

Mission Shaped and Kingdom Focussed

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Introduction

I concluded my pamphlet *Mission Shaped Church: A Theological Response* (SCM Press, 2006) by making a distinction between a church-shaped mission and a mission-shaped church. This refers to the difference between a mission which is essentially shaped by the interests and concerns of the Christian churches and a church which, forgetful of itself, is ready to perceive and respond to the mission of God. The expression 'kingdom focussed' refers to the focus of the church's activity as being not upon itself but upon the coming of the Kingdom of God. The expression 'Kingdom of God' refers to that heavenly and earthly reality in which the purposes of God are realised. It also refers to the teaching of Jesus himself, the proclamation of the early church, and it is also a symbol of the utopian future. Christian faith is best understood in its Messianic aspect as an agent of the now and future kingdom, and church as an agent of Christian faith for the same ultimate purpose. In this sequence, only the kingdom of God, which is the object of the mission of God, is self-authenticating; Both Christian faith and church are instrumental to kingdom.

In the present statement I shall try to clarify this distinction and support it biblically and theologically.

The Problem

Let us start with the notion that Christian faith invites us into a double relationship, one vertical and the other horizontal. The vertical is said to be our individual or collective relationship to God whilst the horizontal is said to represent our relationship with each other.¹² It is sometimes said that the vertical empowers the horizontal, or motivates it, as is suggested by the expression 'social responsibility' which indicates that the church in its vertical relation to God must not forget that it also has a responsibility to others. I have even heard preachers use the shape of the cross to illustrate this idea. The vertical arm, it is said, points heavenward whilst the outstretched arms embrace all humanity. It is something like this that stands behind the concept of a church shaped mission, where the church has become the location for a vertical transcendence, or the guardian of an other-worldly revelation, so that the horizontal dimension becomes an extra, albeit a necessary one.³ I shall offer a

¹ This study was published in Steven Croft (ed) *Missions-shaped Questions: Defining issues for today's Church*. London: Church House Publishing. 2008. pp. 114-132.

² Gnanakan, Ken *Kingdom Concerns, A Biblical Theology of Mission Today* London: Inter Varsity Press, 1993, p.208. Gnanakan rightly emphasises that 'A righteous vertical relationship is demonstrated in righteous horizontal relationships.', p.92 but he continues 'Reconciliation must begin with the vertical dimension, with people made right with God.', p.147 thus indicating his failure to grasp the radical nature of horizontal transcendence. Gnanakan's source for this distinction is Visser't Hooft, 'The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement', Stockholm 1925 reprinted in Normal Goodall (ed) *The Uppsala Report 1968*, pp.313-323.

³ Willem Visser't Hooft (*op. cit.*) was seeking for the right balance between the 2 dimensions when he said 'The whole secret of the Christian faith is that it is man-centred [*sic*] because it is God-centred. We cannot speak of Christ as the man for others without speaking of him as the man who came from God and who lived for God.', p.318 but Jesus Christ was a man, a human person and in that person we see God. Thus the whole secret of Christian faith is that it is God-centred because it is person-centred.

reconstruction of this duality in order to provide a more secure focus upon the kingdom of God leading to a genuinely mission-shaped church.

Knowledge of God in the Bible

The biblical revelation announces the good news that the vertical has been collapsed into the horizontal. In other words, biblical faith in its prophetic form, that tradition which is most significant for the mission of God, transforms the experience of transcendence from the remote to the near, from the abstract to the concrete. We may distinguish between three kinds of transcendence: vertical transcendence, horizontal transcendence and future transcendence. Vertical transcendence is hierarchical. Like Jack's beanstalk or Jacob's ladder it creates two worlds, and earthly one and a superior, spiritual one. Horizontal transcendence means that we are confronted by absolute otherness, by the presence of the other person, the fellow human being, whose need places upon me an unqualified demand such that in that demand I find myself in the presence of God. The third kind, the transcendence of futurity, means that beyond the need of the brother or sister before whom I stand there lies, outside my reach, beyond my grasp, the brothers of that brother, and the sisters of that sister, stretching out to the whole of humanity and indeed to all creation now and to come. In this understanding of future transcendence, God is the lure of history, the One who calls to me from the far side of the horizon. I shall argue that the Bible tells the story of the God who came down to earth, the One who became God-with-us, in such a way that the transcendence of height has become transmuted into that of presence, in horizontality, and into the extension of the horizontal into the horizon, the future of the coming Kingdom of God.

