

# The Kingdom of God and the Transformation of the World

## The Call and Role of the Ecumenical Movement

*Jerry Pillay*

*Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay is extraordinary professor at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, University of Pretoria and general secretary of the World Council of Churches*

### Abstract

*The article explores how pivotal the kingdom of God has been and still is to the identity of the ecumenical movement. The discussion of the biblical vision of the kingdom, which is coming and yet is also present, offers a motif which not only forms the life of the church and gives it hope but also forms the life of the oikoumene, giving hope to all of life. The ensuing discussion shows how, historically, the ecumenical movement has practised its calling of unity and mission as one which offers salvation to all life and to all aspects of life and goes on to outline how the kingdom continues to inspire ecumenical engagement today. Fundamental to this is the realization that the kingdom lays claim not on the church but on the whole world. This turns the ecumenical movement away from self-service so that the life of the world is shifted, challenged, and transformed through the work and witness of the ecumenical movement. This is especially and urgently needed where the powers, systems, and structures of our world cause injustice, inequity, and catastrophe. In this mission ecumenism reaches its fullest unity, in which all are saved.*

### Keywords

*kingdom of God, transformation, ecumenism, mission, unity*

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

DOI: 10.1111/irrom.12473

© 2023 The Authors. *International Review of Mission* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of World Council of Churches.

The ecumenical movement has consistently considered the kingdom of God as an essential biblical theme to support its work in the transformation of the world.<sup>1</sup> From its focus on unity, theology, justice, the preferential option for the poor, the integrity of creation, and peace, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has placed intentional, that is to say, direct, involvement in society at the forefront; it moves beyond the walls of the church and engages in missionary work such as evangelism and work for justice and peace. The understanding of the church as sacrament, sign, and instrument has led to a new perception of the relationship between the church and the world. Mission is viewed as “God’s turning to the world”; this represents a fundamentally new approach to theology and a broader vision of theological praxis.

Emilio Castro, one of the former general secretaries of the WCC, has stated that God’s mission and ours is to bring in the “kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> And the goal of the “kingdom” is life in its fullness. Hence, the kingdom has to do with the welfare of the whole person, not excluding the social, political, and economic aspects of life. Since God is interested in the life of the whole person, so must we be if we are to take our responsibilities of mission seriously. Johannes Verkuyl supports this view by stating that in both the Old and New Testaments, God, by words and deeds, claims that God is intent on bringing the “kingdom of God” to expression and restoring God’s liberating domain of authority.<sup>3</sup> Hence, Verkuyl states that the ultimate goal of the *missio Dei* is the “kingdom of God.” From the countless biblical images and symbols that describe God’s intentions, he selects this one as the clearest expression of God and God’s purpose. It would be difficult to find a more inspiring biblical theme when we face the challenges of the contemporary situation.

As early as 1973, the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Bangkok identified the focus on the kingdom of God as central to its work:

Whereas the implications of the personal dimension of salvation are well known, because they belong to Christian tradition, the implications of the corporate dimension of salvation need to be further explored. The gift of salvation integrates [the human being] into a companionship of which

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on an address given to a symposium on “Political Christianity and Christian Politics,” held on 7–9 July 2023 in Tutzing, Germany, to honour Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm at the conclusion of his 12-year term as bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria.

<sup>2</sup> Emilio Castro, *Freedom in Mission* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985), 56–60.

<sup>3</sup> See Johannes Verkuyl, “The Kingdom of God as the Goal of the *missio Dei*,” *International Review of Mission* 68:270 (1979), 168–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1979.tb01307.x>.

Christ is the head. According to the New Testament, this companionship is to be a sign and a witness to the new humanity of the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

The selection of the symbol of the kingdom of God is not an arbitrary one. First, because it is the central concern of Jesus Christ himself. Second, because we believe that it responds to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that is calling our attention once again to that ongoing memory of the kingdom, to provide the intellectual and inspirational categories that will help the church in its missionary obedience today.

