of the Church. You might ask why does he use a political term? Well, if you look into history, the idea of a paper document that would rule the people comes from the Old Testament. The Torah in the Old Testament was above David, was above the king, was above everybody. Some people mock us and say we have a “Paper Pope.” We are proud to have a Paper Pope, because the Paper Pope assures that none of us, including me, are above the Word of God. We all submit to the Word of God, no one is above it. No, there is [in fact] someone above him, it is Jesus himself, who is the center of Holy Scripture, and the Holy Spirit, who is the author of Holy

Scripture - at least according to our belief. And this is where we think that a movement like ours can bring together the huge emphasis of the Reformation 500 years ago on Holy Scripture with a lot of revival movements including our Pentecostal friends and our charismatic friends and their emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the only One who can transform us and can transform the world.

Let me quote to you from a very Calvinist document, as some people would call it. In 1647, in the Westminster Confession, written in England, there it says: "The supreme judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be determined and all decrees of councils or opinions of ancient writers and doctrines of man and private opinions are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other..." - and now you would expect it to say "than the Scripture", but no! In 1647, they said "...can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture." We believe the Holy Spirit is ruling His Church, but we believe this is not *in opposition* to Holy Scripture, but he is the *author* of the Holy Scripture and He is using His confession, the Holy Scripture, to rule the Church. That for us is the DNA of Christianity and it is evangelical. Insofar as some people question it, then it might be seen as something specific to us, but we believe it is Christian.

And that became very true in two examples I would like to briefly speak to: I already mentioned the document "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World". Evangelicals always have been about preaching that Jesus died on the cross for us and that only in him we find communion with God and eternal life. But now the document of 2011 starts with "mission is the very being of the Church." It speaks about every believer being obliged to witness to other people about the Gospel. Is this evangelical or is it Christian? It is Christian insofar as obviously all churches agree now that mission is the very being of the church. This is the task that Jesus Christ handed to us. Insofar that not everybody is happy about it or putting it into action, it might be seen as evangelical. But we have to be very careful if we say that as evangelicals we automatically we do what Jesus said. Mission is not always the being of our local churches. We often have to be reminded as evangelical churches that we have to put the witness of the Gospel into the center.

And then as a last example, religious freedom and persecution. In 1846, the World Evangelical Alliance was the first ever large religious body speaking up for religious freedom. And that meant speaking up against state churches and against Christian nationalism - we know that this is even within our own ranks still a very "hot potato" today - against Christian nationalism, against the state pressing its religion and its thoughts on the Church.

After a long history meanwhile, the Catholic Church, at the Second Vatican Council, said exactly the same: that religious freedom is not just only a political principle, but it is the DNA of Christianity. Is this evangelical? Well, we have stood for it for a long time. But we did not stand for it as a confessional extra, but as the belief that this is pure Christianity: that God

Himself wants to be loved, wants us to trust Him, wants our life. He does not want us to pray to Him because we are forced or because someone paid us or somebody cheated us. He wants our very trust, our very heart and our very love, and love is something that cannot be forced.

So I am deeply convinced that the evangelical movement stands up for specific things in the Christian world, but they are not specific in the sense that they are owned by us and distinguish us from others, but they are the DNA of the Christian faith itself. And when we strive for unity within evangelicalism, if we want to bring the Anglicans, the Pentecostals, the Reformed, the Salvation Army, all those groups in our midst together, we can only do it around the DNA of Christianity. And we are open to any other church outside of our movement to join us in those points of the DNA, and so we hope that wherever possible to extend our vision to many other churches in this world.

Thank you very much. I am privileged to serve the World Evangelical Alliance, I know all of us are sinners, we are under the one Holy Scripture, which defines when we fail in what we do. And so I am deeply convinced that it is only the prayer of millions - and the prayer of close friends who might know me more closely - that makes it possible to take over a task which is too big just for one human being.

Amen.