The Great Commandment

I shall commence my exposition of the biblical foundations of this theology by drawing your attention to the answer given by Jesus to the question about which was the greatest commandment.

Jesus replied, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Matt. 22:37-39, NLT)

Most of the English translations render verse 39 as 'the second is like it'. The word translated 'equally important' or 'alongside it'⁴ is *homoia*. This is the word attributed to John the Baptist when he said that the person who had two tunics should share with the person who had none and the one who has food should do 'the same'. The first husband of the woman referred to in Matthew 22:23-33 died and the second, third and all the rest did 'the same'. This is the paradox of the two great commandments, one is 'greatest' yet the other is 'the same'. How can this paradox be resolved?

Perhaps someone might wonder why the text does not read *homooia* (of the same substance), bearing in mind the distinction between *homooision* and *homoioision*, which became so significant in the fourth century. At that time, in the debate between Arianism and what was becoming orthodoxy, *homooision* came to mean that which is numerically or ontologically identical, whereas *homoioision* was

⁴ The Message

regarded as meaning only similar. This is why homoousion emerged as the orthodox description of the relation between the Son and the Father. But this distinction only emerged in the course of the controversy, to meet a particular conceptual crisis; before this, the two words were virtually identical in their meaning.⁵

The word homoousia is not found in the New Testament, and it would have made no sense to have used it in the later meaning it came to have, in any of the passages we are discussing.⁶ The lawyer who was told to go and do homoia, the same kind of thing, could not do exactly the same unless he waited by the Jericho road for a Samaritan to be mugged in identical circumstances. The third brother could not die with exactly the same death as the second simply because he was the third and not the second. But they both died and their deaths were the same. If we introduce the later distinction, we may say that the love of the transcendent is not ontologically identical with the love of the immediate, just as the love of ultimacy is not identical with the love of penultimacy but since one is the way to the other, since one is fulfilled in the other they are tantamount to the same thing. In practice, for all intents and purposes, they are the same.⁷

Thus the paradox is resolved: the first commandment is ultimately the greatest, but for all practical purposes, the second is the same. The vertical has no independent existence as far as human beings are concerned; it has conceptual but not practical independence. Indeed it is only approached by that which is similar to it. Nevertheless, the ultimate remains greatest.⁸

The Origins of The Prophetic Tradition

In this teaching Jesus stands squarely in the prophetic tradition. In the Hebrew bible there is to be no image or likeness made of God (Exodus 20:4) and yet God made human beings in God's own image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). Does this mean that human beings are to be worshipped as God? Or that images of the human may be objects of worship? Certainly not! Then how are we to explain the paradox? There could be no independent image of God precisely because the revelation of God came

⁵ G.W. Lampe *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford:Clarendon, 1961 refers to Athanasius using the word homoios to assert the likeness of the humanity of Christ to that of general humanity (p.954) and also points out that the use of the word was attacked on the grounds that the 'distinction between Father and Son is thereby abolished' and that as late as the first century one word was being used to explain the other.

⁶ Note that the word homoousion is not listed in Liddell and Scott - Stuart Jones and Robert McKenzie (ed) *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford:Clarendon, 1968

⁷ Liddell and Scott indicate that Homoios meant having the same rank or station and refers to Plotinus in the 3rd century AD using the word to describe angles which were equal. It is also used in mathematics to describe the square of a number as being the product of 2 equal factors. Stuart Jones and Robert McKenzie (ed) *op. cit.*, p.1224