More recently, the section on “The Church: In and for the World” in the Faith and Order publication *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* describes how the first and foremost attitude of God toward the world is love: “for every child, woman and man who has ever become part of human history and, indeed, for the whole of creation.” The church was intended by God not for its own sake but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world.<sup>5</sup> Against this background,

The life of the church in the world is intrinsically interwoven with the life of the church as *koinonia*, in word and sacrament, and it is based on the triune God’s own identity as divine love and God’s plan for the transformation of the whole cosmos. The church is called to serve, because God has served the world through God’s own son, his incarnation and service, death, and resurrection. By serving the world and human people, the church fulfils its task to bear witness to God’s reconciliation, healing, and transformation of the cosmos. Thus, God’s call to unity goes hand in hand with God’s call to serve and to communicate the gospel in word and deed. God calls the churches to strive for unity.<sup>6</sup>

It is thus not surprising that for the WCC since the 1990s, ecclesiology and ethics are inseparable. Further, the theme “Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace” and now the “Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity” make an integral link between the ecclesial character and work of the WCC with Faith and Order on the one hand and the work for justice and peace as an essential part of the ecumenical endeavour on the other.

Botha, Kritzinger, and Maluleke also select the theme of the “kingdom of God” in their definition of Christian mission: “We understand Christian mission to be a wide and inclusive complex of activities aimed at the realisation of the reign of God in history. It

<sup>4</sup> *Bangkok Assembly 1973: Minutes and Reports of the Assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, December 31, 1972 and January 9-12, 1973* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1973), 65, WCC Digital Archive: <https://archive.org/details/wccmissionconf048/page/65>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper no. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 33, 36, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>.

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Dietrich, “God’s Mission as a Call for Transforming Unity,” *International Review of Mission* 107:2 (2018), 378–90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12237>.

includes evangelism but is at the same time much wider than that. Perhaps one could say that mission is the ‘cutting edge’ of the Christian movement – that activist streak in the church’s life that refuses to accept the world as it is and keeps on trying to change it, prodding it on towards God’s final reign of justice and peace.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus far, we have shown the ecumenical movement’s selecting the theme of the “kingdom of God” as the goal of mission. Perhaps we should now offer more clarity on what we hold the “kingdom of God” to be, since this is an often misunderstood term. Biblically speaking, then, what is the “kingdom of God”?

## Biblical Perspectives on the Kingdom of God and Transforming the World

### The “kingdom” is not merely spiritual

Christians who view the “kingdom” in exclusively spiritual terms, avoiding dedicated service to the transformation of society, usually do so on the basis of two traditions. The first is the apocalyptic notion of a divine future that relegates the Lordship of Christ to an imagined end of times. The other is the Hellenistic notion that the Lordship of Christ is applicable only to the spiritual realm, not to the physical and social realms. The statement attributed to Jesus that “My kingdom is not of this world!” (John 18:36) has been misquoted endless times to legitimate this dual evasion. The “kingdom of God” will come when God wills it to come, it is said, and humans can do nothing about the evil world as long as it lasts. The only valid response to the depravity of the world is to accept one’s personal Saviour, gain peace with God, and love each other. The peace of the rest of creation is not part of the Christian agenda.

Klaus Nürnberger states that “this kind of piety is nothing but an unconscious attempt to rationalise oneself out of responsibility.”<sup>8</sup> Emilio Castro adds that nowhere does the New Testament spiritualize the “kingdom of God” or limit it to the spiritual side of nature. Verkuyl points out that the “kingdom” to which the Bible testifies involves a proclamation and a realization of a total salvation, one which covers the whole range of human needs and destroys every pocket of evil and grief affecting humankind. He adds that “kingdom” in the New Testament has a breadth and scope that is unsurpassed; it embraces heaven as well as earth, world history as well as the whole cosmos.

