

CHAPTER 8

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE GLOBAL SOCIETY

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The two concepts juxtaposed in the title of this paper beg definition and description, both individually and in relation to each other. As we shall see, the terms are mutually illuminating when held in tension. They should open a new perspective on the theme of God's presence in this world as it is and on the consequences that we may draw from such insights for our faith, our hope, and our responsibility rooted in the love of Christ.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In contrast to a detailed exegesis of individual biblical passages, I will develop a more general definition of this concept. It is important to note from the start that any translation of the *malkut/meluka* of Yahweh (or "the Lord") or the *basileia* of God (or heaven) into a modern language is problematic in more than one respect. The two most accepted English translations, kingdom and reign, miss some of the important connotations present in the original languages. The same is true as we try to translate the concept of the kingdom of God into the various languages represented in this international gathering, or each within our own particular languages and cultures. However, the basic meaning which we may find in nearly all of them is that this world belongs to God, who created it and who—as the sovereign Lord and loving Father—sustains it in every present and will renew it in the fullness of time. This understanding is contained, for example, in two phrases of the Lord's Prayer: the plea "your

kingdom come” and the doxology “yours is the kingdom.” Both of these pleas point us beyond a mere individualistic horizon; their perspective includes everything in time and space, the already and the yet to come, the here and everywhere.

As I reflected on this fundamental truth of the scriptures, the difference between the “kingdom of God” and the contemporary conceptions of “global world” or “global society” became obvious. The words “globe” and “global” with their components are not to be found in the Old or New Testaments. The maps of the ancient world, of course, did not include all the continents and countries we know today; nevertheless, the minds of those who believed in the God of the Exodus and the prophets, the Father of Jesus and Lover of the World, were not restricted to their own little private world. They listened to and witnessed to the One who created heaven and earth, the Almighty and Eternal, who was unequalled by any being in the world and beyond. Heaven and earth, that is, everything that exists, was brought into being by the one God. All was and is God’s own: “The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them” (Ps 89:11).

This broad vision is even truer for the New Testament perspective. The horizon of God’s redeeming and renewing work will be *ta panta*; an absolute term, including everything without exception, all in all. The letter to the Colossians explains that those who have “clothed themselves with the new self,” which is being “renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator,” will understand that in this renewal “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:10-11). This is *more* than a global perspective. It encompasses our world and the whole cosmos, the principalities and powers, those we know all too well and those beyond all our dreams, scholarship, and imaginative powers. Moreover, even this perspective is surpassed by the eschatological expectation, which, according to the apostle Paul, sees all things subjected to Christ, who will then be subjected to the “one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

This polar tension between the already and not yet of God’s kingdom can be seen in Jesus’ conversation with some Pharisees, who asked: “When will the kingdom of God come?” The answer they hear rejects all preoccupation with the timing of the kingdom’s coming. Jesus says sharply: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20-21, NRSV) or “in your midst” (NAV) or “in the midst of you” (ESV). The King James Bible (as do Luther’s German translation and most of the ancient fathers) has “the kingdom of God is within you,” which probably does not render correctly

the meaning of the *entos hymon*, since this is directed to the Pharisees. What seems to be notably clear is that the coming of God's kingdom, as well as God's present reign in this world, cannot be described in terms of physical or astronomical phenomena such as "the movements of the planets and signs of illness or changes in the weather." "The coming of the kingdom is discerned by faith, not by empirical observation."¹ Yet, it is identified as happening in our world, when people discover and experience the presence of God's kingdom in their lives and environments.

The kingdom of God is present, because Jesus is present. Jesus is the *autobasileia*, the personal embodiment of kingdom of God. The visible coming of the Son of Man will be a future event, but through Jesus, by his word and work, God's reign enters into the lives of human beings already in the present, evoking a new awareness of God's presence and bringing forth practical consequences. "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). Jesus is there; they only need to open themselves to him, allow him to speak to them. Jesus is here in our midst; it is up to us to understand ourselves anew in his company and to accept God's power working in us. This is probably what Jesus wants to say in these old and always new words.

