

THE KINGDOM OF GOD ITS FOUNDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS*

B. Zylstra**

There is hardly a theme of Christian reflection which requires more attention than the one of the Kingdom of God. For if the church of Jesus Christ - God's people - is to be an instrument of reconciliation and redemption (II Cor. 5) in an age so fraught with tension, turmoil and confusion, it will have to find the foundation and direction of its witness and work in the scriptural teaching on the Kingdom of God. Without this the very meaning of the gospel itself is not clear. This is evident already in the very first message of Christ Himself. Mark describes Jesus' first ministry in these words: "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'" (Mark 1:14ff, RSV).

The important relation between the gospel and the kingdom has been misunderstood from the very beginning of the Christian church. Theological reflection of the last few decades shows new interest in this theme. In the setting of evangelical theology the studies of Herman Ridderbos are perhaps the most significant. In his book *The Coming of the Kingdom* (1950, 1962) he writes: "The central theme of Jesus' message, as it has come down to us in the synoptic gospels, is the coming of the kingdom of God ... It may be rightly said that the whole of the preaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles is concerned with the kingdom of God, and that in Jesus Christ's proclamation of the kingdom we are face to face with the specific form of expression of the whole of the revelation of God. These preliminary remarks may show that for insight into the meaning and the character of the New Testament revelation of God, it is hardly possible to mention any other

* Originally published as a mimeograph by the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto.

** The late Prof. Bernard Zylstra (1934-1986) lectured Political philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies, 229 College Street, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4, Canada.

theme equal in importance to that of the kingdom of heaven" (p. ix). (See also Gerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*, 1958.)

There are many ways in which one can approach the theme of the kingdom of God. One might focus on its place especially in the synoptic gospels. One might try to understand the meaning of Paul's emphasis on the Lordship of Christ. The book of Revelation is immediately important since it presents the drama of the spiritual conflict between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness between Christ's first and second coming. One could begin directly with contemporary movements and events to study the possible relation between faith and culture, politics, economics, philosophy, etc.

Instead I prefer for now to focus on the scriptural context within which the theme of the kingdom of God appears. For I believe that a grasp of the scriptural frame of reference is prior to an understanding of seemingly more significant but still secondary issues. Clarity with regard to the latter depends upon insight into the former.

The kingdom of God can be described in two 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.

From this brief description it is clear that insight into the nature of God's kingdom requires insight into, first, the Word of God and, second, the nature of the creation - that which is subject to this Word. In conjunction with the subtitle of this paper one can say that the first element deals with the "foundations" and the second with the "implications" of the kingdom of God. Since the Bible speaks of "the Word of God" in four distinct though closely interrelated ways - in connection with the creation and redemption of reality, including humans - my article falls readily into the four parts identified above.

We might note that the famous prologue of the Gospel of John is perhaps the only passage in the Bible where these four intertwined meanings of "the Word of God" are present in one context: (1) All things were made through the Word. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. (2) The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received

him, who believed in his name, He gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (3) And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (4) John bore witness to him. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him.

The Word of God in creation

All covenants have two parts

God's Word is his power of creating all things (Ps. 33:6f; II Pet. 3:5f). God's Word is his power of upholding all things once created (Heb. 1:3; cf. Col. 1:16f). God's Word is his power of directing all things, once created, to their divinely destined end, that is, God's Word is the very life of all things. "In Him was life" (John 1:4; cf. Ps. 119:89-91).

The passages referred to indicate that the Word of God in creation is also the Word of God in redemption: Jesus Christ. Thus, already at the outset, we know that the Bible knows of no dualism between God's intent in creation and in redemption. Understanding this is imperative for a proper insight into the kingdom of God.

The meaning of the biblical revelation concerning the creaturely nature of all things is thus clearly not exhausted in finding the *origin* of reality in God. Rather, it directly implies the "orderedness" of reality by the Word (its structured life-dependence upon the Word). Further, it implies the Word-given *destiny* of all created things: they do not exist for themselves, but for Someone else.