<sup>7</sup> Nico Botha, K. K. Kritzingler, and Tinyiko Maluleke, “Crucial Issues for Christian Mission: A Missiological Analysis of Contemporary South Africa,” *International Review of Mission* 83:328 (1986), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1994.tb02336.x>.

<sup>8</sup> Klaus Nürnberger, *Faith in Christ Today: Invitation to Systematic Theology, Vol. II: Involved in God’s Project* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016).

It is true that humans cannot create the ideal conditions envisioned by the concept of the “kingdom of God,” but that does not mean they should not have a vision that provides direction and inspiration for a world according to God’s plan.

Consequently, there are many today who view the “kingdom of God” in socio-economic and political terms. For example, Jon Sobrino points out that liberation theology, as far as it is concerned with liberation, adopts and makes use of the kingdom of God as “its most all-embracing theological concept.”<sup>9</sup> The work of Jesus is seen in a similar way, as Takatso Mofokeng puts it: “The key concept in the praxis of Jesus is the impending advent of the ‘kingdom of God’ with its universality and totality of scope.”<sup>10</sup> In our view, the kingdom of God does not signify something that is purely spiritual or outside this world. It is the totality of this material world, spiritual and human, that is now introduced into God’s order.

Even Jesus did not have an exclusively spiritual view of the kingdom. Such can be seen in some of the ancient texts: “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25). At other times, he promises to whomever abandons all for love of the kingdom a hundredfold in houses and lands (Mark 10:30). To the disciples he says, “and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29-30; see also Matt. 19:28). The breakthrough of this new order is imminent: “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30). On one occasion, he makes it still more concrete and affirms, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). Christ is aware of the fact that the end of the world has begun with him. He himself already belongs to the kingdom. The idea of the kingdom of God not being merely spiritual validates Christian involvement in transforming the world, as understood by ecumenical movements.

### **The “kingdom of God” is not a territory but a new order**

In one of the most visionary passages of the entire Bible, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ who “hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24). In this text, the kingdom is understood as life free from the reign of all those forces which enslave humanity. These powers are understood as enemies, which act against human life here and now – the final enemy being death (1 Cor. 15:26). Elsewhere, Paul defines the power as all those aspects of life

<sup>9</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Takatso Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology* (Kampen: Kok, 1983), 57.

that enslave: sin (Rom. 7:14), the law (Rom. 7:10), vanity and corruption (Rom. 8:19-21), this present evil age (Gal. 1:4), weak and miserable principles (Gal. 4:9), and spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:12). By contrast, the kingdom is life where human beings are no longer subjected to destructive forces.

In another sense, the “kingdom” is the sphere of life where God’s Spirit is in control, where justice, peace, and joy are experienced completely and permanently (Rom. 14:17). It is the messianic banquet, where everyone will enjoy equally and to the full God’s noble gifts, experiencing how another’s enjoyment of being human enhances one’s own. It is the place where God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28): that is, recognized universally as the source of all life, justice, love, wisdom, and truth, the only redeemer, the Lord of history and the righteous and merciful.

The kingdom of God, then, is not a territory but a new order. It cannot be narrowed down to any particular aspect of life. It embraces all: the world, the human person, and society; the totality of reality is to be transformed by God. Hence, the phrase of Jesus that “The kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21). Boff states that the latter expression, according to most recent exegesis, signifies that “the new order introduced by God is at your disposition. Do not ask when it may be established in the future. Don’t run here and there as if the kingdom of God were attached to some place.”<sup>11</sup> Verkuyl states, “The Kingdom of God is that new order of affairs begun in Christ which, when finally completed by him, will involve a proper restoration not only of man’s [sic] relationship to God but also of those between sexes, generations, races, and even between man [sic] and nature.”<sup>12</sup>

Viewing the kingdom of God as a new order characterized by justice, peace, and righteousness has two serious implications.

