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The Kingdom of God and the Church Today

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It is an immense privilege to have this opportunity to share the Word of God this morning during the 11th General Assembly of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Many important and well-known scholars and leaders have occupied this platform before me along the years, and I do not feel worthy to be in their company. At the same time I understand the challenge given by God and I thank the leadership of WEF that graciously gave me this honour.

I pray that God's holy and eternal word shall be made alive for us once again, as his international church, here represented by people from so

many nations, organizations, denominations and local churches.

The Kingdom of God

The theme for the meditation this morning is the kingdom of God and the church today. Both concepts, the kingdom and of the church, have roots in the Old Testament. Both have been discussed by the theologians and by the grassroots constituency throughout the history of the Christian era, and there would be a lot to mention about these discussions. But let us begin with saying something about the kingdom of God—the *Basileia tou Theou*.

Definition of Kingdom of God

The Old Testament background for the concept of kingdom is expressed in several texts where the Hebrew words *Malekut* (reign) and *Malak* (king) are used. The use of the terms tells us about a kingdom and a king of a divine nature, in contrast with other nations and rulers. The kingdom of Yahweh is often mentioned in

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the Psalms and in the later prophets (Psalms 47; 93; 96; 97; 99; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 46:18; 48:15; 51:57; Daniel 7:14,27). Yahweh has become King—the Lord reigns! In Judaism the emphasis is laid on the idea of the Lordship of the Messiah (Isaiah 9:7; 11:1 ff). *Malekut* is much more the power of the king than the locality, being in the beginning more political and later in the understanding of Judah more eschatological. For us the text of Daniel 7 is a key to understanding our passage in Revelation 11:15

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7.13,14).¹

In the New Testament, *Basileia* follows the idea from the Old Testament and only God the Father and Christ are given the full right to the title King.² *Basileia* is more frequently used in the Synoptics and in the book of Revelation, but occurs even in the letters of Paul and in John's other writings.

If we look to the history of the church and the theological discussions we will find many different ways to define the kingdom of God.

To take just a few examples:

- Augustine, one of the early Fathers, identified the kingdom with the church. As the church grows, the kingdom grows and is extended in the world;
- Some Protestant theologians have taught a modified form of this interpretation, holding that the kingdom of God may be identified only with the true church, i.e., the professing church;
- One more optimistic version holds that it is the mission of the Church to win the entire world to Christ and thus transform the world into the kingdom of God;
- Adolf von Harnack, reduced the kingdom of God to the subjective realm and understood it in terms of the human spirit and its relationship to God;
- C.H. Dodd teaches that the kingdom has entered into time and space in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, being the absolute, the 'wholly other';
- Albert Schweitzer defines the kingdom as an apocalyptic realm to be inaugurated by a supernatural act of God when a new heavenly order of existence begins. It is, for him, altogether future and supernatural.³
- The theologians of the Liberation Theology would define the kingdom of God as this world totally and globally transformed in its political, social and economic structures. Leonard Boff, one of the main

¹ The text used is the NIV—New International Version.

² B. Klappert, 'King, Kingdom', in Colin Brown, (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975), p. 378.

³ The examples are extracted from George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 13-23.

Liberation theologians, criticises the traditional approach to the kingdom of God as being a gnostic spiritualised view. He means that the kingdom is here and now but needs to be transformed through a total liberation from evil.⁴

We could continue finding other definitions of the kingdom of God; maybe all of them, or at least the majority, would give us some insights into the issue, but not a full understanding—probably that is impossible. If the disciples of Jesus had a hard time to understand the meaning of the kingdom and asked the wrong question on their graduation day, it looks as if we have had the same problem during the history of the church. Too often we have mixed it up with human values and earthly paradigms.

What we perhaps could agree on, based on the Scriptures, is that the kingdom of God is:

- A present spiritual reality;
- An inheritance bestowed upon God's people at the Second Coming of Christ;
- A realm into which the followers of Jesus Christ have already entered; and
- A future realm that we will enter when Christ returns.

