

Thy Word Our Life

by Bernard Zylstra

In my contribution to *Out of Concern for the Church*, I stated that the loss of the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God is the heart disease of the churches today. The theme of the Kingdom of God is central in the scriptures as can be seen, for instance, in Mark's description of Christ's first ministry: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.' " (1:14f) In a collection of essays on the church it is therefore not surprising that one should also focus on the relation between the Kingdom of God and the church. My method of treatment is relatively simple. I will focus mainly on the scriptural context within which the theme of the Kingdom of God appears. I hope that this approach will contribute to meaningful discussion about the very way in which we are to understand the Bible today.

The Bible speaks of the Kingdom of God in two basic ways. First, it is the Reign of God over the creation by His Word; second, it is the Realm where this Word is heard, obeyed and done. An understanding of the nature of the Kingdom therefore requires insight into the nature of the Word of God and the character of creation and its history. Since the Bible speaks of "the Word of God" in at least four distinct, though closely interrelated, ways, the theme

of the Kingdom of God (as Reign) can be dealt with as the theme of the Word of God: (1) for creation, (2) for the history of redemption, (3) incarnate in Jesus Christ, and (4) for the New Testament church.

Part I. THE WORD FOR CREATION

The prologue of the Gospel of John reveals that the Word of God was in the beginning, that all things were made through the Word. All reflection on the nature of the Word of God must, I think, begin here. The Word, the voice of the Lord is power(ful). (Ps. 29:4) God's Word is His power creating all things. (cf. Ps. 33:6f; II Pet. 3:5f) It is also His power upholding all things, once created. (Hebr. 1:3; cf. Col. 1:16f) Further, it is His power directing all things, once created, to their divinely destined end. It is the very life of all things. "In Him was life." (John 1:4) In a humanly halting way one might describe the Word as God's calling creation into being-for-service.

The One Covenant

At this very beginning of our reflections, because of the very nature of the Word, we should understand that the scriptures present a certain referential frame within which we can know something of the relation between God, man, and the world. It is the frame of the covenant in which there are basically two parts: the Creator and the creation. The Word of God is the link between these two part(ner)s. The Bible pictures before us a two-fold inseparable relationship. On the one hand there is God Who speaks the Word: He makes, molds, patterns, structures and destines the creation. He has the "say" over all things. What does the Lord say? One can put it somewhat as follows: "I, the Lord God, have made you, my creation, so that you may serve me. If you serve me, if

you obey my Word for creation, then you will have life and joy." Thus, on the other hand, there is the required response from the creation to the Word. The Word requires an answer, an *Antwort*. In all covenants, as we learn from the reformed baptismal form, there are contained two parts: God speaks; and the creation answers, by listening, obeying, serving, and praising — by doing the Word.

The Lord Our God is One Lord

It is imperative to see that, apart from man's sinful rejection of God's Word, there is a *unity that precedes diversity* on each side of the covental harmony. This is true in the first place of God Himself, Whom the Bible reveals as one. (Deut. 6:4) Since God is one, He is related to His creation in the first place *in one way*: that of the Creator Who expects service from His creation.

I stress this because Christianity from its very beginning has been plagued by non-scriptural dualistic notions of deity. Here one can think of the *natural* deities and the *cultural* deities in ancient Greece, allegiance to whom caused tensions in the life of Greeks, tragedy in literature, dialectics between nature and form in philosophy, and a dualism of body and soul in anthropology. One can also think of the Manichaeian religion which entered the world of the New Testament and the early church from Persia. It posited the existence of two ultimate deities, the good god and the evil god. This notion was then read back into the Bible by linking the evil god to creation and the good god to redemption. Christian theologies influenced by such ancient conceptions then easily found a tension between creation and redemption, between the Old and New Testament, between matter and spirit, between body and soul. This is not surprising, because these conceptions presupposed a tension in the being of deity itself. An immense amount of

confusion has been introduced into the treatment of our topic by theologians ancient and modern. For even today many conceptions depreciate creation for the sake of the "triumph of grace," or the cross of Christ. If such a depreciation goes too far, then we generally find a wave of theological balancing acts in which the "God of nature" is coordinated with the "God of grace," common grace with special grace, general revelation with special revelation, the Kingdom of power (in creation) with the Kingdom of love (in redemption), and justice with love.

In all of these conceptions and their many variations, it seems as if God works with a left hand as well as with a right hand, and that His left hand knoweth not what His right hand doeth.

Creatures Are Servants

The unity that precedes diversity is also present on the creation's side of the covenantal harmony before sin ruptured it. The very meaning of all creation is service to God; the Word structures the ontic character of reality. This is the point of the Psalmist: "For ever, O Lord, thy Word is firmly fixed in the heavens. . . . For all things are thy servants." (119:89f) Creatures simply are servants. This is true not only of man, who is constantly referred to in the scriptures as a servant of the Lord, whose very freedom lies in being a slave of the Lord. (cf. Rom. 6:18) But social institutions are similarly ministers of the Lord. (Rom. 13:4) Finally, "natural" reality is rehabilitated in the Bible because it is part of God's creation. The Bible rejects the notion of Greek thought and modern humanistic science that reality is *nature*, that is, something that has *the cause of its own existence in itself, can exist by itself, and exists for itself*. The Bible also rejects the Manichaeian depreciation of nature as mere "matter." Instead, we learn that the earth is the Lord's and the

fullness thereof. (Ps. 24:1; cf. I Cor. 10:26; I Tim. 4:4) For this reason "nature" is not self-existent; it looks to the Lord for life (cf. Ps. 104) and in its diverse ways fulfills the Word of the Lord (Ps. 148:8) so that everything that breathes may praise the Creator (Ps. 145-150). It is this understanding of reality as creation that has led the Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd to say that meaning is the being of existence. It is this understanding of the Word that makes us say that the Kingdom of God embraces all reality, first as God's Reign (Word) over all things, and then, second, as realm (service). It is this which makes the apostle Paul exclaim in the Hallelujah passage of Romans 8: "For from him and through him and unto him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen." It is also this acceptance of the Bible's clear revelation of what the Word of God is that lies behind our rejection of those theological constructions that limit the Word to the written texts of the Bible itself.

Man in the Symphony of Creation

God is one. His Word is one. The creation's response must be one. But this unity does not eliminate diversity. The creation is a symphony where we find a variety of creatures each singing the praises of the Maker in accordance with its unique character, different from creatures of another "make."⁴⁴ The lion is to serve the Lord like a lion, the dandelion like a dandelion. The difference in service depends upon the difference in the Word addressed to them. The response of the creation to the one all-embracing Word — serve Me! — is thus a symphony of voices in which each type of creature performs its unique function in the indispensable setting of the whole.

The Word of God has patterned and structured that earthly setting to make man's unique service possible. The Lord, according to the prophet Isaiah, formed and

fashioned and established the earth; He did not create it a chaos, He formed it to be inhabited. (44:18) "God Himself has demonstrated," Calvin writes, "by the very order of creation, that He made all things for the sake of man." (*Institutes*, I, XIV, 21) Within the all-embracing covenant-Kingdom bond between God and creation, the Word of God assigns a place to man where four fundamental and inseparable relations obtain:

1. *God and man.* Here we find man in his relation of utter dependence upon and service to God. The basic creaturely condition which man can never escape without losing his humanity is summed up in this, that man is *God's man*. (cf. II Tim. 3:16, I John 4:6)
2. *Heart and functions.* Here we find the relation between the central religious unity of man's person and the diverse aspects of his personhood and the manifold functions of his life on earth. The central religious direction of man's functions is to be found in the heart of man. If man in his many functional undertakings is to walk in the way of the Lord, his heart must be united, focused solely on the Truth of the Word. (cf. Ps. 86:11, 12)
3. *Man and fellow man.* Here we find man in his relation to his fellows, to the whole of mankind, which is the People of God.
4. *Man and the earth.* Here we find man in his relation to the rest of creation, to its many creatures which serve man and over which man is to have dominion. Under God, man is king of the earth.

The uniqueness of the Christian religion lies in the biblical revelation that the harmony among these four

relations is *life* for man. This harmony in effect is the positive relation between the Word of God and the required response; it indicates the presence of the Kingdom both as Reign (Word) and Realm (obedience, service). This harmony implies wholeness, coherence, joy, and peace. Here one finds the shalom of paradise, where all creatures are at home, in their right place.

God's Word for Man: Love

What is the specific service which man must render his Maker in this paradisaal setting of creation? That service is constituted by the Word specifically directed to man. That Word requires love. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:37f) These two commandments must be distinguished; the one cannot be reduced to the other; and they cannot be separated. Together they constitute the Word, the creation ordinance for man, made in the likeness of God, Who is love. (I John 4:8)

Two things must be emphasized at this point. In the first place, these two commandments sum up all that is required of man. The ~~many~~ statutes and ordinances that one finds in Holy Writ are not additions *to* but explications *of* love. Hence we should not assume that besides love we also owe justice to our neighbour. Justice is a specific way of loving our neighbor. This all-encompassing character of love – both to God and neighbor – has often been lost sight of in those theological traditions that posited the equal ultimacy of love and justice in the person of God Himself, or that divided human earthly existence into two realms (of nature and

grace and their many variants). *All* the law and the prophets depend upon just these two commandments. Hence, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:10) For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. (I John 5:3) If I gave away all I have to my fellow men, as Christ suggested to the rich young ruler, but did not have love, I'd gain nothing. Love never ends; it abides with faith and hope. But the greatest of these is love. (I Cor. 13) So we, if we are to be genuinely human, must put on love, since it binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:14)

In the second place, love is to be expressed in many ways. The Bible speaks of the one Word but also of the ten words, the ten commandments. The central creation order of love embraces and gives meaning to all of the secondary orders directed to mankind in its task of unfolding creation in history. Justice, morality, economy, stewardship, language, science, culture, technique, nurture: here are some of the derivative ways in which the central Word is to be realized. The relation between prior unity and subsequent multiplicity in the Word which God gives to man is parallel to the unity (heart) and multiplicity (functions) of man's person.

The Word of God for creation is a *dynamic order* for mankind, for it entails an historical task: the building of the Garden of Eden into the City of God. While God is the sovereign Creator, Who addresses His Word to creation, man is the obedient cultivator of creation, the maker of history. Man is a *doer* of the Word, whose heart must be inclined to *perform* the Lord's many statutes. (cf. James 1:22; Ps. 119:112) In doing the Word, man finds a great reward. Therein lies blessedness, genuine humanity, and *only* there, in the assigned way that leads from the Garden to the City, where peace reigns, the shalom of the Kingdom of God. "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Gen. 1:31) It was

covenantally good, since in God's creation there was no disruption, no disconnection in the links of the covenantal chain between God and man and nature. The Lord was the Immanuel; He was God-with-us, dwelling with mankind, His People, who responded wholeheartedly and single-heartedly to the Word of their Master. The symphony of creation was a Hallelujah chorus.

Part II. THE WORD FOR THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

The Word is God's calling creation into being-for-service. The Word tells man to serve God by loving Him above all and neighbor as oneself. Man may refuse to serve. That is sin, in its deepest original sense. Sin is man's declaration of independence from God. Instead of being a free dependent servant, man becomes an enslaved sinner (Rom. 6:17) who considers himself (or mankind) to be autonomous: a being who is law unto himself, who can exist by his own word, by his own light, by his own reason or passions, by his own self-revelation.