From the New Testament perspective the reign of God is present where, by God's Spirit, individual human beings are renewed *and* structures and circumstances are being changed. It encompasses both a personal liberation from self-centeredness by the infectious love of God and a new life according to God's reign, the commitment to a life with Christ and the search for new community brought to life by the one Christ, who became the servant to all and invites all to join his ministry.

This reign of God as made present by Jesus, in addition to its unlimited extension over space and time and its inclusion of the whole created world, is also characterized by certain substantial qualities. First and foremost it is characterized by God's unrestricted and unlimited love, in particular for the despised and marginalized, the poor, women, sinners, and the like. It is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). This love cannot simply be derived from what had been taught before, as the Sermon on the Mount makes clear. This is a new message that requires a new thinking, a new direction of life, *metanoia*.² This concept of God's kingdom includes the inmost reality of an individual person as well as the whole of the cosmos, the change of a personal life as well as the reshaping of structures and circumstances of the public life, the experiences of God's presence in our world as well as the living hope of a future new creation.

1. R. Allan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9:329.

2. See Ulrich Luz, *basileia*, in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by H. R. Balz and G. Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990-93), 1:201-5.

In this Christian concept of the kingdom of God we find utopian tension that is similar to and yet different from traditional utopian thinking. Traditional utopian thinking is rooted in the intention to pull what is beyond space and time into the here and now—often at any price, including violence. This way of resolving the utopian tension has yielded innumerable victims even up to the present day. The utopian tension we find in the concept of the kingdom of God is of a different nature: It is characterized by a unique polarity of the already and the not-yet. Its realization is neither transferred into the transcendent, into an unknown future, nor is it required that everything happen here and now. The utopian tension of God's kingdom has both a temporal and eschatological character: Its final fulfillment will arrive on the day God determines, but its reality is present and effective already in those who have become citizens of this kingdom in our world.

This tension is to be found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, especially in the opening beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit," those who experience themselves as inferior to others day by day, those who lack the minimum for living, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poverty is not the kingdom of heaven; it is not a status to be desired or glorified. On the contrary, it is an offense to humanity. It jeopardizes the poor as well as those who are apathetic about poverty. But the poor, like children, are close to God's kingdom. Indeed, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Those who lack everything will receive an overflowing measure of life.

Such teaching surely overthrows nearly all the generally accepted ways of living, especially all expectations of civil security so widely desired by the Northern and Western societies. Yet, these words of Jesus still speak to us, and they are heard even by people outside our churches who are looking for a new perspective on their conditions in life, as well as on the destiny and future of the world. Perhaps they no longer find trustworthy the values and presuppositions upon which our postmodern societies are built.

Therefore we should ask how Christians *can* witness to the gospel in a credible and faithful manner so that the unique message of God's kingdom will be not reduced to a justification of human power or rendered irrelevant. When we pray, "Yours is the kingdom" and "Your kingdom come," what does this mean for our faith and the way we live our lives? Does the kingdom of God imply clear empirical and ethical consequences? In answering these questions we may develop a theologically grounded and ethically significant conception of our place in a globalizing world?³

3. I view this starting point for understanding God's new creation as complementary to Ted Runyon's treatment of the renewal of the image of God by grace. Cf. Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13-25.