⁸ Karl Barth has an extensive discussion of the meaning of the two great commandments in his *Church Dogmatics*, volume 1, part 2, Edinburgh, T& T Clark, 1956, pp.381-454. Although a quick reading might suggest that my interpretation is more radical than that of Barth, a careful study of these pages shows that Barth rejects the idea that the vertical is completely collapsed into the horizontal mainly because "We cannot believe in our neighbour" and thus it would be misleading "to confuse or confound the two demands" (p.413). Moreover, Barth's eschatological interpretation means that love of the neighbour takes place in this world whereas love of God is eternal. However, love of the neighbour is "the inevitable outward side of that which inwardly is love to God" (p.412) and "we cannot love God without this loving, as it were, manifesting itself" (p.413). In this comment "this love" refers to love of the neighbour. This is quite consistent with my own comment "the vertical has no independent existence as far as human beings are concerned" i.e., as far as our lives in this world are to be lived.

only through the human other.⁹ Nor could images of the human be made for worship, for what had become holy was not the image of the human but the image of God in the human such that God was available in no other form or image save through God's image in the human. God had become present only through inter-subjectivity, and through inter-subjectivity qualified in a particular manner, the way of justice.

Thus over and over again, the God of the Bible is described as the God who loves justice.

'The Lord is known by his justice' (Ps 9:16).

'The Lord is righteous; he loves justice' (Ps 11:7).

'The Lord works righteousness and justice for all that are oppressed' (Ps 103:6).

The references to God as the God of justice not only refer to the character of God but to what God does and thus to where and how God is to be served and found. The bible does not merely announce an abstract ethical quality in God but reveals a God who executes justice and who requires justice.

It is sometimes said that the first part of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:3-11) represents the human duty toward God while the second part (Ex. 20:12-17) is duty to our fellow humans. But this must surely be to divide where no division is to be found. The whole of the Two Tables is based upon its preface, in which God is the redeeming and liberating Saviour, who brought Israel up out of Egypt, out of slavery (Ex. 20:2). It is as the emancipator of slaves that God graciously gives the covenant.¹⁰

The popular impression that the Ten Commandments are a series of abstract demands rather than a consequence of the mercy of the liberating God may have been effected by the fact that in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer the text is introduced by the words 'God spake these words, and said, I am the Lord thy God: Thou shalt have no other gods but me, thus omitting the crucial words 'who brought thee up out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'.¹¹

In the Deuteronomic version of the origin of the Decalogue its ethical foundation is emphasised. This is done through declaring the character of God as the lover of foreigners.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. (Deut. 10:17-19)

⁹ Jose P. Miranda *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, London:SCM, 1977, p.36-44

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann *Theology of the Old Testament*, Minneapolis:Fortress, 1997, p.25 'From its beginning, Israel's covenant was a political theory of justice.' Brueggemann is quoting with approval the work of George Mendenhall.

¹¹ In the 1926 revision of the Prayer Book the words were still omitted but in *The Alternative Service Book* (1980) there is an alternative which places the words 'who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' in brackets, a feature which is also found in *Common Worship*, p.250. The effect of this is to minimise the role of the liberating God and to emphasise God as the general law-giver.

The implication of our own liberation is to set others free; indeed, it is through recognising the demand of the oppressed other that God, the great God, is both recognised and obeyed. If God is not worshipped in this way, God becomes just another religious idol, but God is to be worshipped in this way and thus there can be no making of graven images.

The Prophets of Israel

Whenever the cult of worship and sacrifice tried to approach God without passing through the demand of the other for justice, it was regarded by the prophets as being blasphemous and an insult to God.

'I can't stand your religious meetings.
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,
your public relations and image making.
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
When was the last time you sang to me?
Do you know what I want?
I want justice—oceans of it.
I want fairness—rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want.' (Amos 5:21-24)

Isaiah shows us that when the vertical is honoured apart from the horizontal, it becomes trivial and corrupt.

"The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?" says the LORD.
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.

Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts
my soul hates.

They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;

wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,

learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:11-17)

In Hosea we find the same bold affirmation. Reading the book as a whole, it could be said that Hosea teaches that the vertical has become corrupt because the horizontal has been ignored; it could also be said that the way to the vertical has been blocked by failure to observe justice in the horizontal. Israel has become faithless in her religious life in that the character of the covenant God has not been acknowledged.

