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# Jacques Ellul: The Prophet as Theologian

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No argument is necessary to convince anyone that Jacques Ellul is one of the most prolific authors of our time. But if Ellul teaches us anything, it is that quantity is not everything! The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it is intended to present the overall burden of Ellul's voluminous authorship, especially as it concerns theology. Second, it is argued that Ellul's work is best understood and appreciated if it is understood as a kind of prophecy—not least to the theological guild.

## 1. Prophet or Teacher?

While the vocation of 'theologian' is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament as one of the gifts of the Spirit, it is assumed to be a variant of the gift of 'teaching'. According to one author, the spiritually gifted teacher 'did not utter fresh revelations, but expounded and applied established Christian doctrine'. 'The "work of knowledge", implying research and intellectual appreciation, is related to teaching.' In contrast to the teacher, the prophet conveyed 'divine revelations of temporary significance which proclaimed to the Church what it had to know and do in special circumstances'.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the prophet's discourse (*logos*) concerns God (*theos*) and as such is important for the discipline we call theology.

Over the past thirty years a steady stream of literature, explicitly or implicitly Christian in nature, has flowed from the pen of Jacques Ellul of Bordeaux in southern France.<sup>2</sup> Much of this production has to do with matters of God and faith in our era. Considered as 'teaching'—as an ordered exposition of the received truth of Christian revelation—this material may be inadequate, infuriating,

or incomprehensible to some readers. But considered as 'prophecy'—as a proclamation of the Word of God for this moment and this situation—Ellul's writings can be appreciated as one of the most significant contributions to the Christian mind in our century.

By profession and formal training, Jacques Ellul is, of course, a teacher. Since 1946 he has been Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux. As a sociologist and historian he has published some twenty volumes, the best known of which are *The Technological Society*, *The Political Illusion*, and *Propaganda*, and well over one hundred articles.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, as an active lay theologian and ethicist, Ellul has produced another fourteen volumes and many articles and reviews. In this latter capacity, Ellul has also been editor of *Foi et Vie*, the French theological journal, since 1969. He has served on various committees of the Reformed Church of France as well as the World Council of Churches. In personal appearance and manner, Ellul is much more the university professor than the radical prophet in the mould of John the Baptist or Che Guevara. Like the Apostle Paul, his appearance and speech may be unimpressive, but his letters are weighty and forceful, if not also frightening (2 Cor. 10: 9–10).

Ellul has rarely and only grudgingly left his home base in Bordeaux, but his 'letters' have reached far and wide. Despite appearances, the man is best understood as a kind of modern prophet. Not only the content but the rhetorical style of his message is best appreciated as a challenging message for the times, a cry in the technological wilderness, a provocation to reorient us and motivate us to go further.

Would Ellul accept the designation of prophet? Probably not. But then, prophets are seized by revelation and by their task and may not be the best judges of their own significance. The observation that Ellul's work is best understood in the genre of prophecy is based partly on the character of the work itself and partly on a juxtaposition of

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Putman, 'Spiritual Gifts', in J. E. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: Inter Varsity Press, 1962; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 1213.

<sup>2</sup> See my extensive bibliography of the works of Ellul in Clifford G. Christians and Jay Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964); *The Political Illusion*, trans. by Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1967); *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1965).

his descriptions of the aim of his work and of the role of the ancient prophets of Israel. In his study of 2 Kings, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, Ellul describes the prophet as follows:

Man chooses his own actions. But between this decision by man and God's decision we find the prophet. This man has received a revelation of God's intention either before or during the course of the enterprise. He announces and can bend or provoke, but there is no necessity or determination. One is in the presence of open possibilities here. This man also understands what the politician is wanting. He understands it in depth. He sees the reality behind the appearance of the action, and he discloses to the politician his true intention, his situation.

Finally this man gives the meaning of it all, the true significance of what has happened. He brings to light the relation that exists between the free determination of man and the free decision of God.

Thus the prophet plays a role which is radical and decisive and yet also independent, ex-centric, and disinterested.<sup>4</sup>

The prophet thus 'provokes', 'explains', and 'risks'. The prophet is traditionally in conflict with the king, the guardian of the institutional and established. In this conflict the prophet is 'absolutely the wholly other', 'absolutely new and surprising', and he 'disturbs our ritual, morality, and piety'. The prophet is the 'son of thunder who interferes and overthrows, affirming that God is not the God of the past or of the dead, but the God of the present and the living'.<sup>5</sup> The prophet brings the Word of God to bear on 'the actual, concrete situation of man', but 'he does not bring any solution or engage in any action'. He says: listen to the Word of God and make your decision.<sup>6</sup> The prophet opens up situations by mediating the Word of God who is Wholly Other.

If we turn from this biblical study of 2 Kings to some of Ellul's autobiographical comments in other contexts, the correspondence with the role of the prophet is remarkable. He has often said, for example, that no solutions or systems will be offered by him.

I refuse to construct a *system* of thought, or to offer up some pre-fabricated socio-political solutions. I want only to provide Christians with the means of thinking out *for themselves* the

<sup>4</sup> *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

meaning of their involvement in the modern world.<sup>7</sup>

In *Mirror of These Ten Years* Ellul articulates his conviction that there is no comprehensive Christian system possible and there are no 'prefabricated' solutions for social, political, economic, or moral problems.<sup>8</sup> Instead, it is out of a profound knowledge of reality, out of the confrontation of opposing dialectical forces, that solutions will come. God puts the questions to us and we provide the answers.

For it is only out of the *decision* he makes when he experiences this contradiction—never out of adherence to an integrated system—that the Christian will arrive at a practical position.<sup>9</sup>

The clearest declaration of intention was given by Ellul in an interview with David Menninger:

I would say two things to explain the tenor of my writings. I would say, along with Marx, that as long as men believe that things will resolve themselves, they will do nothing on their own. But when the situation appears to be absolutely deadlocked and tragic, then men will try and do something. That's how Marx described the capitalist revolution and the situation of the proletariat—as something absolutely tragic, without resolution. But he wrote this knowing as soon as the proletariat sees his situation as without resolution, he'll start to look for one. And he'll find it.

Thus it is that I have written to describe things as they are and as they will continue to develop as long as man does nothing, as long as he does not intervene. In other words, if man rests passive in the face of technique, of the state, then these things will exist as I have described them. If man does decide to act, he doesn't have many possibilities of intervention but some do continue to exist. And he can change the course of social evolution. Consequently, it's a kind of challenge that I pose to men. It's not a question of metaphysical fatalism.

And later on in the interview:

The purpose of my books is to provoke a reaction of personal reflection, and to thus oblige the reader to choose for himself a course of action.<sup>10</sup> One of the most difficult to accept aspects of

<sup>7</sup> 'From Jacques Ellul,' in James Y. Holloway, ed., *Introducing Jacques Ellul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' *The Christian Century* 87 (18 February 1970), p. 200.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> David C. Menninger, 'Jacques Ellul: A Tempered Profile,' *Review of Politics* 37 (April 1975), p. 241.

Ellul's work is his habitual overstatement, where he sounds as though life is all over, no political change or revolution is possible, etc.—or, conversely, where he proclaims the great victory of God or the radical transformation of human history by the Incarnation. Part of the reason for this hyperbole is his persistent and radical dialectical method. But another reason, we can now see, is that he is writing in the heat of passion and concern. He engages in rhetorical exaggeration to try to provoke a degree of response that may ultimately redeem a situation.

Like most prophets, Ellul's offence is not only his message but his style as well! Richard L. Rubenstein, for example, is thoroughly offended by Ellul's lack of 'ordinary civility', 'sustained intemperance', and 'ungenerous way of dealing with his opponents'.<sup>11</sup> Another reviewer reacts to Ellul's 'continued petty, personal sniping at his colleagues', 'crotchety ill-temper', 'hectoring, sarcastic tone', and 'jeering'.<sup>12</sup> Both reviewers are partly justified in these remarks. And if Ellul offends others, he is himself guilty of 'thin skin' and a persecution complex at times, moaning that no one will listen to him and that his best efforts are useless. Like most prophets, Ellul is somewhat isolated, somewhat a 'loner'.

One important qualification which must be made on this 'Ellul-as-prophet' thesis is that his intended audience is not the population in general. He does not have much direct impact on the masses, either in the marketplace or in the churches. Rather, he speaks primarily to the intellectual and academic community. In this arena he is remarkable for having provoked comment (at least) in so many different academic disciplines (sociology, law, political science, theology, etc.) and so many different constituencies (Marxists, humanists, Liberal and Evangelical Christians, etc.). He has a special concern for two groups: the political Left and the Christian intelligentsia.<sup>13</sup>

As an ethicist or theologian, as a 'teacher', Ellul leaves something to be desired. At some points his approach needs revision or supplementation. As a prophet to the intellectuals, and especially to Christians, however, he is an important and much-needed voice. Ellul's style is always provocative and challenging, sometimes harsh and offensive

<sup>11</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, Review of *The New Demons*, *Psychology Today* (November 1975), p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Z. Friedenberg, 'Faithful Servant Old and Cross,' Review of *The Betrayal of the West*, *Canadian Forum* (October-November 1978), pp. 42-44.

<sup>13</sup> On the Christian intellectual, see *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. by Olive Wyon (New York: Seabury, 1967), pp. 96-136; on the Left, see *The Betrayal of the West*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 82-146.

when he happens to hit a few innocent targets in his mad iconoclasm. My own review essay published shortly after the publication of *The Ethics of Freedom*, summed up his impact in these terms:

Another way of describing the total thrust of *The Ethics of Freedom*, and most of Ellul's previous work for that matter, is to say that Ellul 'takes everything away' from us. He removes our commonplaces and securities, destroys our idols, crutches, and supports, ruthlessly strips away our justification, and attacks our conformity to the world and lack of faith in Christ. Both through sociological criticism and through biblical exposition, he leaves us with no way out, with the exits sealed off, with no hope. But wait! In this work, more than any since *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948), Ellul gives it all back with what can only be described as an inspiring vision of hope and freedom.

The effect of this strategy is to give all activists pause, to pull us back from our relentless plunge into frenetic activity in the world. We are helped to assess the reality of the world more profoundly and hear the Word of God more attentively. Then we are led back into the fray in obedience to our Lord. After everything has been closed off, *The Ethics of Freedom* throws open the doors, batters down the walls, and opens out on a whole new life of freedom in service of God and our neighbour. 'The radical devaluation of everything in society is accompanied by the revaluation (the only one) that everything, by the grace of God, may be able to serve the kingdom' (p. 312). It can hardly be disputed that this approach exemplifies, on the level of contemporary Christian ethical discourse, the pattern of 'leaving all, hating all', and embarking on the path of radical discipleship to Jesus Christ that is repeatedly given in the Gospels.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Passing of the Mantle

Just as surely as Elisha picked up the mantle of the prophet Elijah, Jacques Ellul stands as successor to other voices, other prophets. As a leading critic of the technological society, Ellul's work has affinities with that of Friedrich Schiller, Thomas Carlyle, and the Romantics of the Industrial Revolution period who raised warnings about the ominous nature of a generally mechanistic, rationalistic view of life and the world.<sup>15</sup> Schiller, for

<sup>14</sup> David W. Gill, 'Activist and Ethicist: Meet Jacques Ellul,' *Christianity Today* 20 (10 September 1976), p. 1222.

<sup>15</sup> See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford, 1964).

example, railed against the degenerative effects of the growth of machines on European culture. The machine was leading to 'The Machine' as a social system and world view. Thomas Carlyle (who, not incidentally, published a 'Life of Schiller in 1823-1824) developed this argument by suggesting that the Age of the Machine had an 'outward sense', referring to machine technology, but also an 'inward sense', that is, an internal spiritual patterning of art, religion, and other human activities on the model of the machine. In 1829 Carlyle wrote that 'it is the Age of Machinery in every outward and inward sense of that word'. Many apologists for industrialization countered these charges on Newtonian and Enlightenment grounds: opposing Nature to Machine is false, for the universe itself is a great machine, like a great clock designed and set in motion by the great Clockmaker in the sky!

The list of important predecessors of Ellul must also include the pioneer sociologists of the later nineteenth century. Emile Durkheim, who created the first course in sociology to be offered at a French university while a professor at Ellul's own University of Bordeaux (1887-1902), perceived the pivotal significance of the division of labour, the breakdown of traditional groups and values, and the impact of all this on social solidarity. In this way Durkheim anticipates Ellul's analysis at several points—although Ellul's differences with him are perhaps even more striking. Max Weber's work on rationalization and bureaucracy is echoed loudly in Ellul's work. Weber's fear that the encroachment of *zweckrational* forms of action on all phases and areas of individual and social life was yielding an 'iron cage, a nullity without heart' for a society, is fully shared by Ellul.<sup>19</sup>

Unquestionably the most important sociological ancestor of Ellul is Karl Marx. While a university student in 1931, he 'chanced' to read Marx's *Das Kapital* and became an enthusiastic 'Marxist'. He studied Marx's writings a great deal but never joined the Communist Party because it seemed so far from Marx. In addition to the hypocrisy of all the political groups Ellul saw trying to carry on under the banner of Marx, a second challenge to his own 'Marxism' came with his conversion to Christ around 1934. His great concern in the mid-Thirties was to know if he could be both Marxist and Christian. By 1938 he 'chose decisively for Christianity' believing that all attempts at a Marxist-Christian synthesis led to a betrayal of the

faith: Christianity was swallowed up by Marxism, not vice versa.