THE GLOBAL SOCIETY

What does globalization mean? On a superficial level we may understand it as worldwide economic integration. The term is new, but the economy it describes became international long before. Due to the technical progress in transport and communication, countries and companies and people have become ever more closely connected and economically integrated. The political aims of establishing a stable and peaceful order contributed to this economic integration, which, since the time after Second World War, has been carried on by a growing number of participants engaged in active and deliberate policy-making. The major world powers, looking back at the horrors of the world war they had survived, concluded that it would be sensible to encourage economic integration in order to avoid future wars. This was true especially for the Western European nations but also for the United States of America, which chose economic integration and the expansion of free trade as its most important goal after the Second World War. Since the 1980s, the U.S. has been pressing for a worldwide liberalization of capital movement and the globalization of financial markets. Other Western nations followed without much reservation. Governments subsidized transport and communication at the cost of the general public, not just the users. Scientific curiosity and military considerations also played a part in this development. Indeed, there were many more phenomena linked to this process: media and Internet, tourism and contagious diseases, science and ecological crises, and—not least—the internationalization of terrorism.

The process of globalization has produced advantages for individual people and societies. It can have a peaceable effect in places of conflict. Maintaining peace and exposing violations of human rights has become easier through global exchange and the presence of the media. The bright side of this development may not need extensive description. Almost all of us in the First World profit from it.

The dark side, however, may need more careful attention. Whereas the taxation of capital, enterprises, and top earners has been reduced in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, taxes on wages, value-added tax rates, and municipal charges paid by all citizens have moved in the opposite direction.⁴ In this way so-called economic values are created but are often short-lived; whereas long-term social, developmental, and ecological values as well as public goods are in danger of being neglected, no matter how essential they are for the foundations of society and humankind. Globally, exacerbated economic selection and the acceleration of structural changes entail a reduction in

4. Parliamentary Enquete Commission of the Deutscher Bundestag, September 2001.

diversity. In the ecosphere, fifty to a hundred animal or plant species become extinct on a daily basis; in human society, structures of social support are undermined or even wiped out. The common denominator of the negative aspects of globalization is that public goods and services are at risk or being removed.

Another kind of danger should also not be overlooked. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, a member of the Club of Rome and the German Bundestag, has pointed out recently that there is a well-grounded fear of foreign determination and a rapidly growing gap between winners and losers. The distribution of wealth is becoming more and more unequal. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening. According to the latest Human Development Report, the discrepancy of income between the richest and the poorest 20 percent of the world population has more than doubled between 1960 and 2000.⁵ Those who are politically and economically predominant often do not realize the fears of less fortunate people nor do they understand why they are not loved by them.

We seem to be well acquainted with the term “globalization,” but we hardly understand the whole range of effects it produces for poor nations and for those living on the margins of our own societies that we call “developed.” We are just beginning to address these problems but have a long way to go before achieving anything like a “global equal opportunities policy.” While measures that strengthen the position of the developing countries and encourage them to improve the basic conditions of life at the national level are constantly called for, funding for official development has reached an all-time low of 0.22 percent of the gross national product of the countries who participate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Other issues like cultural domination, the environment, the role of international institutions, the downsizing of the welfare state, and the destruction of well-functioning social systems in many countries cannot be treated in this essay.⁶ I have tried to give only a few glimpses of the challenge that lies before us all. The increasingly dominating myopic economic approaches insinuate that the global free market will be the best system, not only to solve these problems but also to achieve the best living conditions for the greatest possible number of human beings. These expectations, as we now know better than ever before, are built on the sand of wishful thinking. The criterion of human livelihood does not appear in capitalist economics. The world market, like any market, has no morals. It is not necessarily immoral but, by its very self-definition, it is

5. Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program, 2001.

6. On downsizing of the welfare state in particular, see *Globalization: Italian Country Analysis*, Committee on Globalization and Environment of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, 2002.

without morals. It follows the rules of supply and demand. Those who have nothing to sell or whose merchandise, be it service or commodities, is constantly undervalued remain without sufficient means to earn their living. The market will not care; its standards are rooted in the principle of gaining as much as possible. If no other rules are worked out and applied by those who are responsible for the community, every trader may use all of his or her economic power to maximize his or her profit at almost any cost to humanity or the environment.⁷

Recently two students from our theological seminary in Reutlingen came back from Argentina after a year of studying and working with the Methodist Church. One of them wrote a letter before returning home that contained the following: "I have at this point stopped speaking about the one world in which we all live. This is simply a self-deception. We are living in different worlds and in a global system that requires different worlds; it functions by the fact that one part of humanity is basking in their affluence while the other has to live on dust."