First, it implies a revolution in our thinking and acting. It calls for a conversion that consists not only of pious exercises but also of a new mode of existing before God and in the light of the tidings announced by Jesus. It is to choose to be where God is and to do what God does: that is, among the poor and oppressed in society (see Matt. 13:4-46, 10:37; Luke 17:33; Mark 9:43). This is precisely what the ecumenical movement has shown us with the preferential option for the poor. It is a willingness to say no to the established order, which impoverishes and dehumanizes human beings in the interest of self and self-acquisitiveness. This demand goes so far that Jesus threatens us with the following harsh words: that “unless you repent you will all perish just as they did” (Luke

<sup>11</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Verkuyl, “The Kingdom of God as the Goal of the *missio Dei*,” 168.

13:3, 5). The endeavour of Jesus is to (re)create the new human person, free and liberated by Christ, invited to participate in the new order. Mofokeng speaks in a similar way when he talks about the liberation and creation of the new Black human being in South Africa during the time of apartheid.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the kingdom of God implies a revolution of the human world. It calls for a radical change to the human condition of poverty and exploitation. It requires that Christians participate in God's plan to bring about a transformation of the world and the well-being of all human beings. This involves opposing oppressive structures in the attempt to bring about justice and shalom. Thus, action toward the realization of the kingdom of God can now be seen as a legitimate human response to the divine initiative. However, it must be stated that the coming of the kingdom of God is the sole initiative of God. Nevertheless, God can, and does, involve people in the service of the kingdom. It thus places an imperative on the church to be involved in the struggles of people in the world today.

### **The kingdom of God is here**

The kingdom is a present reality. Jesus sends the disciples and tells them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). Consequently, the disciples go into all regions of the world knowing *a priori* that those regions are already being shaped by the kingdom that has been given to Christ and that is surely coming.

According to the Bible, the kingdom does not belong exclusively to the future. It is a present reality that, though not yet fully revealed, nevertheless shows definite signs of being underway. When John the Baptist's disciples came to Jesus and asked whether he was the Messiah or whether they should look for another, Jesus answered with these remarkable words: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me" (Matt. 11:4-6). Jesus was thereby indicating that the kingdom both has already come and is yet coming. It is both present and future. When Jesus sends out his disciples on a missionary journey, he gives them powers related to the kingdom: they are to proclaim the good news to the poor, heal the sick, cast out demons. And when they come back and report to him, Jesus interprets what they experienced as a radical defeat of the forces of evil: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). He tells the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21). At the recent *Kirchentag* in Nuremberg, Germany,

<sup>13</sup> Mofokeng, *The Crucified Among the Crossbearers*, 38–42.

the moderator of the WCC central committee, Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, and I had the pleasure to deliver a sermon on this same passage. We explored what Jesus meant when he said that the kingdom is among you and in you. Jesus was referring to the fact that his kingdom is here in him with his presence on earth. This thus calls Christians into working to make this world a better place for all creation.

The kingdom is present in the struggles of humanity. But insofar as humanity still suffers with Christ, and Christ still suffers with us, its resurrection and transformation remain a future hope, and the kingdom is still to come. It is as Graham Philpott puts it, quoting the Amawoti community: “The kin-dom of God will be perfect at the end of the age. Right now, it is struggling because of sin, the church, and the government. It’s not perfect, but it is here.”<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, human beings are called to participate in the coming of God’s kingdom, which is not just a vision for the future but a profound critique of our best efforts in the here and now.

Bonhoeffer points out that as Christians, our responsibilities are in the world and to the world, not the beyond. By this he meant that one must be “this-worldly,” by which he means “living unreservedly in life’s tasks, questions, successes and failure, experiences and perplexities, – then one takes seriously no longer one’s won sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the kingdom is to be founded here, amid sin and suffering, and not left to the life to come.