A third challenge to Marx was historical change. As great as Marx was, he was not simply transferable to the twentieth century. Put in negative form, for our age Marx is one of 'humanity's great malefactors' in that his system, when absolutized, betrays the individual to the class or the group, creating an insidious 'suspicion' that interprets all individual willing and acting as mere reflection of class interest.<sup>17</sup> More positively, Ellul locates his work in relation to Marx as follows:

Marx showed me the dialectical nature of social phenomena, and also oriented me strongly toward the study of technique. I was actually a Marxist in 1933-1934, and I asked myself then: If Marx were alive today, would he be so disposed to cite as the crucial social phenomenon of history the ownership of property? What would he cite as crucial? And I decided that it would be the phenomenon of technique. Of course, this is something that many followers of Marx today would not propose.<sup>18</sup>

In short, Ellul selectively accepts parts of Marx's analysis. More importantly, he carries on the Marxist (and European) sociological tradition seeking to 'grasp society in its totality' and to discover 'fundamental laws of historical evolution' in a synthetic, historical, comprehensive and sometimes progressive, revolutionary way.<sup>19</sup>

What makes *this* modern-day prophet particularly interesting is that he has picked up not one but two mantles. In addition to his sociological calling Ellul has pursued theology:

I have sought to confront theological and biblical knowledge and sociological analysis without trying to come to any artificial or philosophical synthesis; instead I try to place the two face to face, in order to shed some light on what is real socially and real spiritually.<sup>20</sup>

It is Karl Barth who is most explicitly recognized by Ellul as his theological tutor and source, though Ellul says that he is not an 'unconditional Barthian'.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, 'the theology of Karl Barth is extraordinarily balanced. I believe it is true precisely in the degree in which it expresses the

<sup>19</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1933) and Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford, 1946), pp. 196-244.

<sup>17</sup> *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1973), pp. 48-52.

<sup>18</sup> Menninger, p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> See Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, I (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 1-11.

<sup>20</sup> 'From Jacques Ellul,' p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 8.

remarkable dialectic that appears throughout the Bible'.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand:

I had the impression that the ethical consequences of Barth's theology had never been elicited. I was not satisfied with his volumes of ethics and politics, which seemed to be based on an insufficient knowledge of the world and of politics. However, there was everything there necessary to formulate an ethic without losing any of the rediscovered truth, being totally faithful to the Scriptures, but without legalism or literalism. But this work seemed possible to me only if one conserved the groundwork laid by Barth and did not start over.<sup>23</sup>

By far the greatest number of references to any theological predecessor in Ellul's writings are to Karl Barth. Nevertheless, it is Søren Kierkegaard who stands most clearly as the nineteenth century Elijah to this twentieth century Elisha.

What then do I mean when I say that our hope lies in starting from the individual—from total subjectivity?

\* \* \*

This radical subjectivity will inform . . . the three human passions which seem to be the essential ones—the passion to create, to love, to play. But these mighty drives of the human heart must find a particular expression in each person. It is in the building of a new daily life.

\* \* \*

I am convinced that Christians are absolutely the only ones who can attempt it—but here too on condition that they start from zero. Kierkegaard, it seems to me, alone can show us how to start.<sup>24</sup>

No one can read Kierkegaard and Ellul without observing the strong similarity of content and substance. Both give great attention to the subjectivity/objectivity issue, calling for 'radical subjectivity' in the face of a sterile objectivizing tendency in modern thought. Both stress the importance of 'passion'. Perhaps most obvious of all is the 'beloved individual' of Kierkegaard who lives again in Ellul's writings. Although the terminology is different, Kierkegaard's three 'stages on life's way' are profoundly echoed in Ellul's ethics.

In addition to matters of content, there are intriguing similarities of style and vocation. Think, for example, of the division of Kierkegaard's authorship into philosophical works and edifying

discourses—and Ellul's attempt to clearly distinguish his sociological works from his theological works. Both Kierkegaard and Ellul address the religious intellectual, trying to stir up a nominal, formalized affair into something passionate and vital. Both prophets use irony, sarcasm, accusation, petulance, and overkill in their rhetoric. Both are given to a bit of 'everybody misunderstands me'. How are we to understand this except as a kind of occupational hazard faced by prophets? The prophet stands as a contradiction to the contemporary establishment. This contradiction is as often one of style as of substance.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, Ellul has inherited his mantle from the school of prophets Marx, Kierkegaard, and Barth. Common to them all is a dialectical method. In fact, Ellul says 'I am a dialectician above all; I believe nothing can be understood without dialectical analysis.'<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, Marx taught Ellul 'the dialectical nature of social phenomena'. And in his theological and ethical studies as well, Ellul says that his 'method is the dialectic in accordance with which the biblical revelation is given to us'.<sup>27</sup> The theology of Ellul, like that of Barth and, even more, Kierkegaard, is thoroughly dialectical.

Contradiction, opposition, and paradox are ever-present in anything Ellul has in view. Axiomatic-deductive, linear logic, rationalistic 'scientism' or epiricism—these are relativized or rejected. Understanding, whether of theology or society, results from a true perception of the various antithetical factors and forces at work. On the broadest level, there is a dialectical nature of Ellul's authorship: on the one hand, his sociological description of the world, on the other, the biblical-theological articulation of the Word. It is a 'composition in counterpoint'.<sup>28</sup> These are two perspectives which shed light on our experience, yet cannot be synthesized into a unified 'Christian sociology' or 'social Christianity'. Corresponding to this dialectic of the world and the Word is the dialectic between necessity (the character of the world) and freedom (of the Word of God).

In general, Ellul endorses Hegel's description of the 'positivity of negativity'. That is, the negative

<sup>22</sup> I first outlined the foregoing critique of Ellul's relationship to Kierkegaard in a letter to Vernard Eller, 19 March 1977; Eller subsequently elaborated my critique in his chapter on Ellul and Kierkegaard in the volume edited by Christians and Van Hook.

<sup>23</sup> Menninger, p. 240.

<sup>24</sup> *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1969), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' p. 201; 'From Jacques Ellul,' p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *False Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1972), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> 'Karl Barth and Us,' *Sojourners* (December 1978), p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> 'Between Chaos and Paralysis,' *The Christian Century*, 85 (5 June 1968), p. 749.

pole in the dialectic has a real value. The resolution of dialectical contradiction, tension and interaction would spell the end of life, individually or socially. Life implies movement, change and development through the interplay of opposing forces. Of course, change in this manner is not necessarily progress—on this point Ellul diverges from both Hegel and Marx. But for Ellul, innovation and mutation, revolution and conversion are manifestations of life. Not only between his sociology and theology but also within each of the two areas, Ellul describes (and to a certain extent promotes) dialectical contradiction.

Any synthesis or resolution of antithetical factors and forces takes place in terms of crisis and life—not in terms of an easy intellectual operation or a peaceful transition to a new condition. The crisis of resolution happens in an 'explosion', a moment of illumination, destruction and recreation. While the resolution changes the situation and modifies the forces which led to that point, a new dialectical tension emerges. Life is thus a process of tension, conflict, and resolution, followed by further tension, conflict, and resolution.

So far as the solution is concerned, it cannot be a rational one; it can only be a solution in terms of *life*, and the acceptance of forgiveness given in Jesus Christ. In other words, it is in receiving, and in living the Gospel that political, economic, and other questions can be solved.<sup>20</sup>

In both Ellul's theological and sociological works, decisive importance is placed on the individual as the focal point for dialectical tension and resolution. 'Whether we like it or not, all depends entirely on the individual.'<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The Technological Wilderness

As a 'theological prophet' or 'prophetic theologian', Ellul's understanding of the world—the 'wilderness' in which he cries out 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'—is informed above all by a concept of the 'fall' and by a concept of the 'powers' (*exousia*). With respect to the fall, Ellul's view can only be described as radical. 'The broken communion with God totally changes the life of the creature.'<sup>21</sup>

If the fall and evil were not totally serious, would God have gone to the extreme of this unthinkable sacrifice of his Son, of this incomprehensible self-deprivation? For the work of salvation to be as great as that, the alienation in the fall must have been fundamental. The *whole* must have

been shattered for the *whole* to have been restored. The *whole* must have been lost for the *whole* to have needed to be saved by grace.<sup>22</sup>

There are, in Ellul's view, no unblemished vestiges of the original creation. The fall was not simply a fall of the will, but of reason and nature.

The break with God has global consequences, three of which must be noted here. First, separated from the transcendent, Wholly Other God, the world is closed in upon itself. It becomes the world of necessity.

It was a creation which had been made for the love and the joy of God. It was the very place of freedom, for nothing could be the expression of God except the freedom of his creation. Nothing could have responded to God except the spontaneous free gift. . . . There cannot be any necessity in that creation because God is not subject to necessity; and that which he creates is not the fruit of a torturing and implacable will, but of love. . . . Once love has disappeared through the will to power, the significance of everything changes. The order established by God ceases to be a free gift and becomes an external restraint.<sup>23</sup>

Necessity means that 'several forces act upon man but we cannot say that they represent the totality of his universe or that they condition directly and immediately his whole life and work'.<sup>24</sup> Ellul refuses a rigid determinism or mechanistic view of either the individual or society. Nevertheless, as examples of the factors and forces of necessity Ellul discusses political power, money, technology, the city and religion. 'These necessities do not have to be merely rational or sociological. They have also a spiritual and theological dimension.'<sup>25</sup>

Second, the fall means that the will to love is replaced by the will to power. Eros, understood as the will to power, is the spirit of the fallen world. It is the attempt to dominate, master, and subdue not only nature but humanity and even oneself. It is fundamentally an effort to act in place of God, from whom the fall has cut us off. And as a third consequence of the fall, Christian ethics and theology cannot be built on the basis (even partially) of nature. There can be no natural theology, natural law or natural morality that corresponds to the ethics and theology of grace and revelation. This is true for 'epistemological' reasons (we cannot rely on natural reason or conscience to discern the

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>24</sup> *Ethics of Freedom*, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> *The Political Illusion*, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> *To Will and To Do*, p. 39.

good) as much as for reasons of the will (we cannot rely on natural inclination or natural powers to perform the good). Morality of the world is inextricably of the order of necessity and the order of the fall.<sup>36</sup>

As another way of illuminating the shape of the wilderness, Ellul draws on the 'principalities and powers' language of Scripture.

The Bible speaks of forces which subjugate man. These are distinct from the flesh, which in some sense assimilates itself to man. They are not just evil and rebellious powers. They are not just powers which Scripture has . . . personalized. . . .

The powers seem to be able to transform a natural, social, intellectual or economic reality into a force which man has no ability either to resist or to control. This force ejects man from his divinely given position as governor of creation. It gives life and autonomy to institutions and structures. It attacks man both inwardly and outwardly by playing on the whole setting of human life.<sup>37</sup>

Following Cullmann and Barth, Ellul believes this 'powers' language, far from being outmoded, primitive mythology, is a valid description of reality. The Bible mentions the state and money as powers, Ellul says, but we are also justified in seeing technology, the 'system', religion and other elements of the world in the same light.

The powers are described in a different setting as the seals on the 'scroll of history' in the Apocalypse. These seals give the chief elements in human history. The first four seals evoke the 'four horsemen' who are 'at work always, in all epochs, and in all regimes'.<sup>38</sup> In brief, the white horse represents the Word of God, the red horse represents the state and political power, the black horse represents economic power, and the pale horse represents the power of death. To these are added the fifth seal which is the prayers of God's witnesses, and the sixth seal which brings about the cataclysms and the appearance of the people of God.<sup>39</sup> Once again, Ellul argues that these powers do not show themselves in a systematic causal nexus. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ reveals this ensemble as the summary key to the history of the 'wilderness'.

The fall, necessity, the powers, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse . . . these are the organizing concepts in Ellul's prophetic analysis of our world. The analysis has focused at length on the city,

which is 'man's essential work—the culture of man in history and eternity'.<sup>40</sup> The city is, both in Scripture and in the contemporary world, the focal point of human society and culture, the symbol as well as the real product of human work. Today's city is characterized above all, in Ellul's view, by the rule of technique—raving rationalism. Similar attention has been focused by Ellul on politics and the state.<sup>41</sup> The point of Ellul's analysis is always to indicate the awesome, threatening power of these factors and forces before which the individual is progressively weaker and more dependent, despite all pretensions to freedom. In form and function, though not by common label, these forces evidence a spiritual and religious character, making them all the more difficult to effectively resist.<sup>42</sup>

The novelty of Ellul's approach here is not so much his theological reading of creation and fall, reason and revelation, nature and grace, or the principalities and powers. Debate has raged for decades, if not centuries, on the exegetical and theological questions involved. What qualifies Ellul as a *prophetic* theologian is the force and determination with which he pursues the contemporary application of his theological perspective. In his work the fall and the powers are no longer an academic question but an existential and ethical question that confronts modern Christians very directly and creatively. Even if Ellul has misapplied this perspective, it remains extremely valuable as prophetic provocation to assess things more clearly than he has. If that is the case, he has succeeded as a prophet even if his achievement as a theologian is mixed or debated.