The very word "creation" thus implies a three-fold understanding of reality, in opposition to both the ancient Greek and the modern humanist conception of reality as "nature": divine origin, dependent existence, divinely destined end. Paul sums this up in the hallelujah passage of Romans 11:36: "For from him and through him and unto him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

The Bible thus pictures before us a two-fold inseparable relationship. On the one hand there is God who speaks the Word: He makes, He

molds, He patterns, He structures, He destines. He has the "say" over all things. And on the other hand, directly implied in this, lies the required response, the answer, of the entire creation to this Word. Here we have the basic "frame" of the kingdom of God. Here we also have the basic "frame" of the covenantal bond between God and the creation by his Word. In all covenants there are two parts: God *speaks* and the creation *answers* by listening, obeying, serving, praising.

Creatures are servants

In a general way we can therefore conclude that the very life of all creation lies in service. Creatures are servants. They live when they serve, they die when they rebel. This is true not only of men and women, who are constantly referred to in the Scriptures as the servants of the Lord, whose very freedom lies in being a slave of the Lord (cf. Rom. 6:18). Social institutions are similarly God's servants (Rom. 13:4). There is no Manichean rejection of "matter" in the Bible because 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" too fulfills the Word of the Lord (Ps. 148:8). "All things are your servants" (Ps. 119:91). They exist to praise the Lord (see Psalms 104, 145-150).

Paradisal ecology

Each creature is to serve the Maker in accordance with its specific character, each different from creatures of another "make". The lion serves 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 over-arching word - "serve Me" - is thus a symphony of voices in which each creature performs its unique function in the indispensable setting of the whole.

That "setting" is peculiarly structured to make possible the unique service of humans. "God himself has demonstrated, by the very order of creation, that he made all things for the sake of man" (Calvin, *Institutes* I, XIV, 21). Within the covenant-kingdom relation between God and creation one can say that the Word of God assigns a place to humans where four fundamental and inseparable relations obtain:

* *God to humans*: humans in their relation of service and dependence upon God. People are, to put it succinctly, "God's people" (cf. II Tim. 3:16; I John 4:6). That is the basic anthropological condition which we cannot escape without losing our humanity. (See G.C. Berkouwer, *Man in the Image of God*, pages 349-363.)

* *Heart and functions*: the relation between the heart or center of human personality and its many aspects or dimensions. (See the important anthropological discussion of Paul's conceptions in Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, chapter III.)

* *Interpersonal relations*: relationships between persons, between the whole of mankind which is "the people of God".

* *People and the earth*: people in relation to the rest of creation, to its many creatures over which they must have "dominion". Humans serve as king of the earth, under God.

The uniqueness of the Christian religion lies in the biblical revelation that the unity in these four dimensions is *life for mankind*. This unity is in effect the harmony 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 unity implies harmony, wholeness, coherence, joy, peace. It is the shalom or paradise. For here all creatures are "at home", are in their "right" place.

God's Word for people: Love

What is the Word of God for people in this paradisal setting of creation? The central and encompassing "creation ordinance" for people is to be like unto God. For this reason all things were made for the sake of mankind (cf. Ps. 8). What is it to be like unto God, to be made in his image? God is love (I John 4:8). And therefore the unique way in which the creature man is to serve God lies in *love*. The Word of God for people in the total *direction* of our existence and in the wholeness of the above-described relations is to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves (cf. Deut. 6:5; 10:12; Lev. 19:8; Matt. 22:37f; Rom. 13:10; I Cor. 13; I John 4 and 5).

Our human creaturely reality, our humanity, lies in our obeying this Word of love. The contractual terms of the covenant between God and mankind center on this Law-Word. If mankind obeys, God is our Father and we are God's children (cf. Rev. 21:7). If mankind obeys, the Lord tells us: "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (cf. Jer. 7:23).

This central creation-order for mankind embraces and gives meaning to all of the secondary orders directed to us in developing and opening up the entire creation in our path through time. Justice, morality, economy, stewardship, language, knowledge, culture; they are derivatives of the central Word. Mankind is properly embedded within that creation, at home, attuned. We have been properly equipped for the task, created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10).

Our historical task is to be willing citizens in the kingdom of God. We must lovingly accept the reign of the Maker so that the realm of the Maker will sing his praises in an ever-increasing symphonic beauty through the millenia and centuries of this dispensation (see Rev. 4:6-11).