Summarising G.E. Ladd's definition:

The Kingdom is a present reality (Mt. 12:28) and yet it is a future blessing (I Cor. 15:50). It is an inner spiritual redemptive blessing (Rom. 14:17) which can be experienced only by way of the new birth

(John 3:3), and yet it will have to do with the government of the nations of the world (Rev. 11:15). The Kingdom is a realm into which men enter now (Mt. 21:31), and yet it is a realm into which they will enter tomorrow (Mt. 8:11). It is at the same time a gift of God which will be bestowed by God in the future (Luke 12:32) and yet which must be received in the present (Mark 10:15). Obviously no simple explanation can do justice to such a rich but diverse variety of teaching.⁵

John Bright says:

It lies at the very heart of the gospel message to affirm that the Kingdom of God has in a real sense become present fact, here and now. In the person and work of Jesus the Kingdom of God has intruded into the world.⁶

And he continues:

It becomes clear that the Kingdom of God in the New Testament must be understood in a two-fold aspect: it has come and is even now in the world; it is also yet to come. In the tension between the two the Church must live, and must always live, as the 'eschatological community'.⁷

The Norwegian missiologists Berentsen, Engelsviken and Jørgensen, in their excellent book *Missiology Today*, describe the kingdom of God as having both a soteriological and an eschatological perspective. In the 'salvation' concept they include the preaching of the gospel but also the social action. They say:

The saving power of the Kingdom of God is also active in the mission of the apostles, in a battle not 'against flesh and blood, but against authorities and powers, ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). The emphasis of the Gospel on the relation between the

⁵ Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p.18

⁶ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), p. 216

⁷ Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 237

⁴ Daniel Guimarães, *Teologia da Libertação* (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil: JUERP, 1984), pp. 68,69.

commission given to the disciples and the Kingdom of God lays this extensive soteriological perspective on the Christian mission for all times. To the proclamation of the Gospel belongs the liberating and reliving deeds of love.⁸

About the eschatological perspective they conclude:

The eschatological perspective of the Gospel is basically marked by the tension between the Kingdom of God already present in Jesus, and the fact that it will be revealed fully when the Son of Man comes on 'the heavenly clouds'.⁹

The centrality of the theme in the teaching of Jesus

The Lord's prayer, 'your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt. 6:10) is one of the many examples of the emphasis laid by Jesus on the kingdom. And there is no doubt about the centrality of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. It is a Christological message. Origen said once that he (Jesus) is an '*autobasileia*' though whom God works.¹⁰

Rene Padilla, making a comment on that, says:

Ultimately the Gospel is Himself (both his person and his mission). The key for understanding the Gospel of Jesus lies in the dynamic interpretation that the term kingdom (*basileia*) has. The Kingdom that Jesus proclaims is God's power active among men in his own person and work.¹¹

Jesus made himself the subject of his preaching on the kingdom of God and it is impossible to separate Jesus, the Messiah, from the gospel of the kingdom. He was fully aware of the meaning and the content of his mission. The reading of the prophet Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth was a clear declaration of mission as king (his mission statement) giving the priorities of his reign:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has *anointed* me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18,19).

Even if Jesus was not concerned about titles and human position, he declares his royalty several times—for example, when the disciples of John came and asked if he was the Messiah they waited for, and in the judgement process against him before Pilate and the Sanhedrin. (Mt. 11:5; 26:63,64; 27:11).

Characteristics of The Kingdom of God

What characterises the kingdom of God according to the New Testament? We could spend much time talking about the different aspects of the kingdom, but I want to mention a few of its distinctive characteristics as I understand the teaching of the New Testament.

- The kingdom is God's absolute reign, not a geographic territory—Mt. 18:1-4;
- The kingdom is Christ centred—Eph. 5:5; Mt. 25:31 ff; Acts 2:36;

⁸ Jan-Martin Berendtsen, Tormod Engelsen, & Knud Jørgensen, *Missiologi Idag* (Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1992), pp. 182,183.

⁹ Berendtsen, *Missiologi Idag*, p. 183.

¹⁰ Origen, Commentary on Matthew, book 14, section 7, quoted by René Padilla, *Guds Rike och Kyrkans Uppdrag* (Örebro, Sweden: Bokförlaget Libris, 1988), p.17.

