Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: JUSTIN THACKER

Volume 34 · Number 2 · April 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2010) 34:2, 119-130

The Kingdom of God and Postmodern Ecclesiologies: A Compatibility Assessment

Ronald T. Michener

KEYWORDS: *reconciliation, emerging church, violence, kingdom ethics, hospitality, deconstruction*

WHEN MANY THINK of the concept of 'kingdom' they often think spatially, temporally, or historically. The idea of 'kingdom' is like 'empire'. Empires and kingdoms rise and fall, and it all depends on the power of the monarch or monarchial institution and those investing power into such positions. Of course I am oversimplifying something that is actually quite complex. Such matters involve a myriad of socio-political agendas throughout history in various contexts. When our minds are drawn to the 'kingdom of God' we should rightfully think of the realm of God's reign, God's sphere of authority both now and into the eschaton. But the notion of 'kingdom of God' in today's intellectual climate is not without problems. It may evoke images of oppressive dominance and suppressive coercion, failing to show what we may call 'postmodern sensitivities'.[1] Yet, the theological motif of the kingdom of God in scripture is quite compatible with many postmodern sentiments, and blends in harmony with some central concerns of postmodern moves in ecclesiology. As Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger astutely observe in their book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, 'The kingdom of God offers a reference point for emerging churches as they dismantle church practices that

1 William Schweiker, 'From Cultural Synthesis to Communicative Action: The Kingdom of God and Ethical Theology', *Modern Theology* 5, no. 4 (1989), 367-87. As Schweiker notes, 'The symbol of the "Kingdom" of God is troublesome within our religious and moral situation because of its inscription in patriarchal discourse. The symbol was also 'troublesome' in the early church, but it was reworked, reconceived and re-applied. I am interested in showing how this re-working is also relevant for our postmodern climate.

Ronald T. Michener *is Associate Professor of Theology and Chair of the Department of Systematic Theology at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium. He is the author of* Engaging Deconstructive Theology *(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).*

are no longer culturally viable.'[2] I will affirm that the heart of the kingdom of God is about hospitality and community, not rejection, oppression or despotism. This is not to say that the kingdom of God paradigm is completely 'violence free'. Although ultimate peace is promised as an eschatological reality, this peace comes at a cost: the death of Christ, the suffering of believers, and final judgment.

I recognize in bringing up 'postmodern ecclesiology' that I have scared up a rabbit I cannot shoot in one brief essay. If I attempt to define 'postmodern ecclesiology' then I have already boxed in a concept that refuses to be closed in and labelled. Instead of being contained, it is (to use the buzz words) *emerging*, *organic*, and *missional*. There are in fact many postmodern ecclesiologies, ecclesiological sentiments, sensibilities, and conversations on how to do and think about church in a postmodern climate. By this, I mean there are various community centred approaches to 'doing' evangelical church that resonate with the postmodern critique of extreme rationalism, dualistic interpretations of reality and the human person, objectification, absolute claims to knowledge, abuses of power, priority of economic progress, and on the list may go. The broad term emerging to describe these sentiments is 'emerging' itself. Gibbs and Bolger put it in a simple way, 'Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.'[3] How then do we speak of the kingdom of God as an instructive integrating motif for our ecclesiological concerns within a postmodern context? And what types of themes emerge, allowing us to continue the conversation?

There are two thinkers who offer us some help in this regard: John D. Caputo and Hans Boersma. In John D. Caputo's article, 'The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God', in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, he artfully demonstrates how the radical nature of the kingdom of God resonates clearly with postmodern concerns mentioned above.[4] I will also briefly interact with Hans Boersma's bold proposals regarding the unavoidable violence of the cross as the necessary means by which justice and redemption may occur, especially as seen in his book, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*, Baker Academic, 2004.

My efforts may seem at first glance paradoxical. In dialogue with Caputo, I will attempt to deny presumptions of the inherent violent oppression of a

2 Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 46.

3 Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 44. Gibbs and Bolger go on to say that this definition includes various spiritual practices including identification with Jesus, transformation of the secular, commitment to community, hospitality to outsiders, and generosity (see p. 45).