#### 4. Thus Saith the Lord

The prophet does not restrict his message to a description of bondage and demonic powers, of course. There is a positive side to the 'Thus saith the Lord.' Thus, to the world of necessity, Ellul proclaims freedom. To the world of the fall he proclaims not a return to Eden but the reality of the age-to-come. To the will to power, Eros, he responds with the will to loving servanthood, Agape. To Babylon, the earthly city, he preaches the New Jerusalem, the city of God. To the restrictive bondage of the principalities and powers, Ellul proclaims the victory of God in Jesus Christ.

<sup>40</sup> *The Meaning of the City*, trans. by Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. xviii.

<sup>41</sup> See *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The Political Illusion*, and 'Rappels et réflexions sur une "Théologie de l'état"', in Ellul, *et. al.*, *Les Chrétiens et l'Etat* (Tours: Maison Mame, 1967), pp. 129-180.

<sup>42</sup> See *The New Demons*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 48-87.

<sup>36</sup> *To Will and To Do*, pp. 39-72.

<sup>37</sup> *Ethics of Freedom*, pp. 144, 152-153.

<sup>38</sup> *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. by George W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977), p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-170.



The Word of God, for Ellul, is above all Jesus Christ. 'I refuse to pledge my mind to anything or anyone, save Jesus Christ.'<sup>43</sup> 'The word of God is fully expressed, explained, and revealed in Jesus Christ, and only in Jesus Christ, who is himself, and in himself, the Word.'<sup>44</sup> 'If it is true that God himself has come, does this not mean that everything has changed?'<sup>45</sup> These three statements summarize Ellul's Christology. As revealer of God, Jesus Christ is unique and comprehensive. As God himself come in the flesh, Jesus Christ changes everything on earth and in heaven. At the very outset, then, Ellul's proclamation of the Word challenges all theologies which would restrict the importance of Christ to soteriology or to the ethical 'impossible ideal' or whatever.

The incarnation of God in Christ is *the* act of freedom, shattering the forces of bondage and necessity.

For the old relations, foundations, and habits, however, Christ substitutes new ones, those of love and freedom. . . . The new order, that of the Beatitudes, makes life perfectly liveable and possible. It is not even necessary . . . that all men without exception should live according to love and freedom. But this freedom has to be present and incarnate.<sup>46</sup>

Ethics 'flows out of the relationship with Christ'.<sup>47</sup> The ethics of freedom is rooted in Christ as the free man.

The Gospels clearly show that Christ is the only free man. Free, he chose to keep the law. Free, he chose to live out the will of God. Free, he chose incarnation. Free, he chose to die.<sup>48</sup>

The freedom of Jesus Christ is not that of the sovereign God, for he chooses to be limited by our human situation. His freedom is expressed in relation to this situation, facing all the temptations and tests that we do.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are signposts and pointers toward true freedom. He faces the temptation of food, which Ellul interprets as representative of all natural necessity (food, sex, material things, etc.), and refuses it although he is hungry. He faces the temptation of power, which Ellul interprets as all types of domination (political, economic, etc.), and refuses it in favour of servanthood. The third temptation is

'spiritual'—to give a proof of his divinity. It is the temptation to be religious, self-assertive, self-righteous, self-saving. A part of the temptation is Satan's use of the scriptural text against God. Again, Jesus refuses to yield. Ellul argues that Jesus' later temptations and struggles are but variations on these three. The 'temptation of Christ' episode is a paradigm for Christian ethics of freedom.

Ellul's discussion of violence further illuminates his understanding of Jesus Christ and his implications. Nonviolence appears to be the orientation which Jesus held.

It seems to witness to the teaching of Jesus on the level of personal relations—Love your enemy, turn the other cheek. Jesus carried the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' to the extreme limit, and in his person manifested non-violence and even nonresistance to evil.<sup>50</sup>

The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and of Paul in Romans 12 describe this orientation of overcoming evil with good, of violence with nonviolence.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, there is a more fundamental explanation for nonviolence. What Christ does is make us free—free to struggle against necessity. Violence, above all, is an expression of the 'order of necessity'. We accept either the order of necessity or the order of freedom in Christ. Acceptance of the latter means that violence must be rejected root and branch. 'Because Christianity is the revelation of the Wholly Other, that action must be different, specific, singular, incommensurable with political or corporate methods of action.'<sup>52</sup> Jesus Christ requires action in the face of violence (or any other expression of necessity) but action of a different kind.

No matter what subject is under discussion—law, life-style, violence, the city, etc.—it is Jesus Christ who is the focal point in Ellul's message. Jesus Christ reveals most fully and precisely the Word of God. And this Word of God is, above all else, Wholly Other. As a final note on this subject, we observe that there is a distinctively eschatological character to the Incarnation. 'The promise of the glorious return of Jesus Christ, the *Parousia*' means that Christians are not to cling to the past but rather to live in expectation of the *eschaton*, of the 'coming break with this present world'.<sup>53</sup> Jesus Christ is the first 'man of the future'.

<sup>43</sup> 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' p. 200n.

<sup>44</sup> *The Will and To Do*, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> *Ethics of Freedom*, p. 278.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52ff.

<sup>50</sup> *Violence: Reflections From A Christian Perspective* trans. by Cecelia Gaul Kings (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 157; See *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, pp. 148ff.

<sup>53</sup> *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 49.

His work guarantees the defeat of the rebellious powers and the final victory of God.<sup>54</sup> Thus, 'all facts acquire their value in light of the coming Kingdom of God, in light of the Judgment, and the Victory of God'.<sup>55</sup> Jesus Christ brings the future into the present; this task is also given to his followers.

The Word of God and, thus, the message of Jacques Ellul, is above all Jesus Christ. It can also be said, however, that this Word is mediated by Holy Scripture. Thus, Ellul has said:

The criterion of my thought is the biblical revelation, the content of my thought is the biblical revelation, the point of departure is supplied by the biblical revelation, the method is the dialectic in accordance with which the biblical revelation is given to us. . . .<sup>56</sup>

Ellul's commitment to the importance and authority of Scripture is attested again and again in his writings. Four of his books are explicitly biblical studies. Many passages in his other books and articles include biblical exposition. His own conversion to Christian faith resulted from his private reading of Scripture while a university student.

Like Karl Barth, Ellul differentiates the written text from the living Word of God, but, at the same time, the two are inextricably associated and virtually equivalent. The Holy Spirit activates and empowers the text in correspondence with our decision of faith. The content of the biblical text and the will of God are, in practice, equivalent.

What one ordains and the other requires are therefore practically inseparable. . . . It is clear that every living word of God cannot be different from that which is attested precisely in the Bible. . . . It turns out that the God who spoke to men in the Bible is also our God, and directly ours, thanks to their witness.<sup>57</sup>

In Jesus Christ the law (objective, universal) becomes commandment (personal, individual, concrete address).

The summons of the commandment is contained in its entirety in the Bible. But it does not cease to be a word for being 'written' (hence objectified). It does not become letter, nor does the commandment become law. The word inscribed in the Bible is always living, and is continually *spoken* to him who reads.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> See *Ethics of Freedom*, pp. 144ff, *Apocalypse*, p. 88, and 'Karl Barth and Us', p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> *To Will and To Do*, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274n.

<sup>58</sup> *Prayer and Modern Man*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkins (New York: Seabury, 1970), p. 104.

Nevertheless, this recognition of God personally summoning us is a decision of faith and obedience. 'The word read in the Bible cannot be heard as a personal commandment except by faith.'<sup>59</sup> With such an attitude we can 'know the constant surprise of the transition from Scripture to the living word'.<sup>60</sup> The equation works in the opposite direction as well: all 'self-styled revelation of the current day' is always 'subject to verification by the word revealed in the Bible'.<sup>61</sup>

Scripture is, of course, a book written by people in the historical forms and modes common to their ordinary affairs. This is typical of God's action in human history. He adopts human work and fills it with new significance.<sup>62</sup> Historical fact, myth, symbolism, prophecy, apocalyptic—God uses these and other literary genres to convey his word. In fact, Ellul argues, God uses the redactors, editors, and compilers of the Bible just as much as the authors of the original bits and pieces. The meaning of a passage is discerned in relation to the whole of which it is a part.

Ellul periodically distances himself from what he terms the 'biblical literalist' who represents 'such antiquated, outmoded, trivial attitudes that they are not even worth mentioning'.<sup>63</sup> Literalism

closes its ears to the critics almost to the point of *credo quia absurdum*. The danger here is that of attaching faith to a record rather than to Jesus Christ. For the true reality of the book is Jesus Christ and to divert our faith from him to facts which are not so significant in themselves can be a serious mistake.<sup>64</sup>

The way out of the current crisis is not back to the old and obsolete formulations, but forward and beyond the present situation.

Even more of Ellul's space and energy is devoted to an attack on much of contemporary biblical scholarship—nearly always on the grounds that its passion for historical and literary dissection of the text leaves nothing except a mass of dusty, isolated fragments. This complaint leads us to the heart of Ellul's understanding of Scripture. Scripture must be read and understood as a total unity, and this unity must be understood and interpreted in relation to Jesus Christ as the definitive Word of God. There is no such thing as 'mere tale', 'mere myth', 'mere historical incident', etc., for Ellul as he reads Scripture. The original editors and

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>60</sup> *Ethics of Freedom*, p. 125.

<sup>61</sup> *To Will and To Do*, p. 264.

<sup>62</sup> *Meaning of the City*, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, p. 138n.

<sup>64</sup> *The Judgement of Jonah*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 10.

canonizers were not imbeciles, and they jealously guarded the entrance to the canon. Everything has a point and a meaning.

Ellul's various books and articles repeat these same points over and over again. There is an emphasis on 'the radical unity which the thought of the Bible exhibits from end to end, over and above the diversity of authorship, schools of thought, and literary forms'.<sup>65</sup> This unity is rooted in the Incarnation of the eschatological Son of God, Jesus Christ. Interpretation must be incarnational and eschatological.<sup>66</sup> Revelation requires the action of the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and existential commitment on the part of the hearer, on the other.<sup>67</sup>

We have no valid reasons to be arrogant about our 'superior' knowledge as moderns.

No one has demonstrated that those values which one rejects—those ethical instructions, that social view, that anthropology—were *only* assumptions of a bygone civilization. After all, even if they are *also* to be credited to a form of traditional civilization, it is quite possible that they were *nevertheless* what God willed for man in the order of the fall, or in obedience to his will.<sup>68</sup>

The Bible, understood in this fashion, is remarkably modern. We must

neither cover it with the trappings of tradition and theology, of moralities and rites—making a mummy out of it—nor expurgate it, cut it to pieces and scatter it, like the *membra disjecta* of Orpheus—making an experimental corpse out of it. All that is necessary is to let the explosive power of the word act, just as it is.<sup>69</sup>

And again:

I fail to see the justification for accepting as legitimate all the questions about the revelation . . . while at the same time refusing to question those systems, methods, and conclusions from the point of view of the revelation.<sup>70</sup>

Historical criticism is entirely legitimate so long as it is not an end in itself and so long as it is not a means of raising the Devil's question, 'yea, hath God said?' The problem is that 'we can no longer read the Bible in simplicity of heart, because this theology begets suspicion. . . . We are in the period

of "dilution", of watering down the expression as well as the content of revelation'.<sup>71</sup>

Ellul's contribution to contemporary theology and ethics can be summarized in three dimensions. First, he has affirmed and demonstrated the *relevance* of the whole canon of Scripture for today. His two studies of Revelation and 2 Kings are prime examples. The book of Revelation is no longer merely an esoteric key to interpret for the purpose of predicting the future. Nor is 2 Kings of interest primarily as a battleground for claims of historical inerrancy. Rather, both books are interpreted and proclaimed as the living Word of God addressing us in our contemporary situation.

Second, Ellul has insisted on the underlying *unity* of biblical revelation. Thus, the doctrine of the fall, the revelation concerning the 'meaning of the city' from Genesis to the book of Revelation, and the biblical cosmology with its principalities and powers are discussed in a way that illuminates a broad unity and consistency that might otherwise have escaped us.

Third, and most importantly, Ellul has argued that biblical revelation and faithful theology must be *centred on Jesus Christ*. The unity of Scripture is above all in Jesus Christ. The difficulties of this approach are well known, and Ellul is occasionally open to charges of having forced his Christological interpretation on various texts, especially by means of typology. Nevertheless, if Christians are followers of Jesus Christ, their Lord must be given central importance in theology and ethics. Limiting the importance of Jesus Christ to his soteriological significance—or interpreting soteriology in only a restricted, personal, or future sense—is challenged by Ellul. It is a challenge needed by Evangelicals as much as Liberals.

Once again, the prophetic significance of Ellul's work lies not only in challenging our intellectual constructs, our dogmatics, but in pressing toward the concrete meaning of faith for life in this era. Three themes which run through Ellul's 'Thus saith the Lord' must be noted here. First, Christians are called upon to engage in a vigorous programme of *desacralizing* and *demythologizing* the gods, idols, and powers of our age.<sup>72</sup> This means unmasking the absolutist pretensions of the state and the political order, of reason and technique, indeed of all the factors and forces which are simultaneously worshipped and oppressive. Second, Christians must 'introduce the Wholly Other' into this closed world of bondage and necessity. They must break open

<sup>65</sup> *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, p. 142; See *To Will and To Do*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>66</sup> *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, pp. 172ff.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>68</sup> *False Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 56.