Sin is radical; it affects the root of human existence and thus the direction of the entire creation. Sin is total; it leads mankind into "total depravity." For sin does not merely break man's link to God. Since that is the all-embracing link, its disruption shatters the shalom-harmony in the entire covenantal setting of creation. It breaks asunder the integrality of man's person, leaving him brokenhearted. It disrupts the love towards fellow man, destroying the community of mankind as God's People. It introduces a tension between man and the earth, which now produces thorns and thistles. Sin spreads alienation all around. It makes man a stranger to the covenant, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph. 2:12) In sin, man no longer lives by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God, and thus he gropes

about in the dark, searching for light in his own imaginations where it is not to be found. Sin upsets the entire direction of creation. Instead of creation serving man, so that man can serve God, man now begins to serve the creature, exchanging the Truth for a Lie. Claiming to be wise, man becomes the fool of history, exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. (cf. Rom. 1:21f; Isa. 44:12-20; Acts 17:29) And so there is no longer any peace for the wicked. (Isa. 48:22) The sin of Adam means that the Garden of Paradise will not be the start for the building of the City of God, the Kingdom of Praise.

The Word of the Lord Stands Forever

Sin brings brokenness, heartbrokenness, and disruption to the creation side of the covenant. But the scriptures clearly reveal that sin does not bring about a disruption to God's side of the covenant. For His Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, and His dominion endures throughout all generations. (Ps. 145:13) I interpret this to mean that the requirements of God's Word for creation remain intact after sin's appearance. The Kingdom of God *as His reign* continues to hold for creation, including mankind. In the same way, the Bible repeats again and again that the Word of the Lord stands forever. (cf. Isa. 40:8; I Pet. 1:23-25; Ps. 93) The light continues to shine in the darkness of sin. (John 1:5) For the Word of the Lord is never spoken in vain: "it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." (Isa. 55:10f) The darkness has not overcome the Light, the Word.

There is thus a *second way* in which the Bible uses the phrase "Word of God." It is not only God's calling creation into being-for-service. It is also God's *calling sinners to repentance* and to *the restoration of service*. It is

not only the power of God in the act of creation; it is also the power of God in the act of redemption, that is, in the act of healing the breach caused by sin. That act is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. For this reason Paul can speak of the Word of God as the word of the cross, the power of God to those who are being redeemed. (I Cor. 1:18) That act of the cross is prepared in the Old Testament history by a long series of *redemptive acts and words in which God revealed the original meaning of His Word for creation*. In that redemptive history a new element appears. The Word for creation now appears as a *two-edged sword*. (cf. Hebr. 4:12; Rev. 1:14; 19:15) It is not merely judgement upon disobedience as one might expect; it is also gospel to those who again listen to the Word. "Behold, I am doing a new thing; I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Isa. 43:19) As a matter of fact, what God is accomplishing by way of redemption may exceed in glory what He planned for creation. For God is creating new heavens and a new earth. (Isa. 65:17; cf. Rev. 21:5)

Our present concern here is to show — contrary to a host of theologies — that there is no tension between God's intent in creation and His intent in redemption. That unity can best be understood in terms of a new consciousness of the meaning and content of the "Word of God," since the scriptures reveal that Word to be *the permanent bond between the creation and the Creator in all His mighty acts of calling the world into being and calling it back to service*. In creation, God's Word established the covenant. In sin, mankind, through Adam, its representative covenantal head, rejects the Word as the source of its life and thus breaks the covenant. In the history of redemption, climaxed in the atoning and reconciling event of the Cross, the Creator reestablishes the covenant. The agent of this reconciliation, this peace-making, is the *suffering servant* upon Whom was the

chastisement that made us whole, and by Whose stripes we are healed. (Isa. 53) The loving service asked of the first Adam was rendered by the second Adam, the Word made flesh for death at Calvary. With His coming, the Father's purposes with the entire creation will again be realized. For this reason the angels could sing at Bethlehem about glory to God in the highest — that was our Father's purpose with the creation — and about peace among men on earth — a rebuilding of paradise on the highway to the New Jerusalem, the City of our God.

The Word in the Drama of History Before Bethlehem

However, we should not immediately move from Paradise Lost to Bethlehem. For the revelation of the redemptive Word of God in the Old Testament is a prelude to an understanding of the Word made flesh in the New Testament. We cannot properly understand the place of the church in these "last days" unless we see it in the preparatory setting of the "many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets." (Hebr. 1:1) This continuity is the theme of Lord's Day VI of the Heidelberg Catechism, which speaks of the holy gospel "which God Himself first revealed in Paradise; afterwards published by the holy patriarchs and prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law; and lastly fulfilled by His only begotten Son."

The Old Testament scriptures picture before our eyes a drama of man's path through history, a drama which for centuries had the character of a profound tragedy: mankind severed by the two-edged sword of the Word, limping from the blessing of service to the self-made curse following pride. The Word of the Lord still stands. Ever since the creation of the world His eternal power and deity have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:20) But what do we see? While the sons of

Seth did indeed call upon the name of the Lord, the unfolding of creation into culture is guided by unbelief. During the seventh generation from Adam, when men had learned to play with creation's cultural potentials, Enoch walked with the Lord. But the Lord took him away from man's city. For Lamech, Enoch's counterpart in that seventh generation cultural advance, built the city for his own glory. His children and children's children produced culture and agriculture, music and metal. (Gen. 4 and 5; cf. Jude 14f) The Lord is not against culture; He rejects *man-centered* culture. So when the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, He was sorry that He had made man. And He was about to destroy him, along with the many creatures who formed part of the original paradisaal covenant, the birds and the beasts. But note! Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. After all, the steadfast love of the Lord — that is, His Word as redeeming power — is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear Him, who keep His covenant and do His commandments. (cf. Ps 103:17)

Therefore, in that bird's eye revelational account of the drama of human culture before Abraham, the Word of the Lord is heard again after the flood. It is addressed to mankind via Noah and his children; it is addressed to the entire creation represented by every living creature that was saved in the ark. The Lord reestablished His covenant with creation: He is saving man and beast. (Gen. 9:9; cf. Ps. 36:6) My point is this: the Word of the Lord for *creation* is repeated at every crucial moment in the history of *redemption*. The range of God's plan is never diminished. His Word for creation is the motor and meaning of history. He is merciful and longsuffering so that His purposes can be accomplished, so that His Word can be done. This is evident in the Bible's evaluation of the glories of the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Babylonia. Their cultures were monuments to elitist man's glory.

Their dwelling place was a City of Man, a centre of confusion where language — man's link with his neighbor, the recipient of his love — became an obstacle, a tool of envy and war and estrangement over the face of the earth. That is the story of Babel, of the "world" seeking itself, in Genesis 11, in Daniel 2, and in Revelation 14. The Lord calls Abraham out of that City of Man and makes him a pilgrim in the land of Canaan. In that little land the Lord builds a prototype community of people — His People — to whom He spells out in great detail the radical meaning of His Word. Moses becomes His instrument "to declare to Israel the Word of the Lord." (Deut. 5:5)

I will try to summarize the essential points for my argument regarding Old Testament revelation.

Identity of God's Kingship in Creation and Redemption

My argument is that the Word of God expresses the Creator's Kingship over creation, and that this Word or Kingship is revealed anew in redemption. I therefore reject as unbiblical the notion that God's plan in redemption is basically different from or less extensive than His plan for creation. I do not think it proper to speak *in this way* of an order of creation separate from an order of redemption, of an order of law distinct from an order of love, of a Kingdom of power distinct from a Kingdom of grace, of a realm of nature distinct from a realm of grace, of an area of common grace separate from an area of special grace, of an area of general revelation separate from an area of special revelation, or of an order for the church separate from an order for the state.

The fundamental unity between God's Word for creation and God's Word for history (which is the history of the redemption of creation) is evident or presupposed in numerous texts and contexts. I will mention a few of these from the Psalms.

Psalm 2 (You are my son. I will make the ends of the earth your possession. Now therefore, O rulers of the earth, serve the Lord with fear); 19 (The heavens are telling the glory of God. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer); 22:27, 28 (All the families of the nations shall worship Him, for dominion belongs to the Lord); 24 (Who is the King of glory? The Lord, whose is the earth and the fulness thereof, and Who gives blessing to the man of a pure heart); 28 (The Lord, because He is the Creator, is the strength of His people); 29 (The voice, the Word of the Lord is powerful. He sits enthroned as King forever. May the Lord bless His people with peace); 33 (By the word of the Lord the heavens were made. Let all the earth fear the Lord. Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon those who fear Him); 46 (Be still, and know that I am God, the Creator. I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge); 47 (Sing praises to our King, the King of all the earth, the pride of Jacob whom He loves); 50 (The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth. The world and all that is in it is mine. Hear, O my people, and I will speak, I am God, your God. To the wicked God says, "What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you." To him who orders his way aright I will show the salvation of God); 62:11, 12 (Power belongs to God, and to Thee, O Lord, belongs steadfast love); 66:7, 20 (God rules by His might for ever. He has not removed His steadfast love from me); 68:11, 19, 32f (The Lord gives the command. Our God is a God of salvation. Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth. Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel, and His power is in the skies. He gives power and strength to His people); 90: 1, 13f (Before the mountains were brought forth, or

ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. Return, O Lord, how long? Have pity on Thy servants, satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love. Make us glad. Establish the work of our hands upon us); 91 (He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High (the Creator), who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust"); 93 (The Lord reigns; He is robed in majesty. Thy decrees are very sure; holiness befits Thy house, O Lord, for evermore); 96 (The Lord made the heavens. The Lord reigns. Let the earth rejoice before the Lord, for He comes to judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with truth); 97 (The Lord is most high over all the earth; He loves those who hate evil, He preserves the lives of His saints); 99 (The Lord reigns. Mighty King, lover of justice, Thou hast executed righteousness in Jacob).

Psalm 100 (Know that the Lord is God! It is He that made us, and we are His; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture. The Lord is good); 103 (The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His Kingdom rules over all. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He, the Creator, knows our frame; He remembers we are dust. Bless the Lord, O you His creatures, you mighty ones who do His Word); 106:8 (He saved them for His name's sake, that He might make known His mighty power); 107:1, 20, 29, 33 (O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures for ever! He sent forth His word, and healed them. He made the storm be still. He turns a desert into pools of water, and there He lets the hungry dwell, and they establish a city to live in, and He does not let their cattle decrease); 111 (Great are the works of the Lord. The works of His hands are faithful and just; all His precepts are trustworthy, they are established for ever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent

redemption to His people; He has commanded His covenant for ever); 113 (There is none like the Lord our God in heaven or on earth, Who sets His throne so high but deigns to look so low, Who raises the poor from the dunghill; NEB); 119 (*passim*; e.g. 73: Thy hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn thy commandments); 124:8 (God the Redeemer is dependable because He is the Creator: Our help is in the name of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth); 135:6, 14 (Whatever the Lord pleases He does, in heaven and on earth. He makes the clouds rise, He smites the firstborn of Egypt, He has compassion on His servants); 136 (Give thanks to the Lord, to Him Who does great wonders: Who by understanding made the heavens, Who remembered us in our low estate); 139 (The Redeemer knows my heart and my thoughts since my frame was not hidden from Him when I was being made. Thus He can lead me in the way everlasting); 145 (His Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom. He is faithful in all His words. He fulfills the desire of all who fear Him, He also hears their cry and saves them); 146 (The Lord Who made heaven and earth gives food to the hungry and sets the prisoners free. He will reign for ever); 147 (Great is our Lord, and abundant in power. *He sends forth His word*: He makes grass grow upon the hills, He gives to the beasts their food. *He declares His word*, His ordinances to Jacob: He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds); 148-150 (Praise the Lord! For He commanded and they were created. Praise Him, all His angels, sun and moon, fruit trees and cedars, beasts and all cattle, kings of the earth and all peoples, young men and maidens, old men and children. Praise the Lord: for His glory is above earth and heaven; for He has raised up a horn of salvation for His People who are near to him. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!).