### The kingdom to come

We have referred earlier to the new fact introduced by Jesus – the time is fulfilled, the kingdom is at hand. We have also considered the dynamic historical character of the struggle of the kingdom. Now we further realize that the early Christians were full of the expectation of the kingdom to come, the second coming, the judgment, and transformation of all reality. The prevailing spiritual and theological atmosphere of the early Christian communities was one of praying and waiting for the return of Jesus. The synoptic gospels provide evidence that Jesus shared this expectation. At the same time that he was acting in the power of the kingdom – being himself the kingdom – he called the people to prepare themselves for the radical novelty of its final coming. He used the apocalyptic image of the Son of man, poor and powerless, coming with divine power to judge all people and to inaugurate the kingdom. Most of the parables of the kingdom point to this future coming. The mystery of the kingdom

<sup>14</sup> Graham Philpott, *Jesus Is Tricky and God Is Undemocratic: The Kin-Dom of God in Amawoti* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1994), 74.

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works in English, vol. 8, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 486.



is its inconspicuousness; it is small like a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31) but pregnant with explosive potential.

The prayer of Jesus maintains the dialectic between the kingdom we pray for and the will of God that is to be implemented on earth. God's kingdom is future, it will come, we are called to enter it; but the kingdom is also at work. Barth points this out as he relates the present and active work of the living Lord to his ascension. Jesus is present and active in the existence and by the activity of the community that is created, moved, and enlightened by his Holy Spirit. And because of his presence and activity in and through the community in the world, the alteration that has objectively happened in the world is visible and tangible in it – but only in the light of the story of Jesus Christ and not independently, that is, in the light of the altered community and altered world.

Jesus, who is present and active in the community of his followers, is also the one who is coming in his new being, his new Easter form, as the crucified and risen one. This promise has an unmistakable effect on the community's consciousness, activities, and forms of life or structures. The community understands itself as an eschatological community whose being is ahead of it in the coming being of Christ who is coming. Its activities and its structures of societal life, which it has helped to realize, are provisional and transient in view of the coming Lord of the world. The present, its activities and achievements of the transformation of the world, are not denied or ignored as to their importance for the world here and now. Neither are they overvalued. The present project and the achievements of the committed community do have and do retain an undeniable importance for the overall movement and global project of the community toward the definitive. It is not only a necessary basis for the movement and its activities for the creation of new structures of life and new ways of living. But it is mainly a basis of an impatient movement to the future: in other words, hope of the coming of Jesus Christ, of the definitive manifestation of alteration of the world creates impatience and mobility. This is evident in the phrases employed by Barth to describe the effect of the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ: they "reach forward" and "they stretch out to" the new.

The coming Jesus Christ deepens and enriches present Christian praxis immeasurably, creates and sustains an unshakeable confidence in the future liberation, and makes radical engagement for liberation, by itself almost always a painful burden, a joyful event. He is therefore the object of faith and the content of hope. But faith is not a kind of make-believe utopianism. Faith is protest against apparent inevitabilities.

According to Gutierrez, faith in the future is not restricted to hope for individual salvation but is a faith in a future "which we fashion with our own hands."<sup>16</sup> The historical

<sup>16</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), 238.

world is thus not a cage from which the person needs to escape in order to experience redemption but is itself the arena for God's redemptive activity. The world of cause and effect can thus be transformed by human activity as the course of history is reincorporated into the purposes of God. This means that, for liberation theologians, the vision of the future determines activity in the present: eschatology is realized by human beings acting in accord with divine ends. Fixing our eyes on the future, Gutierrez writes, determines our real action in the present and becomes our effective commitment.<sup>17</sup>

## The Kingdom of God and the Church Today

Drawing from what we have said thus far, allow me to conclude by referring to the role of the church in the world today. The church is a community in response to the *missio Dei*, bearing witness to God's activity in the world by its communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed, proclamation and praxis. It therefore has no liberty to invent its own agenda but to fulfil the mission of its Lord: "Mission is the fundamental reality of our Christian life. We are Christians because we have been called by God to work with him in the fulfillment of his purposes for humanity as a whole. Our life in this world is life in mission, Life has a purpose only to the extent it has a missionary dimension."<sup>18</sup>

The church is called to the following in relation to the kingdom of God on earth.