4 John D. Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God', in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Caputo's recent book, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* greatly elaborates on this theme in Part Two.

kingdom theology. In dialogue with Boersma, I will affirm his position that there is unavoidable violence that takes place in order to establish the fullness of justice in redemption. In doing this, I will advocate a perspective of the kingdom of God that anticipates full eschatological fulfillment and reconciliation, as the impetus for us to engage in restorative acts of 'kingdom' community through the church. As members of a kingdom community we are appointed to the ministry and message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). As ministers of reconciliation, we are called to practise redemptive activities in the public sphere as we 'incarnate' the reconciliation we enjoy with the triune God through Christ's atoning work. This is a great deal of what kingdom work is about.

I The Kingdom of God as a Non 'Objective' Reality

The kingdom of God is about God's reign and his reigning authority of love, justice, and community. It is both situated in the present (but not restricted to it) and dynamic. Theologians through the years have attempted to express the kingdom of God as primarily political, spiritual, futurist, or realistic.[5] But it is important not to force this motif into any one category. It is a variegated, interrelated concept involving each one of these characteristics. It is oriented not only to the present but also toward the future. It is present and revealed, but not fully present nor fully revealed. The eschatological goal of the kingdom is fullness and peace in the reign of God's loving embrace and authority. Joel B. Green astutely observes that,

> In Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcism, announcement of the forgiveness of sins, ministry among the marginalized of society, and open-table fellowship, he demonstrated that, in him, the kingdom of God was already at work in the world. Likewise, while insisting on the this-worldly significance of the kingdom, Jesus also embraced the apocalyptic emphasis on the future of the kingdom of God—God's coming to bring peace and justice to the whole world—were held in dynamic tension in Jesus' message.[6]

But let us remember, the kingdom of God is not really an objective 'thing' at all. As Jesus said in Luke 17:20-21 (NRSV):

> Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'
>
> The kingdom of God, or the kingship

5 For a concise overview see Robert H. Stein, 'Kingdom of God' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 451-52.

6 J.B. Green, 'Kingdom of God' in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, ed. David F. Field David J. Atkinson, Arthur Holmes, Oliver O'Donovan (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP, 1995), 530.

or reign of God is about truthful justice and the renunciation of oppressive violence, spiritually and physically. Jesus is a king of a different nature from Caesar, a king using the resources of 'witness' rather than 'power', pointing to a truth 'not of this world'. Jesus is not contending in the same ring, fighting for dominance in our political arenas. A witness points to the truth, and practises truthful character, rather than trying to create truth and use it to dominate and suppress others.[7] As Miroslav Volf comments:

> The ability to know the truth is not just a matter of what your mind does—whether it adjusts itself adequately to reality or thinks coherently—but is also a matter of what your character is…. Since the self cannot be taken into a power-free space in which its cognition could function undisturbed by power relations, the self must be reshaped within the power relations so as to be willing and capable of pursuing and accepting the truth. In this sense, the truthfulness of being is a pre-condition of adequate knowing.[8]

This is a kingdom, Caputo notes, that is beyond the objective demands of 'the merciless calculations that obtain in the world'. The calculable, sensible, and possible elements within the horizon of the world do not have the last word.[9] The 'objective' kingdom of the world looks toward the mastery of time and economics, to allow for greater mastery, control and organization. But the kingdom of God plays a tune that seems cacophonic to the rational, calculable, kingdom of the world. His kingdom is beyond our notions of possibility, beyond our own objectifications of the way things should be or should go.[10] It calls for submission to the grace and surprise of God in our understandings and aspirations for personal power. It calls for a humble confession of our finiteness and sinfulness, and an admission that a detached, unbiased attainment of reality through 'God's eyes' is not possible.[11]

The kingdom of God is a kingdom turned inside out and upside down. It seems completely illogical and even impossible. It is about a king who rode a simple donkey instead of a spirited stallion in decorated armour. This king turns the ideals of Middle Eastern patriarchy backwards as he tells a story of a celebrated return of a prodigal son who demanded and squandered an early inheritance. It is a king who washes the feet of his subjects and followers; a kingdom with an ironic tendency to go in the opposite direction of expectations. Indeed a strange kingdom. It is in many ways completely

7 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 266-67.

8 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 269-70.

9 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 472.