The Word of God in the history of redemption (I)

The human declaration of independence

Sin is the human declaration of independence from God. Instead of being free dependent servants, people became enslaved sinners (Rom. 6:17) who consider themselves autonomous: a law unto themselves, beings who can exist by self-revelation.

Sin does not merely destroy the link between God and us - it shatters the entire shalom-harmony in the entire covenantal setting of creation. It breaks asunder the integrity of the sinner's personality. Sin disrupts the sinner's peace with others, destroying the community of mankind as God's people. It brings about a tension between the sinner and the earth: thorns and thistles it brings forth. Sin separates the sinner from Christ the Word. It makes the sinner a stranger to the covenant, one having no hope and being without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). In sin mankind is no longer a people, a spiritual community praising the Lord (cf. I Pet. 2:10).

In sin, mankind is in darkness, in the darkness of the kingdom of the Evil One. The sinner no longer lives by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God, and thus loses life itself. Sin upsets the entire direction of creation. Instead of creation serving men and women, so that they can serve God, they now serve the creation rather than the Creator. The truth of God is exchanged for a lie. Claiming to be wise, the sinner becomes a fool, exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles (cf. Rom. 1:21-27).

The sin of Adam means that the garden of paradise will not be the start for building the realm of God, the *civitas Dei*, the kingdom of praise.

The Word of the Lord stands forever

The presence of sin implies that there is discontinuity and disruption on the "creation-side" of the covenantal bond between God and his creatures. But I believe that the Scriptures clearly reveal that there is no discontinuity and disruption on the Creator's side of the covenant after sin entered human history. "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations", says Psalm 145:13. I interpret this to mean that the demands of God's Word in creation are maintained after sin. The kingdom of God as *his reign*, his dominion, still holds for creation. 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 Word of the Lord is not 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 Word as a two-edged sword: Gospel and Judgment

In the presence of the utter broken(hearted)ness in all of the contextual relations of paradise-now-lost, the Lord *re-issues his Word*. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). The Lord - redemptively - takes the side of the sinner against Satan the usurper: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed" (Gen. 3:15).

The *second* way in which the Bible therefore uses the phrase "Word of God" occurs when it refers to his redemptive power (see Deut. 5:5; cf.

here already I Cor. 1:18). In the presence of sin, the re-published Word of God is like a two-edged sword: it is gospel to those who repent and listen anew, but it is judgment to those who persist in self-serving disobedience. Listening to the Word spells life; rejection of the Word implies a curse and final death (cf. Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:14; 19:15).

In the setting of the covenant in creation, Adam was the "head" representing all mankind. In the setting of the covenant in redemption, Christ is the "head", that is, the head of the new mankind, the church. Christ is the second Adam (cf. Rom. 5; Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:28). With Christ's coming the Father's purposes - his kingdom reign - with the entire creation will again be realized. Hence the angels' song at Bethlehem: Glory to God in the highest (that was creation's destiny); on earth, peace among men (a return to the paradisal shalom!).

The Word in the drama of history

However, we should not jump immediately 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-Incarnate in the New Testament. We cannot properly understand the place of the church in the "last days" unless we see it in the setting of the "many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1; cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 19).

The Old Testament Scriptures picture before our eyes a drama of the human 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 curse of pride.

The Word of the Lord still stands, addressed to mankind in its sweat and tears, its pain and toil: "Love me, serve me, and in that love unfold my creation." The Lord seeks out from among mankind a *new people*, a people that will listen to him. He takes it upon himself to begin building the City of Peace once again, but now with those men and women as his covenanted co-workers who repent from their evil ways.

But what do we see? While the sons of Seth called upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26) and Enoch walked with the Lord, *the unfolding* of

creation into culture is guided by un-belief, by the rebellious Lamech who took for himself two wives, and whose children's children produced culture and agriculture, music and metal (Gen. 4:19f). It was a man-centered culture, not God-centered. When the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, He was sorry that He had made man. And God is about to destroy him, and with man destroyed the other creatures who formed part of the original paradisal covenant, the birds and the beasts. But no! Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (see Gen. 6:5-8). After all, the steadfast love of the Lord - that is, the Word as redeeming power - is also from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear Him, and who keep his covenant and obey his commandments (cf. Ps. 103:17).