<sup>69</sup> *The New Demons*, p. 224.

<sup>70</sup> *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, p. 145.

<sup>71</sup> 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' p. 203.

<sup>72</sup> See *The New Demons*, pp. 206-228.

closed situations.<sup>73</sup> The one indispensable means of doing this is a radical rootedness in God and in his coming Kingdom. Third, Christians must not only proclaim and think in conformity to the coming Kingdom, they must find ways of *incarnating this in daily life*.<sup>74</sup> In all three of these aspects, Jesus Christ is the paradigm and example for Ellul. The Gospels and the whole canon of Scripture provide analogies and guides for concrete implementation of this programme.

### 5. The Future of Evangelical Theology

The point of this essay is that the voluminous work of Jacques Ellul is best (I might even say 'only') understood under the rubric of 'prophecy' in the tradition of Søren Kierkegaard and the ancient prophets of Israel. Those coming to Ellul looking for systematic coherence, careful attention to all

<sup>73</sup> See *False Presence of the Kingdom*, pp. 178ff.

<sup>74</sup> See *Presence of the Kingdom*, pp. 146ff.

details, or sober academic refinement will be disappointed. Much of the criticism of Ellul's work is well-founded. The point is, however, to be challenged to go beyond him, to do it better. His work raises questions and points toward creative new answers.

If Ellul can provoke Evangelical theologians to get through and beyond the in-house debates over the best terminology to describe the authority and character of Scripture, if he can challenge us to spend less time responding to the agenda of non-Evangelical 'threats' and more time positively articulating the Word on behalf of the church and the world—he will be a successful prophet indeed. If Ellul can provoke Evangelicals to demonstrate 'walk' as well as 'talk'—that is, to develop a style of life incarnating the faith before the world—he will have fulfilled his mission. Ellul may convert you or he may infuriate you. But he must not be ignored.

# Niebuhr's Doctrine of Revelation in Contemporary Theology

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Richard Coleman, in his fascinating and helpful book *Issues of Theological Warfare: Evangelicals and Liberals*, undertakes to explain the theological position of each protagonist to the other. The difficulty is obvious and did not go unnoticed by reviewers. It is the pride of Evangelical theologians that one can fairly represent the thought of their movement in systematic fashion. But does the bewildering maelstrom of Liberal Protestant thought lend itself to such pat schematization? Probably not, yet why is Coleman's thumbnail system of Liberal theology so helpful? We suggest that there are wide areas of agreement, or trends, which from time to time enable us to characterize Liberal theology as a whole. Or to be more modest,

there are at least broad types of Liberal theologies; or even more modestly still, there are certain spectra in which the thought of a given Liberal theologian can be placed. The utility of such 'placing' may be that it becomes apparent where a thinker might have taken his theology, or where he should have taken it in order to be consistent. We will ask such questions with regard to H. Richard Niebuhr, narrowing our focus to Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation. When we compare his theories with those of conceptually kindred theologians who differ on this or that point, we have the opportunity, as it were, to test Niebuhr's thought with reference to a theological 'control group'. But on to the discussion itself.

As is well known, Niebuhr's acquaintance with the thought of Ernst Troeltsch made him attentive to the problem of historical relativism. How can the observer standing in the midst of the shifting sands of history claim any absolute or normative reference point? Here appears our first question:

According to Niebuhr, can revelation really tell us about reality?

Niebuhr admits the gravity of the problem as well as the high stakes he is gambling: 'We are aware . . . that all our philosophical ideas, religious dogmas and moral imperatives are historically conditioned and this awareness tempts us to a new agnosticism.'<sup>1</sup> This is a problem dealt with engagingly in Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels*. Berger suggests that all 'signals of transcendence' in ordinary life be used to base a new theological reconstruction. Niebuhr dissents from this kind of solution. Such a course of action would be illusory since it could never start at ground zero as it pretends to do. Berger cannot help but use his traditionally-communally received religious notions to interpret such apparently neutral 'signals'. As Kaufman would say, Berger only has an idea of 'transcendence' at all because he has received the concept from his religious tradition. Niebuhr proposes something different from an attempted escape from conditionedness:

It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.<sup>2</sup>

Thus it seems that for Niebuhr, revelation, though historically mediated, can indeed tell us about reality. It may 'see in a glass darkly', but see it does. Here Niebuhr is very close to Tillich with his concept of religious symbols. Symbols, the media of revelation, participate in the Ultimate (or Holy) to which they point, yet without being identical to or exhausting that reality. Or in Francis Schaeffer's terms, they give us 'true truth' without being 'exhaustive truth'.

But this does not give us the whole picture in Niebuhr. There are other statements in his writings, particularly in the key text *The Meaning of Revelation*, which sound much more consonant with an entirely different theological perspective. Niebuhr wants above all things to be fair. But one may wonder if he doesn't sometimes bend so far over backwards as to fall. He begins by pointing out that Christian assertions about reality are not exhaustive, even though sufficiently true. He seems to go on to suggest that all assertions, no matter how contradictory, at least might be equally valid. For instance,

The events of history to which Christian revela-

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1974), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

tion refers may be regarded from the scientific, objective, non-committed point of view . . . when this is done it is apparent that the scientist has as little need for the hypothesis of divine action as Laplace had in his astronomy.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover it seems evident that the terms the external historian employs are not more truly descriptive of the things-in-themselves than those the [believer] uses and that the former's understanding of what really happened is not more accurate than the latter's.<sup>4</sup>

The difference is one of perspective. It all depends on the 'imaginative' *gestalt* one uses to order the otherwise random data of experience. And Niebuhr makes it clear that no finite knower can know the 'ultimate nature of the event'.<sup>5</sup> Here he is close to Bultmann:

. . . objectivity of historical knowledge is not attainable in the sense of absolute ultimate knowledge, nor in the sense that the phenomena could be known in their very 'being in themselves' which the historian could perceive in pure receptivity. This 'being in itself' is an illusion of an objectivizing type of thinking. . . .<sup>6</sup>

What we are suggesting is that certain statements of Niebuhr tend to undermine his denial of agnostic relativism. In his scepticism about knowing the 'ultimate nature of the event', Niebuhr almost approaches Paul Van Buren, a radical theologian on the fringe of the 'Death of God' movement. Van Buren speaks of the 'dissolution of the Absolute'. He adopts a radical 'pluralism' which denies that things are ultimately to be characterized in any one fashion. All Christians know is that the story of Jesus has inexplicably grasped them with its contagion of freedom. He writes:

'Meaning' is not some . . . shadowy element which lies 'in' history. 'Meaning' . . . refers to the attitude of the viewer. . . . It points to *the way in which he sees* history, to the discernment and commitment arising out of his study of one piece of history which influences the way in which he looks at the rest of history and also his own life. Logically, to find 'meaning in history' is to have a 'blik'. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Before such questions as whether there is some absolute being, even 'Being itself', . . . [the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology, The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), pp. 112-113.

Christian] will be wise to remain silent. . . . What he has to tell is the story of Jesus and the strange story of how his freedom became contagious on Easter.<sup>8</sup>

Van Buren has been quoted at some length so that the reader may feel the impact of the similarity between Niebuhr's statements (and the outlook implied in them) and the essentially *agnostic* and *relativistic* viewpoint of Van Buren, and all this despite Niebuhr's disavowal of 'a new agnosticism'. It seems that Niebuhr, to be consistent, should have, with Tillich, maintained an anchoring (though not exhaustive) truth-claim in Reality, or with Van Buren, he should have gone the whole way to pluralistic, agnostic relativism. We could be charitable and speak of a 'tension' in Niebuhr's thought, but why equivocate? This seems like a confusing contradiction.

Moving now to a second important facet of Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation, we must ask about the status of the 'Thou' encountered in revelation. Niebuhr plainly rejects the old notion of 'propositional revelation' for 'personal revelation, or encounter'. (It is this preference, among other things, which has led commentators to place Niebuhr in the 'Neo-orthodox' camp of theologians. It will become apparent that we question this piece of theological taxonomy.) Yet as James W. Fowler inadvertently demonstrates, the 'personality' of God is one of the most elusive and ambiguous elements of Niebuhr's system (if it can be called a system). In his study of Niebuhr's thought, we are told how Niebuhr came increasingly to personalize his originally rather abstract concept of God, yet we are left with equivocal expressions like this: '... we recognize that the Creator has something like personality.'<sup>9</sup> The difficulty seems to be that Niebuhr defines God as the (abstract) 'principle of being itself',<sup>10</sup> yet he adds 'The ultimate principle is not logical, not mechanical . . . it is personal.'<sup>11</sup> Are not these two statements rather difficult to hold together? Niebuhr sets himself the same task as does John A. T. Robinson when the latter describes his 'conviction that reality at its deepest is to be interpreted not simply at the level of its impersonal, mathematical regularities but in categories like love and trust, freedom,

responsibility, and purpose'.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, for Niebuhr one's act of faith (trust plus loyalty) in God so conceived is one's affirmative acceptance of his own absolute dependence on the One.

Thus far, Niebuhr's God-concept is remarkably similar to Tillich's. Both would fit into what Gordon Kaufman calls the 'teleological' model of transcendence, where God as Being is conceived as the unmoved mover. Though 'personality' language may be used of such a God, it is only in a severely qualified sense. That is, to use Tillich's own distinction, God is here understood as the superpersonal 'ground of all personality'. The 'personal' qualities which so concern Niebuhr (and Robinson) are rooted in the ultimate ontological reality, e.g., 'love' is grounded in the universal process of separation and return. One's faith-response to this absolute dependence on, or ontological participation in, Being is 'the courage to be'. Yet Tillich is forthright in his admission that such faith is in 'the God beyond the God of theism', i.e., beyond (the image of) the personal God.

Yet Niebuhr wants to take the personality of God farther. He characterizes God as the structure of causation and purposiveness. Intentionality is present in the historical context as a whole. With this development Niebuhr moves into Kaufman's second model of transcendence, the 'interpersonal' model. Here personalistic language, according to Kaufman, is more directly appropriate since in a real sense we are talking about a 'living' God who 'acts' and who reveals himself in a succession of revelatory events (though not discontinuous, miraculously caused events). This factor of intentionality will make the difference. Or does it?

Niebuhr, it seems to us, runs into an enormously significant problem here. God's intentional will actually seems to make no difference. It 'dies the death of a thousand qualifications' since it is *essentially* unverifiable.

Love to God is conviction that there is a faithfulness at the heart of things: unity, reason, form and meaning in the plurality of being. It is the accompanying will to maintain or assert that unity, form and reason despite all appearances.<sup>13</sup>

What kind of 'unity, reason, form and meaning' are compatible with any apparent state of affairs, no matter how chaotic? If language means anything, such words are surely meant to make a claim about the discernable state of reality. Yet Niebuhr

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, quoted in James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom, the Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, quoted in *To See the Kingdom, the Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978), p. 37.

says they have really nothing to do with discernable reality. To put the dilemma in slightly different terms, let us consider another of Niebuhr's statements: 'This same structure in things . . . "means intensely and means good"—not the good which we desire, but the good which we would desire if we were good and really wise.'<sup>14</sup> In other words, we can be confident that God's providential direction of things will issue in what is good. Unfortunately, however, God's standards of 'good' seem to have very little to do with ours! So in the long run, we can be confident of nothing except that things will turn out as they turn out! Our standards of good give no indication of *how* things will turn out, though at the beginning of the quote they sounded like they could. Niebuhr's talk about 'unity, form, reason, meaning', or 'willing the good' is finally just bait on the theological hook! The all-important 'intentionality' recedes from the arena of meaningful discourse. Incidentally, these observations would tend to corroborate our observation. That is, Niebuhr implies that faith/revelation does not allow us definitely to characterize reality in any way. Rather it gives us only a subjective 'blik', in this case a positive disposition toward *whatever* happens rather than an assurance that something definite (definable) is happening, i.e. provident direction toward a meaningfully 'good' end. It only seems to give such assurance if one doesn't look too closely.

Niebuhr would have done well to stay (with Tillich) within Kaufman's first, 'teleological', model of transcendence. This model is quite adequate to Niebuhr's discussions in, e.g., *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* ('Radical Faith—Incarnate and Revealed in History') and *The Responsible Self* ('Responsibility in Absolute Dependence'), where he speaks of one's encounter

<sup>14</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, quoted in *To See the Kingdom, the Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr*, p. 80.

with, or responsibility toward, the One in whom we participate and meet in all our finite relations. The idea seems to be that one's relation to Being may be characterized as 'personal' because life is not a spectator sport. Involvement in it is lived with the passion of subjectivity and requires an I-Thou, not I-it, relationship. Of course this might imply that the 'personal' applies, strictly speaking, more to the character of my relating than to that to which I relate.

Our comparisons of H. Richard Niebuhr with other contemporary theologians has attempted to clarify various threads of his thought by placing them in a larger context. In so doing, we have found reason to suggest that Niebuhr sometimes inadvertently tries to combine incompatible notions and sometimes tends toward positions much more radically liberal than one would at first think.