10 See Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 471-73.

11 See Merold Westphal, *Blind Spots: Christianity and Postmodern Philosophy* (June 14, 2003), accessed October 2, 2008; available from http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_12_120/ai_103996827.

illogical. Yet, the kingdom of God does abide by a 'certain logic', as Caputo puts it, 'but it is a divine logic'. The world expects regularity and possibility, and 'what goes on in the kingdom looks mad and even impossible'.[12] Of course, this is the 'poetics' of impossibility, for the one living according to the kingdom has developed his/her ear to the poetry of parable, the ironic, the paradoxical. The kingdom of God often antagonizes and, as Caputo adds, 'comes to contest the economy of the world, to loosen the grip of the world's merciless rationality'.[13]

Caputo is forthrightly trying to create lines of communication between deconstruction and the theological motif of kingdom. Deconstruction, if I read Caputo correctly, is even necessary for properly yielding to the kingdom of God. In order to submit to the reign of God, we must allow the deconstructibility of our own self-made authority structures, our ideological idols, our self-built, self-confident mental security systems of knowledge. This is why Caputo says that 'the deconstructibility of things is one of the hallmarks of the kingdom of God'.[14] This is why the use of paradox, as Richard France observes, is 'never far' from Jesus' kingdom language. The kingdom of God is just that, it is God's reign, and it cannot 'be reduced to a human agenda. Its values and principles constantly offend against human expectation.'[15]

In Rom. 14:17, the apostle Paul writes, 'For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' As ministers of a new covenant, we display Christ's reign not on written tablets of stone, but on human hearts (2 Cor. 3:3). We do not need an objective physical temple to enter to experience the presence of God; we ourselves are the temple and the Spirit of God lives within us (1 Cor 3:16). In his book, *An Emerging Theology for Emerging Churches*, Ray Anderson points out that the shift in thinking from a merely physical temple and a physical reign to a spiritual temple and spiritual reign must have been a difficult, revolutionary way of thinking for the early Christian community in Jerusalem. The 'objectivity' of the temple in Jerusalem had a looming influence on the spiritual lives of the early Christians. Paul desired to shift the influence from the mere physicality and objectivity of the kingdom to a spiritual temple and reign of Christ. Then we see the church at Antioch—separated both geographically and theologically from the temple.[16] Consequently, when the church 'emerged' at Antioch, the interest was not as much in 'kingdom building' as it

12 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 470.

13 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 471.

14 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 478.

15 Richard T. France, 'Kingdom of God: New Testament', in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). France notes especially Mk. 10:13-16, 23-7 (difficulty of the rich to enter kingdom of God, etc.)

16 Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: IVP), 108-9.

was 'in living on the growing edge of the kingdom of God, where the dynamic presence and power of the Holy Spirit was found in a community of the Spirit rather than in a sanctuary of stone and glass.'[17] The mission of the church is not to build an empire to control 'but to experience and express the kingdom of God through the lives of its members as well as the various groups and organizations that they form'.[18]

Community centred postmodern ecclesiologies easily resonate with such concerns. Only a few hits on websites with 'Emerging Churches' will tell you that the concern is not with 'objectified' buildings and structures (do I dare say 'foundations'? whether materially or idealistically/ rationally), but with communities, people and authentic relationships. The church is the living temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16) empowered to live as kingdom people with the Spirit guiding and directing our lives as we participate in the mission of the King.[19]

Saying the kingdom of God cannot be 'objectified' or is not of this world is not to say it is only non-material, mysteriously abstract and non-visible. We must not confuse a criticism of objectivity (especially in terms of false structures of security) to be a criticism of reality or physical manifestations. But the kingdom of God is holistically spiritual, body and soul, the seen and the unseen, under and for the reign of Christ. Jesus' personal ministry demonstrates that salvation is whole person, whole creation centred.[20] Yet for now, the full, fulfilled physical display of the kingdom is deferred. In the meantime, we are to physically display the kingdom of God through kingdom living as spiritual beings in a lost world through acts of charity and justice, proclaiming peace that comes through the reconciling and redeeming work of Jesus.

Caputo also affirms that the kingdom of God is a kingdom involving the body, the flesh. B. Keith Putt notes (referring to an unpublished article of Caputo) that Caputo argues for a Yeshua that speaks to a 'kingdom of flesh' that faces the pain and suffering of disease, hunger, and oppression. As Yeshua reached out to the lepers and outcasts in his kingdom proclamations and activities, so our kingdom ethic must respond responsibly to the outcries of 'afflicted flesh'.[21]

II Welcoming, Forgiving Kingdom of Community

So, the kingdom of God has to do with the total sphere of God's reign, a dynamic, ongoing reign and reconciling work of God for and through his people. It is not about human-con-

17 Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 101.

18 Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 99.