So after the flood the Word of the Lord is heard again, addressed to Noah, to his descendants, and *to every living creature* that was saved in the ark (Gen. 9; cf. Ps. 36:6). The point is this: the Word of the Lord in *creation* is repeated at every crucial stage in the history of *redemption*. The range of God's plan is never diminished. He is merciful and longsuffering so that his purposes can be accomplished. When ancient civilizations again wander away from the Word of Life and erect the City of Man (Gen. 11), the Lord calls Abram out of that city, Ur of the great Chaldeans, and places a prototype community of people - his people - to whom He spells out the radical meaning of his Word in specific detail. Moses is the instrument "to declare to Israel the Word of the Lord" (Deut. 5:5).

"I will be your God, and you shall be my People"

In order to gain at least some perspective on the meaning of the matter, I will try to list the essence in point form:

* *Creation and Redemption.* There is a parallelism and coordinacy between God's Word in creation and in redemption. Redemption occurs on the stage of creation. If we are of the opinion that God's plan in redemption is somehow different from or less extensive than his plan in creation, then we do injustice to Scripture. There is not a separate order of creation distinct from the order of redemption. There is no "order of law" separate from an "order of love".

This fundamental unity between the "creational" expression of the Word and its "redemptive" expression is evident in these passages: Deut. 10:15; 11:13-17; 32:3,4,15; 33:26-29; Psalm 2; ("I will give you the ends of the earth as your possession"); Psalm 19 ("The heavens are telling the glory of God; the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul"); Ps. 22:27,28; Ps. 24:1,5; Ps. 28 and 29 as a revelational unity; Ps. 33 in its entirety; Ps. 47:2,5 ("The Lord, the Most High, a great King over all the earth, he chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves"); Ps. 50:12,23 ("For the world and all that is in it is mine; to him who orders his way aright I will show the salvation of God"); Ps. 113 ("There is none like the Lord our God, who sets his throne so high but deigns to look down so low" NEB); Ps. 119 (e.g. vs. 73); Ps. 124 ("Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth"); Ps. 135:6,14; Ps. 138:6 ("For the Lord, high as he is, cares for the lowly"); Ps. 139 ("Whither shall I go from thy spirit?"); Ps. 145 (The Lord's greatness in creation and redemption evokes man's praise); Psalms 146-150; Job 38 and 42; Isa. 40:26-31; 42:5-9; 43:1f. ("Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Israel"); 44:2 ("The Lord, your maker, your helper"); 44:21 ("Remember, Israel, for you are my servant; I have fashioned you, and you are to serve me"); 45:8 ("Rain righteousness, you heavens, that it may bear fruit of salvation"). One passage succinctly makes clear what I am driving at. It is Isaiah 45:18 and 22:

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.

Look to me and be saved,
you peoples from all corners of the earth;
for I am God, there is no other. (NEB)

* *The kingdom.* I believe that these and many parallel passages indicate that the kingdom which the Lord established in creation is being re-established by way of redemption. This is evident in the re-publication of the basic norm for mankind, now spoken to Israel:

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).

Love me! That is the basic Covenant-Kingdom norm found in the books of Moses. It permeates and undergirds all of the partial mandates and decrees.

* *The people of God.* The Word of the Lord as redemptive Gospel constitutes a new people, with whom the Father *restores* the covenantal bond. Here we have the "word" at Mount Sinai:

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, is building a new people, a new humanity, a special possession among the peoples of the earth who really are "no-people" (cf. Hos. 1:8). He does this on the basis of the "old terms" of the constantly renewed contract, the covenant. *In it the basic human condition of paradise is restored*, with God speaking and man listening: "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the ways that I command you, that it may be well with you" (Jer. 7:23).

I will be your God, and you shall be my people. That is the heart of the matter, 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 Jer. 31:33; Ex. 11:19f; 14:11; 36:28; Isa. 41:8-10; Zech. 2:10; I Pet. 2:9f; Rev. 21:3.

