

Christian Commitment towards International Development

A Biblical and Theological Perspective

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I.

International development can be described as a process of liberation from hunger, poverty, disease, unjust economic structures, violation of human rights and power structures which deny people access to resources necessary for life. Development aims at justice and the improvement of living conditions and thus contributes to peace.

A Christian theological foundation of development oriented political action cannot claim universal validity because Christians are a minority among the world's population despite the fact that Christianity with about 33% of the world's population and about 2.1 billion adherents is the largest religious group¹. Theological ethics of development therefore is a kind of internal or domestic ethics which from a Christian perspective tries to establish why churches and their members should be committed towards international development and why they should engage in development policy and development oriented action.

The *Memorandum on the Development Service of the Church – A Contribution towards Peace and Justice in the World* published by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) already in 1973² still is the fundamental theological pronouncement of the protestant Churches in Germany on the issue of international development. The memorandum emphasizes the unity of proclamation and service and it places the development service of the Church into the horizon of the coming Kingdom of God. According to the memorandum the faith in the triune God is the basis for the witness of the Church through proclamation of the Gospel as well as the basis for the responsibility of the Church for development.

Christian involvement and action is rooted in the faith in God the creator who has created humankind in his image and who has commissioned them to use and to preserve the resources of the earth. Christian involvement and action is rooted in the experience of faith that God in Jesus Christ became human, turned to the afflicted and miserable people, suffers with them, and leads them out of misery. Finally, Christian action is oriented by the promise of the coming Kingdom of God. By turning towards the afflicted and the miserable Christians witness to the love of God and at the same time they exercise Christian discipleship.³

II.

Focusing on the image of *bread* and especially on the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer I shall now try to explain in more detail from a biblical perspective a possible theological foundation of Christian commitment towards international development.

The simple Biblical imperative *share your bread with the hungry*⁴ is a sufficient and timely motivation for Christian involvement towards development. This is true especially in a time in which hunger in an unprecedented way leads to a world wide crisis, as the World Bank and the

¹ Christianity: 2.1 billion (33%); Islam 1.5 billion (21%), Hinduism 900 million (14%), Chinese Traditional Religion 394 Million (6%), Buddhism 367 million (6%), Nonreligious 16% of the world's population, see http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html

² Der Entwicklungsdienst der Kirche – ein Beitrag für Frieden und Gerechtigkeit in der Welt. Eine Denkschrift, ed. by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (1973)

³ For the introduction see Wilfried Steen/Rudolf Ficker, *Entwicklungspolitik, Entwicklungshilfe: Evangelisches Staatslexikon*, ed. By W. Heun, M. Honecker, M. Morlok, J. Wieland, Stuttgart 2006, 451-457, especially 454

⁴ Isaiah 58:7

International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently declared.⁵ Bread is the symbol for all things indispensable to life. *Bread for the World* therefore is the catchy slogan for the development cooperation of the Protestant churches in Germany. The image of bread can be immediately understood by everyone. It is important for Christians that in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer we pray: *Give us this day our daily bread*⁶. I shall now turn to this petition in more detail.

The Lord's Prayer is the centre of the Sermon on the Mount. Like the religious teachers of his time, also Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, giving this prayer to them, which is a prayer deeply rooted in the religious tradition of Judaism. The Lord's Prayer is the key to the understanding of the Sermon on the Mount⁷, and it can serve as a key to a Christian theological foundation for the commitment of the Church towards development.

The fourth petition of this prayer is the first one which deals with the human condition. "It appears to be the most humane of all petitions", as Pope Benedict XVI remarks in his recent book on Jesus⁸. With this petition Jesus takes seriously the human needs in this world and places them before God. Thus this petition reflects the work of Jesus who in his interaction with people always took seriously their needs.⁹ He was healing sick people and he was feeding the hungry. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for their needs. And therefore he also advises them not to be *anxious about their lives, what they shall eat or what they shall drink, nor about their body, what they shall put on*.¹⁰ Jesus was concerned about the supply of the day-to-day requirements of people and through this prayer he advises his disciples to place the concern for their daily needs into the hands of God. This act of faith shall make them free from sorrow.

The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of a community, not the prayer of an individual. It does not use the first person singular but the first person plural. *Give us this day our daily bread*. It is the prayer of Jesus and his disciples. The word *we* of the Lord's Prayer unites Jesus and his disciples and it unites those who say this prayer with others. How can this be understood?