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

They will not pour out wine offerings to the LORD,
nor will their sacrifices please him.
Such sacrifices will be to them like the bread of mourners;
all who eat them will be unclean.
This food will be for themselves;
it will not come into the temple of the LORD. (Hosea 9:4)

Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unploughed ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
until he comes
and showers righteousness on you. (Hosea 10:12)

It might appear that the teaching of the prophets was no more than the demand for a balance between the vertical and the horizontal and a claim that without a just dealing with the horizontal the vertical would be imperfect. The truth of inter-subjective transcendence, however, is more radical.

The rubric of covenant thus requires a departure from the more conventional philosophical categories of immanence and transcendence and the entire Cartesian temptation to dualism, for covenant is not balancing of

transcendence and immanence, but is a complete rejection of a dualism that is too tidy and free of risk.¹²

One of the clearest statements of the knowledge of God in the whole Bible is in Jeremiah 22.15,16. The prophet is attacking the luxurious lifestyle of the king, and comparing him unfavourably with his father, the great and good king Josiah.

"Does it make you a king
to have more and more cedar?
Did not your father have food and drink?
He did what was right and just,
so all went well with him.

He defended the cause of the poor and needy,
and so all went well.
Is that not what it means to know me?"
declares the LORD.

This, the prophet says, is what it is to know God: to defend the oppressed and the helpless.

Note well these lines do not say that judging the poor and needy is the cause and knowing Yahweh the consequence; nor, conversely, that judging the poor and needy is the consequence and knowing Yahweh the cause. Rather the two are equated.¹³

We may conclude that the prophetic tradition attacked a religion-shaped mission in the name of a mission-shaped, or a Kingdom of God-shaped religion.

Jesus and The Prophetic Tradition

The same teaching is typical of Jesus. Access to the vertical is impossible unless the horizontal is first recognised.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23,24)

There is no point in worshipping God if you are not at peace with your brother or sister. Human reconciliation is a condition of access to the divine. There is no point in praying for forgiveness unless we forgive others.

Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matt. 6:12)

¹² Brueggemann *op. cit.*, p.30

¹³ Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, p.613

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. (Matt. 18:5)

There is a precise reciprocity between the human and the divine. Forgive us as we forgive. Of course, God remains God, and sometimes the ultimate breaks through disregarding the failure of the penultimate. Jesus prayed that God would forgive those who nailed him to the cross not because they had forgiven him but because they did not know what they were doing. But in all ordinary human relations, divine/human similarity is the rule of grace.

It is through the demand for justice that the Kingdom is declared (Luke 4:18-19). The central theme of the teaching of Jesus, the great reversal, announces the blessing upon the poor and the disaster to fall upon the rich (Luke 6:20-26). He fulfilled the spirit of what Mary had sung about, by casting down the mighty from their seats, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich empty away (Luke 1:52-53). Jesus interpreted the meaning of following him as consisting of a life lived within the sphere of the great reversal, the demand for justice in inter-human relations. The rich young ruler went away sorrowful when Jesus invited him to get rid of his possessions in favour of the poor (Luke 18:18-26), Jesus makes radical and concrete the commandments of the law and then interprets their meaning as relationship to himself, but only when the demands of inter-subjectivity have been recognised. In the same way, Zacchaeus, confronted by the gracious acceptance of Jesus, put right the injustices that he had carried out in his professional conduct (Luke 19:1-10). There is a contrast between the man who brought Jesus to his home having recognised his social obligations and the man who went away sorrowful to his own home, not able to accept the demands of radical discipleship.

Typical of the prophetic understanding of God was the scribe of Mark 12:32,33 who responded to the reply of Jesus about the greatest commandment who said

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:32, 33)

In Matthew's gospel, the prophetic principal that mercy is better than sacrifice is twice referred to. In Matt. 9.17 Jesus defends his ministry to the marginalised by referring to it and in Matt. 12.7 he defends his disciples against the demands of religious legalism.