International experiences of the most recent years have proved that no vice is unknown to the intelligent people running the market. Those who suggest that the global society should best be governed by the market system are ignoring the power of sin, both in individuals and in systems like major corporations, stock markets, and political regimes. The works of the flesh—idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, rivalries, divisions, envy, and greed—have not been defeated thus far. In any case, the effects of sin are much more destructive if they seize systems rather than merely individuals.

UTOPIAN PERSPECTIVES

On August 28, 1963 a man stood on the steps at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and spoke to black and white fellow Americans who had come a long way to hear him. Most of us know the content and purpose of this speech that left and still leaves no one untouched who hears its words. In this address Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity." He continued: "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of the nation. . . . Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children." There was a strong sense of urgency in his speech, and a warning that "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted citizenship

7. For a thorough, illuminating, and stimulating discussion of this theme see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

rights.” Then King went on with the famous lines, “I have a dream.” The first statement of his dream sounds quite topical to me: “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—‘we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”⁸

Dr. King had fewer than five years remaining to live. His very last speech, which, like others, survived the speaker, ended with these words:

I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.⁹

A dream of the promised land coming true in this world where injustice, poverty, and hatred are winning battle after battle? We may call it a *utopia*, a no-place, a faraway island of the blessed, a vision of the suffering who want to overcome their misery. Yet, this utopian dream is a day-dream that does not vanish with the morning fog; it is born from a deep longing for a better place on this very planet, earth. It develops certain conceptions of what a place devoted to the full life of human beings should look like, of a new society where people can live in justice, peace, and freedom. It provides a target for action and prayer; it can be communicated in order to create a movement which unites people for the changes that are so urgently needed. And even if all may know that they will never complete the task within their life span, the utopian goal shines like a star that gives direction, hope, and perseverance to their wandering.

In the context of biblical thinking we may find a different understanding of *utopia*, different from Thomas More’s work, which is a reflection of the living conditions in England in the mirror of the fictitious island *Utopia*, and different from present-day connotations of the concept *utopia*.¹⁰ Though we do not use the word “*utopia*,” we may speak of a vision closely connected with a trust in God that leads God’s people toward a promised land or a new city that includes all. Reflecting on these aspects might induce a new perspective on our global reality and God’s kingdom, a new understanding of their connectedness and the character of their interrelatedness.

8. M. L. King, “I Have a Dream” (1963), printed in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James Melvin Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 102-3.

9. M. L. King, “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” (1968), in *I Have a Dream*, 203.

10. For information about the concept of *utopia* and its history, see *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, edited by Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

We turn now to yet a different approach to this theme in the New Testament Gospels.

God with No Room

In John's Gospel (1:9) we read about a startling experience of the Son of God, "the true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world: He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." There was no place in *the world*, because "the world did not know him." A similar report is given in Luke's Gospel (2:6). When Jesus' parents arrived in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to give birth to her firstborn son whom they had to wrap in swaddling cloths and to lay in a manger, because there was *no place* for him and his parents in the inn.

"No place" (*ou-topos*) was the meaning of the title that Thomas More gave his novel *Utopia*, a description of a fictive, not (yet) existing island. Does God have a *no place* in the world that belongs to God? Is Christ *persona non grata* at home? Perhaps the negative feelings of his own people were not unjustified. They may have sensed somehow that his coming would disturb their normalcy and turn their value systems upside down, that some day they would unmask his true identity as blasphemer¹¹ and rebel.¹² Therefore, it might be better not to offer him a home in their midst, better to continue business as usual. After all, they claimed, "The temple of the Lord is here," and "We are Abraham's children." We are the church, we know the Bible and have the right doctrines. God is with us!

