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James Will

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

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MUST WALLS CONTINUE TO DIVIDE?

by James Will

Dr. James Will (United Methodist) is professor of systematic theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. Dr. Will is a frequent visitor and lecturer to Eastern Europe and has written prolifically on issues dealing with Eastern Europe, including a book, Must Walls Divide? He is a former president of C.A.R.E.E. and an advisory editor of OPREE. His articles appeared in OPREE, Vol. I, No. 2 and Vol. II, No. 4. The present article is a longer version of an editorial by the same title in The Christian Century, Vol. 106, No. 39 (December 20-27, 1989), pp. 1191-1192, copyrighted by the Christian Century Foundation and used here by their permission.

Millions have been celebrating the breaching of the wall that has divided Germany for twenty-eight years. Especially those who have lived in Berlin, as I did in 1967-68, celebrate the removal of this inhuman barrier. Many of my friends and neighbors amongst the 2.2 million residents were and are the children, parents, and grandparents of the 1.1 million persons in East Berlin, from whom they were literally cut off by concrete and barbed wire. Winston Churchill's rhetorical image of an "iron curtain" dividing our world into East and West was palpable in their emotional pain and loneliness. The celebration of the removal of such a dividing wall is spontaneous and inevitable; but the spirit, or Spirit, in which we celebrate requires thought and prayer.

"Must Walls Divide?" was the title of a book I wrote ten years ago with my imagination moved by the metaphor of this Berlin wall. Those who read this book as a part of the 1981 ecumenical study of the mission of the European churches discovered, however, that an even more important image was provided in Ephesians 2:14: "Jesus Christ . . . has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." I wrote then what I think still help guide our celebration of the breaking down of walls today:

The good news of Christian proclamation includes Christ's victory over the hostilities dividing human beings. This does not mean that a Christian's perception of quite real walls is somehow dulled. If anything, Christian sensitivity to the human tragedies created by such walls is heightened by the gospel. Rather, it means that the life of faith and the community of the faithful are found on both sides of every wall. Christians thus experience every political, economic, or ethnic wall as provisional and penetrable. No wall reaches to heaven or penetrates the heart for heaven belongs to Christ who guards faithful hearts. It is characteristic of Christians to move through walls regularly, whether
by prayer, letter, gift, or travel. . . . The penetration of walls must increasingly become a commonplace for Christians.¹

The dominant mood and mode of celebration in our media, and I fear some of our churches, reveals, however, that "the dividing wall of hostility" has penetrated our hearts, and to continue the metaphor, it functions like a coronary block to inhibit the reconciliation achieved through the shedding of Christ's blood. What else can we say of those who see the breaching of the "iron curtain" primarily as victory for Western-style market capitalism, the meaning of freedom primarily as access to the glut of Western consumerism on the Kurfürstendamm of West Berlin, and attribute these changes primarily to the success of former President Reagan's aggressive military posture and policies? The spirit of these claims betrays the continuing corrosion of our human alienations and hostility. Christians, on the other hand, who long since have penetrated this not-so-iron curtain by prayer and ecumenical communication with our East European brothers and sisters continue to celebrate the gracious providence whereby God breaks down our human dividing walls of hostility.

Writing for the Christian Century in 1982, I interpreted on two occasions the perspective and program of the European peace movements for American audiences. Few remember almost eight years later that crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands were marching then in the western cities of Bonn, London, Rome, Brussels, Amsterdam, and others, just as they are now marching in the Eastern cities of Berlin, Leipzig, Prague, and Budapest. Though the motives are significantly different, there is considerable overlap in the longings for a just society, concerns for demilitarization, and the reallocation of economic resources. Ironically, there were Americans in 1982 who claimed that representatives of the European peace movements were "supporting the Kremlin line,"² just as similar voices now attribute the mass movements in the East to the victorious influence of U.S. policies. I think they were and are largely wrong in both cases.

George F. Will, whose ideas often lead me to regret the sharing of the same family name, is perhaps the best informed of those who articulate the ideological perspective. In trumpeting the year 1989 as the most significant year ever in human history—no small claim for even a ideological columnist—he suggests that only the year of the Protestant Reformation was remotely comparable.³ But he erroneously took Thomas Jefferson as his key to interpret the Reformation, so that he can claim both that the primary idea of the

Reformation was the primacy of individual conscience and that "today history is marching to the cadence of an American president." I think again he is wrong on both counts.