The Absence of Jesus And The Presence of Other People

In discussing the God of the Hebrew Bible, we saw how in the absence of God, justice, extended to the image of God in the other person, became the way of God. At first, in the garden of Eden, God came visiting like a friend, but after the murder of Cain the resumption of human trust became the principal direction of the will of God and this, as we have seen, implied the absence of the explicit image of God. So it is in the New Testament as well. The truth that the biblical God is known in inter-subjectivity reaches its fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ, in relation with whom, his first followers found God (John 20:28; 1:1; Mark 1:1). When God was found in the face of Jesus Christ it was not the supreme anomaly of biblical religion but its epitomy, it encapsulates all the other tendencies.

In the absence of Jesus, he is to be found through the open acceptance and reception of others.

'Who ever receives a child in my name receives me' (Matt. 18:5)

The way to Jesus Christ is through an open reception offered to children, and the whole logic of the inter-subjective structure is brought out clearly in the parallel in Mark and Luke:

'Whoever receives a child like this in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.' (Mark 9:37)

In Luke 10:16 the logic is the same although the interpersonal direction is reversed, now the reference is not to receiving but to being received

"He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

In Matthew 18:10 and additional mediation is introduced, that of the angel who represents the child before God, but the logic is the same, since God remains the Father of Jesus, and access is through a child.

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Matt. 18:10)

The disciples of Jesus are to find him again and again in the face of human deprivation and poverty, wherever there is human loneliness or sickness, there he is to be found (Matt. 25:37-40). The remarkable thing about this last saying is that access to Jesus Christ is secure through the needy other even in ignorance thus the cognitive aspect of recognition is transmuted into ethical action.

This is the essential message of the Minjung theology of South Korea. As Professor Kim of the South Korean church said to a group of people invited to meet him in Birmingham some years ago, 'This is the teaching of the Minjung theology: Jesus Christ was born among the poor. If you would find him, there you must seek him. This meaning of the absence and the presence of Jesus continues throughout the rest of the New Testament.

Examples may be found in 1 John 3:17,18; 4:20-21. James 1:27; 2:14-16; 3:9; 5:4. It is worth pointing out that in James 2:8 the commandment which Jesus described as being equivalent to the love of God is described as 'the royal law' and that this central tradition of the New Testament is squarely in the prophetic tradition is illustrated by the anti-iconic reference in James 3:9.

The Transcendence of Otherness

Let us return for a moment to the saying by Jesus about the greatest commandment and the one like it. Jesus says that we are to love our neighbour not as the neighbour loves us but as we love ourselves. The relationship between love of self and love of neighbour is not reciprocal but parallel nor does the text say that we are to love our neighbour in so far as our neighbour loves God, nor in so far as we

ourselves love God. The commandment places upon each one of us an unqualified, one-directional, non-theological obligation. It is in these characteristics that transcendence is to be found. Emmanuel Levinas puts it like this. 'the idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me or my relation to God- comes to me in the concreteness of my relation to the other... in the sociality which is my responsibility for the neighbour'¹⁴ Levinas goes on to say that we certainly will not discover it by looking upon the human face as some kind of emblem or picture of divine creativity. Nevertheless, it is when I contemplate the origin of this that 'the word God comes to the tip of my tongue' and it is in this sense that the idea of the infinite is placed within me as a prophetic event, that is, because my responsibility to the other is unqualified and is not reciprocal.¹⁵ Levinas concludes 'responsibility for the other is transcendence'.¹⁶

Because I am placed under the command of the infinite which comes to me through otherness, I am not free to decide whether or not I shall respond. Responsibility for the other is not a product of my freedom. I am thus hostage to the other. In the same way, we are not to have the luxury of choice as to which neighbour we will select for the exercise of our responsibility. I do not designate the neighbour for whom I will be responsible but I say "Here I am"¹⁷

This, of course, is not a proof of God's existence. It is not a proof of anything. It is a trace of ultimacy found in the penultimate. 'Our relation to God is itself real only as it shows itself in relation to our neighbours'.¹⁸

Modernity and the loss of biblical otherness

It is easy to see why the significance of this biblical tradition has been so misunderstood and minimised in our culture. Possessive individualism,¹⁹ which has been the central characteristic of the Western worldview since the 17th century tends to exaggerate the character of human beings as consuming units, and the place of mutuality has been overtaken by an emphasis upon the interior life, heightened by the continually growing expectation of freedom and multiple choice.