¹¹ Padilla, *Guds Rike och Kyrkans Uppdrag*, p.17

- It is a reality in the present era but will be manifested in a perfect and complete way in the future. Several of the parables of Jesus speak about the tension between the present and the future (Mt. 13; Mark 10:30; Eph. 1:21);
- The kingdom, to the human eye, can appear insignificant today but it can have a strong impact on the society depending on the action of the church and its members (Mt. 13:31-34);
- The kingdom tells us about the total and final victory over Satan, sin and the death. We can take part of this victory through the new birth in Christ, being born into the kingdom. That demands a radical conversion based on a conscious decision to follow Christ (I Cor. 15:24-28; Rev. 20:1-7; Mt. 5:20);
- The result of being a citizen of the kingdom is salvation and eternal life. The kingdom belongs also to the citizens—the followers of the king Jesus (Rev. 5:20; 22:5);
- The kingdom of God has principles and values that must be followed and lived out by the disciples of Christ. The ethical and moral standards are high, and nothing less than a search for holiness, perfection and justice is accepted. A holy nation! (1 Peter 2:9; Mt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23; 23:23);
- Citizenship in the kingdom is not according to human values and criteria (Mt. 5:3,10; 25:34; Luke 6:20 ff);
- People can reject the kingdom today, but one day 'every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord' (Phil. 2:9-11; Daniel 7:27);
- The gospel of the kingdom must be proclaimed to every people, tribe, tongue and nation, so that all people have the opportunity to glorify God and get to know the plan of salvation. Through the proclamation of the kingdom its principles and values of the kingdom will also be spread (Acts 8:12; 28:31);
- The church is not the kingdom but an agent of the kingdom in the world (1 Peter 2:9).

Present and yet not

Perhaps the biggest problem for us is the fact that the kingdom is not totally present and seen in our days. I suppose that most of us long for the day when the kingdom will finally be installed. The 'already and yet not', a classic term in the neo-evangelical theology, explains the theoretical tension but there is not always response of the heart. I believe that the kingdom could be much more present in our midst if we as a church and as Christians were aware of the power of the kingdom and of the importance of sharing Christian values. A hindrance for a greater impact of the kingdom of God in our society has been our incapacity to present the real gospel, the heart of the Christian message, free from all our ecclesiastic and cultural baggage. It has been hard for many people-groups to understand how the gospel has something to do with their history, tradition and culture, or, in what way the Christian message has

an answer for their present needs. One day there will be no doubt—the king Jesus is the Lord of all and the kingdom belongs to born-again people from all nations, cultures and tongues.

Our text

The text from the book of Revelation chapter 11 verse 15 that is the starting point for our meditation says:

‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever’.

We could spend much time analysing the text, very rich as it is. I just want to come back to the text before entering on the theme of the church so we do not think that the text was only a pretext and to apply some of the thoughts about the kingdom to it. For John, the author of the book of Revelation, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven is a central subject. The ultimate rule of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed to be the king for ever, is the liberating message for the human race and for all creation being freed from sin, death and the devil once for all (Rev. 12:10-12), or as it is written on his robe, ‘The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords’ (Rev. 19:6,16).

Our text says, ‘the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ’. The kingdom of this *kosmos*. *Kosmos* can mean the universe, or the world in terms of the sphere or place of human life—the earth, or humanity. Guhrt defines *kosmos* in the writings of the apostle John as ‘the world of men that constitutes a uniform subject which opposes God in enmity,

resists the redeeming work of the Son, does not believe in him, and indeed hates him’.¹²

I believe that John includes both the creation and the creature, both the earth as the habitat of people and mankind. The whole *kosmos* is longing for freedom and relief (Rom. 8:18-22). But even if the prince of this *kosmos* still rules (John 12:31), the final victor is Jesus Christ (John 16:33).

It is interesting to look at the tense of the verb ‘to become’. In the original text it is in the past tense ‘aorist’, meaning that it is a consummated fact. There is no doubt about the victory of Christ over the enemy and that it has already happened. The kingdom is already *present* based on an event which occurred in the *past*, giving guarantees for the whole *future*. He will reign for ever, for ‘*aiónos*’, for all eternity!

The Church of Christ

It is also important for us today to look at the church and how the community of believers fits into the whole issue of the kingdom of God. Again, it is impossible to deal with all the different aspects that could be interesting to discuss when we talk about the church. We have a task force in the Missions Commissions working with that issue and I hope that we can present something more substantial in a few months.

God’s creation of the Church

I believe that the church is God’s idea and creation. We have, of course,

¹² J. Guhrt, ‘Earth’, in NIDNTT, vol 1, p. 525.

the Old Testament background where a nation was formed to be the channel for blessing for the whole mankind. In Jesus, the second Adam, a new race was created, forming a new people described by Peter as: 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (I Peter 2:9). The initiative comes from God himself. The church is not a human invention to build an institution that takes money from people and gives jobs to those who cannot do real work.