I need not explain why this human reaction is hardly a singular historical event, why it is often found especially among faithful and strong believers who have bid farewell to all kinds of doubts and insecurities, who know only too well what is right and wrong and are confident that their own judgment and behavior are by far superior to that of the majority of society.¹³ They are deeply convinced of their religious and moral standing, while they look upon others who are different from them, praying, "God, I thank you that I am not like others, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Matt 6:5). They always have something to lose. For these reasons they are understandably willing to resist any interference. There is no place for Jesus and his message of God's kingdom. Eventually even the most faithful prove to be incapable of watching one hour with him. They leave him, anxious to save their own

11. Matt 9:3-6, Mark 2:7-12, John 10:36-38.

12. Mark 15:17-32, John 2:19-22, 19:12-16.

13. "The simple-minded use of the notions 'right' or 'wrong' is one of the chief obstacles to the progress of understanding." Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 11.

lives. There was no place for Jesus or God's kingdom on this earth except outside the city on the cross between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

But there is still another way of refusing Christ a home in our lives, namely, by converting him into a nice fellow, easy to handle and good to have when we need him. Here we create our God after our own image, after our own wishes. In this way we use God to serve our own religious needs but do not allow God to interfere with the questions of social responsibilities, not to mention the use of our money or stock shares. This "God" will remain silent when experts talk politics or discuss the terms of trade or consider our responsibilities regarding human rights. At least in my country most people in power, be it in politics or economics or the sciences, do not like to think of faith in God as a source of ethical consciousness or even rules. They in fact exclude God from the "real" decisions they make and leave God within the realm of emotions and so-called ultimate questions. No place for God?

God's Utopia

When I was a seminary student, our choir once sang music for Passion Week by a modern composer, parts of which are still vivid in my memory. One of the lines expressed what Jesus might have felt during his tortures: *Darum, dass ich sie liebe, hassen sie mich*, "That is why they hate me: because I love them." It was out of divine love that the Son of God left behind all privileges and set out for a place where there seemed to be no place for him. It is out of longing that this utopia was born. "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10), "For God so loved the world." John's Gospel does not stop after the harsh statement: "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." Instead it continues, "but to all who received him, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:11-13). This is God's utopia: to have children in this world. Those who receive and respond to this love are destined to become God's utopia in the global society as well as in their private lives and in their neighborhoods and communities.

It is not our own choice or our own strength that entitles us to this position, it is God's power and love command that converts us into dwelling places of God's Spirit in the midst of our world. Thomas More described a faraway island as the model for a new society; Karl Marx and his followers praised the new class of the international proletariat as the instrument for bringing justice and freedom through class struggle. The images Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of God are the peasant sowing seed, the widow searching for and finding a coin, the leaven in the dough, light and

salt changing the character of what is around. These parables and metaphors represent a new power that is working in this world, working to give protection from evil, to recover from losses, to create new relationships, to give hope and courage and a new orientation. The reality of God's kingdom is reflected in the father who receives his prodigal son with open arms offering a new life after utter failure, or in the shepherd who leaves behind the flock to find the one gone astray and restore it to the fold. Jesus not only interprets the world differently from others, he makes present and effective the heavenly power of unconditional love. This is, as I understand it, a revolution, a fundamental change for both the pious and the offenders. This love manifests itself not merely in emotion but in benevolence and unselfishness, courage and self-giving. We are God's utopia as Christ is God's kingdom in our midst, and we are thus in the midst of our world.

God is a king with no land. *We* are God's land. The earth is the Lord's, but there is no country that calls God its governor. Our questioning minds hear Jesus say: "My kingdom is not from this world." Those who do not understand ask: "So, you are a king?" And receive the response: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). No army of this world is his. Christ's soldiers are those who take the helmet of salvation and fight with the sword of the Spirit. By receiving Christ, persons become citizens of another world without losing their citizenship in this world. They are in this world though not of this world; their "citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20). The gospel is *the power of God for salvation* that we can receive by faith and live out in love.