19 Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 109-10. Also see Scot McKnight, 'What is the Emerging Church?', *Fall Contemporary Issues Conference* (Westminster Theological Seminary, October 26-27, 2006), accessed October 2, 2008; available from: www.jezusvolgen.nl/nederlandverandert/whatistheemergingchurch_mcknight.pdf

20 Green, 'Kingdom of God', 531.

21 B. Keith Putt, 'The Im/possibility of a Passionate God: A Postconservative Mani(n)festation of Caputo's Kingdom Christology', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 24.4 (1997), 452.

trolled empire making agendas. Rather than being about our kingdom, our particular concerns, or our individual life; it is about a redeemed community falling more and more into God's loving, caring fold. In view of this, we cannot ignore the eschatological dimension of the kingdom. It is now, it will continue, and it will continue to manifest itself more fully in God's redemptive work and reconciliation of his creation in the eschaton. As you know, this has been affirmed in the 'already, but not yet' schema of George Eldon Ladd, Robert H. Stein and others.[22]

Stanley J. Grenz, suggested that we combine the theological notion of kingdom with community in a dialectic. When God's rule, reign, or 'kingdom' is present, when his will is done, then community emerges. Or, when true Christian community is present, God's will and reign in kingdom is present. For Grenz, the notion of 'eschatological community' is God's program of bringing about a community of the highest order—reconciled people, restored creation all in the presence of a great Redeemer.[23] Postmodern ecclesiologies move away from radical autonomy to a community centredness of the kingdom of God. The individualism pervasive in society often results in sectarianism in the church. John Franke notes that this is the result of 'individualistic ecclesiologies that fail to comprehend the interconnectedness of the entire church as the one body of Christ in the world, though with diversity in its expression'.[24]

The kingdom of God is about peace, justice, and reconciliation in the loving community of God's all-caring embrace. But this is a community that does not remain closed to outsiders. It is the kingdom 'not of this world' that reaches out to outcasts, lepers and widows. Humility, grace and compassion are marks of this kingdom community. But this is not simply one religious community, as Jürgen Moltmann states, 'among other communities, as modern pluralism wants to have it, but the beginning of a new creation of all things and a vanguard of saved humanity'.[25] This is not to say this kingdom is absent of power, but it is not a power of tyrannical oppression, but an enabling power to love the unlovely, to care where nobody cares, and redeem where freedom was lost.[26]

Of course, this kind of true kingdom living is inconvenient, often unplanned, and prone to interruptions to the self imposed 'normalcy' of a structured life. It challenges our self-imposed notions of justice, and extends the welcoming hand of mercy and compassion from the justice of

22 See again Stein, 'Kingdom of God', 453; and George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 57-80.

23 Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology For the Community of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 28-30.

24 John Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 190.

25 Jürgen Moltmann, 'The Hope for the Kingdom of God and Signs of Hope in the World: The Relevance of Blumhardt's Theology Today', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 26: 1(2004), 10.

26 See Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 291.

God. Caputo describes the kingdom of God as a 'possibility of the impossible' with an 'odd predilection for reversals.'[27] He continues,

> The last shall be first, sinners are preferred to the righteous, the stranger is the neighbor, the insiders are out. That makes for the astonishing hospitality portrayed in the story of the wedding banquet in which the guests are casual passers-by who are dragged in off the street while the invited guests snub the host. That seems like an excessively mad party, which would stretch the imagination even of a Lewis Carroll.[28]

This is a welcoming kingdom, where the sceptre of the King remains extended to both nobles and peasants, resident and alien, the healthy and sick, the oppressed, the ostracized. And often, it is the outcast Samaritan 'stranger' who is portrayed as the one with godly character. In fact, we often hear more about those stuck on the outside, than we do about those already on the inside.[29] This is a subversive kingdom, overturning, re-situating the notion of power from elitist conceptions from the hands of power brokers into the hands of the 'poor in spirit', the humble, the repentant. Kingdom becomes more the reign of justice and love as displayed in Christian community because of the shared Spirit of God reigning in our hearts. But this 'justice' is a justice of grace, forgiveness and redemption, not a heartless 'law by the book'. The power of this kingdom is not a power to oppress, but an empowering of grace stemming from the redemptive work of Christ, to serve others justly by inviting them to join the loving embrace of a God who loves and wants to free men and women from oppressive structures.[30] The complete fulfillment of the kingdom of God is the fullness of redemption and complete reconciliation of creation to God.