The Psalmist sings a new song because the Creator is the Redeemer, the Redeemer is the Creator, the Alpha is

the Omega, the Omega is the Alpha. The meaning of redemption is the meaning of creation, and thus also the meaning of history: of the history of Israel and via its mission to the world, also the meaning of global history. This is the theme of the prophets, especially of Isaiah, whose vision of redemption is so beautiful because the horizon is lifted from the limits of Israel to the four corners of the earth. The drama of history is slowly losing its tragic character because the breadth and height and depth of redemption begin to parallel the initial scope of creation:

Thus says the Lord, the Creator of the heavens,
He who is God,
Who made the earth and fashioned it
and Himself fixed it fast,
Who created it no empty void,
but made it for a place to dwell in:
I am the Lord, there is no other.

Gather together, come, draw near,
all you survivors of the nations,
you fools, who carry your wooden idols in procession
and pray to a god that cannot save.

There is no god but Me;
there is no god other than I, victorious and able to save.
Look to Me and be saved,
you peoples from all corners of the earth;
for I am God, there is no other. (Isa. 45:18-22; NEB)

The People of God: the Old Testament Church

The core of God's Word for redemptive history is the creation ordinance of love: "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut. 6:4) *This Word constitutes Israel as the restored mankind with whom the Father revives the covenantal bond:* "Tell the people of Israel, you have seen

what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:4f) Out of all the nations of the earth (Gen. 10), the Creator-Redeemer, the Alpha-Omega (cf. Isa. 44:6), is building a new spiritual community, distinct from the nations who know not the Lord, who really are no-people. (cf. Hos. 1:8; I Pet. 2:10) In this spiritual community the basic human condition of paradise is restored, with God speaking the Word of life and man listening and doing: "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you." *I will be your God and you shall be My people.* Here lies the heart of the Christian religion in its scriptural purity from Paradise to Sinai to Carmel to Bethlehem to Golgotha to the New Jerusalem. Whenever the covenant is *renewed* we are confronted with the *old* terms. See Ex. 11:19f; 14:11; 36:28; Isa. 41:8-10; Jer. 31:33, Zech. 2:10; I Pet. 2:9f; Rev. 21:3.

This People of God is the church of the Old Testament. It is not merely a body united within one nation. It is not just a cultic community whose life centres around temple worship. It is, rather, redeemed humanity restored to its original task assigned to mankind at the beginning. It is the corporate body of all those whose hearts are open to the Lord, whose hearts have been circumcised. (See Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4) In principle, the spiritual/communal character of the church in the Old Testament is the same as that of the New Testament church. Concerning the holy catholic church, we believe: "That the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit

and Word, in the unity of true faith, a Church chosen to everlasting life; and that I am, and forever shall remain, a living member thereof." (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day XXI)

The church is the community of God's servants, the citizenry of the Kingdom who live for the King. This communion establishes a relation between the citizen and the King. It also establishes a relation among men. For within the covenantal community there are no *individuals*, men cut off from their fellows. The redeemed person is a *member* of the body. We see that beautifully in the poetic balance between the singular and the plural in Psalm 106: "Remember *me*, O Lord, when thou showest favor to *thy people*." More importantly the restoration of the created bond between people is clearly revealed in that second commandment which is like the first: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord." "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:18, 34) This Word requiring love to neighbor constitutes the all-inclusive bond in the community of God's people. It eliminates individualism from the "social" horizon of the scriptures. Needless to say, the dependence of this second commandment upon the first eliminates socialism as well!

The spiritual community of God's people does not stand outside of a so-called "secular" realm. To the contrary, that spiritual community is the revival centre for the entire range of Old Testament culture. The Word of the Lord is the *very life* of God's People: "thereby you shall live long." (Deut. 32:46f; Lev. 18:3f) That Word of the Lord was not too hard for God's people, nor was it far off. "The Word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." (Deut. 30:14) For Israel, too, that Word is two-edged. It gives goodness and

joy and blessing and peace upon obedience. But disobedience leads to disintegration and a curse. Moses sums it up for Israel and for the world: "Understand that this day I offer you the choice of a blessing and a curse. The blessing will come if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day; and the curse if you do not listen . . . but turn aside from the way I command you this day and follow other gods whom you do not know." (Deut. 11:26f; cf. chs. 27 and 28)

This choice between blessing and curse affects the entirety of Israel's life. All of the four basic relations that existed in paradise (God-man, heart-functions, man-neighbor, man-earth) are involved: God is rebuilding life in all of these. So in the books of Moses we find the Father stipulating the rules for His People, His children. These rules are positive and negative explications of what the two love commandments really mean in human existence: in worship, sexual relations, slavery, nurture, the life of law, the possession and use of the land, distribution of products, etc. It is interesting and very important to note, as one little example, that the Old Testament so clearly rejects the modern individualistic notion of absolute private property. Since the Lord owns all things, men only possess the land as a patrimony, to be used for the care of those for whom they are responsible: children, the poor, the alien, the widow, and the orphan. This is a beautiful instance of how the second commandment, expressed in concrete socioeconomic relations between people, depends upon the first. Moses can thus tell the People of God: "There will never by any poor among you if only you obey the Lord your God by carefully keeping these commandments." (Deut. 15:4f) One of these commandments stipulates: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap right into the edges of your field; neither shall you glean the loose ears of your crop. You shall leave them for the poor and the

alien. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 19:9f; cf. Lev. 25; Deut. 15; Ex. 22; Isa. 1:10-17)

In this way the Lord, in the setting of Israel’s agricultural life, is restoring the creation to its original intent, is restoring the meaning of history as man’s path before the Lord. Blessed therefore is the man who walks in the law of the Lord, whose steps have held fast to the paths of the Lord. “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” (Ps. 1; Ps. 17:5) In principle, man’s personality is no longer subject to estrangement and tension; the social relations with one’s fellowman are redeemed; and man’s setting on the earth is one of joy and peace in the land of milk and honey. For the man of God life is of one piece. For creation is one, called to service. The whole creation groans in travail together until the wayward sons of the Lord are adopted again by the Father. (Rom. 8:22) There is covenantal linkage throughout, in obedience and disobedience. “And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the buyer, so with the seller. The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word.” (Isa. 24)

O Earth, Earth, Earth, Hear the Word of the Lord!

There is only one Word for mankind. It is the Word given to Israel. Not to Israel as a national community but to Israel as a spiritual community of service. In that sense all men and all nations must become “Israel.” We now see two things happening in the latter phase of Old Testament history. The prophets point to the “remnant” of the true Israel in distinction from the political Israel. That remnant is, in the final analysis, limited to the suffering servant, the Messiah, through Whom the word and will of the Lord will prosper and be realized. (Isa. 53:10)

Precisely at this time of deepened understanding of commitment to the Lord, the prophets are the Lord’s instruments in revealing that the Word is not for Israel only but for the entire world. This occurs when we see the beginning of world civilization in the integration of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, the Persian Empire, the realm of Alexander the Great, and the Roman Regime, stretching from Scotland to the Euphrates. In this broadened context – the foundation ultimately for today’s global civilization – the confinement of the Word to the sons of Abraham is finished, and the stage is set for the realization of the promise (and task!) given to Abraham and his children: “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Gen. 12:3) Isaiah can speak of a day when the true Israel will be a blessing in the midst of the earth, to “Egypt my people and to Assyria the work of my hands.” (Isa. 19:24f) The Lord is concerned with all His creatures. Should He not have compassion also for Nineveh, a City of Man, “with its hundred and twenty thousand who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and cattle without number?” (Jonah 4:11) In that now widening perspective, Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the City of Man, is told how a little stone, hewn from a mountain, *but not by human hands*, will shatter the image of this world. “The stone which struck the image grew into a great mountain filling the whole earth.” (Daniel 2:35) The mandate of the covenant in Genesis, which is often called the cultural mandate, is equated with the mission mandate: “Bring my sons and daughters from afar, bring them from the ends of the earth; all whom I have created, whom I have formed, all whom I have made for my glory.” (Isa. 43:6f) This one mission that God’s People have for the world is not, of course, limited to what today we call soul salvation. It pertains to the entirety of man’s earthly existence, where the Lord desires peace and justice. For the Word of the Lord, the Kingship of Jahweh, is to be the very life of

mankind in all its dimensions. The Old Testament bequeathes a testament of that vision which points to Jesus Christ and which gives the marching orders for the church, God's People, as it moves from Pentecost to the New Jerusalem:

Then a shoot shall grow from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall spring from his roots.

He shall judge the poor with justice,
and defend the humble in the land with equity.

Then the wolf shall lie with the sheep,
and the leopard lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,
and a little child shall lead them. (Isa. 11; NEB)

Part III. THE WORD INCARNATE IN JESUS CHRIST

The scriptures use the phrase "Word of God" in a *third* basic way, as we know from the prologue of John's gospel. For Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, fit for hanging on Calvary's tree. His very name is: Word of God. (Rev. 19:13) At this point in our deliberations everything comes to a head. For the crucial question now becomes: What think ye of the Christ? Conflicting answers to this question have divided Christendom since its birth, and today an unbiblical understanding of Christ's place in creation and redemption has eroded the strength of God's people. Only a few things can be said here, but I believe that the following needs saying: In Christ God the Father is bringing His plans with the entire creation to fruition. "The will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand." (Isa. 53:10) This means that whatever we have said about the Word of God for creation, about the covenant, and about the Kingdom, must be related to what the Bible reveals about Jesus Christ. For whatever the Lord wants to say to His creatures is summed up in Christ, the God-man. Hence

He is the Word in Whom the entire Bible finds its focus.
(Cf. Luke 24:27)

Christ is Creator and Redeemer: Alpha and Omega

One way of grasping this focus lies in seeing Christ as the divine agent in both creation and redemption. For the Bible does not only speak of God the Father as the first and the last; Christ, too, is "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:12; cf. Isa. 44:6) The cosmic significance of Christ's role in creation and re-creation is revealed in Paul's incisive letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. (1) Christ is the firstborn of all creation; all things were created through Him and for Him, and in Him all things hold together. *He is the Alpha.* (2) But Christ is also the head of the body, the Church, the New Mankind. He is the beginning in the economy of redemption, the last Adam, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might be preeminent in all things. *He is the Omega.*

We can see the centrality of Christ the Word somewhat in the following picture. The Word of God for creation is total. That Word is Jesus Christ, in Whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Sin affects the totality of creation; it disrupts the shalom of paradise. In the setting of sin, God the Father continues to speak His Word to the entire creation, since He is *reconciling all things* that sin disrupted. This work of reconciliation is founded on the incarnation of Christ, the Father's only begotten Son, in Whom He is again *uniting all things*. Christ, we said, is the cohesive link in creation. Sin is a rejection of that link. Redemption is the restoration of that link, an expression of the Father's unfathomable love. "For God so loved the *world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the

world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:16f; cf. 1:29; I John 2:2) That *world* is not just a collection of saved individuals. It is the cosmos, made through Christ the Word and redeemed through Christ the Word made flesh.

