THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS THE GOAL
OF THE MISSIO DEI

JOHANNES VERKUYL *

What really does God intend for the world to which he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ? What is the ultimate goal of the missio Dei? The answer is easy to find; in both the Old Testament and the New, God by both his words and deeds claims that he is intent on bringing the kingdom of God to expression and restoring his liberating domain of authority. From the countless biblical images and symbols which describe God's intentions I select this one as the clearest expression of God and his purposes.

Biblically speaking, what is the kingdom of God? Some exegetes frequently narrow its borders to include only the inner life of the individual. Their interpretation is not wrong; it is, however, inadequate, for the preaching of Jesus so obviously treats issues which extend beyond the individual soul.

Other people restrict the kingdom exclusively to the church. Kingdom and church are for them interchangeable terms. But many scholars are quick to point out that the terms basileia and ekklēsia, though related, are anything but synonymous. Still others claim that the kingdom has come when man's spiritual needs are satisfied; kingdom involves the forgiveness of sins. But the New Testament nowhere spiritualizes the kingdom of God or limits it to the spiritual side of man. 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 mankind. Kingdom in the New Testament has a breadth and scope which is unsurpassed; it embraces heaven as well as earth, world history as well as the whole cosmos.

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 relationship to God but also of those between sexes, generations, races, and even between man and nature. This is the message of the prophets, and this is what John saw in his visions recorded in the book of Revelation. This too is the testimony of the Apostles who join Peter in affirming, "We await a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (II Pet. 3 : 13).

The Importance of This Goal for the Missionary Mandate Today

What then is the kingdom? It is the creation which has achieved its goal. Chaos will be overcome, every antimessianic tendency will have been erased,

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and God's liberating acts will have reached their final goal. The whole of the
curch's deep and wide mission agenda must receive its focus and orientation
in this kingdom perspective.

The first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer summarize so well the deepest
and ultimate goal of mission: "Hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done on earth as in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10).

Leading People to a Belief in Jesus as Messiah and to a Confession of Him
as Lord

When we inquire into the practical consequences of viewing mission from the
perspective of the kingdom and its structures, one of the first things to mention
is our God-given call to invite human beings to come to know Jesus as the
Messiah of that kingdom. Throughout the Gospels, the Epistles, and indeed
all of history, the whole missionary enterprise has always begun with this. The
New Testament itself arose as a result of the deep urge of his disciples to tell
the story of Jesus.

Today there is widespread neglect of this basic task. Missionaries look beyond
it to other dimensions and end up with a kingdom without Jesus; they speak
of peace without mentioning him who himself is peace. They quest for right­
eousness but in a way that completely skirts him. Such a tendency is perhaps
at least understandable in view of the fact that in times past people often held
up for honour some syrupy-sweet notion of Jesus without ever mentioning
the messianic kingdom which he began and the promises and demands which
follow from it. But though this may suffice as an historical explanation this
overreaction is certainly not justifiable. For this reason I rejoice in the fact
that leading figures in world mission today are increasingly emphasizing the
importance of telling the story of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord.

Two things are necessary in order to lead people to the Messiah and to invite
them to confess him in word and deed. In the first place, they must come to
know what the New Testament says about him. All the New Testament wit­
tesses agree that Jesus is Messiah, but they also agree that this Messiah was
quite different from what they had anticipated. Men must come to know this
Jesus, whose very life and work are an open window letting us see the very
heart of God who has come to us. God has employed many means in the
course of time to reveal something of himself, but in Jesus he has truly com­
communicated himself. Said Jesus: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Fa­
ther" (John 14:9).

But in this Jesus, through whom God disclosed himself, we also meet the Son
of Man — that is, the authentic and new man as God intends him to be. In
John's Gospel we read that various individuals tried to make Jesus conform
to their own purposes. But the Apostle goes on to say that "Jesus for his part
would not entrust himself to them, ...for he could tell what was in a man"
(John 2:24-25). And because Jesus could not facilely be shaped to fit into
their idle dreams and plans, he was rejected and nailed to a cross. Yet God acknowledged Jesus and by his resurrection confirmed him as the Lord of the new kingdom. We may withhold from no one an opportunity to meet personally this Jesus who comes to us in the clothing of Scripture.

The second thing necessary as we lead people to the Messiah is for each of us to recall that the living Lord is actually present. As Dr Gerhard Hoffmann said: "We who tell the story of Jesus are not simply acting as historians who dig out the rich spiritual treasures from a bygone era; rather we are ambassadors of a ruling Prince." ¹

We represent a living Messiah who is enroute to the final revealing of his kingdom. Therefore every generation discovers fresh aspects about him and confesses him in a new manner. I must only remind my readers of the multitude of new christological themes which have recently been developed — themes like Christus Liberator which is so popular now in the world of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, or the Christology being articulated by advocates of “black theology”, many of whose experiences as humiliated and oppressed people led them to grasp new insights into the person of Jesus. The danger of trying to annex Christ to one’s own ends remains ever present, and therefore we must continue to strip off those myths and dreams in which he has been wrapped. People everywhere must hear the clear invitation to know him as the Savior and Liberator of the world — Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, scientific humanists — indeed everyone.