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# The Interpreted Word: Reflections on Contextual Hermeneutics

Dr C. René Padilla

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The word of God was given to bring the lives of God's people into conformity with the will of God. Between the written word and its appropriation by believers lies the process of interpretation, or *hermeneutics*. For each of us, the process of arriving at the meaning of Scripture is not only highly shaped by who we are as individuals but also by various social forces, patterns and ideals of our particular culture and our particular historical situation. ('Culture' is used in this paper in a comprehensive way to include not only technical skills, lifestyle, attitudes and values of people, but also their thought patterns, cognitive processes and ways of learning, all of which ultimately express a religious commitment.)

One of the most common approaches to interpretation is what may be called the '*intuitive*' approach. This approach, with its emphasis on immediate personal application, is found in many of the older commentaries and in contemporary popular preaching and devotional literature.

In contrast to this is the '*scientific*' approach, which employs the tools of literary criticism, historical and anthropological studies, linguistics, etc. It is adopted by a large majority of biblical scholars, and by Christians interested in serious Bible study. It appreciates the need for understanding the original context. But like the intuitive approach, it may not be sensitive to contemporary social, economic and political factors and cultural forces that affect the interpretive process.

A third approach is the '*contextual*' approach. Combining the strengths of the intuitive and scientific methods, it recognises both the role of the ancient world in shaping the original text and the role of today's world in conditioning the way contemporary readers are likely to 'hear' and understand the text.

The Word of God originated in a particular historical context—the Hebrew and Graeco-Roman

world. Indeed, the Word can be understood and appropriated only as it becomes 'flesh' in a specific historical situation with all its particular cultural forms. The challenge of hermeneutics is to transpose the message from its original historical context into the context of present day readers so as to produce the same kind of impact on their lives as it did on the original hearers or readers.

Thus, hermeneutics and the historical context are strongly linked. Without a sufficient awareness of the historical factors, the faith of the hearers of the Gospel will tend to degenerate into a 'culture-Christianity' which serves unredeemed cultural forces rather than the living God. The confusion of the Gospel with 'culture-Christianity' has been frequent in western-based missionary work and is one of the greatest problems affecting the worldwide church today. The solution can come only through a recognition of the role that the historical context plays in both the understanding and communication of the biblical message.

## Traditional hermeneutics

The unspoken assumption of the *intuitive model* is that the situation of the contemporary reader largely coincides with the situation represented by the original text. The process of interpretation is thought to be rather straightforward and direct (diagram 1).

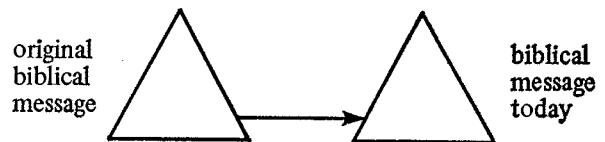


Diagram 1

This approach brings out three elements essential to sound biblical hermeneutics. First, it clearly assumes that Scripture is meant for ordinary people and is not the domain of trained theologians only. (Was it not the rediscovery of this truth that led the sixteenth century Reformers to translate and circulate the Bible in the vernacular?) Second, it highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the meaning of the Scripture for the believer. Third, it emphasises that the purpose of Scripture is not

merely to lead readers to an intellectual apprehension of truth but to elicit a conscious submission to the Word of God speaking in Scripture. These elements are of particular importance at a time when, as Robert J. Blaikie protests, 'Only as mediated through the scholarly priesthood of "Biblical Critics" can ordinary people receive the truth of God's Word from the Bible.'<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the intuitive approach can easily lead to allegorisations in which the original meaning of the text is lost. Someone has said that allegory is the son of piety. The fantastic interpretations by such reputable theologians as Origen and Augustine, Luther and Calvin, are more or less sophisticated illustrations of a piety-inspired approach to the Bible. The question to be posed to this approach is whether the appropriation of the biblical message is possible without doing violence to the text.

The *scientific approach* also has its merits and defects. Anyone with even a superficial understanding of the role of history in shaping the biblical revelation will appreciate the importance of linguistic and historical studies for the interpretation of Scripture. The raw material of theology is not abstract, timeless concepts which may be simply lifted out of Scripture, but rather a message embedded in historical events and the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the biblical authors. One of the basic tasks of interpretation therefore is the construction of a bridge between the modern readers or hearers and the biblical authors by means of the historical method. Thus, the *Sitz im Leben* ('life situation') of the biblical authors can be reconstructed, and the interpreters, by means of grammatico-historical exegesis, can extract those normative (though not exhaustive) and universal elements which the ancient text conveys. This view of the interpretive process is represented in diagram 2.

This approach throws into relief the historical nature of biblical revelation. In a way, it widens the gulf between the Bible and modern readers or hearers. In so doing, however, it witnesses to the fact that the Word of God today has to do with the Word of God which *was* spoken in ancient times by the prophets and apostles. Unless modern interpreters allow the text to speak out of its original situation, they have no basis for claiming that their message is continuous with the message recorded in Scripture.

The problem with the scientific approach is first, that it assumes that the hermeneutical task can be

<sup>1</sup> *Secular Christianity and the God Who Acts*, Hodder and Stoughton, p. 27.

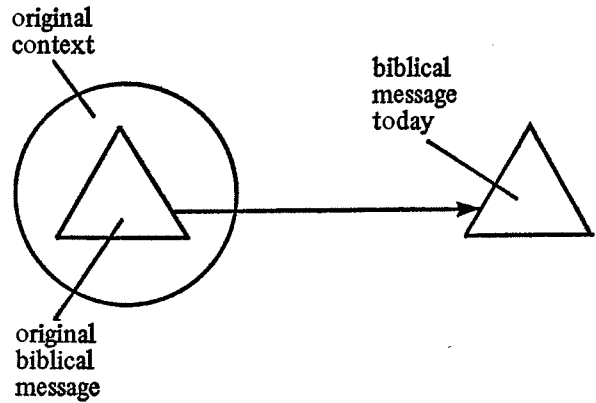


Diagram 2

limited to defining the original meaning of the text, leaving to others its present application. Second, it assumes that the interpreters can achieve an 'objectivity' which is neither possible nor desirable. It is not possible, because contemporary interpreters are stamped with the imprint of their particular time and place as surely as is the ancient text, and therefore they inevitably come to the text with historically-conditioned presuppositions that colour their exegesis. It is not desirable, because the Bible can only be properly understood as it is read with a *participatory involvement* and allowed to speak into one's own situation. Ultimately, if the text written in the past does not strike home in the present it has not been understood.

### The contextual approach and the hermeneutical circle

How can the chasm between the past and the present be bridged? An answer is found in the *contextual approach*, which combines insights derived from classical hermeneutics with insights derived from the modern hermeneutical debate.

In the contextual approach both the context of the ancient text and the context of the modern reader are given due weight (diagram 3).

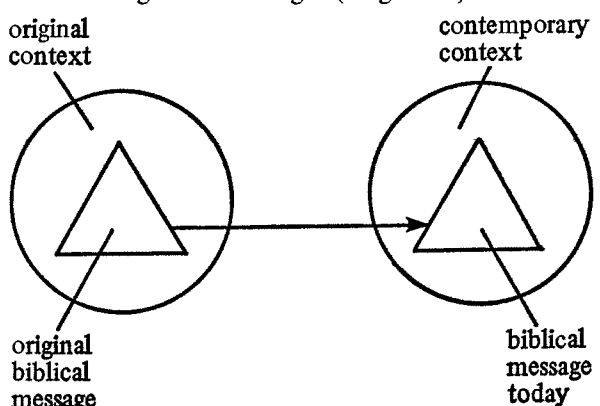


Diagram 3

The diagram emphasises the importance of culture to the biblical message, in both its original and contemporary forms. That is, there is no such thing as a biblical message detached from a particular cultural context.

However, contrary to the diagram, the interpretive process is not a simple one-way process. For whenever interpreters approach a particular biblical text they can do so only from their own perspective. This gives rise to a complex, dynamic two-way interpretive process depicted as a 'hermeneutical circle', in which interpreters and text are mutually engaged. The dynamic interplay will be seen more clearly if we first examine the four elements of the circle: (1) the interpreters historical situation; (2) the interpreter's world-and-life view; (3) Scripture; and (4) theology.

**1. The interpreters historical situation.** Interpreters do not live in a vacuum. They live in concrete historical situations, in particular cultures. From their cultures they derive not only their language but also patterns of thought and conduct, methods of learning, emotional reactions, values, interests and goals. If God's Word is to reach them, it must do so in terms of their own culture or not at all.

This is clear from the Incarnation itself. God did not reveal himself by shouting from heaven but by speaking from within a concrete human situation: he became present as a man amongst men, in Jesus, a first-century Jew! This unmistakably demonstrates God's intention to make his Word known from within a concrete human situation. No culture as a whole reflects the purpose of God; in all cultures there are elements which conspire against the understanding of God's Word. If this is recognised, it follows that every interpretation is subject to correction and refinement; there is always a need for safeguards against syncretism, i.e., cultural distortions of the Word of God. Syncretism occurs whenever there is accommodation of the Gospel to premises or values prevalent in the culture which are incongruent with the biblical message.

On the other hand, every culture possesses positive elements, favourable to the understanding of the Gospel. This makes possible a certain approach to Scripture which brings to light certain aspects of the message which in other cultures remain less visible or even hidden. The same cultural differences that hinder intercultural communication turn out to be an asset to the understanding of the many-sided wisdom of God; they serve as channels to aspects of God's Word which can be best seen from within a particular context.

Thus, the hermeneutical task requires an understanding of the concrete situation as much as an

understanding of Scripture. No transposition of the biblical message is possible unless the interpreters are familiar with the frame of reference within which the message is to become meaningful. There is, therefore, a place for auxiliary sciences such as sociology and anthropology which can enable interpreters to define more precisely the horizons of their situation, even as linguistics, literature and history can help them in their study of the text and its original context.

**2. The interpreter's world-and-life view.** Interpreters tend to approach Scripture from their particular perspectives. They have their own world-and-life view, their own way of apprehending reality. This imposes certain limits but also enables them to see reality as a coherent whole. Whether or not they are conscious of it, this world-and-life view, which is religiously determined, lies behind all their activities and colours their understanding of reality in a definite way. We can extend this observation to biblical hermeneutics and say that every interpretation of the text implies a world-and-life view.

Western theology generally has been unaware of the extent to which it is affected by the materialistic and mechanistic world-and-life view. It is only natural, for instance, that those who accept the modern 'scientific' view—which assumes a closed universe where everything can be explained on the basis of natural causes—will have difficulty taking the Bible at face value whenever it points to a spirit-world or to miracles. Western theology, therefore, greatly needs the corrective provided by Scripture in its emphasis on a personal Creator who acts purposefully in and through history; on creation as totally dependent upon God; on man as the 'image of God', affected by sin and redemption. Such elements are the substance of the biblical world-and-life view apart from which there can be no proper understanding either of reality or of Scripture. It may well be that what prevents westerners from entering into the 'strange world of the Bible' is not its obsolete world-and-life view but their own secularistic and unwarranted assumption with regard to the powers of reason!

**3. Scripture.** Hermeneutics has to do with a dialogue between Scripture and the contemporary historical context. Its purpose is to transpose the biblical message from its original context into a particular twentieth-century situation. Its basic assumption is that the God who spoke in the past and whose Word was recorded in the Bible continues to speak today to all mankind in Scripture.

Although the illumination of the Spirit is indispensable in the interpretive process, from one point

of view the Bible must be read 'like any other book'. This means that the interpreters have to take seriously that they face an ancient text with its own historical horizons. Their task is to let the text speak, whether they agree with it or not, and this demands that they understand what the text meant in its original situation. In James Smart's words,

'All interpretation must have as its first step the hearing of the text with exactly the shade of meaning that it had when it was first spoken or written. First the words must be allowed to have the distinctive meaning that their author placed upon them, being read within the context of his other words. Then each word has to be studied in the context of the time in order to determine . . . what meaning it would have for those to whom it was addressed. . . . The religious, cultural and social background is of the greatest importance in penetrating through the words to the mind of the author. . . . The omission of any of these disciplines is a sign of lack of respect not only for the text and its author, but also for the subject matter with which it deals.'<sup>3</sup>

It has been argued, however, that the approach described in this quotation, known as the grammatico-historical approach, is itself typically western and consequently not binding upon non-western cultures. What are we to say to this?

First, no interpreters, regardless of their culture, are free to make the text say whatever they want it to say. Their task is to let the text speak for itself, and to that end they inevitably have to engage with the horizons of the text via literary context, grammar, history and so on.

Second, western theology has not been characterized by a consistent use of the grammatico-historical approach in order to let the Bible speak. Rather a dogmatic approach has been the dominating factor, by which competing theological systems have muted Scripture. Abstract conceptualization patterned on Greek philosophy have gone hand in hand with allegorizations and typologies. Even sophisticated theologians, losing sight of the historical nature of revelation, have produced capricious literary or homiletical exercises.

Third, some point to the New Testament use of the Old as legitimizing intuitive approaches and minimizing the importance of the grammatico-historical approach. But it can hardly be claimed that the New Testament writers were not interested in the natural sense of Old Testament Scripture. There is little basis for the idea that the New Testament specializes in highly imaginative exegesis,

similar to that of rabbinic Judaism. Even in Paul's case, despite his rabbinic training, there is great restraint in the use of allegory. As James Smart has put it, 'The removal of all instances of allegory from his (Paul's) writings would not change the structure of his theology. This surely is the decisive test.'<sup>3</sup>

The effort to let Scripture speak without imposing on it a ready-made interpretation is a hermeneutical task binding upon all interpreters, whatever their culture. Unless objectivity is set as a goal, the whole interpretive process is condemned to failure from the start.