The Lord's Prayer as a prayer of the congregation makes those who pray it one body. First of all it makes the disciples of Jesus one body, but it also includes humanity. Those who pray to their Father by doing so acknowledge that they have brothers and sisters who are also children of God. God, to whom we pray, created all humankind in his image, not only Jews or Christians. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for their daily bread he at the same time teaches them to pray for the daily bread of all the others.¹¹ The fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer is no egoistic or exclusive petition. Prayer should never be egoistic or exclusive! This prayer includes other people. Praying in this way we place ourselves within a wide human horizon. The plural makes the petition for bread an ecumenical prayer in the sense that indeed *bread for the world* is prayed for. Martin Luther said in an exposition of this petition that all prayers and psalms ought to be included in it, especially the intercession for all distressed and hopelessly suffering people.¹²

⁵ The present hunger crisis is unprecedented because it affects many countries around the globe at the same time and leads to hiking prices for food all over the world. The reasons for this crisis, which has been identified much too late, are manifold: crop failure, dumping of cheap and subsidized food from industrial countries in developing countries and subsequent destruction of markets for local farmers, growing demand in emerging economies, increased meat production for rich countries, conversion of farmland into land for bio fuel production, corrupt governments.

⁶ Matthew 6:11; Luke 11,3

⁷ Cp. W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus: ThHKzNT I*, 5. edition Berlin (1981) 187.205

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger Benedikt XVI., *Jesus von Nazareth. Erster Teil Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung*: Freiburg (2007) 185

⁹ Cp. E. Schweizer, *Die Bergpredigt: 2.Aufl.* Göttingen (1984) 66: Jesus feeds the hungry (Matthew 14:13-21; 15,31-39)

¹⁰ Matthew 6,25

¹¹ see Joseph Ratzinger loc.cit. p. 186 where he refers to Cyprian who emphasized the plural of the petition and comes to the conclusion: "We pray for our bread – and consequently also for the bread of others."

¹² Eine kurze Form der Zehn Gebote, eine kurze Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers 1520: O. Clemen (Hg.) *Luthers Werke in Auswahl Bd. 2 S. 57*

That Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for their daily bread points to an important aspect. If you have to pray for your *daily* bread, you are poor.¹³ Jesus and his disciples are poor and they are living in solidarity with the poor. The poverty of Jesus and his disciples has a symbolic value which goes beyond the solidarity with the poor of their times. Living from day to day relying on God who will provide is a witness to God who cares for humans; it is a testimony of faith. At this point we may remember the Exodus and how God sustained his people during their march through the desert.¹⁴ God provided the manna from heaven each day and it was not possible to keep it for the next day except for the sixth day of the week because on the seventh day, on the Sabbath, everybody had to rest and no one was to go out and gather manna. The Exodus story shows how the Israelites had to rely on the food which was daily given by God. There was no possibility to accumulate manna.

The attitude of prayer for the daily bread and of trust in God who provides is – as we can easily see – quite contrary to the attitude of our present globalised world where accumulation of wealth and power seems to be the ultimate goal. Thus the very prayer for the daily bread criticizes human greed and challenges the philosophy of capitalism. The objective of human life is not the accumulation of wealth by few but the supply with daily needs for all.

Another aspect of the *prayer* for the daily bread is that prayer makes us aware of the fact that despite all their work and technical skills humans ultimately can guarantee the daily bread neither for themselves nor for all mankind.

Bread is the classic symbol for things that are essential for life. The things essential for life are from a Christian point of view – as is evident in bread – the products of co-operation between God and humans. Bread is a product of human culture. It took a long time of cultural development until humans were able to bake bread and thus to improve their nutrition. Humans had to learn how to cultivate and how to process cereals. Development of agriculture and development of technology was necessary for the production and processing of cereals. Also baking needed the development of an applicable technology. During thousands of years humans have constantly developed and improved the necessary skills and technologies to produce bread and other things essential for life.

In short, bread is the result of human cultural achievements and it is the product of constant human effort and labour. But it is not only this. The cultural achievement bread is possible for us only because God has designed the world and keeps it in such a way that we can explore and understand it to a certain extent and that we also can make use of the earth and its resources through our work. Without the blessing of God, who lets cereals grow, who entrusts the resources of nature to us and who enables us to recognize a little bit of his blueprints, the cultural achievement bread would not have been possible. “For if God did not let it grow and did not bless it on the land, we would neither be able to take bread out of the oven nor to place it on the table” writes Luther in his Large Catechism.¹⁵ The wise and informed use of natural resources first of all requires that we respect these resources as God’s creation and gift, that we look after them and that we co-operate with God and do not autonomously and egoistically exploit and destroy the gifts entrusted to us. Neither individuals nor industrial companies ought to claim the given resources and God’s ‘blueprints’ as their possession or even apply for patents for what is God’s creation. The wise and informed use of natural resources requires that all humans have fair access to them.