The Lamb of God is King of Kings

The reconciling work of Christ brings peace to mankind. He is our peace. How? Christ made peace by the blood of the cross. (cf. Eph. 2:14f) The key event, therefore, in the coming of the Kingdom is the crucifixion. It is the centre of history, for there the Prince of Darkness lost his hold on the direction of mankind. Hence Christ could say: It is finished. (cf. Luke 10:17; John 12:31; 16:11; Rom. 16:12; Rev. 12:17-11) Further, Christ's victory at the cross means that the entire creation is being restored to its original intent, to sing the praises of God and the Lamb: "Then I heard *every created thing* in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, all that is in them, crying, 'Praise and honour, glory and might, to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever.'" (Rev. 5:11f)

This song clearly reveals the universality of Christ's redemptive Kingship. It embraces the entire cosmos, including the realm of matter, plants, animals, men, and society in its historical development. Christ's Kingship is as broad as creation. A denial of that, I believe, is a clear contradiction of the Bible's direct testimony, and a diminution of the honour due to our Saviour, the Lord of glory. For the Lamb Who was slain is Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 17:14), to Whom *all* authority in heaven and on earth has been given. (Matt. 28:18) The import of Christ's death on the cross is summed up in John's vision: "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have

come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (Rev. 12:10f) Satan is conquered, and in his place there is the salvation, power and Kingdom of God, and the authority of Christ. In view of that, after accepting the Bible's testimony about the *one* Lord, we should not revert to the theory of *two* realms, dominant in traditional Christian ethics. Since Christ made peace by the blood of the cross, God the Father has delivered His reborn children from the dominion of darkness and transferred them to the Kingdom of His beloved Son, in Whom they have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:13) There is no other realm or kingdom besides the one of His beloved Son, except the *civitas terrena*, the kingdom of darkness.

The universality of Christ's Kingship attained at the cross does not imply universal acceptance of that Kingship. For this reason John's vision of the drama of history between Christ's first and last coming is a vision of a spiritual conflict between the dragon, cast out of heaven and thrown down to the earth, and the woman, the church, the body of those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. (Rev. 12:13f) We see a picture of men who are of one mind and give allegiance to the beast, Satan's earthly ally. Instead of accepting the authority of the King of kings, they make war on the Lamb. The outcome of that war is never in doubt. Christ will conquer every opposing authority and power until He has put all His enemies under His feet. "For he is the Lord of Lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." (Rev. 17:14; cf. I Cor. 15:24f) This brings us to the church, the body of those who are called by the Word, accept that Word, and remain faithful to that Word. They share in Christ's work until the day of the Lord's return.

Part IV. THE WORD FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

The final passage in the book of Matthew states specifically what kind of work the disciples must share with their Master until the close of the age. They must go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded them. The task of the church is to make all men servants of the Word.

A. The Word of the Lord Must Speed on and Triumph

For there is a *fourth* basic way in which the Bible uses the phrase "Word of God." It is the gospel, the Good News about Jesus that the world must hear, believe, and do. The task of the church is to proclaim that gospel, in word and deed. Paul describes that task as the ministry of reconciliation, of peacemaking. God the Father, he writes, was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. We, who have heard the Word of the gospel and have accepted it in faith, have been reconciled. For this reason we, who are in Christ, are already a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. But then there are still so many who have not heard of the Lamb slain at Golgotha and now King of kings. They are still in darkness, alien to God. *There* lies the task of Christ's disciples: to them has been given the ministry of reconciliation. "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us." (II Cor. 5:16-21) God's appeal to men through the church is again the *Word of God*. Quite clearly, therefore, the Bible's use of this same phrase can give us a key to understanding the constant link between the Creator and the creation in every one of its redemptive-historical stages until the final *eschaton*, when God will be all in all.

The fourth use of the phrase "Word of God" is employed by Paul to describe his message: "When you

received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers." (I Thess. 2:13) Already in this passage the Word is God's redemptive power. It should not surprise us that in this sense it appears again and again in the Book of Acts, which centres on the proclamation of the Word beginning from Galilee throughout the entire Mediterranean world. (cf. 10:36f; 11:1, 13:15; 13:49; etc.) This Word is described in a variety of ways but with essentially the same content. It is the Word of truth, the gospel of our salvation. (Eph. 1:13) It is the Word of the cross, and thus the power of God to those who are being saved. (I Cor. 1:18) Through that Word, which is living and abiding, we have been born anew. (I Pet. 1:23) That Word is the sword of the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. It can save our souls. (James 1:21; Eph. 6:17) Through that Word we know Christ and the power of His resurrection. (Phil. 3:10) Hence, it is the Word of life. (Phil. 2:16; cf. I Cor. 2:3-5) In short, the Word is the gospel, that is, "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Rom. 1:16)

This use of the "Word of God" in the Bible places us before the dynamics of world history until the second coming of our Lord. With the cross and the resurrection, the Kingdom of God becomes the redirecting force in mankind's history. For in this setting, which today is global, "the Word of the Lord must speed on and triumph." (II Thess. 3:1) That sentence sums up the scriptural conception of history — and the Mission of the Church!

B. The Bible is the Word of God

At this point a few comments can be made about the Bible itself. The church must rightly handle the Word of

truth (II Tim. 2:15), must preach the Word (II Tim. 4:2), must keep the Word (Rev. 3:10) and "must hold firm to the sure Word as taught . . . to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it." (Titus 1:9) The Word, as we said earlier, is God's power creating all things. The Word, after sin, is God's power reconciling creation to its original relation with the Creator. That reconciliation is founded on Christ, the Word made flesh. The Word is the gospel, the power of God for salvation. What then is the Bible? *The Bible is the infallible record of the Word of God. Hence the Bible is the Word of God.* The Bible is a book in which "God, from a special care which He has for us and for our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing." (Belgic Confession, Art. III)

Since the Bible is a book, it is God's Word in human, creaturely and historical form. A good deal of contemporary theology has a difficult time accepting the Bible as God's Word because it has first depreciated creation and then history. The question then is: How can there be any identity between something creaturely and historical and the Word of God? This question comes out of a humanist framework of reference which is entirely foreign to the Bible itself where the very first thing we learn is that reality is creation. Because reality is creation, there is no tension between it and the Creator. The Word can therefore enter history, in Christ and the Bible. This is clear in Peter's identification of "the prophetic word" and the "prophecy of scripture" which is given to us because men spoke from God, moved by the Holy Spirit. (II Pet. 1:19f) For this reason the Bible comes with divine authority. Modern thought, which relativizes history, has greatly influenced twentieth century existentialistic theologies. The latter seek to locate the Word of God in a realm above or beyond human history. In doing this, these

theologies undermine the authority of Holy Writ, which clearly is a historical document and which posits historical realities — God's redemptive action in the Old Testament period, the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ — as the foundation of the Christian faith.

Historical relativism, however, is not the only source of undermining the authority of the scriptures. In polar tension with it we find, especially in orthodox theological circles, a revival of rationalistic propositionalism. Here the Bible is looked upon as the Word of God because it contains "propositional truth," that is, *rational verbal statements that are true in and of themselves*. In this conception, the texts of the Bible are rational propositional statements. This view also undermines the authority of the Bible as God's Word, because the Bible does *not* contain "rational" verbal statements that are true in and of themselves. Professor S. U. Zuidema of the Free University of Amsterdam has written about this way of looking at the scriptures as a "sort of pious superstition which is nothing but a type of unbelief."

This superstitious application of scripture is always ready to undo scripture by prying off a text from the whole. In such a situation every text by itself functions as the key to scripture and then we have as many keys as there are texts which can be wrenched loose. Another result of such undoing of scripture is that justice is not done to the relief of scripture by which one text can mean more as divine revelation than a number of chapters taken together. (*International Reformed Bulletin*, Nos. 32-33, 1968, p. 54)

The point is that rationalistic propositionalism operates with a conception of truth that may stem from Aristotle or positivism, but not from the Bible itself. *For truth in the scriptures is covenantal, referring to the entire context of God's dealing with man.* For this reason a single text, or a chapter, or even an entire book of the Bible contains truth that can only be understood *in that entire*

context. The final context is Christ, the Word through Whom all things were made, and the Word made flesh through Whom God is making all things new. Christ is therefore the key to the scriptures; without Him they remain a closed book. (cf. Luke 24:27)

One example of a theological discussion in which the Bible itself largely remains a closed book is the ongoing debate about the nature of the Bible itself. A number of leaders in the orthodox protestant community have lately insisted that the scriptures are the Word of God, *only* and *exclusively*. An appeal is made to the "sola scriptura" principle of the reformation to defend this. That principle, of course, does not in any sense imply a reduction of the Word of God to scripture; it affirmed that *by the scriptures alone, and not by any other human writings*, has God revealed His gospel to mankind. I do not in any way argue against that principle. But when that principle is interpreted to mean that only the Bible is God's Word, I come to the conclusion that the defenders of this position do not open the Bible itself to learn of it what the Word of God is. On this score the scriptures remain closed. The immensely rich variety of ways in which the Bible employs the phrase "Word of God" simply does not enter the arguments of the reductionists. They seem to believe in the Bible rather than in God Who reveals His Word in the Bible. They seem to be more concerned with a theology of rational propositional truth than doing the truth, doing the Word. Does not this approach lead to epistemological Arminianism, where in the final analysis one's private theory and interpretation of isolated texts, placed in a subjectivistic logical framework, contributes to salvation?

The Bible itself tells us what the Bible is for. The sacred writings, Paul tells Timothy, "are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in

righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (II Tim. 3:15f) Without objection Paul accepts the divine authority of the scriptures since they are inspired by God. But he does not stop there. The scriptures are not an end in themselves. They must instruct God's people for salvation, they must equip the man of God for good works, for the task of reconciliation. We should not, therefore, stare ourselves blind at the Bible. As Word of God, it must be a lamp to our feet and a light upon our path. (Ps. 119:105) We must not fool ourselves by a mere reading of the Bible, by only hearing the Word. We must be doers of the Word. (James 1:22) That is, the Word must be our life. That brings us back to our main theme: the Word for the New Testament church.

C. The Nature of the New Testament Church

In the period between Christ's first and second coming the Word of the Lord must speed on and triumph. The instrument of the Word is the church, God's mission agent of reconciliation. How can the church be a proper vessel of the gospel? What does it mean to be church? That's all we are asked to be. For this reason we will focus our attention on these questions in this final section.

There are certain norms for God's people which they must meet if they are to be ~~min~~ ministers of reconciliation. These norms are *the marks of the church*, confessed in the Apostles' Creed and in the Nicene Creed: "I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church, the communion of saints." If the church attempts to meet these marks it will understand its role in history, its responsibilities in the entire area of cultural endeavor, its response to the Word of the Lord. In other words, all that we have to be today is the Body of Christ, People of God. In the measure that we are not, we are in need of conversion, of revival, of reformation.