Objectivity, however, must not be confused with neutrality. To read the Bible 'like any other book' is not only to take seriously the literary and historical aspects of Scripture but also to read it from the perspective of faith. Since the Bible was written that God may speak in and through it, it follows that the Bible should be read with an attitude of openness to God's Word, with a view to conscientious response. The understanding and appropriation of the biblical message are two aspects of an indivisible whole—the *comprehension* of the Word of God.

**4. Theology.** Theology cannot be reduced to the repetition of doctrinal formulations borrowed from other latitudes. To be valid and appropriate, it must reflect the merging of the horizons of the historical situation and the horizons of the text. It will be relevant to the extent that it is expressed in symbols and thought forms which are part of the culture to which it is addressed, and to the extent that it responds to the questions and concerns which are raised in that context. It will be faithful to the Word of God to the extent that it is based on Scripture and demonstrates the Spirit-given power to accomplish God's purpose. The same Spirit who inspired Scripture in the past is active today to make it God's personal Word in a concrete historical situation.

Daniel von Allmen has suggested that the pages of the New Testament itself bear witness to this process, as the early Christians, dispersed by persecution from Palestine, 'undertook the work of evangelism and tackled the Greeks on their own ground. It was they who, on the one hand, began to adapt into Greek the tradition that gave birth to the Gospels, and who, on the other hand, preached the good news for the first time in Greek'.<sup>4</sup> They did not consciously set out to 'do theology', but

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Birth of Theology,' *International Review of Mission*, January 1975.

<sup>3</sup> *The Interpretation of Scripture*, SCM, p. 33.

simply to faithfully transcribe the Gospel into pagan contexts. Greek-speaking Christian poets then gave expression to the faith received, not in a systematically worked theology, but by singing the work which God had done for them. According to von Allmen, this is the origin of a number of hymns quoted by the New Testament writers, particularly the one in Philippians 2: 6–11. The theologians ensured that this new way of expressing the faith corresponded to apostolic doctrine and showed that all theological statements must be set in relation to the heart of the Christian faith, i.e. the universal lordship of Jesus Christ.

In other words, the driving force in the contextualization of the Gospel in apostolic times was the primitive church's obedience to God's call to mission. What is needed today, says von Allmen, is missionaries like the Hellenists, who 'did not set out with a theological intention', and poets like the authors of the hymns quoted in the New Testament, who 'were not deliberately looking for an original expression of their faith', and theologians like Paul, who did not set out to 'do theology'. Von Allmen concludes, 'The only object of research which is allowed, and indeed commended, is the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ (cf Mt. 6: 33). And theology, with all other things, will be added unto us.'

I would also add that neither the proclamation of the Gospel nor the worship of God is possible without 'theology', however unsystematic and implicit it may be. In other words, the Hellenistic missionaries and poets were *also theologians*—certainly not dogmatists, but proclaimers and singers of a living theology through which they expressed the Word of God in a new cultural context. With this qualification, von Allmen's conclusion stands—the way in which Christianity was communicated in the first century sets the pattern for producing contextualized theology today.

### Dynamics of the hermeneutical circle

The aim of the interpretive process is the transformation of the people of God within their concrete situation. Now a change in the situation of the interpreters (including their culture) brings about a change in their comprehension of Scripture, while a change in their comprehension of Scripture in turn reverberates in their situation. Thus, the contextual approach to the interpretation of Scripture involves a dialogue between the historical situation and Scripture, a dialogue in which the interpreters approach Scripture with a particular perspective (their world-and-life view) and approach their situation with a particular comprehension of the

Word of God (their theology), as indicated in diagram 4.

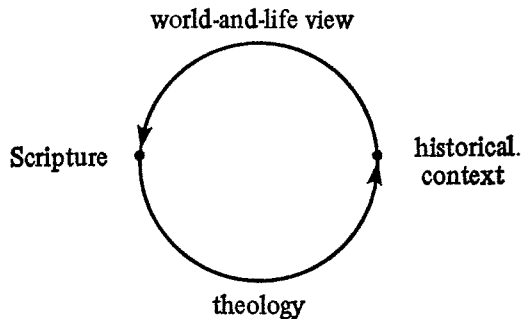


Diagram 4

We begin the hermeneutical process by analysing our situation, listening to the questions raised within it. Then we come to Scripture asking, 'What does God say through Scripture regarding this particular problem?' The way we formulate our question will depend, of course, on our world-and-life view, that is, the historical situation can only approach Scripture through the current world-and-life view of the interpreters. Lack of a good understanding of the real issues involved will be reflected in inadequate or misdirected questions, and this will hinder our understanding of the relevance of the biblical message to that situation. Scripture does not readily answer questions which are not posed to it. Asking the wrong or peripheral questions will result in a theology focussed on questions no one is asking, while the issues that urgently need biblical direction are ignored.

On the other hand, the better our understanding of the real issues in our context, the better will be the questions which we address to Scripture. This makes possible new readings of Scripture in which the implications of its message for our situation will be more fully uncovered. If it is true that Scripture illuminates life, it is also true that life illuminates Scripture.

As the answers of Scripture come to light, the initial questions which arose in our concrete situation may have to be reformulated to reflect the biblical perspective more adequately. The context of theology, therefore, includes not only answers to specific questions raised by the situation but also questions which the text itself poses to the situation.

The deeper and richer our comprehension of the biblical text, the deeper and richer will be our understanding of the historical context (including the issues that have yet to be faced) and of the meaning of Christian obedience in that particular

context. The possibility is thus open for changes in our world-and-life view and consequently for a more adequate understanding and appropriation of the biblical message. For the biblical text, approached from a more congenial world-and-life view, and addressed with deeper and richer questions, will be found to speak more plainly and fully. Our theology, in turn, will be more relevant and responsive to the burning issues which we have to face in our concrete situation.

### The contextualization of the Gospel

The present situation of the church in many nations provides plenty of evidence to show that all too often the attempt has been made to evangelize without seriously facing the hermeneutical task. Western missionaries have often assumed that their task is simply to extract the message directly from the biblical text and to transmit it to their hearers in the 'mission field' with no consideration of the role of the historical context in the whole interpretive process. This follows a simplistic pattern which does not fit reality (diagram 5).

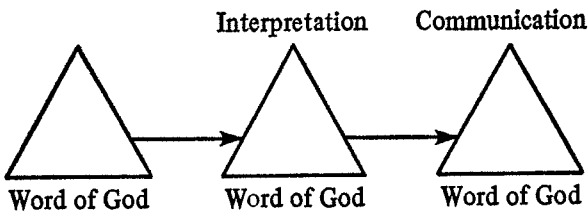


Diagram 5

This simplistic approach to evangelism has frequently gone hand in hand with a western view of Christianity which combines biblical elements with elements of Greek philosophy and of the European-American heritage and places an un-

balanced emphasis on the numerical growth of the church. As a result, in many parts of the world Christianity is regarded as an ethnic religion—the white man's religion. The Gospel has a foreign sound, or no sound at all, in relation to many of the dreams and anxieties, problems and questions, values and customs of people. The Word of God is reduced to a message that touches life only on a tangent.

It would be easy to illustrate the theological dependence of the younger churches on the older churches, which is as real and as damaging as the economic dependence that characterizes the 'underdeveloped' countries! An amazing quantity of Christian literature published in these countries consists of translations from English (ranging from 'eschatology-fiction' to 'how-to-enjoy-sex' manuals) and in a number of theological institutions the curriculum is a photo-copy of the curriculum used at similar institutions in the West.

The urgent need everywhere is for a new reading of the Gospel *from within each particular historical situation*, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The contextualization of the Gospel can only be the result of a new, open-ended reading of Scripture with a hermeneutic in which Gospel and situation become mutually engaged in a dialogue whose purpose is to place the church under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

It is only as the Word of God becomes 'flesh' in the people of God that the Gospel takes shape within history. According to God's purpose the Gospel is never to be merely a message in words but a message incarnate in his church and, through it, in history. The contextualization of the Gospel demands the contextualization of the church, which is God's hermeneutical community for the manifestation of Christ's presence among the nations of the earth.

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### Correction

In the April 1981 issue of *Themelios*, we wrongly stated that Anthony Stone is studying for a post graduate degree from the United States. Dr Stone is in fact working with the Theological Research and Communication Institute, New Delhi, India.

# The Kingdom of God and Christian Politics

David G. Kibble

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## 1. The need for Christians to think politically

Recently I was at a Christian houseparty where one of the speakers was complaining that he was tired of seeing Christian newspapers and journals filled with discussions of social issues—capital punishment, medical ethics, politics, the media and so on. 'Let's get back to Jesus,' he complained. I felt annoyed and yet challenged by his remark. Annoyed, because I believe that the Christian must, if he is to be true to his faith and his Lord, work out his beliefs in terms of the secular world in which he lives; challenged, because I believe that some 'practical Christianity' is being done from the basis of charity or philanthropy which, whilst commendable in themselves, are not equivalent to the Christian faith. I am concerned that Christian social involvement should be just that: *Christian* social involvement—involvement thought out and prayed out from the base of a personal relationship between the Christian believer and his Lord.

We could take no better starting point than that taken by Donald Coggan in his opening sermon in Canterbury Cathedral at the beginning of the 1978 Lambeth Conference. 'The Lord reigns,' the Archbishop declared at the beginning of his address. The Lord reigns, however, in two different ways. Firstly he reigns as creator in that he upholds, sustains and renews the whole of his infinite universe. Secondly he also reigns as redeemer where individual Christians submit themselves to him in faith as redeemed creatures; hence St Paul could pray in Ephesians 3: 17 that '... Christ might dwell in your hearts through faith,' and tell the Christians in Rome that '... the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you' (Rom. 8: 11). God reigns as redeemer where the Christian submits himself to a personal relationship with him. The concept of the imitation of Christ or of obeying Christ's teaching is not good enough; God reigns as redeemer only when there is a personal relationship between the Christian and his Lord.<sup>1</sup> God may be said to reign then in two

different ways: as creator and as redeemer. It is the same God who reigns, but the mode of his reign that is different. This distinction is vital if we are to avoid confusion about God's action in history, a confusion that is, as we shall see, present in some present writings on political theology.

The Christian then, as a member of the redeemed community has a two fold mission. Firstly, he will seek to realize more fully God's reign as redeemer; this will involve his work *qua* Christian in the church, teaching, pastoring, evangelizing and so forth. The second aspect of his mission will be to see that God's reign as creator is more fully reflected in society. It is this second aspect that has received prominence recently, and particularly so in the evangelical wing of the church,<sup>2</sup> although the 'mission' in this respect is by no means complete. There are some, of course, like the speaker quoted above, who would maintain that the sole task of the Christian is to 'preach Christ', 'win souls' or 'win others'. Whilst agreeing that this is part of the Christians mission, I do not believe that it can in itself be the sum total of that mission.<sup>3</sup> Such a view of the Christian task has its roots in a protestant individualism that dates right back to Luther's (correct) affirmation of the justification of the individual believer through faith. The Christian, of course, would want to maintain that the individual must be justified by faith, but he must also go on from there and work his justification out in practical terms in secular society. As Christopher Sugden has pointed out, 'Perhaps nowhere in the world has "individual conversion" been preached so faithfully as in the Southern States of America,

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London, 1964. Unfortunately both carried the polemic too far—obedience to rules is necessary once the personal relationship with God is established: cf. E. L. Long, Jr., *A Survey of Christian Ethics*, O.U.P., New York, 1967, esp. ch. 19 and 20; P. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*, S.J.T. Occasional Paper no. 11, Oliver and Boyd, London and Edinburgh, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. the publication of the fortnightly paper *Third Way*, the ethical studies being currently published by Grove Press, and the relevant sections in *The Nottingham Statement*, Falcon, London, 1977, emanating from the National Evangelical Anglican Congress in Nottingham.

<sup>3</sup> For a statement of other arguments against political and social involvement and a refutation of them cf. J. G. Davies, *Christians, Politics and Violent Revolution*, SCM, London, 1976, ch. 2.

<sup>1</sup> Hence Barth's and Bonhoeffer's polemic against Christian ethics being seen *merely* as obedience: cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1957-1963, II/2, sect. 36; D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Fontana,

South Africa and Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> The results speak for themselves. If the Christian faith remains something individualistic and privatized it can harbour the most damnable of social ethics.