Even if someone does not agree that the church was born on the day of Pentecost, there is no doubt that it was the Holy Spirit that made, out of the group of disciples, a community that started growing and became the early church. If we follow the history of that first church narrated in the book of the Acts, we can see the continuous initiative of God, through his Holy Spirit, making his church more and more international and plural-cultural. (Acts 2; 13:1-3).

The spiritual and sociological nature of the Church

The church is in its essence spiritual. Peter says: 'As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (I Peter 2:4). As we all know, 'spiritual house' (*oikos pneumatikos*) is the spiritual construction that God is making. We are, as individuals, temples for the Holy Spirit, but also stones in the whole spiritual building.

But the church has also a sociological nature. One of the terms used especially by Paul is that we are 'the Body of Christ'. 'Body' tells us about relationship, dependence, and unity in the diversity with mutuality (I Cor. 12). Christ himself is the head and we are members of his body. The community of believers, another way to define the church, based on the description of the church in Jerusalem, gives us a lot to think about in terms of the social dynamic among the Christians.

Howard Snyder defines the church as body, community and people:

The Church is the Body of Christ, the community of the Holy Spirit, the people of God. It is the community of the King and the agent in the world of God's plan for the reconciliation of all things.¹³

Bo Nylund says:

The Church is a community that is called to serve the Kingdom, to build the Kingdom and to show the signs of the Kingdom.¹⁴

The missionary nature of the Church

The church has also a missionary nature. Quoting Peter again,

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, *that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*. (The RSV says, 'declare the wonderful deeds'). (I Peter 2:9)

¹³ H. Snyder, 'The Church in God's Plan', in Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Third Edition) (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), p. 141

¹⁴ Bo Nylund, 'Kyrkobegreppet i Latinamerikansk Befrielseologi', *Svensk Missionstidskrift* (Uppsala, Sweden, 1989) 89/10, p. 5

Johannes Blauw is radical when he comments on this text. He says:

'What does this mean if not that the Church of Jesus Christ only has the right to call itself 'Church' if it is a missionary Church?'¹⁵

Blauw gives a strong emphasis on the Greek term *hopôs* ('so that'—translated in the NIV by 'that you may'), affirming that this word indicates exclusive finality. The church is 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a people belonging to God' with the exclusive purpose of proclaiming the gospel. Certainly, we have other texts that show us that the mission given to the church is broader than just the proclamation. But I believe that we still need to stress the fact that the church has the responsibility for the expansion of the kingdom and a vocation given by God to spread the Good News of salvation to all. The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole man in the whole world.¹⁶

The expansion of the Church in the world today

Christianity is the only religion that is really global. There are very few countries in the world where the Christian church has not been established. At the same time there are hundreds and thousands of people groups that are not reached with the gospel. Missionary work is still an unfinished task. The concentration of foreign missionaries is still very high in the areas where the church is

already strong and growing. Only a small percentage of the missionaries are working where the real needs are. We receive every day new missionaries to Latin America and we have a hard time to send out as many Latin Americans to other parts of the world as we receive, just to try to maintain a balance. Maybe Latin America is not the most needy place in the world for evangelism just now, although we still have unreached indigenous tribes and one or two countries with a very low percentage of evangelical Christians. I wish we could be more strategic and wise in our sending of missionaries, especially those who have the resources and the people so they can choose the place where to send them.

But the Christian church is growing. In Latin America we have nations where almost half of the population professes the new birth in Christ. But have we seen any changes in those countries in terms of social justice, human rights, ethical and moral standards, end of corruption and of violence? Very little. Why?

I think Orlando Costas had the answer:

The issue seems to me to be not whether the church is growing, but whether it is authentically engaged in the mission of the triune God in its concrete socio-historical situations. It is a matter of efficacious participation in the ongoing life-struggles of society in a total witnessing engagement, which, more than a program or a method, is a lifestyle. For when this happens, the church is turned upside-down. It becomes a living organism, a dynamic training and research centre, and an effective team that is capable of leading multitudes to Jesus Christ. In such circumstances, the church is turned inside-out; its structures are put at the service of

¹⁵ Johannes Blauw, *A Natureza Missionária da Igreja* (São Paulo, Brazil: ASTE, 1966), p. 129.