### Declaring the sovereignty (lordship) of Jesus Christ in the world

The world and its history are under the rule and authority of God. The church must remember this, especially when tempted to "flee the world" by withdrawing into itself. It declares from within the world the new thing that God had done in world history, a history of which the church is an integral part. This new thing is the reconciliation of the world that has taken place in Jesus Christ and, as such, has altered the whole human situation and the course of world history. As Pannenberg says, all history is God's history and therefore subject to God.<sup>19</sup>

Naturally, this will include all powers and authorities on earth, including political powers, governments, and states. Calvin and Luther advocated the same in their views about church and state relationships. Generally, they saw a clear distinction between the role of the church and that of the state. According to Calvin, "There is a twofold government in man [sic]: one aspect is spiritual ... the second is political ... two worlds, over

<sup>17</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 220.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: DLT, 1999), 31.

<sup>19</sup> See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 125–30.

which different kings and different laws have authority” (*Institutes*, III: XIX, 15).<sup>20</sup> The state, for Calvin, is essentially an organ of constraint in which the dynamic element is represented by the magistrate, while the static element appears in the laws. The state is to secure the minimum of peace and concord required by human society for its existence. However, the state has not only to maintain peace; it must also endeavour to maintain, here below, a certain standard of morality or, as Calvin calls it, “some taste of the celestial realm.”<sup>21</sup> Calvin first distinguishes and then joins spiritual and civil government and sets his discussion of civil government in the context of his teaching on providence, Christian freedom, and the church (*Institutes*, IV: XX, 1–2).<sup>22</sup>

The task of government, according to Calvin, is to “provide a public manifestation of religion that may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among people.” This is to imply that the duty of magistrates “extends to both tables of the law” (*Institutes*, IV: XX, 9),<sup>23</sup> that is, to their duty to God as well as to their duties to other people. Thus God “entrusts the condition of the church to their protection and care” (*Institutes*, IV: XX, 5).<sup>24</sup> Simply put, the church’s mission is to bear testimony among the people to Christ and the Christian faith; the state’s highest function is to cause this mission to be respected. Although there is a differentiation in role between church and state, Calvin saw a unity in purpose insofar as both church and state are subject to the authority of God. There is cooperation between the spiritual and the civil powers to ensure that the people live according to God’s Word. He envisaged human society as a whole, directed simultaneously by church and state and not by one of these institutions to the detriment of the other.

Calvin, though, gave a great deal of recognition to the role of the state. Ferguson points out that the separation of church and state was strictly limited by Calvin’s need for the protection and support of the secular authorities in their protest against the Roman church.<sup>25</sup> Calvin thus allowed for the state to intervene in the affairs of the church and leaned toward the state’s assistance in suppressing idolatry in the church. The closeness

<sup>20</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 847.

<sup>21</sup> Richard C. Gamble, *Calvin’s Thought on Economic and Social Issues and the Relationship of Church and State* (New York: Garland, 1992), 114.

<sup>22</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1485–88.

<sup>23</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 1495.

<sup>24</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 1491.

<sup>25</sup> David Fergusson, “Church, State and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition,” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 111.

of church and state can be seen in Calvin's attempts in establishing a theocracy in Geneva, and here he relied a lot on the state to advance the course of Reformed churches.