III The Violence of the Kingdom and the Notion of Public Justice

Christians through the years have certainly appealed to the kingdom of God to justify and legitimize various interpretations of reality that have resulted in violent action. But the kingdom of God must not be construed as a grand integrating theological motif that is essentially violent. It is a kingdom of hospitality and warm reception, not usurpation or abusive dominance. All nations, cultures, races and people groups are invited to join in reconciliation with their Creator and with one another. The primary call of the kingdom is not 'self righteous exclusion' but 'inclusion of forgiveness'.[31] However, violence is not completely absent from the work of the kingdom of God. But, as Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat contend, it is not a kingdom

27 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 471.

28 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 471.

29 Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible', 480.

30 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 112.

31 Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 110.

won 'through violence imposed on others but through violence imposed upon the Son'. Although I agree, it is significant to remember that in spite of the imposition of violence upon Jesus, he willfully endured the violence to ensure the redemption and reconciliation of his kingdom and kingdom subjects. Ironically, the violence he endured in his atonement work on the cross in sacrificial love, completely 'disarmed' the regimes of oppressive spiritual powers trying to lay hold on his kingdom.[32] This is truly a story that 'redeems our material reality, welcomes the outsider, shares generously, empowers, listens, gives space, and offers true freedom'. Though it has a multiple local expressions, it 'remains the singular *missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, the gospel'.[33]

It is the atonement work of Christ that actually allows this kingdom hospitality and practices of justice to take place. As Hans Boersma puts it, 'we may look at divine penal substitution on the cross as an instance of eschatological justice that furthers peace and reconciliation and, as such, offers hope to both victims and perpetrators of violence'.[34] Moreover, this violence was endured for the sake of redemption, not a violence imposed upon those receiving the benefits of the redemption. Yet, Christians are often called to suffer for the sake of the kingdom and hence endure violent opposition. Striving for reconciliation and justice under the reign of Christ means that all other established allegiances must be put aside. Joel Green says it well when he writes, 'All other loyalties and commitments are relativized by the demand of the kingdom, including those of family and State.'[35]

Proclaiming the unavoidability of violence toward Jesus in the atonement, and the violence that is often imposed upon those proclaiming the radical reconciliation work the atonement has accomplished, is not to say that the kingdom prescribes violence and exclusion. Yet through the crucible of suffering, Christians serving the kingdom have much to offer to those under regimes of violence. As Jesus has suffered, as we (if we) have suffered, we can carry an empowered message of God's grace-filled message of embrace to others, women and men, the sick, the outcasts, the poor—beyond our self-drawn lines in the sand.[36] We reach out and actively extend a warm welcome to all peoples, all nations.

This is not to say that we fall prey to a radical pluralism that simply ignores the emotional force of religious or theological differences among people. But we must learn to critically appropriate these differences and learn to participate in friendly engagement with those whose journey seems radically different from our own. Boersma astutely observes the ethics of Derridean hospitality; it is a hospitality of 'utter openness and a readiness to give, unconditionally, all my possessions to the

32 See Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 110-111.

33 Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 46.

34 Hans Boersma, 'Eschatological Justice and the Cross', *Theology Today* 60: 2 (2003), 187.

35 Green, 'Kingdom of God', 529-32.

36 Green, 'Kingdom of God', 531.

stranger knocking on my door. Hospitality means self-sacrifice rather than a sacrificing of the other.'[37] But with Derrida the fullness of hospitality is always deferred and never arrives. It is an utter impossibility with his lack of transcendent referent.[38] Which stirs up this question: Are there any boundaries here?

After all, whether for good or bad, hospitality always makes judgment calls. We try to protect our families from the bad guys, and most of us don't open the door to feed violent convicts. Again Boersma submits, 'Absolute hospitality not only makes it possible for the devil to come in… it makes his arrival unavoidable.'[39] Hospitality has boundaries, and is always tempered by our application of wisdom. But the application of hospitable wisdom with perimeters in our kingdom communities, does not imply an ontology of violence. Boundaries in hospitality are necessary margins to keep violent oppressors of injustice at bay. We will fall short in our efforts. But with margins in check, we strive to manifest privately and publicly (through the church), the reality of the hope of the fullness the *civitas Dei* in the eschaton.[40] Boersma is not saying that this eschatological fullness of hospitality is completely realized this side of glory. But he is saying (and I am agreeing) that it is our theological and moral obligation to serve the causes of justice in both the church and civil government as we reflect the reconciling and redeeming work of the atonement.[41]