What is the relationship between evangelism and salvation on the one hand, and social justice on the other? The first point I would make most emphatically is that the two must not be identified with each other. Gustavo Gutierrez seems to have fallen into this trap. In his *Theology of Liberation* he says,

‘... the frontiers between the life of faith and temporal works, between church and world, become more fluid... to participate in the process of [political] liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work.’<sup>5</sup>

Gutierrez would mistakenly have us unify God’s reign in creation and his reign in redemption; true, both are the work of the same God, but they are two distinct aspects of the divine activity. I quote Gutierrez again when he affirms that

‘... there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, “juxtaposed” or “closely linked”. Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history. His redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness.’<sup>6</sup>

Gutierrez is prepared to use such terms as redemption and salvation to describe the Christian’s efforts in the field of social justice, a use which is clearly mistaken if the trouble is taken to examine the New Testament use of such words.<sup>7</sup>

Another South American writer, José P. Miranda, makes the same sort of mistake but expresses it in a different way. For him God cannot be known *apart from* social action:

‘... he is knowable *exclusively* in the cry of the poor and the weak who seek justice. To know God directly is impossible, not because of the limitations of human understanding but rather, on the contrary, because Yahweh’s total transcendence, his irreducible and confused otherness, would thereby disappear... Transcendence does not mean an unimaginable and inconceiv-

able God, but a God who is accessible only in the act of justice.’<sup>8</sup>

This seems to be a most peculiar (and utterly erroneous) definition of transcendence; a definite case of using a word with a specific meaning and foisting your own meaning upon it to make your readers believe that they should agree with you! In an attempt to prove his point he takes 1 John 4: 7–8 completely out of its context and out of its surrounding theology.<sup>9</sup> In opposition to Miranda we must reiterate that God is known in his Word to us in Christ Jesus. To dissolve the gospel in Miranda’s fashion just will not do—it’s almost a case of back to *Honest to God* and the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

If evangelism and social justice are not to be identified and conflated together then they must in some sense be separate. The danger here, of course, is that we separate them so much as to make the one more important than the other. It must be emphasized that both are equally important. Ronald Sider in his *Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice* categorizes the two as ‘distinct yet equal’, and this would seem to be acceptable. As Sider points out, the gospels provide no indication that Jesus considered preaching the good news more important than healing the sick; Jesus commanded us to feed the hungry and preach the gospel without saying that one was more important than the other, or that the former was to be done only when we had some spare time and the money available.<sup>11</sup>

Our social concern must take two forms. Firstly it must take the form of what we have in the past called charity: caring for the sick, aiding the poor, helping our next door neighbour and so on. But social concern must also take the form of structural or political charity. Just to care for the individual victims of a disease is not sufficient: the disease itself must be fought and destroyed. So with charity—it is not enough just to care for the casualties in our society: where society is less than fair and just, society must be changed—the structures of society must themselves be altered to ensure that casualties are avoided. Thus it is not enough for the Christian in South Africa to care for the black community: structural charity demands that the whole system of apartheid be challenged; it is not enough for the Christian in South America to give money and goods to the poor: structural charity demands that

<sup>4</sup> C. Sugden, *Social Gospel or No Gospel?*, Grove Books, Bramcote, 1975, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, SCM, London, 1974, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. R. J. Sider, *Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice*, Grove Books, Bramcote, 1977, ch. 2; also the articles on *sozo* and related words and *apolutrosis* in G. Kittel and G. Freidrich (eds.), *A Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964–1974 (henceforward *TWNT*).

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, SCM, London, 1977, p. 48 (my italics).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61 and 64.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent recent plea for proper theological thinking cf. E. L. Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, SPCK, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 17.



the whole economic system be challenged. Gutierrez expresses it as follows:

‘... the neighbour is not only man viewed individually. The term refers also to man considered in the fabric of social relationships, to man situated in his economic, social, cultural, and racial coordinates. It likewise refers to the exploited social class, the dominated people, and the marginated race. The masses are also our neighbour.’<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Biblical guidelines

My main aim in the preceding section was to show that true faith issues in social action. Nowhere does such a theme appear more clearly than in the Old Testament prophets; we can begin our Biblical exploration by quoting Jeremiah:

Woe to him who builds his house by  
unrighteousness,  
and his upper rooms by injustice;  
who makes his neighbour serve him for  
nothing,  
and does not give him his wages;  
who says, ‘I will build myself a great house  
with spacious upper rooms,’  
and cuts out windows for it, panelling it  
with cedar, and painting it with  
vermillion.

Do you think you are a king because you  
compete in cedar?

Did not your father eat and drink and do  
justice and righteousness?

Then it was well with him.

He judged the cause of the poor and needy:  
then it was well.

Is this not to know me? says the Lord.

(Je. 22: 13–16).

To ‘do justice and righteousness’ is to know the Lord. There can be no knowledge of the Lord without social action. The theological rationale for this is outlined in Jeremiah 9: 23–24:

‘Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practise steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord.”’

Here the basis for identifying knowledge of God, and justice is spelled out: it is Yahweh’s own character. To know God, who himself practises love

and justice, is to pattern oneself on him; to know God is to do as God himself does.

The same theme appears in Hosea. The prophet explains that ‘There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no love of God in the land’ (Ho. 4: 1); this lack of a proper knowledge of God has led to ‘... swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery’ (Ho. 4: 2). There is no social justice because there is no knowledge of God. In the same chapter Hosea complains that there is a ‘lack of knowledge’ of Yahweh, and that this has resulted in the people forgetting Yahweh’s law (v. 6).

In the Messianic oracle of Isaiah 11: 1–9 the future King is seen to have God’s Spirit in him, ‘the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord’ (v. 2). Because he has this relationship with Yahweh, this knowledge of Yahweh, his efforts in the field of social action and social justice will be perfect:

‘He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the  
earth;  
and he shall smite the earth with the rod of  
his mouth, and with the breath of his  
lips he shall slay the wicked.’

(v. 3–4).

He is able to perform this social justice because, *and only because*, he has a knowledge of the Lord.

In the New Testament a similar equation is made by St John. According to the apostle, man needs both faith in God and practical love; both are seen to lead to eternal life because both are inextricably involved with one another:

‘Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life’ (Jn. 5: 24).

‘We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death’ (1 Jn. 3: 14).

The same theme also appears with great clarity in 1 John 4. To know God then, to be redeemed, to have a personal relationship with the living Lord *is also* to ‘do justice’. The two are interdependent, two moments of the same thing. And yet, as I pointed out earlier, the two must not be said to be equivalent; to see a man fighting for human rights is not to see a Christian. Miranda and Gutierrez wrongly equate the two; José Miguez Bonino tries to express the relationship correctly, almost succeeds, but then fails. He sums it up as follows: ‘Obedience is not a *consequence* of our knowledge of God, just as it is not a precondition for it:

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 202.

obedience is included in our knowledge of God. Or, to put it more bluntly: obedience *is* our knowledge of God. There is not a separate *noetic* moment in our relationship to God.<sup>13</sup> He seems to have been near the truth when he says that obedience is *included* in our knowledge of God, but then he falls back into the same trap into which Gutierrez and Miranda fall in confusing the two. Such a confusion arises, it would seem, from an inability to distinguish between an experiential and logical relationship between the two: *logically* knowledge of God and social action can be identified with each other as two different parts of the same thing; *experientially* however, our knowledge of God in Christ *precedes* our obedience to the Lord's commands. I feel that this disentanglement should lead to much clearer thinking on this issue.

The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, shows God to be a God of justice, one who is always concerned for the poor and disadvantaged. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, for example, there are a number of laws laid down specifically to help the poor. Thus, the man who is reaping his field and inadvertently leaves a sheaf in the field shall not go back and bring it in—it is to be left there for the poor (Dt. 24: 19); the man who gathers from his olive trees is not to go over the boughs a second time to gather what he has missed—these too are to be left for the poor and the widows (Dt. 24: 21); the farmer, when he brings in the harvest, is not to reap to the very borders of his field—the crop around the outside is to be left for the poor and the stranger (Lev. 23: 22); the annually given tithe of all the farmer's produce is to be given every third year for distribution to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow (Dt. 14: 28–29). Every seven years there was to be a 'Sabbath Year', when no crop was to be planted and the ground was to be left to lie fallow; what did grow of its own accord was for the slave and the stranger (Lv. 25: 2–7). Also important was the year of the Jubilee: in this year all property that had been bought during the past forty-eight years was to be returned to its original owner without fee (Lv. 25: 10ff).

Other measures too existed to help the poor or the man who had fallen on hard times. If a man became poor and sold some or all of his property, then the man's next of kin had the right to buy it back or 'redeem' it for him. If he had no one to redeem it, then, should the man eventually acquire enough money himself to buy it back, he should be able to, making a small payment to the man to

whom he had sold it (Lv. 25: 25–28). If a man became so poor that he was unable to support himself then he was to be supported by his brother, who was also to lend him money without interest (Lv. 25: 35–38).

It would seem that there are two reasons for these laws protecting the poor. The first is that servility and poverty was a contradiction of the true religion of Yahweh; it was because of this that Yahweh had led the Jews out of slavery and poverty in Egypt. At the end of each group of laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, therefore, there appears a formula reminding the Jews of this fact: 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this' (or some similar variant). The second reason why the poor are protected is that poverty contradicts God's purpose for man: man's purpose on earth is to dominate the earth and to reflect God's image (Gn. 1: 26; 2: 15). If a man is poverty stricken his dominion over the earth becomes something servile and dehumanizing, whilst if he is unable to determine his own life autonomously he does not reflect God's image properly, for God is a self determining agent. Poverty therefore is a contradiction to God's purpose for man in the created world and also a contradiction to the religion of Yahweh. Biblical laws thus attempt to eradicate poverty. The purpose of such laws has been said by Gutierrez to '... prevent the accumulation of wealth and the consequent exploitation.'<sup>14</sup> Whether the laws were actually designed to prevent the accumulation of wealth might be a debatable point, but certainly they were designed to prevent poverty and the exploitation and humiliation that accompanies it.

Also in the Bible are numerous condemnations of fraudulent and dishonest practices undertaken by the powerful and the rich. Traders are condemned for having scales that have been tampered with (Ho. 12: 7; Am. 8: 5; Mi. 6: 11), wicked land-owners are condemned for seizing land at the first sign of a man's misfortune (Mi. 2: 1–3), the ruling classes are condemned for failing to see that justice is properly executed in the courts, particularly justice due to the poor (Am. 5: 7; Mi. 3: 9–11; Is. 10: 1–2). Particular attention is paid to the violent oppression of the poor by the rich; in Micah 3: 1–3 we read:

'And I said:

Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel!

Is it not for you to know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil;

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Bonino, *Christians and Marxists*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1976, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 293.

who tear the skin from off my people,  
and their flesh from off their bones;  
who eat the flesh of my people, and flay  
their skin from off them,  
and break their bones in pieces, and chop  
them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh  
in a cauldron.'

Further condemnation of the rich oppressors also appears in Amos 4: 1 and Micah 6: 12. Certainly, the Old Testament prophets utterly condemn the acquisition of wealth where the acquisition necessarily involves the oppression of the poor. Whether, however, we can go as far as José Miranda in condemning the acquisition of wealth as such would seem open to question. Miranda believes that the Bible condemns any acquisition of private wealth because it *necessarily* involves violence to the poor: 'The fact that differentiating wealth is unacquirable without violence and spoilation is presupposed by the Bible in its pointed anathemas against the rich, therefore almsgiving is nothing more than the restitution of what has been stolen, and thus the Bible calls it justice.'<sup>15</sup> This seems to be reading into the texts more than is really there—reading the Bible through South American spectacles and with socialist presuppositions. Wealth does not seem to be condemned by the Bible: unjust and oppressive wealth is.

There is also material that relates to social justice in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, well known for its emphasis on the underprivileged. Woes are directed at the rich (Lk. 6: 24), and the rich man who did not help Lazarus the pauper failed to get into heaven (Lk. 16: 19ff); in Luke 18: 19ff the rich ruler found that his attachment to his wealth prevented him from being a true disciple of Jesus. Jesus was therefore forced to remark, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' It would be pertinent to say that Jesus did *not* announce that those who had riches were automatically unable to enter the kingdom. For some, however, God requires that wealth is disposed of.<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament then, unjust wealth and an unhealthy attachment to wealth are condemned: the possession of wealth as such is not. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that Christians who do have wealth are instructed to sit very, very lightly to it: they are

required to ensure that its acquisition is not the result of oppression or injustice, and once this requirement is fulfilled they must be prepared to dispose of it as the Lord directs.

### 3. The Kingdom of God

Much writing on political theology is dominated by the concept of the kingdom of God; one student of the subject has commented that 'The kingdom of God is the key category for approaching questions of political theology.'<sup>17</sup> It will be helpful, therefore, to examine the concept. When we talk about the United Kingdom we are talking about something concrete: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; wherever we are within these boundaries we are in the United Kingdom. The kingdom is a definite and specifiable area. In the New Testament however, the Greek word *basilea* has a slightly different connotation—it refers to something dynamic, and is more akin to the English concepts of reign, rule or dominion. K. L. Schmidt puts it in these terms: '... it is to be noted first that it (*basilea*) signifies the "being", "nature", and "state" of the king.'<sup>18</sup> If the 'United Kingdom' usage suggests first territory or distinct area, the original Greek usage suggests first the actual power of the king himself. Greek usage would have us think *first* of the power of the king, and then *second* of the territory over which he had that power. The kingdom then is something dynamic that depends upon the king himself. Nowhere is this more true than in the idea of the kingdom of God: it is not some definable territory, nor is it a specifiable group of people—it is where God has his reign. The kingdom of God is where God reigns, and particularly where he reigns over man. Schmidt thus sees the kingdom as being something essentially soteriological, where man has a relationship with God.<sup>19</sup> John Stott describes it as follows: '... the kingdom of God in the New Testament is a fundamentally Christological concept, ... and it may be said to exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord.'<sup>20</sup> This is borne out by St Paul's description of the kingdom as 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14: 17). The kingdom of God is where God rules over men; it is rooted in a relationship with a living Lord.