* *The Old Testament Church.* The "People of God" is the Old Testament church. That is, it is the spiritual community of all those whose hearts are open to the Lord, whose hearts have been circumcised. See Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4. It must be clear from the outset that *the church, the People of God, is neither a collection of redeemed individuals nor a cultic community.* It is, rather, humanity,

redeemed, restored to its original task. This is evident from the Old Testament stress on the covenant: the restored bond between God and man constitutes the people of God and the church. The spiritual-corporate bond between restored mankind and the Father has primacy in the Bible. Within that corporate bond the human ("individual") heart is renewed (cf. here Heidelberg Catechism Answer 54).

* *The Word is life.* The Word governs the totality of the life of God's people. There is no dualism in the Old Testament between a "sacred" (holy) and a "secular" (worldly) realm. "Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you ... For it is no trifle for you, *but it is your life, and thereby you shall live long*" (Deut. 32:46f).

I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in Egypt ... You shall observe my institutions and my laws: *the man who keeps them shall have life through them.* I am the Lord (Lev. 18:3f NEB).

In this setting we see that the Lord stipulates the rules which his people must follow if their lives will be blessed. These rules - multi-dimensional expressions of the overarching norm of the kingdom-covenant: Love - pertaining to worship, sexuality, slavery, nurture, legal relations, property, social concern, use of natural resources, etc. (See especially Lev. 19, 25; Deut. 15f; Ex. 22.)

* *Total redemption.* In this way the Lord is restoring the creation to its original intent. Since the covenant embraces all of life, human redirected existence in it implies renewal and peace in the fundamental relations that we found in paradise; in principle the human personality is no longer subject to estrangement and tension; the social relations with one's fellows are redeemed; and the human setting on the earth is now one of blessing in the land of milk and honey.

An example of this in economic relations is: "There will never be any poor among you if only you obey the Lord your God by carefully keeping these commandments" (Deut. 15:4f). "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 our God" (Lev. 19:9f; cf. Isa. 1:10-17 regarding temple worship and social justice).

* *Blessing and curse.* Because of the redemptive power of the Word we see that mankind can again become a *community of praise, a fellowship of service.* For that Word gives life, blessing. When the people of God reject that Word, their life disintegrates, deteriorates, becomes a curse. This is the way Moses summed up life's choice:

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 that I command you this day and follow other gods whom you do not know (Deut 11:26f; cf. chapters 27 and 28).

* *Exile and remnant.* When the people of Israel do follow other gods, the intergrality and shalom and blessing disappear; they are exiled into Assyria and Babylonia. At this very time the Lord sends his prophets who proclaim the necessity of covenantal renewal, emphasizing ever more fully spiritual heart-commitment, the allegiance of the "true Israel", the remnant. With this "radicalization" of service-to-the-Lord, the path is prepared for the Messiah.

* *Return to the worldwise vision.* At this time, too, the prophets are the Lord's instruments in revealing to us that the Word is not for Israel only, but for the entire world. "Sing psalms to the Lord, for he has triumphed, and this must be made known in all the world" (Isa. 12:5). The prophets present us with a picture of the history of the entire world: God's world which he has judged but which he will now bless according to his promise (Gen. 12:3). We see the beginning of world-civilization, in the nations of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece and Rome, and beyond that to the modern world.

In that setting 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 the world's empire. "But the stone which struck the image grew into a great mountain filling the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35).

There we see a vision of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Egypt is also the Lord's people, and Assyria's capital. For should not the Lord "be sorry for the great city of Ninevah, with its hundred and twenty thousand

who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and cattle without number" (Jonah 4:11)?

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 NEB).

* *The promise of the Messiah.* The kingdom of our Lord is about to be revealed to the world. This can only come about by the arrival of the Messiah, who will crush the Prince of Darkness (Gen. 3:15). He will be the supreme Reconciler, the Peace-Maker. His name will be the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). For he will make himself an offering for sin, removing the cause of the cosmic disturbance. And this the Word, "The will of the Lord will prosper in his hand" (Isa. 53:10). Behold the vision that Isaiah places before the people of God, the vision that must move the church after Bethlehem on its way to the New Jerusalem. Here is the foundation and future of the church:

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 live 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. 11:1,4,6 NEB).