It is true that the modern status of human rights has been enormously important in the protection of the vulnerable, and of all citizens in the presence of the state and other powers but this theology of the covenant does not refer to the other as having rights but to myself as placed under a responsibility of guardianship for my fellow human being. True, conservative newspapers are fond of saying, rather resentfully, that we have emphasised rights at the expense of responsibilities but they are always speaking of the responsibilities of the other upon whom rights have been conferred, not of my unqualified responsibility to the other in a realm which transcends rights. Levinas sums this up by saying in this way I am 'ousted from my interiority as an ego'.²⁰ Is it any surprise that in a society built upon the stimulation

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Stanford University Press, 1998, p.xiv

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Stanford:Stanford University Press, 1998, p.xv

¹⁶ *op. cit.*, p.13

¹⁷ *op. cit.*, p.72

¹⁸ MacMurray, John *The Search for Reality in Religion*, London : Friends Home Service Committee, 1965, p.72

¹⁹ C.B. Macpherson *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1964

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p.73

of the consuming ego, such an ethic is seldom heard? In such an ethic the identity of the self does not reside in possessions.

Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15)

So Levinas remarks to listen to the cry of the desolate is to 'walk among reasons that reason does not know'.²¹ I am torn out of my habitat, stripped of my comfort zone by the fact that I am not innocent of what happens to my neighbour.

The Intention of The Word 'God'

We see then that the logic of the word God implies ethical intentionality on my part. This is not in the first place an intention to worship God because one must resort 'to the notion of a horizontal religion, abiding on man's earth, and which ought to be substituted for the vertical one which departs for the Heavens in order to refer to the world'.²²

It is important to recognise that in this relationship, the space between, or the distance, is always preserved. If I love myself in the neighbour this distance disappears. The parallelism implies relationship not fusion. This has the effect of making religion objective. After all, interiority can only be memory, given the 'darkness of the lived moment'²³ and if I live for my inner Christian experience I am involved in a kind of religious memorial reconstruction but if I acknowledge the intentionality of faith in God toward the human other, I am dragged out of my feelings and memories, out of the salvation of my soul into my love for my brother and sister. Moreover, to realise the full force of this it is necessary to grasp the fact that it goes beyond dialogue.²⁴ I am responsible for the other whether or not the other is interested in or capable of dialogue with me. This is clearly evident in the Christian concept of love, and at this point I may perhaps part company with Levinas, whose concept of love seems to be embedded within friendship, with associations of fecundity and the erotic. The divine love which was poured out upon us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us is not a matter of friendship but of the God who loves even when love is not returned (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10).²⁵

The Mission of God Distorted When Its Agent Becomes Its Objective

The mission of God is therefore to restore the brokenness of the body of humanity and to renew the face of the earth. Of this mission Israel was to be an agent, a chosen vessel, to be a light to the nations. Again and again, however, Israel assumed that it was the object of God's mission. This is why the Deuteronomist had to remind the people that they had not been chosen because they were a great and mighty people but because they were the 'smallest of all nations'. (Deut. 7:7) Similarly, Amos had to warn the people of Israel that they were in danger of exaggerating the significance of their own salvation history.

²¹ *op. cit.*, p.77

²² *op. cit.*, p.105

²³ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, last words.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969, p.68f

²⁵ Levinas, *op. cit.*, pp.254-5, 270-273. On the other hand, Levinas also speaks of 'The imperative of gratuitous love which comes to me from the face of another.' *God Who Comes to Mind*, preface.