In the gospels the kingdom of God is seen in two ways. Firstly it is seen to be an eschatological event

<sup>15</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Luke 12: 33; J. H. Yoder, in his *Politics of Jesus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972, pp. 75-76 interprets this logic of Jesus to indicate that *anyone* who has wealth must give it to the poor. I would question this interpretation.

<sup>17</sup> C. Sugden, 'A Different Dream: Jesus and Revolution,' in *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin*, vol. 71, 1975, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> K. L. Schmidt, art. *basilea* in *TWNT*, vol. 1, p. 579.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583.

<sup>20</sup> J. Stott in R. J. Sider, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

in the future. Some of the Jews of Jesus's time thought that this eschatological event was about to occur in the near future—that God's kingdom was about to be inaugurated. This hope was probably seen in terms of a political victory over the Romans after which God would begin his glorious reign. In response to this expectation of an early coming of the kingdom Jesus relates the parable of the pounds, designed to inform his hearers that the coming of the kingdom is definitely not imminent, and to instruct his disciples that the time before the inauguration of the kingdom will be a time of testing.<sup>21</sup> The kingdom then, was seen as something in the future—as an eschatological event that would inaugurate God's rule on earth. But there are, secondly, other sayings in the gospels in which the kingdom is viewed as a present reality as opposed to a future event. Thus in Mark 10: 15 Jesus says, 'Truly, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom like a child shall not enter it.' Here then the kingdom is something to be received here and now, and its reception involves childlike obedience and trustful receptiveness. Jesus saw himself as inaugurating the kingdom as a present reality; for him the kingdom had become dynamically present and active in his own person. This is why when Jesus had cured a blind and dumb demoniac he remarked, '... if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Mt. 12: 28). In Jesus the kingdom was actually present; with him its reign as something present had begun. The kingdom then, whilst being an eschatological event of the future in which God would judge and rule his creation is also at the same time present and active in the person and work of Jesus himself. G. E. Ladd comes to the following conclusion:

'An all-important fact in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom was the recovery of the prophetic tension between history and eschatology in a new and even more dynamic form. In this person and mission, the Kingdom of God had come near in history in fulfilment of the prophetic hope; but it would yet come in eschatological consummation in the future at a time known only to God (Mk. 13: 32).'<sup>22</sup>

Now if the kingdom is where God reigns, and if the kingdom is present now on earth where man submits to God's reign, it follows that the church is to be the expression of the kingdom in the world. Also, if the kingdom is where God reigns, and if

the kingdom is the future coming of God's perfect rule, it follows that the perfect character of society is depicted in the kingdom. Let us take these two points separately. Firstly, then, the church is the earthly expression of the kingdom of God. This is not to say that the church *is* the kingdom: it is rather that the kingdom creates the church. The kingdom, as we have already noted, is God's dynamic reign on earth and where men have submitted themselves to it. The church therefore is the place where men have submitted to God's reign. But secondly, the kingdom is also something that is coming in the future where God's reign will be fully realized. In this final kingdom the whole of creation will be redeemed so that God's creation once again becomes the perfect expression of God's will. In the present world the cosmos remains in a fallen state with men living apart from a relationship with God with the consequent results that this reputed relationship has: greed, envy, pride, lust, hate and so on. In the future kingdom such traits will not exist: God's kingdom will be throughout the perfect realization of love for one's fellow man and one's God, with its obverse characteristic of justice. This is, therefore, a picture of perfect society; the eschatological kingdom is a society based upon perfect love between God and man and between man and man.

The earthly church lives in a sinful and fallen world; the earthly church is composed of fallen men, and although it experiences the blessings of the new age it still lives in the old age with its temptations to selfishness and apostasy. And yet because it is a sign of the future kingdom, because here in the church relationships between man and God and man and man are being healed and redeemed, it experiences in part the quality of life of the final kingdom. Those who are in the kingdom can experience relationships that are true, close and deep, because they are relationships restored by the heavenly Father. The church then, must bear witness to the final order of things:

'The role of the Christian community and of Christian communities is to demonstrate within its membership that God's final kingdom will include men of every colour and class, will be a community of self giving rather than go-getting; will be a community where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white, have or have not; because the kingdom has broken in men can be freed from the powers that force these divisions on men and live in the community of the free of the church.'<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM, London, 1972, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> G. E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, SPCK, London, 1966, p. 316.

<sup>23</sup> C. Sugden, *Social Gospel or No Gospel?*, p. 17.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Christian faith requires that we involve ourselves in social action; social action, in turn, requires that we involve ourselves not only in individual charity but also in structural charity—ensuring that the structures of our society are just and fair. The Christian faith therefore requires that as Christians we bring our religious beliefs to bear on our political thinking. From what we have said in the previous section our conclusion would seem to be this: that we should support a political programme which aims at the ideals reflected in the kingdom of God whilst also taking into account the fact that we live at present in a sinful world with men who are not yet fully redeemed.

On no account therefore can we see our political objective as 'furthering', 'building', or 'realising' the kingdom of God. There are at least two reasons for this: firstly, we ourselves can do nothing to build or further God's kingdom, for the kingdom is where God reigns as creator and redeemer; the kingdom is essentially God's work. Secondly, the kingdom only exists on earth where men submit themselves to God's rule, and this aim does not and cannot come within the scope of political objectives. We cannot agree then, with some of the South American political theologians who identify the process of political liberation with the coming of God's kingdom. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, believes that 'The growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically *in* liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater fulfillment of man.'<sup>24</sup> The 'greater fulfillment of man' is an immanent objective: the growth of the kingdom is something transcendent; the two cannot be identified. South American theologians seem rather adept at dissolving transcendence into immanence.

We have already seen that the Biblical evidence will force us as Christians to embrace political strategies that aim to reduce poverty and the subsequent humiliation that goes with it; like Jesus and the prophets we must be on the side of the poor and the oppressed. In the South American situation this is assumed to mean that the Christian must support a socialist system. Gutierrez quotes two South American Roman Catholic priests:

'Only socialism can enable Latin America to achieve true development . . . I believe that a socialist system is more in accord with the Christian principles of true brotherhood, justice and peace . . . I do not know what kind of socialism, but this is the direction Latin America should go. For myself, I believe it should be a

democratic socialism.'

'Socialism, although it does not deliver man from injustices caused by personal attitudes nor from the ambiguity inherent in all systems, does offer a fundamental equality of opportunity. Through a change in the relationships of production, it dignifies labour so that the worker, while humanizing nature, becomes more of a person.'<sup>25</sup>

José Miranda believes that the socialism demanded by the Christian faith is of a radical kind; so radical indeed that he categorizes private ownership as robbery—'legalized, institutionalized, civilized, canonized robbery'.<sup>26</sup> He also challenges the traditional assumption that workers should receive wages according to the type of work they do. He complains that we are all indoctrinated by capitalist dogmas:

'A certain unchallengeable conviction is created that those who do certain kinds of work ought to receive lower incomes and be content with lower levels of consumption than those who do other kinds of work. A classist society is thereby, in people's minds, canonized as something morally correct, as a situation demanded by justice.'<sup>27</sup>

The defect of such policies is obvious: whilst they may aim at the ideals reflected in the kingdom of God they do not take into account the fact that we live at present in a sinful world with men who are not yet fully redeemed. No doubt in the consummation of God's kingdom such policies could be implemented because the whole of creation would have been redeemed and restored. But this is to pre-empt what is to come; we cannot use such policies in the present kingdom because man is not yet fully redeemed. In the present world man needs private property; man needs to be paid not only according to his needs but also according to his deserts; man needs immediate and identifiable rewards. What radical socialist theologians and politicians fail to realize is that whilst their goals are admirable and good, even godly, they will not work in the real world because the real world is a fallen world with fallen and sinful humans populating it—even fallen and sinful Christians, albeit redeemed ones. This is plain Biblical teaching.

If radical socialism is too idealistic, what then of capitalism? Does this contain the realism that is needed? One of the fundamentals of capitalism is that the consumer is best served where there is economic competition: if there are two firms each

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 112.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 177.

competing with one another to sell roughly identical products then each will be forced, by virtue of competition, to produce a good product at the right price. The general aim will therefore be to produce the product as cheaply and as well as possible. Wages are therefore, in theory, kept low (in order to keep costs down), and the method of production used is that which is most likely to produce a large number of high quality goods. All the time the stress is on the goods, the manufacturing process and the sale to the consumer: the worker, his conditions and methods of work and his wages are secondary—second to the product. This emphasis, product first and worker second, does not seem to reflect the kingdom of God: God's kingdom places the highest value on men. Another fundamental of capitalism is that a man sells his labour on a free market to work for a firm for a certain number of hours per week. His labour, and not his person, is hired. As a result the worker has no share in the profits which his own labour creates: the profits earned through his own toil pass on to the owners, the shareholders. This is a dehumanization of man—man is being treated as a thing. In addition the worker is not expected to take any part in the decisions affecting the firm in which he works, even though these decisions may affect his own employment conditions. In the kingdom of God man lives with his fellow man as a partner, as one who has dignity, as one who has rights and as one who shares in the benefits of his own labour. Such an understanding of the kingdom would seem to be demanded by the Christian understanding of the Christian community as the body of Christ.

If radical socialism reflected the kingdom of God but failed to take into account man's sinful and unredeemed nature in a fallen world, traditional capitalism accepts human selfishness (it may even be said to make it respectable) but fails to see that men have a responsibility for and to one another and that man's dominion over the world is given to us all by God in the form of trusteeship. In short, capitalism has no picture of the kingdom of God at all.<sup>28</sup>

Let me state once again our conclusion: the Christian should support a political programme which aims at the ideals reflected in the kingdom of God whilst also taking into account the fact that we live at present in a sinful world with men who are not yet redeemed. Neither radical socialism nor traditional capitalism seem to fit the bill. There is no easy way for the political Christian. A truly

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed critique of capitalism from a Christian standpoint cf. D. Hay, *A Christian Critique of Capitalism*, Grove Books, Bramcote, 1975.

Christian political programme would seem to be somewhere within the extremes of the far left and the far right. What as Christians we must continue to do is to evaluate the policies of the various parties and decide for ourselves (probably after a lot of prayer and a lot of discussion with other members of the body of Christ) which most nearly conforms to our guideline. There is no way in which either socialism or capitalism can be said to be automatically more Christian than the other.

This may seem to be a disappointing conclusion. Indeed it is—it is disappointing because we are not yet fully redeemed in the consummation of God's kingdom. It is disappointing because no political system can fully deal with man's underlying selfish and unredeemed nature; only God himself can deal with that. What we have to settle for is some sort of balance between the two extremes. However, perhaps I could make a few personal comments. It does seem, as far as Britain is concerned at least, that the parties of the left in general come nearer our yardstick than the parties of the right. As Christians, in the footsteps of Jesus and the prophets, we should support policies which aim at eradicating poverty and any consequent humiliation or rights denied because of that poverty. Thus, private medical treatment seems unjust; true, man should have the freedom to spend his money as he wishes, but not when this denies someone else the right to medical treatment. If there were sickness in the eschatological kingdom of God can we see our Lord allowing those with money to receive priority when it comes to treatment? This is not solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Again, take the example of education. Of course man should have the freedom to spend his money as he wishes, but not when 'going to a good school' where fees are paid, deprives other children of an education that is less than best.<sup>29</sup>

One final comment: I have already pointed out that the earthly church, being the locus where the kingdom of God has entered, experiences now the quality of life of the final kingdom. As such the church must ensure that her own house is in order

<sup>29</sup> This is a complicated issue with many factors involved. The 'creaming off' of bright children to private grammar schools effectively lowers the academic standard of the top sets in state schools; the private school children therefore have an unfair advantage by depriving the able state school child of competition and stimulation. Private schools may therefore be said, in some measure to oppress those children in state schools and particularly the bright children. But equally, I must also say that I do not believe the present comprehensive school does full justice to the bright child either, although I believe that the average child gains. Personally, I would be in favour of some selective grammar schools, run by the state—say one or two in each large city.

before she goes out and in humility makes comments about the house of secular politics. The church must be a more perfect model of the kingdom than any secular state can be because it consists of redeemed men and women, people in whom Jesus reigns as Lord. It is this thought that is central to the writing of J. H. Yoder; I will close with a quotation from his book *The Politics of Jesus*:

'The church must be a sample of the kind of humanity within which, for example, economic and racial differences are surmounted. Only then will she have anything to say to the society that surrounds her about how these differences must be dealt with. Otherwise her preaching to the world a standard of reconciliation which is not her own

experience will be neither honest nor effective.'<sup>30,31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> Having written this article I have come across an excellent paper by Prof. Karl Nipkow in which he seeks to establish the relationship between theology and education. He concludes, like myself, that social action (in his case in the field of education) is not to be totally separated from Christian belief nor is it to be totally identified with it. He sees the two as having a dialectical relationship. Cf. K. E. Nipkow, 'Theological and Educational Concepts—Problems of Integration and Differentiation,' in *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 1, 1978. Reference might also be made in this context to A. O. Dyson, 'The Church's Educational Institutional Institutions: Some Theological Considerations,' in *Theology*, vol. 80, 1977, and my own attempt to work out Dyson's ideas in a practical sphere in D. G. Kibble, 'From Theology to School Council,' in *Learning for Living*, vol. 17, 1978.