¹⁶ Theme of the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization in 1974.

the kingdom and its missionary practice is transformed into a comprehensive endeavour, where the gospel is shared in depth and out of the depths of human life'.¹⁷

So, perhaps, our problem, at least in Latin America, is not so much whether we grow or not. The main issue is that we grow in quantity but not very much in quality. A deeper understanding of the discipleship must follow the expansion of the church.

The growing number of believers must signify a greater influence in the society. The big churches and the mega-churches can be good, but if they do not advance the kingdom of God and are occupied only with advancing their own private kingdoms, we have gained very little for the present age and maybe also for the eternity.

The expectations on the Church from the world

There are high expectations on the church today. Even the governments count on the church for helping to solve the problems of the society. Of course, there are many exceptions and nations where the church has no or very little chance to influence. But in many of our countries we have the access and the opportunity to take part in the daily administration of a neighbourhood, a city or even a state and a whole nation. We have people here that can witness to that.

The main question is, are we willing to give up some of our taboos and prejudices? Can we agree that

Karl Marx was wrong when he said that the religion is the opium for the people, meaning that the church led people to forget their daily life, thinking only of a heaven in the future? Or shall we continue to reinforce our inferiority complex that we cannot do anything because there are such strong powers at work in the economic and political world arena that no one, not even God, can change the course of this planet?

Ladd says about the challenge of church in bringing forth the kingdom:

The evil, demonic powers that the church must face in the eschatological consummation are in principle no different from the autocratic power that the church has had to face in secular states throughout her history.¹⁸

Lets us keep this challenge in mind and go on to see the relation between the kingdom of God and the Church.

The Relation between the Kingdom of God and the Church of Christ

The Church as the agent of the Kingdom

A question that arose early in the church was the equivalence or not between the kingdom of God and the church of believers in Christ.

Johannes Blauw states:

In the New Testament the Church is never presented as equivalent to the Kingdom of God, but it is also true that they are never presented as opposites to one another. The Church is not the Kingdom but its

¹⁷ Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 54.

¹⁸ Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 161

manifestation and form. The Church is the sign that the new future broke forth in the world.¹⁹

Rene Padilla has the same view:

The church is not the Kingdom of God, but it is the visible result of the Kingdom. The church still carries the signs of the historical presence of the Kingdom, the signs of the 'not yet' that impact the present age.²⁰

Charles Van Engen chooses to call the church the 'branch' or the 'filial' of the kingdom.²¹

Verkuyyl says about the relation between kingdom and church:

The Kingdom is, of course, far broader than the church alone. God's Kingdom is all embracing in respect of both point of view and purpose; it signifies the consummation of the whole of history; it has cosmic proportions and fulfils time and eternity. Meanwhile, the church, the believing and active community of Christ, is raised up by God among all nations to share in the salvation and suffering service of the Kingdom. The church consists of those whom God has called to stand at His side to act out with Him the drama of the revelation of the Kingdom come and coming.²²

As I see it, the kingdom is not only the church, even if the church belongs to and represents the kingdom on earth and in history. The church is not merely an instrument but an agent of transformation of the kingdom, having the responsibility to make the kingdom visible. People

looking at the church must see the kingdom in action and the church has to advance the kingdom among all nations making disciples of Christ.

Snyder advocates the use of the term 'agent':

I purposely speak of the Church as the agent of the Kingdom, rather than merely as a sign or symbol of the Kingdom or as an inanimate tool in God's hands.²³

So, today it is the Body of Christ, the community of the King, that makes the kingdom visible, attractive and present in our fallen world. We are, says Peter, the royal priesthood, priests of the kingdom, with the same double function that the priests in the Old Testament had: to be a channel for God's blessings to all nations, and to be intercessors for the redemption of every person and every nation.

The Church integrated in the society representing the Kingdom

Only by taking an active part can we influence this process. Jesus is very clear to his disciples when he prayed for them and when he taught them about their relation to the world.

Jesus prayed:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:15-18)

It has been hard for us to understand how the Christian church could be integrated into society without being infected by the sinful mind of

¹⁹ Blauw, *A Natureza Missionária da Igreja*,

p. 79

²⁰ Padilla, *Guds Rike och Kyrkans Uppdrag*,

p. 33

²¹ C. Van Engen, *Povo Missionário, Povo de Deus* (São Paulo, Brazil: Edições Vida Nova, 1996), p. 133

²² J. Verkuyyl, quoted by Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 185, 186.