"Are not you Israelites
the same to me as the Cushites?"
declares the LORD.
"Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt,
the Philistines from Caphtor
and the Arameans from Kir? (Amos 9:7)

The history of Israel shows a tendency to change emphasis between the tribalism of Gideon and Ezra and the universalism of Ruth and Jonah. This tendency to replace the mission of God by the welfare of the nation led finally to the destruction of the temple and of the state. That destruction was repeated in the destruction of the body of Jesus upon the cross and the total elimination of Jerusalem. It was out of these tendencies toward idolatrous self-absorption and the destruction that followed that Christian faith emerged as a new vehicle for the universal restoration, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. The reference to the body of Jesus in this context may surprise some but I am thinking of John 16:7

But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

and

Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.(2 Cor. 5:16)

Christian faith institutionalised within churches and denominations is not immune from these tendencies. Again and again Christian history shows that Christians have consciously or unconsciously turned away from the mission of God for justice and peace toward the propagation of their own tribalistic religion or Christian faith has been identified with the interest of Christians and the welfare of the church. So powerful is this tendency that it is possible to lose sight of the mission of God almost entirely and to replace it with the notion of ecclesiastical expansion. These experiences give a new and more disturbing meaning to the saying of the apostle that we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.²⁶

While I respect the intentions of those who divide people in Britain into the church and the unchurched, and see it as their mission to transfer as many people as possible from the latter category to the former, I do not believe that this distinction is fundamental to the mission of God. If we take the biblical prophetic tradition seriously, we must say that a more fundamental distinction in the sight of God is between the rich and the poor, those at home and the aliens, those who seek for selfish power and those who set out to serve their neighbours, those who in the name of the national interest are ready to renew nuclear weapons and those who seek for peace and equality between the nations. Where do we look today to find the great reversal of which Jesus spoke? How can it be that the mission of God who wills that all people should be saved has been turned into a competitive ideology and an institution with the same survival instincts as any other institution?

²⁶ In my studies of the theology of Isaac Watts (1674-1748) I have shown how the British congregations of the early 18th century turned away from the mission of God for justice and peace and concentrated upon the adoration of their own religious belief structure.

Concluding Questions and Answers

Finally, I am aware that so profoundly has our understanding of Christian faith been contaminated by our culture of individualism, money and power, and by the replacement of the agent by the object, that my exposition of what I regard as the mission of God today must give rise to many questions. I will anticipate some of these and no doubt there are many others that I have not noticed.

The Mission of God and Social Service

What is the difference between the approach outlined here and social and political service? Are not the peace and justice issues I mention the responsibility of secular professions and of society as a whole? Should not the church let them get on with it and concentrate on what we do uniquely, proclaim Jesus Christ?

First I would say that anyone who struggles for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an ally, and should be encouraged. What matters is not being different but getting on with the job. Never the less, the presence and activities of the church are different in several important ways. Jesus asked his critics by whom did their own people cast out demons if his own exorcisms were the product of a partnership with Beelzebul. He went on to say that if, on the contrary, his works were done by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God had come amongst them. (Luke 11:20) On the face of it, an exorcism is an exorcism no matter who does it, and a pain relieved is a pain relieved. But when the relief of suffering is done in the name of Christ, it becomes significant of something greater. In other words, Christian faith places the elements of individual and communal reform in a wider pattern of interpretation. This context is provided by Christian faith itself, which gives to the acting parties the vision of a whole historic destiny, in which God is working out the purpose and meaning of creation itself. Such an interpretation sustains meaning and hope in the most hopeless situation, and this gives to the Christian working for the coming of God's kingdom a strength and an endurance, a joy that others must find elsewhere, if at all. Thus the Christian may glimpse the transcendent beyond the other, and the ultimate future of transcendent otherness, while the secular person may not have such imaginative resources of interpretation to inspire and strengthen.

Secondly, the churches must exercise an influence upon secular society by occupying a significant place in civil society, and by the insistence on ethical and humane standards maintain a constant pressure on public life. This we may describe as the prophetic function of the church.

Moreover, if the churches withdraw into purely religious activity (as the secular world would see it) and only preach Christ without lifting a finger to alleviate human suffering, our message will become mere words. We will lose the respect of the public even more thoroughly, and we will be in flagrant disobedience to scripture. Nothing in my argument implies that the church will not go on preaching Christ. In the context of striving for the Kingdom of God, such preaching, which will expose the faith, hope and love which inspire us, will have much more credibility, and is more likely to draw people into the relevance of faith.