1. The Communion of the Saints: a Work of the Spirit

The church, in the first place, must be a communion of saints, a spiritual community of persons who respond to God's call. The possibility for the coming into being of that communion is Christ's atoning work of redemption, which removed the guilt of sin between men and God. The actual creation of this communion is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. In the church of the New Testament the Holy Spirit is central because the Body of Christ participates in the glory and rule of the ascended Lord via the gifts of the Spirit. The first and all-encompassing gift is regeneration. Christ Himself related this gift of the Spirit to the central theme of His preaching concerning the Kingdom. Unless one is born anew, born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Christ's Kingdom is not of *this world*, for that which is born of flesh is flesh. The Kingdom cannot become a reality in the lives of men unless the Spirit radically changes their hearts. (cf. John 3:3f; 18:38)

This indicates also that the New Testament emphasis upon the Spirit does not carry us away from the theme of the Kingdom of God. The one presupposes the other. In the early church the theme of the Kingdom was fully present, in terms of the Lordship of Christ. That Lordship is indeed universal, but it could become a personal reality only through spiritual rebirth: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (I Cor. 12:3) God saved us, "not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5) "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him." (Rom. 8:9)

In the gift of regeneration, the Holy Spirit makes persons members of the church. He makes men, in faith, children of God. "For all who are led by the Spirit are sons

of God." (Rom. 8:14; cf. Gal. 3:25f) At this point it becomes imperative to make clear that what the New Testament means by church cannot and may not be identified with what today we call the institutional church. There does not necessarily have to be a tension between the spiritual communion of saints and the institutional church. But they are not identical; the latter presupposes the former. For the church in the New Testament is the Body of Christ, that is, the New Humanity restored to serving God the Father. The foundation for that Body is the death and resurrection of Christ; the new mankind shares that death with Christ; it was baptized into His death. (Rom. 6:3) Hence Paul can conclude: by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. (I Cor. 12:13) In another context, Paul speaks of the result of Christ's reconciling work at the cross in terms of the creation of one new man(kind), one Body, because peace has been restored between God and men. This makes it possible for the new believers to become "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." The church is the redeemed mankind, one in Christ Jesus, "in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Eph. 2:11-22; cf. Gal. 3:25f)

In view of this it is dangerous to speak lightly about the church. For whenever we employ the word "church" we make a confession. This can be illustrated in terms of Christ's discussion of the church in John 15: "Abide in me, and I in you. . . . Apart from me you can do nothing." If a person says he is a member of the church, he in effect says that apart from Christ he can do nothing. Paul makes the same point in different words. "Do you not know," he writes, "that your bodies are members of Christ?" (I Cor. 6:15) Finally, when we say we are members of the church we must be willing to say with Paul that the source of our

life is: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20) I take these passages to mean that the life we live now, in our bodies, in our entire earthly existence, must be the life of Christ, the life of faith. This embraces our personal commitment, our social values, our politics, our economics. All these facets must be life-in-the-church, the life of rebirth, the life of the communion of *saints*, of persons who dedicate their entire existence in service to God. For if we *live* by the Spirit, we must also *walk* by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:25)

2. The Church is a Community of Mutual Love

If that is clear, then we can also turn to the second dimension of the church: it is a communion of saints, that is, it is a community of love where we are members one of another. (Eph. 4:25) The church is the New Mankind where the creation ordinance of love to God above all and love to neighbor as ourselves is heard and done. The church is that spiritual community where men can be genuinely human again, open to one another, forgiving each other. In this sense the church is the citizenry of the Kingdom. Peter calls the church a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. The radical newness of this Body is evident in these amazing words: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people." (I Pet. 2:9) Here we have mankind restored to its original creational intent.

It should not surprise us therefore that the main rule of the body of Christ is love, the all-encompassing norm. The Spirit gives to the church a variety of gifts, but the greatest of these is love. (cf. I Cor. 12:4 and 13:13) Paul prays that the Father may grant the believers strength through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell

in their hearts through faith, and that they may be rooted and grounded in love, and thus that they may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14-19) Once again, those who walk by the Spirit shall inherit the Kingdom of God. They belong to Jesus Christ, and thus have crucified the flesh. Does this then mean that they avoid the earth, God's creation? Not in the least. But their walk in God's creation, their relations with their fellowmen, are now rooted in a new allegiance of service to the King. For the fruit of the Spirit now becomes their standard: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law." (Gal. 5:22f)

By making the fruits of the Spirit real in its life, the Body of Christ itself becomes a minister of reconciliation. Its ministry has many dimensions, as many as there are walks of life. For that reason the church has many members, each endowed by the Spirit with different gifts and talents so that the totality of Christ's Kingship can be witnessed to. Some members are preachers, some teach in the schools, some are doctors and nurses, other are industrialists, statesmen, journalists, homemakers, helpers. In the variety of their tasks they form one body, fitly framed together, experiencing the communion of the saints on the job, strengthening one another in the faith, "sharing with one another in Jesus the tribulation and the Kingdom and the patient endurance" (Rev. 1:9), knowing that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Tim. 3:12), putting on the new man, putting on "love which binds everything together in perfect harmony," letting the peace of Christ rule in their hearts, called in the one Body, letting the Word of Christ dwell in them richly. In short, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." (Col. 3:12-17) That is the church, the Body of Christ, the New Mankind.

3. The Church is an Apostolic Movement

God is one. His Word is one. Christ's Body is one. The Spirit is one. The Spirit's mission for that body is also one. The characteristic difference between the Old Testament church and the New Testament church lies in the global range of the mission and God's equipping His people to meet that mission: "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And it shall be that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2) What then is the one, all-inclusive mission of God's people, old and young, men and maidens? Their single mission is to bring the gospel to all men in the totality of their earthly lives. It is to tell men that they must change masters. This is the message of Pentecost! Tell the house of Israel "that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus Whom you crucified." Tell them, one and all, nearby and far off: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation. Repent. And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," that is, the new life which is Christ. (cf. Acts 2:36-40) Since Pentecost, the church is indeed apostolic: sent out into the world to bring the healing gospel to every area of human life, to every area of suffering and darkness. The *total mission* therefore diverges again into *distinct missions*. The totality and the distinctness of the mission are possible because God is reconciling the entire creation in Christ. The exclusion of any area of life from the healing power of the Word of the cross implies unfaithfulness to the Lamb Who was slain, the Lord of lords, Who seeks preeminence in all things. For in His preeminence, in His Lordly rule, lies the life of mankind. There is no other Name by which men can be saved and find genuine humanity.

For this reason, I think, the prevalent separation of the

mission of Christians in the area of the institutional church from their mission in society is unbiblical.

For what is society? Society is the horizontal complex of the entirety of human relations intertwining with each other in a particular culture. Society is *human*. It is a complexity of institutions and associations, such as we find in a modern metropolis. From a normative point of view, institutions and associations are avenues in which men embody specific norms. For a Christian these norms are specific ordinances or Words of the Lord, partial expressions of the all-encompassing norm of love. For example, in industry men are called to give embodiment to the divine norm of stewardship; in the state, the divine norm of justice; in the home, the divine norm of nurture; in the school, the divine norm of education in truth.

Society therefore, with reference to its norm and in the light of the radical acceptance of the meaning of creation and its redemptive history, may only be mankind's response to the Kingship of Christ, to Whom all power and authority in social relationships belong. Outside of that redemptive and healing Kingship human society has no foundation and thus no lasting meaning. It is not a law unto itself; its law is the Word of the gospel.

With reference then to its concrete historical reality, human society must simply be the Body of Christ, differentiated in accordance with its many distinct structures. The life of that Body is the Word of the Lord, poured out by the Holy Spirit. The life of society is to be found in that same Word. For what other life can there possibly be in God's creation? The very possibility for human society – for the state, for industry, for the family, for the school – is Christ's reconciliation at the cross. Without that reconciling, life-giving work, society is subject to a slow process of disintegration; is subject to the law of the curse that follows upon disobedience. That process may be slow in coming, but the final reality of the

curse will be evident in the day of judgment, when Christ will destroy every opposing rule and authority and power. (I Cor. 15:24) And in the meantime — that is today — without a foundation in Christ's atoning work, states, families, industries, universities, and international orders are indeed disintegrating until finally the man of lawlessness, the Anti-Christ, who takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God, is revealed. (II Thess. 2:3f)

Today is already a day of judgment. But today is also a day of salvation. That means that God still has open possibilities for man's historical project in society. These divine possibilities are to be given concrete form in the signs of healing and restoration that God's people can erect in society. Paul already addressed the gospel to human relations in the family, in the master/slave context, and in the state. Today that mission is still there. All we need is missionaries, pointers to the life that the Spirit will give. Our young men must see visions. Our old men must dream dreams.

What is the institutional church? It is part of society. It is human. It is a divine institution, founded like all other institutions on God's order for creation. It is distinct from the family and the state in that it can excommunicate the unbeliever, the person who does not confess Christ as Lord. Its specific mission is the ministry of the Word in proclamation and sacrament. It is not an end in itself. It proclaims the Word so that men and nations can serve the Lord; so that the life of people — in the state, in the economic sector, on the assembly line, behind the computer, in the classroom, at home, in the media, in the laboratory — may be the life of Christ. The institutional church is the vanguard of the apostolic body of Christ. It should always be in the forefront of history, for men and civilizations perish without vision. The institutional church, in executing its mission, does not rely upon the

power of the state, nor upon the blessing of industry, nor upon the wisdom of the university. It is armed with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. It is equipped with the gospel of peace; its shield is not denominational power but faith. (cf. Eph. 6:15f)

The institutional church will carefully limit itself to its specific mission, "preaching the Word, in season and out of season." (II Tim. 4:2) The subsidiary tasks that it will take upon itself are to create the conditions for its major responsibility: to bring men to repentance and service by proclaiming the Good News for man's earthly existence. But *as an institution* it will avoid taking over that service itself. The institutional church, in pulpit and pastoral care, will proclaim the gospel for politics and economics; it will not want to become institutionally involved in political and economic decisions except in emergency situations. Instead, the proclamation of the gospel must challenge the members of the church to become servants of the King in the non-ecclesiastical areas of life, as part of a life of sanctification. Since the institutional church is but part of the Body of Christ, one does not have to twist in every direction to find tasks for its organization in an increasingly secular culture as many do today. Instead, precisely in a time of secularization, the institutional church must set its house in order, must order all its work in accordance with a clear notion of proper priorities; it must run a tight ship. It must proclaim the Kingdom (cf. Acts 20:25) over against the gods of the age, and it must challenge the body of believers to become doers of the Word, so that the entire body can be built up "to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (Eph. 4:13) In other words, the *limitation* of the office of the institutional church to the proclamation of the *universal* gospel ("the whole counsel of God," Acts 20:26) is meaningful if the reformation emphasis on the office of all believers is revived among us. In that context

the apostolicity of the church can be properly channeled. This brings us directly to the next mark of the Body of Christ.

4. The Church is Catholic

The word "catholic" means: according to the whole. The "whole" that is of importance here is the entire setting of man in God's creation, where we find the four basic relations that we spoke of earlier: God-man, heart-functions, man-fellows, and man-earth. The gospel must be proclaimed to men in that "catholic" setting. A good deal can be said about this. At this time two points need emphasis.