By stressing this kingdom ethic of hospitality and justice, I am not advocating a theology of liberation that ignores the personal and supernatural aspects of sin and estrangement from God. This itself would be suppressing the total truth and committing further violence against a personal God.[42] Our struggle is not simply against flesh and blood. We must not ignore the transcendent, supernatural aspects of personal, existential, familial alienation from God because of sin. I am simply calling for a holistic anthropology when we paint our pictures of reconciliation—being involved in social, or political action for the renewal of human dignity is also helping, initiating restorative acts of justice for the *imago dei*. When we help others to escape from social, political oppression we are displaying the larger reality of freedom from sinful structures as a whole. This is how we, as a Christian kingdom community 'image' the reconciling work of Jesus.[43] I believe if we ignore this aspect of reconciliation in kingdom work, and move only at our presupposed pseudo-spiritual understandings, we are harbouring a closet

37 Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 30.

38 Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 32, 36.

39 Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 237.

40 Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 238.

41 Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 239.

42 Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 248.

43 See Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 186.

dualism. Real spirituality and theology integrate spirit and body (as we are spirit beings).

I readily agree with Boersma when he submits that Christians must participate in efforts to reform systems of justice so they reflect God's gracious hospitality of the cross.[44] In *my* affirmation of all these things said however, allow me a caveat. We must not allow our vision of justice to obscure our need to work in the context of personal relationships. We may become so encumbered (as some have) by 'politicking' for just causes, through social action and legislation that we end up (ironically) neglecting the orphans and widows in our midst. The face of the other (I hearken to Levinas) is constantly before us. I believe Charles Marsh affirms this line of thought in his magnificent book, *The Beloved Community*:

> The same God who preaches the 'good news to the poor' and 'proclaims release to the captives,' 'recovery of sight to the blind,' and 'liberty to those who are oppressed,' *also* 'desireth truth in the inward being.' It is not only the 'great house' that is smitten into fragments but the 'little house' as well. Let us not forget that Jesus did not call prophets but disciples, ordinary people willing to lay down their nets and journey through dust-ridden towns. The dream, unanchored in the disciplines of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, becomes an evasion of love's duty in the everyday.[45]

Indeed, as Christ followers, we should be involved socially and politically. But political or social action ought not to take away from our personal care and simple acts of restoration, kindness, and charity in lives of others in their 'everydayness'. To truly witness to the kingdom, it is essential to stay involved with needy persons who live next door, or those sitting in the pew next to us, not just with government programs and systems that may one day promise widespread resolutions. Personal sacrificial care and involvement is key. If we cannot stop and help the suffering Samaritan on the side of the road on the way to the legislative body, or on the way to church, or on the way to some social action committee (whatever that may look like in your country) with an eloquently drafted proposal to help with disaster relief, then perhaps our focus on ecclesiological community is skewed. Our daily responses to the sufferings and needs of others along our path are an essential part of community building.

Marsh, in discussing John Perkins's assessment of the civil rights movement in the United States, describes one of its ultimate failures as its constant preoccupation with legal injustices, at the expense of providing the spiritual disciplines necessary to maintain 'beloved community'. Hence, one might say the civil rights movement committed an injustice to a 'wholistic Gospel'.[46] It did not recognize that our personal salvation 'is the most enduring source of social engagement, care for the poor, costly forgiveness, and

44 Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 255.

45 Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 149.

46 Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 176.

reparations for slavery.'[47]

The kingdom of God inconveniently interrupts us and moves us beyond ourselves, our agendas, to the other. This flies in face of the predictability of the kingdom of modernity. This is a kingdom that is truly compatible with many postmodern communitarian ecclesiological expressions. Caputo, Boersma, and also Marsh, although coming from different backgrounds and perspectives, certainly help us to see this. The kingdom community demands the practice of spiritual disciplines that must come from faith beyond this worldly affairs, while consistently 'imaging' that faith in this worldly affairs.

I conclude with this final brief citation from Marsh:

> The worldly body of Christ remains the only real counterculture, precisely because it is the place where obedience, gratitude, and praise create free, complex, and multiracial spaces—the most enduring source of forgiveness and reconciliation in a violent and balkanized world.[48]

May we exemplify this by intentional multi-national, multi-cultural contexts within our churches in the postmodern climate.

47 Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 177.

48 Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 187.