Finally, I do not claim that proclaiming and working for the Kingdom is the only thing Christian life offers. There is still what Bonhoeffer described as 'the secret discipline',

there is still worship, the study and interpretation of the scriptures, the intellectual life of theology, the pastoral care of congregations, the carrying out of the rituals of the life cycle. However, I do maintain that in the context of mission as the Kingdom of God, all these other meditations and activities take on a new urgency and relevance.

What About My Personal and Individual Relation To Jesus Christ As My Saviour and Lord?

Although at first sight this might seem to be an example of the vertical, I have shown that in the days of his ministry, relationship with God through Jesus was the supreme example of prophetic horizontality. In these days of the church, when Jesus is seated at the right hand of God in glory, he is to be found through human otherness, as we have seen.

However, I acknowledge that the prophetic tradition may be placed side by side with other traditions such as the mystical, the charismatic and the sacramental. I have emphasised the prophetic tradition because it is the one most relevant to the mission of God. If we are to mould the life of our churches upon the mission of God, it is to the prophetic tradition that we must look. That does not mean that I have no sympathy for and first hand knowledge of individual religious experience, especially as reconstituted in memory around the person of Jesus.

Christ-mysticism, however, is in danger today of becoming a kind of erotic spirituality in which it is easier to adore Jesus than to follow him. This erotic fascination, so neatly summed up in the comment 'Jesus is my girlfriend' has many of the features of a fetish. This is why I have little sympathy with the preacher at the most recent Good Friday morning service who said 'I have nothing against social justice but the heart of the Christian faith is personal devotion to Jesus'. This is indeed the case, but what the preacher has forgotten is that I am to find Jesus through human otherness, and any religious experience of which Jesus is the content but which is isolated from obligation to the human other quickly degenerates into a kind of self-congratulatory spiritual self-enclosure. One can see this clearly in so many of the hymns about this kind of Christian experience, in which the believer's feelings of happiness, satisfaction and security have become the focus of faith. Such 'Happy Christians' need to hear again the words of the prophet James who says that without ethical commitment, faith is meaningless.

Does Not Prayer Represent A Vertical Relation With God?

If prayer is naively addressed to God, it is necessarily addressed to the God-image within us, and psychoanalytic object-relations theory and attachment theory have helped us to realize the process whereby the God-image is created.²⁷ It is necessarily formed through absorption and projection of traces of God as perceived or imagined in other people, so even in direct prayer, we are in a bundle of life with others. Whether in sophisticated prayer it is possible consciously to pass through the other to the infinite, I cannot tell. This would mean approaching the God beyond God

²⁷ Rizzuto, Ana-Maria *The birth of the living God : a psychoanalytic study*, Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1979; McDargh, John *Psychoanalytic object relations theory and the study of religion : on faith and the imaging of God*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1983

in earthly human experience, but I am sure that such communion with God, if it can be known, would be in love, and love of God is only formed through love to others.

The Church and The Eucharist

What then, of the church? If, as the theologians from Asia, Africa and Latin America are always telling us, God becomes real in the pursuit of justice, we need have no fears for the church once it pursues the mission of God along prophetic lines.

In the eucharist, the person of Jesus Christ is reconstructed in memory and becomes a presence which is at least symbolic. Because of this way of memorialising Jesus, the presence of Jesus in his mission as the one who being sent also sends us transforms the Lord's Supper into an impetus for the mission of God. Being a communion, most usually taken together, and being a sacrament of reconciliation, it has powerful elements of prophetic faith. The broken bread brings us into a single body as we eat it, meaning that in the body of Christ we become his body, the reconstructed social body. This is also why the sacrament is essentially inclusive, and should be open to all, so representing and creating that universal fellowship which is the objective of the mission of God.

What Of 'The Unchurched'?

Here I find significance in Isaiah 65:1. 'I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said "Here am I, here am I"'. I also remember the words of Paul when addressing the Greeks, God 'is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17:27,28) and in the idea that 'the word is near you, it is on your lips and in your heart' (Rom. 10:8) and that Christ is 'the logos that enlightens every human being'. (John 1:9)

Although the dangers faced by our species seem to be very threatening and the solutions hard to seek I do not believe that the Spirit of God, the Lord and giver of life, is finished with us yet.