Is there a responsible scholar anywhere who would substitute the "primacy of individual conscience" for justification by grace through faith as the primary idea of Martin Luther? Certainly no one who had read Luther's arguments for the bondage of the human will in polemical rejection of Erasmus' affirmation of individual freedom. The intricacies of that argument are not our point, however, except as they apply to the Christian understanding of our dependence on God's gracious initiatives for personal and social transformation in general, and the Lutheran church's role in the recent changes in the German Democratic Republic in particular. In neither case should we interpret significant social change from a Reformation perspective with anything analogous to George Will's American individualistic ideology. I am sure that Luther would continue to teach us that God's gracious presence and guidance has preceded our every constructive human response in both East and West, and few know that better than the leaders of the church in Luther's homeland, now known amongst us as East Germany.

Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, student and disciple of Dietrich Bonhoeffer before finally becoming bishop of the Church of Berlin-Brandenburg and chairman of the Federation of Protestant Churches in the German Democratic Republic, characterized the experience of his church after World War II as "the school of God." Because he understood himself and his church from the standpoint of justification by grace, he wrote, "In the confidence that God faithfully supports those who place themselves in his service, we can understand this period as a school." The church he helped lead from this Lutheran and Bonhoefferian stance could develop its responsible witness in a socialist society with the confidence that, "If God's free grace is the ultimate reality in this world, nothing can separate us from the love of God."

With the faith that no ideological or political wall was more powerful than God's liberating and reconciling grace, they witnessed to their discernment of God's presence and action in their difficult context. One of the results was the leadership given by one of their creative women, Christa Lewek, in the "Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act," which she carried from 1980-85 from her office as secretary for church and society of the Federation of Protestants Churches.

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4 Must Walls Divide?, p. 64-72, quotation from p. 62.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 68.
A more fateful and fruitful program contributing to the events we now celebrate was their high priority commitment to peace witness and service that was inaugurated in 1980. It was carefully described and critically evaluated by Christa Lewek and Günter Krusche, general superintendent of the Church of Berlin-Brandenburg and former professor of practical theology in the theological seminary of East Berlin, in a book I had the privilege of editing in 1985, *The Moral Rejection of Nuclear Deterrence.* The theological basis for this program as articulated by the Federation of Protestant Churches is so much more profound than the ideological perspectives expressed by those like George F. Will, that it deserves to be known and celebrated by North American Christians now. Our East German brothers and sisters decided to make visible witness in ways that "revealed the gospel and which themselves often disappear in political action," which they characterized as:

Forgiveness, which makes possible one's own action and one's own first steps, even when they involve risk (and risk they did).

The privilege of encouraging others, without concern for one's self, to exhibit freedom from prejudice, openness and temperance in negotiations and discussions (and open discussions emerged).

The admonition given in God's word to see ourselves, the church, and our own country critically (and criticism was powerfully articulated).

The prayer that within and beyond our activity the final decision be left to God (and God worked and is working in and with them and us).8

Their witness eventuated in social and finally political action without being ideologically swallowed up and disappearing, and it is incumbent upon us North American Christians not to let it disappear in our celebrations today. One of the principal instruments they developed beginning in 1980 was their annual Friedensdekade (Ten Days for Peace) held each November. Congregations throughout the GDR engaged in prayer for peace, peace workshops, peace celebrations, peace correspondence with Christians in other nations, etc. These provided the opening which the creative unrest and driving imagination of East German youth especially were seeking. The church became the safe social space for their critical reflection and action with some amazing results. The bishop of the Methodist Church in the GDR, Dr. Rüdiger Minor, told some of us that a poll conducted by his office in 1988 indicated that forty percent of the youth in the Methodist churches had become conscientious objectors to the military training and service required in their country. It was the churches'

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7Funded by the Ford Foundation and published in New York by Friendship Press.

8From *The Moral Rejection of Nuclear Deterrence*, p. 120.
at the Berlin wall with words attributed to a West German radio station: "The celebration was Christmas, New Year's and Easter rolled into one." That surely hyperbolic exclamation, nevertheless, carries more theological truth than the editors of *Newsweek* may ever understand. But Lech Walesa and Albrecht Schönherr would understand. And so should we!

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18George Will, *op.cit.*, p. 27.