Initially I said that bread is a symbol for all things indispensable to life. This needs some further explanation. Martin Luther in his exposition of the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism answers the question: “What does daily bread mean?” He says, daily bread is “all what is necessary to sustain the body and human life, such as food, drink, clothes, shoes,

¹³ See Joseph Ratzinger loc.cit. p. 186, who again refers to Cyprian.

¹⁴ Exodus 16:9-30

¹⁵ M. Luther, Großer Katechismus: Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, 6. Aufl. Göttingen (1967) 679

house, farm, fields, cattle, money, property, loyal spouse, loyal children, loyal servants, loyal and faithful magistrate, good state of public affairs (good government), good weather, peace, health, modesty, honour, good friends, faithful neighbours and the like”.¹⁶ In the Large Catechism Luther sums up his reflections on bread with these words: “And to make it short: this petition wants to include everything belonging to the full life in the world since for this reason alone we need our daily bread.”¹⁷ This enumeration of things, for which the term *daily bread* stands, clearly shows that Luther understood the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer in a comprehensive way. The petition aims at everything necessary to make life in society possible and to sustain it here and now. In addition to things which are necessary to satisfy the immediate need of humans also things are mentioned which belong to social and political needs.

Luther’s explanation of the meaning of *daily bread* comes amazingly close to the development discourse of recent years. In this discourse it became clear that purely economical and one-dimensional indicators like the gross national product or the average per capita income are no adequate measure for human development. Rather indicators like life expectancy, access to education and health services, participation in decision-making processes, access to and control over resources, gender equality, security, peace, legal security, freedom, good governance etc. have to be taken into account for an assessment of human development. Bread in Luther’s comprehensive understanding is a symbol for human development. The millennium development goals also focus on what bread stands for. Human development aims beyond the immediate needs of the poor like food security, clothing and shelter and includes social, political and cultural aspects of human life.¹⁸ To pray for the daily bread means to pray for the fundamentals of human development. The prayer Jesus taught to his disciples two thousand years ago is still valid in our times.

Let us to turn to another aspect of the forth petition of the Lord’s Prayer which has to do with the translation of this petition. So far I have just followed the translation of the RSV: *Give us this day our daily bread*. However, a footnote in my edition of the RSV points to a different possible translation: *Give us this day our bread for tomorrow*.

The Greek word which can be translated either as *daily* or as *for tomorrow* is *epioulosios*. This unfortunately is a very rare word which occurs again only in a papyrus of the 5th century A.D.¹⁹ The translation of the word therefore is quite uncertain.²⁰ This uncertainty results in different meanings of the forth petition depending on what translation we choose.

If we follow the translation *give us this day our daily bread* the meaning is – as has been explained above – the bread which is necessary for this moment. The petition aims at the earthly bread and at the present. If we follow the translation *give us this day our bread for tomorrow* the meaning changes. Now the *bread for tomorrow* means the bread for the future, the bread of life in the Kingdom of God. How to decide the dilemma of translation?

Joachim Jeremias in an essay on the Lord’s Prayer²¹ suggested to solve the problem by paying attention to an observation already made by the church father Jerome (ca. A.D. 342-420), who wrote that in the now lost Aramaic Gospel of the Nazarenes the Lord’s Prayer has the word *rxm*

¹⁶ M. Luther, *Kleiner Katechismus: Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 6. Aufl. Göttingen (1967) 514: ...omne, quod ad vitae nostrae necessitatem ac sustentationem pertinet veluti cibum, potum, vestes, calceos, domum, aram, agros, pecudes, pecuniam, divitas, probam conjugem, probos liberos, pobos servos, probum ac fidum magistratum, bonum reipublicae statum, commodam aeris temperiem, pacem, sanitatem, modestiam, honorem, bonos amicos, fidos vicinos et id genus alia.

¹⁷ *Der Grosse Katechismus 1529*: O. Clemen (Hg.) *Luthers Werke in Auswahl* Bd. 4, S.71.

¹⁸ cp. the UNDP reports on human development.

¹⁹ J. Ratzinger op.cit. 188

²⁰ Some with reference to Jewish parallels suggest to translate “*necessary bread*”; cp. W. Grundmann op. cit. 202. The German Bible in Just Language, (*Die Bibel in Gerechter Sprache*, hrsg. Von U. Bail, F. Crüsemann u.a., Gütersloh 2006) has: *Das Brot, das wir brauchen* (the bread that we need).

²¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount. The Lord’s Prayer. The Problem of the Historical Jesus*: Facet Books, TPI Bangalore p. 87ff

(*mahar*) which means “tomorrow”. Jeremias argues that the Aramaic Gospel of the Nazarenes, though it most probably is younger than the Synoptic Gospels and was dependent on them, it nevertheless preserves the original Aramaic wording of the Lord’s Prayer. The reason being that “in first-century Palestine the Lord’s Prayer was prayed in uninterrupted usage in Aramaic, and a person translating the Gospel of Matthew into Aramaic naturally did not translate the Lord’s Prayer as he did the rest of the text.”²² Instead of translating he would have used the Aramaic words he knew from his daily prayers. Most scholars seem to agree with Jeremias that the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer must be rendered as: *Give us this day our bread for tomorrow*.²³ According to Jeremias the rare Greek word *epiouisios* stands for the Aramaic *mahar*.

Bread for tomorrow has been understood by some scholars in the sense that it points to the bread of the coming kingdom of God. This interpretation goes back to Jerome, who was of the opinion that *bread for tomorrow* did not mean the earthly bread but the bread of life and he therefore used the word *supersubstantialis* in his translation into Latin.²⁴ *Bread for tomorrow* in this interpretation has an eschatological meaning. Though this interpretation is not commonly accepted and seems to contradict the clearly earthly character of the fourth petition²⁵ an eschatological interpretation could add an important aspect. It can make us aware that ultimately the fullness of life can be achieved and sustained only in God’s Kingdom. Whatever we do on this earth to provide the daily bread for all, if we pray for the *bread for tomorrow* we acknowledge that the fulfilment is yet to come in God’s Kingdom. This does not free us from the duty and responsibility to provide bread and to share it with the hungry here and now; but it sets us free from the burden of being ultimately responsible for everything.

The attitude of prayer for the *bread for tomorrow* and of trust in God whose Kingdom comes is quite contrary the attitude of presumptuous makers who think that they are the ones who can manage and solve the problems of this world. Thus the very prayer for the *bread for tomorrow* criticizes the limited horizon of human activity and the narrow perspective of this life and challenges the belief in technological solutions of all problems. An eschatological understanding of the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer makes us aware that our activity ought to be oriented towards and inspired by the coming Kingdom of God, but that it never can build this Kingdom. The fourth petition can be understood in the light of the other petition in the Lord’s Prayer: *Thy kingdom come*.²⁶

Excursus on the understanding of Biblical texts

If we want to understand the meaning of a text we ought to be aware of the fact that the “text” or even the “original text” is always a reconstruction. In the case of Biblical texts it is a historical and philological reconstruction based on the methods of historical research and philology. Consequently the “meaning” of a text also is a reconstruction. It is not only the author who is responsible for the meaning but also the readers of a text are responsible for the meaning they find in a text. In the case of the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer it depends on the historical and philological reconstruction whether we translate “our daily bread” or “our bread for tomorrow”.

Since both interpretations are reconstructions, though the majority of translations seem to give preference to “our daily bread”, it is in my view possible and permitted to make use of both reconstructions for one’s own construction of the meaning of this text. Interpreting ancient texts like Biblical texts always is influenced by earlier interpretations. Therefore it seems to be legitimate to refer to both interpretations of *epiouisios* in Matthew 6:11. And it also seems to be

²² J. Jeremias op.cit. 88

²³ Cp. E. Schweizer, op.cit. p. 66, J. Ratzinger, op. cit. p.188

²⁴ Cp. J. Jeremias op.cit. 89; J. Ratzinger op. Cit. 188. The Vulgata has the following text of the fourth petition: panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie.

²⁵ Cp. E. Schweizer op.cit. 66 who points out that an eschatological interpretation was improbable, since Jesus in his ministry cared for earthly needs and since the next petition definitely points to life on this earth.

²⁶ Matthew 6,10

legitimate to draw upon the eschatological and Eucharistic interpretation. If we want to grasp the present meaning of a text we need to consider the tradition of its interpretation.