In the first place, the Bible's placing of man in the entire setting of creation implies the rejection of both the social gospel and the individual gospel. By *social gospel* I have in mind the view which (1) holds that man is first of all a social being whose humanity lies in his relations with his fellowmen (*Mitmenschlichkeit*); and (2) which looks upon the gospel as the source of inspiration for improving and restructuring these (horizontal) relations. The problem with this view is not that it sees man constantly interacting with his fellowmen in the execution of his various tasks in culture. We also acknowledge that. The very notion of mankind as a community brings us to that conclusion. However, the uniqueness of the biblical picture lies herein, that this community is founded on mankind's covenantal bond with the Creator. The basis of that community is not man's social inclination (*appetitus socialis*, Aristotle) nor man's essence as a productive being, where production is by definition social (Marx: man is *homo faber* and thus a *Gemeinwesen*). In the scriptures, man's bond with his fellowmen presupposes man's bond with God, the Father of the human family. For this reason, the *great* and *first* commandment of Christ is: "You shall love the Lord your

God with all your heart." And the *second* commandment, like unto the first, is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This means that man is not first of all a social being; he is a religious being whose life is service to God. This service includes obedience to the second commandment. Love to God demands love to neighbor. But love to neighbor is not to be equated with love to God. That is the error of the social gospel. Hence it is a reductionist, a partial interpretation of the gospel of the Kingdom. Hence it lacks the catholicity that must characterize God's people in its doing of the Word of the Lord.

Doing the Word of the Lord in society is not to be equated with the promotion of man's humanity or mankind's livability within the purely horizontal political and economic relationships. Sin is not in the first place a disruption and dislocation within these horizontal structures. Social revolutions are never the first turning points for lasting renewal in a culture. I believe that the social gospel, carried out consistently, cuts the heart out of the authentic gospel. In saying this I do not mean that the gospel can be separated from a restructuration of social relations; for these are human relations, and whatever is human stands in need of redemption. But this restructuration is authentically Christian when it is founded on the biblical conception of man as God's imager: man's self is service. This means, for one thing, that the love which must motivate man's political and economic existence ought to be a reflection of man's love to God. Without this, Christian social concern quickly becomes another form of humanitarianism. In the practical political struggle, Christians may well want to pursue a strategy of provisional cooperation with humanists. For they will doubtless agree on certain immediate goals. But the lasting impact of any Christian social endeavor lies in the implementation of the biblical conception of a

genuinely *open society* whose final point of reference lies beyond the horizontal social structures in Christ Jesus, the Head of the Body to Whom all power has been given. A conception of society whose final point of reference is either autonomous individual man or autonomous humanity cannot provide a lasting foundation for an open society: its horizon is too limited. And the absolutization of limited horizons is idolatry: a service of the creature rather than the Creator. (cf. Rom. 1:23-25) The witness and action of Christ's followers in society are an expression of catholicity if placed in the totality of Christ's redemptive Lordship over history. The visions of Isaiah and the book of Revelation set the context within which God's people are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the leaven of the lump.

The gospel of the Kingdom is not a social gospel, nor is it an individual gospel. By *individual gospel* I have in mind the view (1) which holds that man is first of all an individual being whose humanity lies in an identity separate from other men; and (2) which looks upon the gospel mainly as a power for the salvation of individuals. The problem with this view is not that it emphasizes *personal* repentance from sin, conversion and regeneration, and commitment to the Lord in the joy of faith. The Psalms of the Old Testament are the most beautiful songs of the church because there we find the individual sinner and saint searching for forgiveness and light. "Create in me a clean heart, O God. . . . Take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation." (Ps. 51) The individual person does not get lost in God's creation. "Teach me thy way, O Lord, that I may walk in thy truth; unite my heart to fear thy name. . . . Great is thy steadfast love toward me; thou hast delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol." (Ps. 86:11f) In the New Testament it is also emphatically clear that the individual person must make a radical turnabout if he is to become a disciple of

Christ. The Lord finds Philip and tells him personally and directly: "Follow me." (John 1:43) The cost of discipleship may cut through personal ties and friendships: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword . . . He who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life (in himself) will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 10:34f) Christ did not address these words to political and social structures. He addressed them to individual persons.

No, the problem with the individual gospel and its many variations is not that it stresses personal conversion and personal evangelism. Its critique of both the social gospel and traditional orthodoxy without Spirit-filled life is perfectly understandable. For Christianity quickly becomes a mere source of moral and social reform or a tenacious maintenance of dead orthodoxy without personal conversion. But why is personal conversion so imperative? Because the Kingdom of Christ can only enter human life and culture via the avenue of radically changed heart commitments. The human heart generates the issues of life. It must be *regenerated*, filled with the life of the Holy Spirit, before a person can acknowledge Christ as Savior and Lord. Even Nicodemus, a fine representative of doctrinal purity and moral uprightness in the church, had to be told by Christ: unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

This brings into clearer focus the shortcomings of the individual gospel and the strategies of its adherents. For the latter have not sufficiently understood that conversion from a life of sin must lead to a new life of Kingdom service. They have not fully seen *the context of repentance* since they tend to sever the tie between individual rebirth and the totality of God's plan for creation, culture and society, where the Father wants to establish His gracious

rule. They neglect to notice, at least in part, that the *motive for rebirth* is the coming of the Kingdom, as Christ so clearly articulated throughout His entire ministry: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 4:17; cf. Mark 1:14)

Over against the biblical motive of regeneration and conversion as the first step to a life of integral discipleship and service for the Master, the individual gospel posits the motive of *the salvation of the soul*. In the scriptures, the soul is the life of the body. It is not some spiritual entity separate from the body as a material entity. But beginning with the seventeenth century, the dualistic conception of man as both body and soul served as a foundation for the individual gospel and the subsequent loss of catholicity in many segments of Christendom. Since the latter is so important for a proper evaluation of today's misunderstandings, we will briefly consider a few historical background factors. Here we are confronted with the British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) who exercised a distinct influence on modern thought and practice. In *A Letter concerning Toleration* (1689) Locke writes that religion and the church are concerned with the fulfillment of certain human *interests* and *needs*. In this, religion and the church do not basically differ from politics and the state, since these also exist to fulfill and protect human interests. When Locke speaks of human interests he has in mind the interests of individuals, not those of social structures or mankind. For social structures exist only for the well-being of individuals. The distinction between religion and politics lies in the difference in interests each pursues. Religion concerns itself with "the salvation of men's souls" or "the acquisition of eternal life." Civil society or politics, on the other hand, concerns itself with what might be called the salvation of men's bodies or the acquisition and protection of private property needed to sustain men in their temporal life.

Since each man has the supreme and absolute authority of judging for himself what is beneficial for his temporal and eternal interests, the care of each man's salvation as well as the care of each man's earthly needs belongs only to himself. This radical individualism in matters of religion and property is tempered only by the notion of consent which, via a social contract, ties men to religious societies and civil societies. The expression of individual free will in the acquisition of salvation finds its parallel in the expression of free will enterprise in the acquisition of private property. Synergistic Pelagianism and classic economic liberalism have thus become twins since the birth of seventeenth century individualism.

Religion, Locke argued, should not concern itself with the business of civil government. This meant that in effect it should not interfere with matters of civil interest: "life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like." Having limited religion to soul salvation, having cut the body out of Christianity, Locke could easily propose toleration between the various sects of Christendom: private religious opinions should not affect the affairs of the commonwealth in any way. Along with many of his eighteenth century deist followers (among them, a number of "founding fathers" of the United States of America), Locke readily acknowledged and even encouraged religion as a basis for morality since for the rationally unenlightened citizens a moral basis for politics is better than no basis at all. In other words, besides serving as the avenue of soul salvation, Christianity could also function as a *civil religion*. This meant that Christianity was allowed to support a particular political order after that same political order had been secularized, that is, cut off from the redeeming Lordship of Christ.

Locke made it very clear that the political order had to determine the range of influence of Christianity, for only

in that manner could toleration be maintained. If the Christian religion came into conflict with the political system, the Christian religion had to surrender. Thus Locke formulated the essential ingredients of the relation between the social order and the Christian faith that we find in modern secular culture: "no opinions contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society, are to be tolerated by the magistrate." Here toleration, based on a *supposed* common rational consent, turns into intolerance. The polite totalitarianism of liberal rationality was created at the expense of the catholicity of the gospel of Christ. The sweet reasonableness of this totalitarianism determines the decision-making process of contemporary culture in the schools, the universities, the trade unions, the political parties, and most professional organizations.

This new foundation for the social and political order did not spell the end of the Christian faith in the western world. For one thing, Locke's formula of toleration was not immediately and universally accepted. Moreover, at the grass-roots level of the simple believers, the Christian faith often revealed an amazing resilience and power of recuperation. In the eighteenth century we find renewals in continental pietism, in Great Britain the Wesleyan revitalization of the Church of England, and in the United States the recurrent revival movements. All of these forces contributed to the worldwide missionary endeavors of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, these movements could not contain the forces of the religion of humanism that gradually captured the direction of Western culture. As time progressed, the Christian religion became a private thing. And Christians, especially in orthodox protestant churches, grew more and more accustomed to this confinement of Christian conviction. The wall of partition between religion and the state, established by the Enlightenment rationalists, became a bulwark of mainline

orthodoxy itself. Behind that bulwark the churches were allowed to pursue their programs. What was accomplished must not be despised. But the thrust of the accomplishments, in revivals, in missions, in evangelism campaigns, was largely limited to the well-being of the churches themselves and to the salvation of the souls of individuals.

The individual gospel, implicitly or explicitly, proceeds from the assumption that the individual person, or at least the individual soul, can somehow be lifted out of the context of creation. That context is then left to itself, neutralized, or avoided. In recent decades there is a new and highly interesting development, namely, the proponents of the individual gospel become proponents of an individualistic social order as well. This is not surprising, since human life indeed *is* of one piece: the individual soul cannot so easily be lifted out of its creaturely setting. And a basic conception defended in one area of life will soon influence one's thinking in the remaining areas. Careful commentators have indeed correctly concluded that it is precisely the gospel of individual soul salvation that is now becoming the civil religion of the United States. The Christian religion, having lost the wide scope of a God-centered walk of life, narrowed down to man-centered soul salvation, has become for many the moral justification for nationalism, the American way of life, and all that it stands for in the world today. This development indicates that the loss of catholicity makes it extremely difficult for the church to be holy, to lead a life of sanctification. Before we turn to that mark of the Body of Christ, its unity requires our attention.

5. The Church is One

The marks of the Church pertain in the first place to the Body of Christ as the New Mankind, the spiritual

community of those whom the Lord calls His own. This is also true of its unity. It is one of the central religious norms to which Christ's disciples must be subject in all of their undertakings. For if the believers are divided, how can the world believe that the Father has sent Jesus into the world? (cf. John 17:21) Did not Jesus come into the world so that men could be one in love, reconciled to God? (cf. Eph. 2:14f) Is not Christ's Kingship over all things to be evident in the Church, which is His *body*, the fullness of Him Who fills all in all? (Eph. 1:23) If there is now one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, how could the believers possibly *not* be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?" (Eph. 4:1-6)

The unity of Christ's body must be evident in the institutional church. In many ways we have lost a biblical sense of unity here because so many leaders and theologians in the institutional churches have largely lost the vision of Christ's Kingship, have lost a sense of the one Word for men and nations, and consequently have lost an urgency of the oneness that must characterize God's People as an agent of reconciliation in the world. This loss of the vision of the gospel of the Kingdom created a vacuum in which many partial visions could develop. Around these partial visions the members of the many denominations could gather together. The individualistic sociology of the seventeenth century provided a ready foundation for the voluntaristic and nominalistic ecclesiology that colours a good deal of the reflections on the nature of the church in the English-speaking world. John Locke had defined the church as a "voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord in order to the public worshiping of God in such manner as they judge acceptable to Him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls." This voluntaristic conception of the church — essentially a variation of the political social

contract theory — contributed greatly to the tragic process of fragmentation in Protestantism, especially in North America where one finds hundreds of denominations and thousands upon thousands of independent local congregations.