The Word of God incarnate: Jesus Christ

Christ is God's Word for the world

The Scriptures use the phrase "Word of God", in a third basic way, as we have already seen in the prologue of John's gospel, namely, in reference to Jesus Christ, whose very name is: Word of God (Rev. 19:13). Whatever God desires to say to his creation is summed up in Christ Jesus: the Anointed Savior.

The unity and continuity in God's kingdom-plan are most clearly revealed in this: that Christ is the divine "agent" of both creation and redemption. It is on this point that the message of Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians has to be rehabilitated in the church.

The Bible not only speaks of God the Father as the Alpha-Omega; Christ, too, is the "Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:12).

* 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 cohesive link in the chain of the entire symphony of creation. He is the Alpha.

* But Christ is also the head of the Body, the church, the new humanity. He is also the beginning of the economy of redemption, the second Adam, the firstborn from the dead, so that there, too, he might be pre-eminent. He is the Omega.

In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell - in creation. And then, after sin disrupted the shalom of creation, God is reconciling all things, restoring shalom. Creation is God's handiwork and it is therefore never beyond redemption. The Creator himself is the Redeemer. In the fullness of time God is again *uniting* all things, in Christ. Thus Christ is our peace. How? Christ made peace, shalom, by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15f; Eph. 1:9,10; 2:14f).

The Kingdom and Golgotha

The key event therefore in the coming of the kingdom is Calvary, where they nailed him on a tree. This is the decisive turning point in the entire history of mankind, since the Prince of Darkness in principle lost his hold on the direction of the world at the Cross. Hence Christ could say: it is finished (cf. Luke 10:17; John 12:31; 16:11; Rom. 16:12, Rev. 12:7-11). With Christ's victory, the reign of the Lord can enter human history, so that men and women can enter the kingdom, the realm of God's reign. God's work is no longer to be confined to Israel; he has returned to the initial global intent, so that all people - no longer strangers - can become "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). "God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his

beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13f). All authority has been given to Christ, in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:22).

The Resurrection-Life

Christ not only died. He also rose again. He is the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25). We already saw that in the Old Testament God's Word is life (Deut. 32:46; Lev. 18:3f). In the New Testament, Christ is the Word, the Word *for* men and women, and the life *of* men and women. He is the bread of life (John 6:35, 47; cf. 20:31; Rom. 6:1f).

The scope of Christ's kingdom depends upon the scope of his reconciling work. That work indeed is directed to human hearts, since it is humans who are God's "vice-gerents" on earth (see Calvin's *Institutes*, Vxx,4,6). But I believe that against all anthropocentric reductions of redemption to "individuals" and their "soul salvation" *the Bible clearly teaches that the entire universe is subject to God's redemption in Christ*. The "world" passages and the "all things" passages are crucial to a proper understanding of the kingdom. "For God so loved the world". "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:2).

This is beautifully pictured in the visions of Revelation. In chapter four the twenty-four elders, representing God's new people, sing the praises of the *Creator*, in conjunction with the four living creatures, representing the forces of "nature". But in chapter five, when the Lamb of God appears to open the scroll, that is, to break open the seals of history, then the church, the angels, and "every created thing in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea" sing the praises of him who sits on the throne *and of the Lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him*. The life of every created thing depends upon the Redeemer.

This can only be seen in faith by humans. And that brings us to the church, where we find the *communio fidelium*, the communion of believers.

The Word of God in the history of redemption

The Word of the Lord must speed on and triumph

There is a fourth basic use of the phrase "Word of God" in the Bible. It is also the Good News about Jesus that the world must *hear, believe and do*.

This use of the phrase "Word of God" is most frequent in the book of Acts and in the Epistles. The *acta apostolorum* centered on the *kerugma*, on the proclamation of the Word, beginning from Jerusalem, to Galilee, to the Mediterranean world, and today to the entire global civilization that grew out of the Mediterranean basin (cf. Acts 10:36f; 11:1; 13:5; 13:49, etc.).

This is the Word of truth, the gospel of our salvation (Eph. 1:13). It is the Word of the Cross, and thus (again) 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 therefore the powerful instrument of the Holy Spirit, the 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 Tim. 1:10; Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 2:3-5).

This use of the "Word of God" in the Scriptures places us before the dynamics of world history until the second coming of Christ. With the Cross and the Resurrection, the kingdom of God becomes the redirecting force in history. In this dynamic setting, "the Word of the Lord must speed on and triumph" (II Thess. 3:1).