²³ Howard Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1977), p. 13.

this world. The truth is that we have been much more influenced by the mentality of the world through passivity than if we had taken the initiative to really impact and actively fight for transformation of our societies. I could mention more than one case in Latin America where we have seen an active local church making a difference in the neighbourhood and in the whole city. Is it done overnight? No, it takes time, patience, courage and a lot of dependency on the Holy Spirit to see a city or a neighbourhood changed for the better.

Maybe it is only we Latin Americans that run away from difficult situations. It is much easier to sit, or stand, in the temple and sing great hymns of praise for God's victory and how he will judge and win over his enemies. I do not know about you, but especially our charismatic churches, and I belong to one, love to sing songs of spiritual warfare using military texts from the Old Testament. The real war against the devil and his demons is not done only through spiritual exercises in singing and praying, but also, and especially, in the daily battle taking part in the society standing for the values and principles of the kingdom.

And that leads us to the next point.

The impact of the Church in the society defending the Kingdom values

Valdir Steuernagel, says in his commentary on the song of Mary, The Magnificat:

The kingdom of God represents a reality of hope precisely because it embraces the lonely, comforts the despairing, takes care of the abandoned, protects the exploited,

liberates the oppressed, raises up those who are discriminated against, and chooses Mary as the blessed one. In God's kingdom there is no room for a social, economic and political practice where the place at the table of decisions, of brotherhood and of food is made according to the criteria of having (the rich), of knowing (the proud), and of power (the powerful). The best way to understand the kingdom of God and how its dynamics work is to look at the life of Jesus—the things he said and did.²⁴

Roger Hedlund reminds us that:

The two tiny parables of salt, 'You are the salt of the earth' (Mt. 5:13), and light, 'You are the light of the world' (Mt. 5:14-16), emphasize witness in society through kingdom living. The scope of this witness and influence is worldwide. Jesus intended for his followers to take his teachings seriously and practice them in all ages. Otherwise, these two sayings are meaningless.²⁵

The disturbing question remains, Why do we not see more influence of the Christian witness in our world today? Is the kingdom of this earth to be converted to the kingdom of Christ only an eschatological hope? Or can we expect that Christ can reign and his kingdom be a reality, even in a limited way, already here and now? Must we wait until Revelation 11:15 is fully fulfilled, when Jesus Christ has been finally enthroned in the eternal kingdom or can we suppose that the church today can be an agent of transformation in our societies, so that Jesus begins already to reign in our nations and that the signs of the kingdom are visible for our generation?

²⁴ Valdir Steuernagel, *I Sing of Hope*, (Monrovia: MARC—World Vision, 1993), pp. 73, 74.

²⁵ Hedlund, R. *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 175.

The Challenges for the Church in the 21st Century

To sum up some of the thoughts during this meditation, I want to mention a few challenges I feel are crucial for the credibility of the church today:

To be relevant for our historical moment

The gospel, preached by the church today, must be relevant for the historical moment in which we live. How can we expect to be respected, trusted and believed if we do not present a message, based on the Bible, that has to do with the needs of people? The diverse situations in the world today demand a new whole new openness and flexibility from the church. We cannot live in the illusion that the same good theology done by great Germans, Swedes, Americans and others, will function and be of relevance for other parts of the world.

We need also to address the real issues of our time both in a more global aspect like the globalisation, post-modernism, secularism, religious encounter, suffering, poverty, and so on, but also the issues that are important for the different regions, nations and localities.

If we fail to present the gospel of the kingdom for the young generation independently where they live, we will see a much stronger growth of New Age, Spiritualism, and even of other religions in our societies. And we will also condemn our teenagers and children to a world without any hope and with very little of influence of the kingdom values.

To take seriously the missionary vocation

Secondly, the 'chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, people belonging to God' exists to declare and proclaim the salvation plan of God. We must have the realistic view of the kingdom that I believe the Bible has. Heaven is not here, at least not before the return of Christ. The kingdom will not fully come to this earth, and we will never see human societies transformed in such a way that they could replace heaven. But God has a plan, a way of salvation made possible through the work of Christ. Only by faith in Jesus as the only Saviour and Lord have we access to the kingdom. There is no other way. That means that the church must take the missionary vocation very seriously today, both in the North and in the South. At the same time that we see the missionary movement growing in the new sending countries, there is a tendency to stagnation and decrease in the old sending countries. Do we still believe in the North that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation and that a personal commitment to him is necessary for participation in his kingdom?