But what does all that mean for us? Globalization is neither our fate nor our salvation; it is a process in history. We have to ask and to learn how God's kingdom is both different from and related to the globe on which we live. But this, of course, is easier to demand than to execute.

In his *Doxology: The Praise of God in Doctrine, Worship, and Life*, Geoffrey Wainwright, as the title promises, describes among other things the ethical character of a Christian life, which he calls "doxological." He does this by choosing and interpreting some terms that are central in this respect: freedom and service, liberty and equality, grace and gratitude, justice and peace. He continues as follows: "The fact is: the world is not an easy place in which to live doxologically. If the kingdom of God consists in justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (see Rom 14:17), our world displays many counter-signs of oppression, war and sorrow."¹⁴ If we look at "the fact" from the opposite perspective, we can state inversely: If the

14. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Doctrine, Worship, and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 425.

world shows injustice and oppression, violence and war, sorrow and resignation, then God's kingdom displays as its main characteristic what is contrary and contradictory to this reality.

Those who live as God's children in this world, consequently, represent a counter-reality. They are ready to be peacemakers and comforters, to bring justice and solidarity, to live out the love they receive daily from their Creator and Sustainer. They let themselves be formed into a community living in this world—not on a distant island in self-sufficient isolation, but as a consciously alternative society in which the presence of God's Spirit can be received and experienced as the power to live as God's children everyday. It is by this doxological life that they are God's utopia in God's world that does not yet know the One who has drawn near to them, creating in them a desire for true life and fulfillment.

FAITH, FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Being different makes the crucial difference when the world is as it is. In too many situations we lack this "being different"; we prefer to blend in, to be like our peers. We divide the nations into good and evil, our neighbors into patriotic and unpatriotic. We regard people of other races or religions as inferior to ourselves; we tend to blame others for the evils or disadvantages we experience; we consciously or unconsciously use neighbors and colleagues as stepping stones, making them instrumental in our plans to enlarge our own privileges. Furthermore we are prepared to deny that we behave in this way. Where does being different begin? How is it possible?

It is essential to acknowledge that living as citizens of God's kingdom does not begin with our actions. It begins neither with our creating God's kingdom in the world nor with our fighting back or chasing away the evildoers. It begins with God's peace, God's *shalom*, which comes to us in this world through Christ and which we receive and live by faith, trusting in God above all others. It begins with realizing that there is no one excluded from God's *shalom* and that all human beings are created in God's image; all have, as Wesley taught us, an immortal soul that entitles them to be God's children. "The option for the poor is not grounded in the goodness of the poor but in the goodness of God,"¹⁵ nor is our own effort at being just the grounds for our justification. God's story with this world began before any individual's beginning, and it continues in spite of the fact that all are sinners.

15. Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-first Century* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1998), 130.

Faith, Love, and Hope

The perspective of God's kingdom as revealed in Christ is opened to us when we join the community of believers, gathering in Christ's name and using the means of grace: reading and studying the Scriptures, praying individually and in community, gathering with others around the Lord's table and receiving what God alone can and will give: the bread and the light and the orientation for a new life. This is not "merely" a spiritual process; the spiritual and the ethical are closely linked together. There is, as we learn from Wesley, a correspondence between salvation and human welfare, between the deliverance from sin and the freedom from slavery, between justification by grace and love of neighbor. There is an inseparable relationship between understanding human beings as created in God's image and constant resistance against turning them into tools or commodities. We are not the judges of any person even if we have to judge sinful behaviors, actions, and structures. Every person is to be judged by his or her own conscience and by the One who judges justly. But we must realize that God's kindness is meant to lead to repentance (Rom 2:4), and that faith works through love (Gal 5:6).