Luther took a somewhat different perspective on church and state relationships. Instead of turning to the state to protect the church, Luther appealed to the Christian conscience of the Protestant princes. Like Calvin, Luther argued for a clear separation of church and state, claiming that the state was concerned with the proclamation of divine grace and the freedom of the Christian who lived by faith.<sup>26</sup> In his theory of the so-called two kingdoms, Luther establishes that both church and state are willed by God: "The church is responsible for proclaiming the Word of God; the state is responsible for developing social structures. The church should not employ force; the state should not preach. The state must maintain law and order so that the church can accomplish its work of proclaiming the Word; the church must proclaim the Word so that the state may be governed in righteousness and peace."<sup>27</sup> Nürnberger affirms that there is no autonomy on either side:

Church leaders must submit to the outward order of the state; political leaders should submit to the inner power of the Word of God. Because the state works through outward means, it can coerce the church – something that the church has to endure. Because the church works through inward means, it has the power to take political leaders to task – something political leaders have to endure. The church has no power to coerce anybody, least of all the government. But it must fearlessly proclaim the will of God even if this entails martyrdom.<sup>28</sup>

It is fairly apparent that the Reformers, no matter their differences, acknowledged a relationship between church and state. This, evidently, emerges from their theological beliefs and practices. The Reformed tradition is considered a tradition dealing with everyday life, with work and public issues. For this tradition there exists no sacred sphere for religion, separated from the spheres of politics and the economy. Everything is related to God.<sup>29</sup>

One of the central themes for most of the reformers is the sovereignty of God. In this understanding, there is nothing in this world that can be separated from God. The sovereign God is in charge and in control. Therefore, everything is under God's care and

<sup>26</sup> Fergusson, "Church, State and Civil Society," 111.

<sup>27</sup> Klaus Nürnberger, *Martin Luther's Message for Us Today: South African Perspectives* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2005), 257.

<sup>28</sup> Nürnberger, *Martin Luther's Message*, 257–58.

<sup>29</sup> Bram Van de Beek, "Reformed Theology and Politics," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 54:3–4 (2013), 1, <https://ngtt.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/363/468>.

authority. This would include governments and civil structures since God upholds an interim relative order in society. Allan Boesak, a Reformed theologian in South Africa, in the struggle against apartheid firmly declared that Jesus Christ is Lord of all areas of life.<sup>30</sup> For Boesak, Jesus and politics was not a strange combination but a necessary one if we are to truly live out the gospel and declare the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Reformed theology is public theology. It acknowledges that the gospel is a dynamic force that always tends to reform the established order, to turn it into a more just order. For any order whatever is always in the process of corruption because of the effect of sin.<sup>31</sup> This view has over the centuries encouraged, and continues to inspire, Reformed Christians to work toward the transformation of society and the world. In the same breath, it also defines the prophetic calling of the church to resist the powers that be that go against God's desire for justice, peace, and unity in the world. The prophetic task of the church is to speak and act out against any form of oppression, unjust laws, and systemic evil. It is this prophetic calling that enables churches to stand up against racism, xenophobia, ethnic violence, gender discrimination, and economic, social, and political injustices. The focus on the kingdom of God warrants a transformation and healing of a broken and suffering world.

### **Be a servant of the kingdom of God**

God takes the human person seriously, and the church is a community of human persons. This is what Barth means when he speaks about the *Menschlichkeit Gottes*; in Christ, it is once and for all established that God does not exist without human persons: God is who God is, not in the abstract or without relationship, but as God for the world. If this be true, it follows that the church that exists for God must also exist for all human persons and the world. Just as Jesus Christ expresses his own true divinity in his true humanity, so the church expresses its Christological character in being for human beings.

Mission, then, is clearly not an option, not something added to the being of the church that the church does as one of its many tasks. On the contrary, mission is part of the event-character of the church. The community exists by and with its task. This implies that the Christian church is called upon to embrace a view of mission that is not limited to the mere "saving of souls." Nürnberger states that "Christians, who are concerned about nothing but their personal salvation, have no contribution to make to the church

<sup>30</sup> Nico Koopman, "Jesus Christ is Lord!: An Indispensable Parameter for Theology in Public Life?" in *Prophet from the South: Essays in Honour of Allan Aubrey Boesak*, rev. ed., ed. Prince Dibeela, Puleng Lenka-Bula, and Vuyani Vellem (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2014), <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/13844626>.