Let me quote from the Lausanne Covenant:

We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ,

being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. There is no other name by which we must be saved.²⁶

Jun Vencer summarises the Mission of WEF as 'the total mobilisation of churches and Christian organizations to work together and to share resources in discipling every nation for Jesus Christ'.²⁷

To defend the principles of the Kingdom of God in a holistic way

Thirdly, we are challenged by God to defend kingdom values and principles in every nation and situation through a true discipleship.

If I may quote Jun Vencer again, as he presents the vision of WEF in the following words:

The vision of WEF is to see the world reached for Christ. It is to disciple every nation where there is a vital Christian witness, justice for all, diminishing poverty among the poor, and where lasting peace is enjoyed by people.²⁸

The Lausanne Covenant affirms also:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.²⁹

Real discipleship involves more than good theories and change of

terminology. It is a whole change of mentality, a *metanoia*, according to the mentality of Christ. (Rom. 12:2; Phil. 2:5). The fact that the kingdom will not come in fullness on this earth does not give us the right to give up the effort of bringing it to every society and nation. That does not mean that we need theologies that are a defence of the opulence of the rich, nor a theology that fights only for the political and economical liberty of the oppressed. These kind of theologies are based on the assumption that the kingdom is merely earthly. What we need to do is to struggle for the coming of the kingdom, the implantation of the values and the principles of the kingdom, knowing nevertheless that the final establishment of the kingdom of Christ is an eschatological reality.

The church must defend and struggle for the issues of restoration of individuals, families and nations. Christians must be paladins of peace and reconciliation, of release from political oppression and freedom from spiritual bondage, of social justice, of equality between races and gender, of concern about the environment and of religious liberty. I believe that we must go back to the synagogue of Nazareth and listen to the mission statement Jesus gave for his kingdom.

A conquering Church—defeating the Enemy in every nation, area of life and society!

Jesus said to his disciples when they had recognised that he was the Christ, the son of the living God, that 'on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not over-

²⁶ The Lausanne Covenant, point 3: 'The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ.'

²⁷ J. Vencer, 'On the Vision of WEF' in W. Harold Fuller, (ed.) *People of the Mandate* (Grand Rapids: WEF and Baker), p. 196.

²⁸ Vencer, 'On the Vision of WEF', p. 196

²⁹ The Lausanne Covenant, point 5: 'Christian Social Responsibility.'

come it' (Mt. 16:18). The church is a conquering church. The church should not run away being afraid of the enemy. On the contrary, it is the church that conquers new territory, that invades the reign of evil and that releases people from the slavery of sin. Again, we must lay aside our inferiority complex, the feeling that we are like 'grasshoppers before Nephelins' (Num. 13:31-33).

To proclaim the final coming of the Kingdom in its fullness.

Ultimately our hope is for the final and definitive establishment of the kingdom of God. We do what we can and pray that the Lord does what he wants to for the advancing of the kingdom in the present era, but we know that only when Jesus Christ returns will the kingdom be seen in its fullness and perfection. The Christian hope is an important message for people today. The humanistic and the optimistic standpoint by which we can transform this world into a heaven is gone. But there is light at the end of the tunnel. The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ in its full sense.

Conclusion

Lesslie Newbigin, concludes his commentary on the proclamation of the kingdom of the Father and the mission of the church, saying:

Mission is faith in action. It is the acting out by proclamation and by endurance, through all the events of history, of the faith that the kingdom of God has drawn near. It is the acting out of the central prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to use: 'Father, hallowed by thy name, thy

kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as in heaven'.³⁰

In these last years we have, focused very much on ecclesiology in our local communities and in our denominations and organizations. We need to see the bigger picture, the kingdom of God. Only when we realise that we belong to the same kingdom will we have conditions for real partnership and collaboration. What does it say in your ecclesiastical passport—Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Anglican, Lutheran, Independent? We are citizens of the same kingdom, and Jesus Christ is our king. Let us continue to pray together 'Your kingdom come' anticipating the final day of establishment of the kingdom of Christ through an active, sacrificial, wholehearted involvement in the advance of the kingdom of God in our days.

One day the future will be present. The kingdom will come in its fullness and we will take part of the chorus that sings:

'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever! (Rev. 5:13).

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 43