Hope is the power that opens our horizon beyond what we see here and now. Christian hope is born of trust in God. Hope should never be despised or given up even if our expectations are proved wrong by developments we do not accept. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while in prison at the turn of the year 1942, looked back on the past ten years of his life and reflected on the "will for the future." He said,

There are people who regard it as frivolous, and some Christians think it impious, for anyone to hope and prepare for a better earthly future. . . . In resignation or pious escapism they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for future generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before.¹⁶

Living in the perspective of God's reign does not mean inactive waiting, nor does it mean identifying our activities with God's purpose. It means walking as Christ walked, seeing people with eyes of love that penetrate the surface. It means abiding in Christ as he abides in us and having the courage to trust God to do what is necessary, and then doing what we can do.

16. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dec 31, 1942 / Jan 1, 1943), ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 15-16.

Freedom and Fellowship

The chains of our captivity are invisible. They are the chains of existential dread: the anxiety of missing our aims and being left behind, the threat of living in permanent insecurity. The best-hidden chains may be our cultural captivity that converts those who were created for freedom and fellowship into windowless monads. We often prove to be incapable of perceiving fellow human beings of other faiths or cultures and fail to communicate our own values, intentions, and aims.

Freedom and true fellowship begin with truth, not with protecting privileges. We prefer to divide humanity into “them and us,” evil and good, black and white. One of the main differences between Jesus and the people of Qumran was that the latter were taught to love the sons of light and to hate the sons of darkness, whereas Jesus taught his disciples to love their neighbor, even if their neighbor should turn out to be their enemy. Excluding people from God’s love and our concern, blaming the devil for taking hold of them, and projecting all evil and its causes on them, is bluntly refusing God’s will as revealed in Christ. Blaming the poor, the refugees, and those who cry out for justice for being themselves the causes of their own misery, or, indeed, seeing them as the just recipients of just divine punishment for their deeds—the “blame-the-victims game” familiar to all of us—is condemned in John Wesley’s writings and should also be condemned by all Methodists and Wesleyans.¹⁷ These evasions of our own responsibility do not reveal us as “free” or “superior,” they are merely unsuitable attempts to hide the narrowness of our hearts and minds.

Jesus shows us the way to overcome this all-too-human captivity in these words: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31). Listening to and allowing the Spirit to guide our understanding will help us to recognize who we are and also how we, step by step, can overcome our blindness and captivity. Freedom is not without repentance and conversion, a new and clear returning to the God of liberation. Freedom is not the elbowroom of the fittest but joining hands for a better community. The Protestant churches in Italy have made a clear statement: “The free market is not the freedom we are looking for.”¹⁸ Peace cannot be found where the strong live as they like and the weak live in passive acceptance of the way they are being treated.

17. Cf. Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 30-34.

18. “The free market is a dangerous risk because it only heightens injustice and the gap between the poor and the rich.” *News-press service of the Federation of the Protestant Churches in Italy*, February 22, 2002.

The Christian churches in Europe, looking back on times of separation and oppression by totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, have realized and confessed in public that remaining connected to one another is crucial for their spiritual freedom and survival until the time of liberation. "Freedom does not mean absolute autonomy," they say. "To be free means to recognize that freedom is received and accepted in order to be shared with others."¹⁹ I would add: Freedom cannot be lived out and preserved without the fellowship of others or without reaching out to those whose neighbors we become in this globalizing world society. Because of their self-understanding as communion and their international structures and relationships, the Christian churches have a special responsibility to be an example by creating a society that responds to the needs of all people.