Bread and wine – another cultural achievement, which results from the co-operation between God and humans – in the Eucharist are signs for the presence of Christ in the Christian congregation. Basic foodstuffs, symbols for things that are essential for life and products of God's co-operation with humans make Christ accessible for us and thus demonstrate that He is essential for our lives and that He is given for us. The church fathers therefore almost unanimously understood the petition for the *bread for tomorrow* as a Eucharistic petition.²⁷ So did Martin Luther: "The bread is our Lord Jesus Christ who feeds and comforts the soul."²⁸ Bread and wine are not only on the surface level foodstuffs they are in a deeper understanding food of eternal life.

III.

Finally I shall draw a few conclusions with regards to Christian commitment toward development and Christian development oriented action. I shall try to suggest some specific characteristics which distinguish Christian commitment towards development from other commitments toward development.

The obligation to development oriented action arises out of the misery of a large proportion of mankind. In the light of the complexity of the problems humankind faces, compassion causing the spontaneous human impulse to help is a necessary though not sufficient condition for development oriented action. Development oriented action needs justification and it needs reflection about objectives and methods in order to achieve the desired effects. In short, commitment towards development needs to be professional commitment. This is true also for the Christian commitment towards international development. In this regard Christian commitment towards development is not and must not be different from the commitment of other people.

However, what makes commitment to development distinctive Christian, is in the first place that it is an essential expression of faith and not just optional for Christian churches. It is a characteristic of the Church. This follows from central texts of faith like the Lord's Prayer. Commitment of the Church to development is practice as a consequence of belief in the triune God; it is part of the life of the Church and is clearly ecumenical. Without commitment towards development the Church loses her character as the worldwide body of Christ.

Christian commitment to development as an effort to provide bread for the world does not only aim at the satisfaction of the immediate needs of the poor like food, clothes and shelter, but includes also liberation from despotic rule and social exploitation as well as justice and peace. Thus Christian commitment to development follows the example of Jesus who cared for the earthly needs of people. If the Christians would only pray for the daily bread but would not be concerned about the bread for the world, they would lose their credibility.

A second distinctive feature of Christian commitment towards development is the eschatological horizon of this commitment. The eschatological understanding of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer prevents Christians from an overestimation of human capabilities with regard to combat of poverty and it prevents Christians from overburdening themselves. Thus an eschatological perspective makes us free for action and inspires our action through the promise of the coming Kingdom. Since Christians cannot do everything and need not do everything to overcome poverty and hunger in this world, they are free to act here and now in the light of the future world in order to overcome misery and suffering in this world. Christian commitment towards development is informed by the awareness that all human efforts are tentative and will be overtaken by the future

²⁷ J. Ratzinger op.cit. 189

²⁸ Eine kurze Form der zehen Gebote, eine kurze Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers 1520: O. Clemen (Hg.) Luthers Werke in Auswahl Bd. 2 S. 56.

kingdom of God. All our efforts are based on the hope that the fulfilment will come in Gods Kingdom.

However, in the light of a Eucharistic understanding of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer - and that is the third distinctive feature - it becomes clear that Christian commitment to the overcoming of poverty is not limited to aiming at providing bread in the sense of the things necessary for life. We are aware that humans do not live on bread alone and therefore Christian commitment to development has to offer more than only food and shelter. And we have to offer more indeed, namely the Good News. But we have to be careful not to instrumentalize the misery and poverty of humans in order to convert them. But we must not hide our faith, our foundations and our motives. If we speak of *bread* we do not only mean the bread which feeds our bodies and constitutes the basis of our life on earth, we at the same time mean the Eucharistic bread in which Christ is present and strengthens us. In this sense *bread for the world* is not only a programme for development policy; it is at the same time a theological programme for Christian commitment to development which includes the sharing of faith.

A further distinctive feature of Christian commitment towards development is that it is inclusive. Since we pray for *our daily bread* Christian commitment towards development does not only aim at brothers and sisters in faith, it aims at all people in need. Christians see others as children of God with whom they are deeply connected. Before God all humans are equal, there is no discrimination on the grounds of sex, religion, nationality, social status. Christian commitment towards development therefore is a commitment towards equality based on the Biblical understanding of the human being as created in the image of God.

Finally, Christian commitment towards development, does not aim at strengthening of the Church or of Christian development organizations. Christian commitment towards development is a commitment for others. The Church committed towards development is *Church for others* (Bonhoeffer). However, this does not mean that Christian commitment towards development is paternalistic and creates dependency. Being Church for others means to help others to become independent, responsible and mature people. Everybody who tries to help others – and this is of course true also for Christians – is in danger to make others dependent through aid. This however would contradict the example of Jesus who, wherever he turned to people who needed his help, literally helped them to come on their own feet. Christian commitment towards development ought to have a liberating and emancipatory effect.