<sup>31</sup> André Bieler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 231.

as a living community, to society at large, to the natural world as a whole.”<sup>32</sup> The integral character of salvation demands that the scope of the church’s mission be more comprehensive than has traditionally been the case.

Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the needs and exigencies of human existence. Mission therefore means being involved in the ongoing dialogue between God, who offers salvation, and the world, which – enmeshed in all kinds of evil – craves that salvation. Mission means being sent to proclaim in deed and word that Christ died and rose for the life of the world, that he lives to transform human lives (Rom. 8:2) and to overcome death.

Salvation, then, is explicitly tied to developing this world. The Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah and Amos, consistently tied “knowing God” and receiving his “kindness” to the doing of the works of justice. In this respect, the New Testament only confirms the Old: the humanization of life has religious value in itself, for the command to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless (Matt. 25:31) is categorical and unconditional.

Humanization, then, is part and parcel of the mission of the Christian church. As a servant community, the church is tasked to help those deprived of their humanity in Christ to become more human. The church suffers with the suffering people of God as it works for their liberation and freedom.

### **Live as a sign of the kingdom of God**

The church intentionally bears witness to the meaning and relevance of the kingdom: while not itself being identical with that kingdom, it serves as a sign of that kingdom. It is called to the risky task of being the living interpretation of that kingdom; otherwise, the kingdom can be a little more than a slogan, ideology, or human programme of betterment. Hoekendijk puts it starkly: “The nature of the church can be sufficiently defined by its institution, i.e., its participation in Christ’s apostolic ministry.”<sup>33</sup>

The church’s ministry is to be a manifestation and community of Christ’s love in the world. The most recent WCC assembly, in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022, took as its theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” All of God’s people are called to be agents of this love. We do this as we witness on behalf of social and ecological justice and call out for repentance and reconciliation. We do this as we become the voice for (and with) the poor and a challenge to the rich. God accompanies

<sup>32</sup> Klaus Nüurnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 195.

<sup>33</sup> Johannes C Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *International Review of Mission* 41:3 (1952), 334, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1952.tb03688.x>.

the poor on the journey to justice and calls the church to accompany the poor – working and sharing with them, learning from them, and testifying with them to the presence and power of God (Is. 40:27-29).

The church is also called to be a community and agent of hope in a dark and fallen world. It has this responsibility because of the good news it shares in the resurrected Lord Jesus. The resurrection of Christ is a constant reminder that pessimism is premature! Hope is always warranted. This is the mission of the church: to bring hope especially to the poor and oppressed in the world.

## Conclusion

Ecumenism is concerned with the world. This has always been the case in history, whether in earlier centuries or during the self-consciously ecumenical 20th century. The Greek word *oikoumene* refers to the whole inhabited earth. From the perspective of Christian faith, the ecumenical movement sees the world in a particular light – of what it is, could be, should be, and will become. In recent years, attempts have increasingly been made to use the metaphor of *oikos*, household, implied in the *oikoumene*, to develop this vision further. Ecumenical leaders and theologians are intentionally relating the *oikoumene* of the church to the *oikonomia* or fullness of the life of the trinitarian God, to be reflected in the life of the church. The *oikoumene* is furthermore related to the global political and economic realities, and we are now speaking of transformative ecumenism, which is a call for us to root ecumenism in the people's struggle for justice and life, an ecumenism that envisions not only the unity of the church as in conciliar ecumenism but focuses on the unity of the whole humanity and creation.<sup>34</sup> What we need today, as some have called it, is an ecumenism of the heart that stirs us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Hopefully, we can then make the world a better place for all creation, and we can pray, "Lord, let your kingdom come among us, in us, and through us so that you can use us to transform a struggling, suffering, and broken world in accordance with your kingdom ideals." May this be our prayer in the world today!

<sup>34</sup> See Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. J. O'Donohue (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1992).