The Bible is the Word of God

The church must rightly handle this Word of truth (II Tim. 2:15), must preach this Word (II Tim. 4:2), must hold firm to the sure Word as taught (Titus 1:9), and must keep the Word (Rev. 3:10).

Because of this the church accepts the Holy Scriptures as the infallible record of the Word of God in creation, in the Gospel, in Jesus Christ,

and in the history of the Old Testament and New Testament church (cf. Heidelberg Catechism Answer 19; Belgic Confession, Article III).

The Bible does not, I think, contain God's "special revelation" in distinction from a supposedly broader "general revelation" in creation and history. Since the creation is structured by the Word of God, it reflects the Creator: the heavens declare the glory of God. For the heavens, too, are God's servants. But the declaration of God's glory on the part of the creation is a response to the Word of the Lord for the creation. That Word - with respect to its central thrust and direction - is re-published in the Bible. And the church therefore needs the Bible on its way to the Holy City, where mankind again finds the tree of life, the tree of healing (Rev. 22:19).

The Bible is the Word of God. For this reason it does not contain propositional truth (in the traditional sense of Aristotelian logic) but covenantal truth. The Bible is the Word of God. For this reason it does not contain "moral lessons" for the guidance of human "virtues". This conception of the nature of the Bible is dependent upon a Greek view of man as a rational, moral being whose life must be guided by "rational" and "moral" revelation: "doctrine" and "ethics".

The church must not stare itself blind at the Bible. As Word of God, it must be a lamp to our feet and a light upon our path in the creation of God (cf. Ps. 119:105). We must not fool ourselves by only hearing the Word. We must be doers of the Word (James 1:22). That is, the Word must be our life.

What does this mean concretely for our time? In the light of the covenantal frame of reference presented in the first part, I would want - in conclusion - to suggest the following concrete points.

The church is God's new peoplehood

The church is Christ's instrument of reconciliation - peace-making - in the world (II Cor. 5). The church is the citizenry of God's kingdom. Reflection on the kingdom of God therefore immediately presents us with the question of the nature of the church.

In my view a renewed biblical understanding of the kingdom of God as his reign over the entire creation by the Word - Jesus Christ - gives us also a new conception of the church, in distinction from the prevalent institutionalistic or nominalistic notions.

The Old Testament conception of "the people of God" is spiritually deepened in the New Testament conception of the church as the Body of Christ. This body is the spiritual community of those who - in Spirit-given faith, with circumcised hearts - are re-committed to the covenantal task of subjecting this world to God's Word. Persons whose hearts are opened by the Spirit to receive the Word of Life in faith become members of Christ's church. It should be noted that in the very few passages in the Gospels where the church is mentioned it is referred to by Christ as "my church" (Matt. 16:18; this is the meaning of the Heidelberg Catechism Answer 54). One way in which Christ describes the essence of the church is this: "Abide in me, and I in you. I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:4; cf. I John 4:15f).

The church is created in the world when the Spirit gives mankind new *life*, the life of Jesus Christ. The theme of the new life in Christ is elaborated by Paul in a hundred ways. God's Lordly and gracious reign - the kingdom - is present in this world when Christ creates in Himself one new humanity, reconciling men and women to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility that served men and women from God to an end (Eph. 2:14-16). Paul describes the basic condition of that New Humanity thus:

I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within 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; cf. II Cor. 5:14f).

Our bodies, that is, our entire earthly existence, must become members of Christ (I Cor. 6:15; cf. Rom. 8:11). To me this means that the entirety of the life of God's people in the world must be the life of Christ. Being a member of Christ makes us members one of another (Rom. 12:4,5; I Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23; Eph. 4:25). Peter sums this matter up most radically, using Old Testament terminology:

But you are a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (I Pet. 2:9f).

The identification of the church as Christ's body with any historical institution - ecclesiastical or not - is contrary to the New Testament teaching. Contemporary theological reflection is discovering this.

The Church in history

The reign of the Lord enters history through the witness and work of the people of God. This implies that the new humanity as a spiritual community will take on institutional and organizational and individual directions depending upon the tasks to be performed, the stage of civilization reached, and the range of freedom protected.