And what must be said about the way in which Christ's disciples are to be instruments of healing in the non-ecclesiastical areas of life? The traditional stance, especially of evangelicals, has been that involvement in social, political and educational tasks should follow the avenue of individual witness and action. Here it must be immediately admitted that many assignments of proclamation and healing in missions, evangelism, and social work can only be executed in a person-to-person encounter. To put it somewhat technically, the social structure of missions and evangelism is by definition of an inter-individual character. But even there the person-to-person confrontation occurs within the communal setting of Christ's Body, of which the missionary and the evangelist and the social worker are individually members. (cf. I Cor. 12:27) The unified way in which believers are to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called is beautifully described in Ephesians 4:10-16. If God's People have been captured by the Word of the Lord and begin to see visions of the Kingdom of Christ in education, the world of the arts and sciences, in the political and economic sector, they will urgently desire to witness to these visions as a body, differentiated in accordance with the gifts of each member. Within the all-embracing context of the spiritual communion and unity of Christ's Body, they will form teams sufficient for the task at hand. *The measure of cooperative unity among Christ's followers will depend upon the size of the task to be tackled and the number of disciples equipped for the task.* If it is a small task, a small team will do. There will be plenty of one-man jobs for the

creative loners, who have great faith and who have matured to manhood. If the task to be undertaken is a large one, Christ's workers, all sharing in the office of believers, all desiring to grow up in every way into Christ Who is the head, will establish a large team. They will know that spiritual unity provides the strength needed for witness to Christ in politics, economics and education.

The notion that Christians can shift for themselves in the culturally directive organizations of our society is not only at odds with the spirit of Ephesians 4. It is also a grave strategic error. By culturally directive organizations I have in mind those associations that are formed on a voluntary basis to influence the direction of a culture: schools, colleges and universities (which in structure are not of a public-legal nature); political parties (by means of which the citizenry expresses its coresponsibility for the administration of justice in the state); trade unions, businessmen's associations, and professional bodies (by means of which workers — a category used broadly here — attempt to influence the structure and direction of the economic order in a society, both locally and nationally); the media, etc.

This can be illustrated from the area of education. Most protestant Christians in the United States and Canada pursue either or both of these avenues: (1) assigning Christian education to the institutional churches, which then establish an elaborate system of Sunday schools or their equivalent; and (2) assigning Christian witness to believing teachers in the classrooms of public schools. In rural communities these avenues proved quite effective until the second world war, at least if the individual Christian teacher had a conception of the intrinsic connection between a scriptural view of life and the educational curriculum. But today, with the immense centralization of education in ever larger schools, it is evident that the individual teacher can accomplish

increasingly little all by himself. The very process of education has become teamwork, and the direction of the process is conditioned by the proponents of secular humanism. For the latter control the teachers colleges, write the textbooks, determine the curriculum pattern, and form the majority of the teaching staffs. The individual Christian teacher in the public schools may well be an excellent evangelist. But the educational system hardly permits him to be an excellent Christian *educator*. And we do not improve strategy by confusing the mission of evangelism with the mission of Christian education. The former is of a person-to-person encounter. The latter today requires a team whose members can be a hand and a foot to one another in the execution of one communal task, namely, providing an alternative direction to secular humanism in educating the nation's youth. More and more believers are realizing this and are beginning to establish Christian day schools in their local communities. A similar practical strategy should, I think, be flexibly and responsibly — in the light of historical conditions and the availability of talent and resources — pursued in the political and economic sectors of our society. The problems here are huge since local solutions do not suffice. For politics deals with the direction of an entire state and its parts, and the economic sector is largely controlled by a relatively small group of exceedingly powerful industrial empires.

God's People are not one body in their social witness. They are fragmented. Hence they are weak. And the world does not believe that the Father has sent the Son to be the Healer of mankind's social wounds. (cf. John 17:21) As soon as Christians discover again what kind of Saviour Jesus is, they will find new and Christ-Body-like ways of serving Him, knowing that the Lord, the Creator, has given the Church "as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon." (Isa. 42:6f; cf. Luke 4:18f)

Does this mean that a "Christian organization" is sufficiently "dependable" to be a light to the nations? Sad to say, not really! A Christian cultural organization — in and of itself — is no more dependable as a witness to the Master than is the institutional church, a home missions board, a church's theological seminary, a Bible school, or an individual believer. These can be meaningful agents of the gospel only if they are "servants for Jesus' sake," bringing and defending not their own message but "Christ the Lord," in the knowledge that they have "this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." (cf. II Cor. 4:5-7) In other words, every manifestation of service must be an expression of daily sanctification, of holiness. That brings us to the last mark of the church.

6. The Church is Holy

Christ's Church must be a holiness movement. Perhaps everything that I have tried to convey is summed up in that final mark. Our theme has been: Thy Word our life. The apostle John writes about this in his first epistle, so that our joy may be complete. The Word of Life, he writes — the Word that was from the beginning, the Word made manifest in the Saviour of the world, the Word that appeared to destroy the works of the devil, the Word that we have touched with our hands, the Word that we now proclaim to you — that Word must be our life. That Word must be "in us," it must "abide in us." For that Word is eternal life, the only life. "This life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son has not life." (cf. I John 1; 2:14; 5:11f) This life is first of all man's fellowship with the Father and the Son: God abides in us and we in Him "because He has given us of His own Spirit." (4:13) But the new life is not only fellowship between God and His little children. It also means that we

have "fellowship with one another." That fellowship is the bond of the Church; and that bond is *holy*. Since that is the case John writes his letter to us, "so that we may not sin." For if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves; if we say we have fellowship with God while we walk in darkness, hating our brother, we lie. Only if we are holy, if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, can we have fellowship with one another. (1:5f; 2:9)

What does it mean to be holy, to be cleansed from sin, to walk in the light, to keep the Word, to be children of the Father? The answer lies in the old commandment ever new: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God." (4:7) Holiness is thus first of all a *positive* norm that must characterize God's people. Holiness is a life of love dedicated to God the Father, in Christ the Son, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of peace among men. Holiness does not imply that Christ's followers must step out of this world, that they must leave it to the devil's devices. This is our Father's world, and only *there* can we love Him and our brother. Holiness is the total dedication of that world to the Father. For from Him and through Him and unto Him are all things. The world is holy when it serves the Maker. We are holy not in ascetic isolation from that world, as if sin has its source outside of men's hearts; instead, we are asked to be holy in the simple and concrete earthly, creaturely setting of our daily life. The bells of the horses and the pots in the kitchen must be "holy to the Lord." (Zech. 14:20) Holiness is not a matter of being "sacred" in one part of life — the so-called religious or spiritual part — in distinction from a profane or secular part of life. That notion is not scriptural but pagan. It presupposes the existence of a deity who is far away from men, who does not covenantally link himself with men through a clearly revealed, understandable and trustworthy Word. That kind

of a god must therefore be approached and placated by a special order of men in a special "cultic" manner. These special men or women are the "sacred" priests whose office only is "divine" in distinction from the "profane" or "mundane" tasks of the rest. The Bible teaches us an entirely different conception. Paul addresses all of the members of the church in the various congregations that he founded as "saints." All God's beloved are "called to be saints." (Rom. 1:7) It is the universal office of all men to be holy. Within that universal office there are indeed many distinct offices, depending upon the gifts of the Spirit to the members of the church. But there is certainly not one set of office-bearers that is specially holy ("reverend," "revered") in distinction from the rest of the congregation of the Lord ("laity"). If that distinction still lives among us we are influenced by a remnant of paganism.

The church is holy in the measure that it recognizes that earthly life as an integral totality is religion, that is, service of God in Christ our King. This means that the motivation of all that God's People do is grounded in love. There is no other ground of being, of life. God's little ones pray: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." They also pray: "Hallowed be Thy Name." God's Name must be hallowed, His Kingdom must come on earth in lives of holiness, of sanctification. This means, to use a phrase of Paul, that our lives must be "worthy of the Lord," (Col. 1:10; cf. Eph. 4:1) Who calls us into His own Kingdom and glory. (I Thess. 1:12)

Holiness, as the Church's positive response to the Word in service, does have a negative implication as well. The demand of holiness posits a profound *spiritual antithesis* between the Kingdom of Christ and the dominion of darkness, between a life of service and the death of sin. For though the Kingdom of God has come into the world and Satan has been conquered by the blood of the Lamb, the evil one is still making war on those who keep the

commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. (Rev. 12:17) He prowls around like a lion, seeking someone to devour. (I Pet. 5:8) The apostle John deals explicitly with the resulting situation in the book of Revelation and in his first epistle. Since the whole world is still in the power of the evil one (I John 5:19), the Body of Christ, if it is to be holy, must be a *militant* church. For there are two powers at work in human history and thus also — especially — in the church: the power of the Word of Truth and the power of the Lie. The latter becomes a concrete historical force in the spirit of Anti-Christ, embodied in those who deny the heart of the gospel, that Jesus the Man of Nazareth is of God. (I John 4:3) That spirit, John writes, is in the world already. As a matter of fact, it arises in the historical process precisely where Christ is preached. (cf. I John 2:19) For this reason it is indeed called the spirit of *Anti-Christ*, whose Lie is a rejection of the Word of Truth, whose Lie is thus a counter-gospel. This rejection of the Word of Christ's gospel is thus a *powerful possibility right within the church itself, within the sphere of Word proclamation, within the so-called Christian West*. For counter-gospels appear as lasting historical forces only after the Truth has been proclaimed.