Response and Responsibility

What characterizes the life of the people who have become God's utopia, who are infected by God's love, illumined by God's spirit, built up by the community with Christ, embodied by the fellowship of his disciples, who shout for the mute, stand up for the oppressed, who become eyes for the blind, and never lose their anger about all kinds of injustice and their yearning for the shalom of God's kingdom? We all have our experiences with such lives and our own discipleship; we have vivid imaginations of how and where the lights of God's kingdom should be ignited. "The starting point of Christian ethics is the response of the historical Christian community to the God whom it recognizes in Christ and whose guidance it seeks in continuing history. The church 'seeks' the kingdom of God. . . . And it struggles to find the ways of faithfulness in a world of conflict."²⁰

Obviously this is no ethic worked out once and for all, deduced from eternal principles, valid for an unchanged world of sinners, possessed by the continuously evil inclination of the thoughts of their hearts. It is rather a "venturing ethic" of a people on pilgrimage whose faithfulness sometimes means constancy in the face of temptations, and sometimes innovation in response to new opportunities and challenges. I mentioned the international Christian church communities and the World Communions with their special responsibility in the global developments of our days. Is it not their extremely important duty to voice the ethical implications of the gospel concerning local and global challenges? The World Alliance of

19. The Executive Committee of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, Strasbourg (France), (June 22, 2002), 2.

20. Roger L. Shinn, "A Venturing Social Ethic," *Ecumenical Review* 37:1 (1985): 135.

the Reformed Churches in 1997 and the World Council of Churches in 1998 “urged the churches to consider how social injustice and destruction of the environment in today’s world affect their profession of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”²¹ Lukas Vischer, former General Secretary of the WCC, asked consequently whether these decisions did not “constitute, fundamentally, a challenge to all the world communions,” and he found it significant that “Christianity can manage to speak out with a truly *common* voice against the foolishness of the present course of social and economic development.”²²

We are God’s utopia, signs of an unfinished task and an immortal promise, witnesses to God’s loving and working presence in the midst of this world, messengers of Christ who pray that the gospel of Christ may be reflected, however poorly, by our words and deeds and by being with those who need him most.

In conclusion, I would like to use some phrases of my friend Robert Kohler that have remained with me since he spoke at a Methodist international consultation in Vienna. I will quote his words and then try to transpose them into my own biographical experience. These words bear witness to God’s grace which does not destroy our biographies and identities but changes them into a new self-understanding and self-awareness as children of God who belong to God’s kingdom and a global community. Bob Kohler said:

I am an American, and my understanding of individual freedom is in my bones and in my self-understanding. Still, it is not my experience as an American that defines my Christian way of life. Indeed my experience as an American could have been a roadblock to my journey with Christ. . . . I am a Christian, and being a Christian allows me to stand outside the circle of those who would attempt to sanctify all that America is and America does.²³

I have to say: I am a German. My understanding of duty and a decent life and my shame of the incredible and unimaginable crimes of Nazi Germany are impressed deeply on my soul. I enjoy the beauty of our poetry and music, the richness of the German language, and the treasure of European philosophy. I enjoy the freedom I have as a citizen of a free country, holder of a passport and a currency that allow me to travel almost everywhere on this earth. Still, nothing of this is foundational for

21. Lukas Vischer, “World Communions: The WCC and the Ecumenical Movement,” *Ecumenical Review* 54:1 (2002), 159.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Robert Kohler, “Individual Freedom and the Christian Way of Life,” in *The Quality of the Resurrection Faith*, edited by Helmut Nausner (Vienna: Evangelical-Methodist Church in Austria, 2003), 77-88.

my journey with Jesus Christ. I am a Christian, and being a Christian allows me—although I do not always make use of this permission—to stand outside the circle of those who are dominant in our society.

Together, both Kohler and I can say: Freedom is community and communion with one another through the Body of Christ. Freedom is living out of our call to ministry with the knowledge that God is present in this world. Freedom is the awareness of Jesus Christ in our lives which speaks deeply to our soul saying that our living is not in vain. When we live in relationship to God through Jesus Christ, we are new creatures. Independence gives way to interdependence and interdependence to life in the way of Jesus Christ. We are entitled to be citizens in God's kingdom and citizens in a global society, both of which are centered in the reality of Christ and the reign of God's gracious love. This is the foundation and the measure of who we are and which way we go.