* *The church as institute.* The church as institute has been given the ministry of the proclamation of the Word in its central religious thrust. The church as institute can thus be looked upon as the vanguard of the Body of Christ in history. This proclamation announces Christ as the healer of the wounds of people and nations. It exposes the demons that call for human allegiance apart from the only Lord. Its proclamation is addressed to the hearts of men and women, where the foreign lords - the idols, the nothings - are enthroned, and shows how life, joy, peace, righteousness and love are available in the faith. Its proclamation is addressed to the "principalities and powers" that are the agents of the Evil One in the lives of men and women (Eph. 3:10).

In the covenantal setting of creation it should be clear that the proclamation of the Word by the institutional church - at the home base, in evangelism, in missions abroad - is neither an "individual gospel" nor a "social gospel". It is, rather, the proclamation of the Good News for people in the entire covenantal setting of their creational life, for life in its entirety, in its wholeness, in the shalom-context of Christ's peace-victory at the cross. The "cultural mandate" and the "mission mandate" are essentially the same: the Word must speed on and triumph.

If the church only proclaims an anthropocentric "individual gospel", those brought into the fold will readily lose their way in God's creation, where their lives of necessity are being lived. They will again be enslaved by the foreign lords.

* *The church and the direction of civilization.* Since Christ is Lord of all, the church must not only proclaim and hear the Word. It must do the Word. That means that the church as the New People of God must witness and work in the entirety of the life it lives in the setting of today's civilization. That may be the life in the concentration camp. It may also be the life in the western democracies which are now becoming the basis of global culture. If the "people of God" does not direct its witness and work to the direction of that culture, it will eliminate itself from its present base. The Lord of the church may then remove the candlestick from North America and plant it elsewhere. The church must share the kingdom with the world in darkness, even if that means tribulation and patient endurance (Rev. 1:9).

* *A kingdom vision.* While it is still day, the people of God are to relate the Word of the Master to the key areas of contemporary culture by the development of a vision in terms of which it develops alternative directions to those now prevailing in these areas.

* *The question of Christian organizations.* The life of Christians in missions, health care, education, politics, industry, the arts, etc., must be the life which Christ lives in us. That life will be characterized by the marks of the body of Christ, as confessed in the Nicene Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Some facets of work and witness can best be performed by persons individually; other tasks can best be realized communally. This often depends upon the structure, scope and size of the task undertaken. It also depends upon the stage of differentiation and the range of freedom attained within a culture. In North American civilization, the spiritual-cultural direction of major areas generally depends upon *voluntary associations* by means of which groups of people communally attempt to influence human affairs. We see this notably in the area of politics (parties), industry (unions, employers' organizations), and education. If North American Christendom, now badly divided, pursuing many, often conflicting aims, can recover a consciousness of Christ's redemptive Lordship in history, it will certainly avail itself of the avenue of voluntary

associations - not permitted in the peoples' republics of eastern Europe - to present a united front where the nature of the task requires it.

Conclusion

The main integrating phases in human history, after the disintegrating effects of disrupting sin (cf. Gen. 11), occurred during the conquest of Alexander the Great, in the fourth century before Christ (shortly after the visions of Isaiah and Daniel about the coming kingdom of our Lord); during the *pax Romana* of Emperor Augustus (when Paul preached the Good News in the Mediterranean world); and during the period of continental discovery after 1492 (when the Reformation revitalized the church).

Today we are experiencing the greatest phase of global integration, sparked by two world wars and the results of technology. The spiritual leadership in that integrating process is largely in the hands of the secular children of Christendom: western liberal humanism and eastern collectivist humanism.

Christendom is hardly equipped to provide an alternative to these spiritual directions. It has lost the strength of the Word because of its reliance on visions foreign to the Scriptures. All these foreign visions generally have the same effect: the redemption of Jesus Christ is severed from the given condition of life in this world: the Father's good creation. Hence our hesitance in understanding the Bible's kingdom vision. But this is our Father's world, claimed by the new Lord, Jesus Christ. Our task is to regain the biblical vision as Christ's disciples, as reconciling peacemakers, until the Master returns to gather in the harvest, separating the wheat from the chaff.