Counter-gospels are ways of life and commitments that search for salvation in human possibilities outside of the Man of Nazareth, Who died and rose again. The parable of the sower explains man's search for self-redemption: "When any one hears the Word of the Kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart." Or: "when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, immediately he falls away." Or: "the cares of thy world and the delight in riches choke the Word, and it proves unfruitful." (Matt. 13:18f)

The Word of the Lord is conveniently exchanged for a deception when God's People, consciously or

unconsciously, narrow the concerns of the Lord. This narrowing may take a variety of forms. At times "religion" becomes a matter of mainly personal morality, or of the support of the "institutional church" and its projects, or of the adherence to certain dogmas, or a combination of these. The result of this narrowing or reduction is the establishment of an area of life where God does not rule and where man can pursue his own ends, be his own master. The prophet Jeremiah radically opposed those leaders of the People of God who conveniently limited the concerns of the Lord to the institutional church in order to create a "neutral" area in society where they neglected to do justice, oppressed the alien, the fatherless and the widow, and shed innocent blood. In short, like many Christians today, they preferred to go after other gods and comforting riches in their life outside of the institutional church. The Lord, says Jeremiah, casts such people out of His sight. For their claim "We are delivered!" was based on the counter-gospel of trust in the institutional church instead of trust in the Lord. Theirs was not the gospel of service — justice! — but of ecclesiastical self-righteousness, of self-redemption through formal church membership and a religiosity climaxed in unholy triumphalism: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." (see Jer. 7:1-15)

Christ Himself exposed the false covenantal reliance on purely blood connections of the church's leaders of His day who argued "Abraham is our father" with these cutting words: "Why do you not understand what I say? *It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.* You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me." (John 8:43-45) And Paul

calls those "accursed" who turn to a "different gospel" of self-justification by moralistic humanitarianism instead of through faith in Christ. (Gal. 1:6; 2:16) He knows that for such the Word of Christ crucified is a stumbling block, an insult to their egos. (I Cor. 1:23) But for Paul it is a matter of either/or, since this "different gospel" destroys the meaning of Christ's reconciling work at the cross and thus annihilates the church's holy task of peacemaking in the world: calling all men to the freedom of faith, working through love, making us servants one of another. (cf. Gal. 5:6, 13)

The Church must be holy. But this requirement calls forth a conflict within the Church itself; indeed, it calls forth a battle within the heart of every Christian. For holiness is man's surrendering commitment at the foot of the cross, which is the crossroads where final allegiances are made that affect the entire direction of one's earthly existence. The Word must be our life, but it can only become our life if we deny ourselves, seek first the Kingdom, take up our cross and follow the Man of Galilee. (Matt. 16:24) But who wants to deny himself? Doesn't Jesus' perturbing condition of self-denial destroy all genuine humanity, self-expression, authenticity? Wasn't Marx right when he asserted that religion — man's dependence upon something or someone outside of himself — is an illusory expression of self-realization, of lostness and alienation in the only world we know, the human world? How can man be a *self*, a person, when he needs salvation initiated by one of the many deities worshipped when mankind hadn't arrived at self-consciousness and self-activity and thus explained its still mysterious existence in terms of a Creator? Indeed, in order to relieve the intense suffering of the oppressed, should we not make men responsible to themselves for their actions in history? And thus listen to Karl Marx:

A being does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favour of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by another person's favour when I owe to him not only the continuance of my life but also *its creation*; when he is its *source*. My life has necessarily such a cause outside itself if it is not my own creation. (*Karl Marx: Early Writings*, Bottomore edition, p. 165)

There it is: the naked simplicity of the spiritual antithesis between the gospel of self-creation and self-redemption and the gospel of creation by the Word of Yahweh and redemption by the Word of the cross. Holiness requires understanding their mutual exclusion at the root of things in the struggle for men's allegiances today. The first gospel attempts to win converts by asserting that man can be human only if he is responsible to himself, or if mankind is responsible to itself, in managing the affairs of this world. The second gospel attempts to win converts by confessing that man, in the spiritual community of mankind, is responsible to God in managing the affairs of this world. The first claims that it speaks the Truth, that the second therefore is a Lie. The second also claims that it is the Truth, that the first is therefore a Lie, a counterfeit. Moreover, the gospel of the Kingdom holds that the religion of self-creation and self-redemption in the end is no gospel at all. For even if men, starting from the all-encompassing integrative principle that man(kind) is the measure of all things, still suppose that the essence of life lies in love, as we find it in the conceptions of the great humanists, and even if men further proclaim that this love must be one of universal philanthropy as we find it in the conceptions of the great socialists, then we are still left with some basic questions. On the basis of the humanist principle of integration the answers to these questions have proved contradictory.

The first question is: what criterion do we have for determining the content of this love that must direct us in managing the affairs of this world? Is it the well-being of the individual in the first place or is it the well-being of mankind as a whole? Do we find humanity by searching for it in political stability, in universal education, in technological progress and economic productivity? The different answers to these questions have resulted in radically conflicting conceptions of the social order. Again, who is really equipped to answer these fundamental questions, the "masses" or the "elite"? If the former, how can we avoid the regime of power, the dictatorship of the majority? If the latter, is it the political, economic, or intellectual elite that provides conclusive answers? And if one elite or another discovers what is good for mankind, how are its answers translated into the social order? By persuasion, by forceful imposition, by a reign of terror? Finally, what happens to those in the minority or to those who still beg to differ with the elite on what is in the common interest of all? What happens to those who *from the start* are committed to the opposite principle of integration, namely, that God is the measure of all things? Do we politely let them pursue the acquisition of other-worldly soul salvation while systematically denying them the opportunity and freedom of influencing the this-worldly order of things? Do we subtly but legally exclude from public life a cultural and social policy that finds its all-encompassing principle of integration in God Who speaks His Word as the ordering measure of all things? In short, can humanism provide a lasting basis for an "open society"?

The history of the West during the last four centuries has provided a long series of answers to these questions, in ever new combinations of intellectual and cultural and political forces. That history, expanding from the Mediterranean basin — the birthplace of Greek thought,

the Judaeo-Christian faith, Roman law, and Islam — has become the main link to today's global civilization. The history of the "Old" World provides the integrative and directive premises for the "New" World(s) of the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia. That history has not been without immense merit, even during the latter centuries when its premises and principles were largely those of unbelief, of apostasy from the gospel of the scriptures. For apostate man is still a creature, a wayward servant, a prodigal son no doubt, but until today not entirely a law unto himself. The ordering measure for creation still hems in the destructive possibilities of unbelief. The religious ground motive of self-creation has been posited in thought, but it has not as yet been fully executed in practice.

However, the principle of apostasy and unbelief is like a leaven which increasingly permeates not necessarily every nook and cranny but the *direction* of our life together. And that *direction*, the scriptures tell us, is no gospel at all. It cannot direct us to a lasting cure for mankind's intense suffering and agony since it lacks a permanent norm for love. It cannot appeal to an arbiter beyond itself. How can mankind heal itself when man is the measure of things? Which man, which philosopher, which statesman, provides the remedy? John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, John Dewey, Herbert Marcuse, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon? Rousseau, Marx, Lenin, Mao-Tse-tung, Brezhnev? We discover to our dismay that the doctor himself is the patient, *brokenheartedly* yearning for love of self and love of fellow, searching for the key to individuality and community, freedom and order, liberty and equality, self-consciousness and social control, authenticity and organization, free enterprise and social welfare, nature and culture, past and future, simplicity and production, autonomy and authority, spontaneity and technique,

passion and rationality, beauty and efficiency, truth and consequences. As long as the doctor himself is the patient, his diagnosis is partial, his prescription quickly countered and superseded, his therapy at best provisional, at worst fatal.

The time will come when apostate man will run out of cures for mankind's maladies, when he will be caught in his own trap, in the labyrinthine twilight of his own imaginations. When man is not inclined to do the Word of the Lord, his deeds become his own undoing. Apostasy is a falling away from God into one's own pit. The man of pride and self-reliance reaps his own reward — the self-inflicted curse inherent in disobedience. (cf. Prov. 28:10; Isa. 3:9; 14:11) There is a dynamic in the development of unbelief: the farther man stumbles from the Word of life, the deeper his fall. (cf. Isa. 14:12-21) There is no rest for the wicked in his unending search for answers. There is no peace for the prodigal son unless he returns to the Father's home. (cf. Isa. 48:22; 57:18-20)

We can sense something of the frustrations of apostate man in our time. The principle of toleration, forged by the eighteenth century "enlightened" deists as the foundation for a just society, appears to shed little light on the race issue in the United States, on the tensions between French culture and Anglo-Saxon culture in Canada, the tensions between factions in Northern Ireland, on the clash between Mohammedans and Hindus in Asia, between Arabs and Zionists in the Middle East. The politics of liberty, equality, and fraternity, first proclaimed in that provincial revolution of Paris in 1789, has not prevented the worldwide terror and slaughter of 1914-18 and 1939-45. That seemingly so logical and beneficial link between self-revelatory reason, autonomous science, neutral technique, uninhibited industrial expansion, and rational social control, has today brought the Atlantic community to personal estrangement, social disorder,

feverish acquisitiveness, and misdirected energies. The clarion call to revolution, since 1848 the communist counter-gospel suggesting a human alternative to the capitalist counter-gospel, has not brought peace on earth. Apparently a "new" social order does not produce "new" men.

Conclusion

Into this world God sent His only begotten Son, to reveal the Word, to do the Word, to die as the Word made flesh. Into this world the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, to pour out new life in the hearts of young and old, to make men "new." Into this world the Spirit sends the Church, the new mankind, the community of love, the fellowship of *saints*. "Do not be conformed to this world," Paul admonishes the church at Rome. (12:2) "Little children, keep yourselves from idols," John warns the church in his first letter. (5:21) They must not listen to the words — lies — of the gods of this passing age. These are the gods whose agents speak their words of Babylonian confusion in the papers we read, on the TV screens in our homes, in the classrooms of our educational system, in the programs of the political parties (right, left and middle), in the gross products of our industrial captains, in the promises of the trade unions.

Holiness on the part of the church today requires a new maturity, a new awareness of the real heresies, of the real idols. The requirement of holiness implies the rejection of accommodations, of adjustment to the spiritual forces that guide modern man. God's People so much prefer to limp with two opinions, especially when their leaders mislead them and confuse the course of their paths. (cf. I Kings 18:21; Isa. 3:12) For God's children at heart are also lovers of self, of money, of pleasure, rather than lovers of God; they are always tempted to "look after

their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." They may then still hold the form of religion while denying its power (Phil. 2:21; II Tim. 3:1-5), trusting on Egypt's horses without consulting the Holy One of Israel. (Isa. 31; Ps. 146:3)

Indeed, the Church displays so little holiness. It is meant to be a community of love, of dedication; it is also one of sinners. However, the Church of sinners confesses: "I believe the communion of saints; *the forgiveness of sins*." For the Word of God is not bound. (II Tim. 2:9) There lies the Church's hope and with it, the hope for mankind. Sin is not the last word. For "if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (I John 2:1f) This means that history is never a closed book until the judgment day. Moreover, since Christ is our advocate, our spokesman, the outcome of the battle between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness is never in doubt.

The victory of the Kingdom of Light is assured not because of the dependability of its citizens but because of the faithfulness of its King, Jesus Christ. "Little children," the apostle John writes, "you are of God, and have overcome the spirits of antichrist and the spirits of error; for He Who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (I John 4:4) This means that only as Christ's disciples, only in the measure that Christ is our life, have we actually *overcome* the Anti-Christ, the "beast" within us and about us. Ours therefore must be an entirely new allegiance, motivation, strategy, and goal. We must be "of God." Then we are allowed to share in Christ's victory over the dark demons that yearn for our allegiance. We cannot conquer these demons on our own. We must be "born of God" if we are to "overcome the world." John puts it succinctly: "this is the victory that overcomes the

world, our faith." (5:5) Surrendering, serving faith of men mature in Christ makes them like little children, more than conquerors through Him Who loved us in the face of tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. (Rom. 8:35f)

Love, faith, hope. There is hope for our world if modern, self-reliant man, now depending upon the undependable gods of metaphysical speculation, of scientific, technical, industrial "progress," and military power, is willing to let Christ cast out the demons from his heart and life and culture. We must repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Since today is still the day of salvation, God desires that all men should reach repentance. (cf. II Pet. 3:9) We must confess that the works of our hands and the imaginations of our hearts have failed us, that these cannot give us meaning, fill the empty void in our yearning for paradisaal peace and goodness. That void *can* be filled since God wants to be with us. He is the Immanuel Who wants to be our Father. We must become His little children, like little Samuel, who said what God desires all men to say: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." His Word must become our life.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, He put him in the midst of them, and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18)

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