Precisely because we have accepted the kingdom as the frame of reference and point of orientation for our missionary task, we must go on to claim that a call to conversion must necessarily follow our proclamation. This is fundamentally important, for confessing Jesus without following him as his disciples makes no sense at all. This imitatio Christi is what the New Testament calls metanoia. To it I now turn my attention.

**The Kingdom and Conversion**

Within the framework of the kingdom, conversion has been viewed properly as one of the inclusive goals of mission. To see how this goal applies, we must return to the New Testament itself, for so many people have such diverse conceptions that it becomes necessary once again to inquire what Jesus really meant when he declared: “The Kingdom of God is upon you; repent, and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Conversion is the answer Christ requests and expects from those who take his message of the kingdom seriously. C. H. Dodd, the British New Testament scholar, claims that in times past metanoia, or “conversion”, had a negative ring emphasizing a sorrow for sin. But in the New Testament it is used positively. Metanoia literally means “to think again” or “to have second thoughts”.

It therefore involves a total reorientation of one's thinking, will, and emotions and results in a new style of living and new conduct. These are the fruits of conversion to the message of the kingdom, a message in which Jesus confronts us in all of his splendor. Of course, the negative element of sorrow and repentance, of *fletus*, as Augustine termed it, is not absent, but the stronger accent falls upon the turning to God and orienting oneself anew to the standards of his kingdom.

Two aspects require special attention. First, *metanoia* embraces all of one's life, his life in society included. Therefore, anyone who divides personal conversion from participation in the life of society makes an unbiblical separation. Second, conversion is not a once-for-all event; it is a continual process of renewing one's life, or reorienting himself to the kingdom as he, Christ's disciple, confronts new and changing situations. Emilio Castro continually emphasizes that conversion as the New Testament describes it is no "agency of escapism". Conversion requires that Christ's disciples stand with both feet in the cold, hard, tough world and continually reorient themselves to persons and structures within that real world. When seen in this light, conversion is indeed one of the inclusive goals of mission.

The Messianic Kingdom and the Messianic People

According to the New Testament, proclaiming the messianic message must always be accompanied by gathering, preserving and adding to the people of God. When Jesus invites us to become his disciples, he calls us to join a community and become members of the people of God, not to stand isolated and alone. He calls Zacchaeus a "son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9) and the woman whom he healed in the synagogue, "Abraham's daughter" (Luke 13:16). His interest was not merely in converting individuals but in forming a new people. Having seen that the synagogue "establishment" rejected him, he immediately began to form a new community and called the Apostles out from the ranks of his disciples to become the founders of this new fellowship (Luke 6:13).

The Apostles carried on the work begun by Jesus. They established a new community of faith among the various peoples whom they met. It was a community which bore the stamp of God's own possession. The factors which united this people were not the economic or political or cultural ties which usually bind human communities together; this people emerged from the ranks of Israel and the Gentiles by the words, deeds, and Spirit of the Messiah and existed only in complete dependence on him, its shepherd and king. He calls it, cares for it, and frees it through the forgiveness of sins and the renewal which proceeds from him. Furthermore, he desires to employ this people as the means of realizing his world-embracing plans.

Listen to the words of I Peter 2:9-10: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once
you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

Since God’s call and mercy are so basic to the life of this people, it becomes rather obvious that human beings are not the ones to trace out who does and who does not belong to it. The Messiah himself determines the boundaries, and in doing so, he is guided by grace. The Bible constantly claims that the people of God which we now see taking shape before our very eyes is but the small beginning of a completely new humanity (see II Thess. 2:3; James 1:18). God’s purposes extend much farther than we can see at any moment in time. The firstfruits will in due time yield a bountiful crop, and workers are needed to reap the harvest (Matt. 9:37-38). Here is where the people of God fits in, for it, like the Messiah whose mark it bears, is called not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:42-44). As he lay three days in the grave and then arose, so this people must fall into the ground and die like a grain of wheat in order that it might later produce a rich harvest (John 12:24-25). Just as he carried his cross, so his disciples must deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him (Luke 14:26-27). When this people identifies itself with its Messiah in this manner, it will discover that God the Father is pleased to grant it his kingdom (Luke 6:20).

My concern here is not to present an elaborate ecclesiology. For this one can refer to such books as Paul Minear’s *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, which carefully details the various images depicting the new people of God. My only concern here is to show that if we take the message of the kingdom as the frame of reference and point of orientation from which to view our missionary task, we shall come to see the work of forming a church as an essential aspect of our larger calling.

Much ink and many words have been wasted on the question of whether we ought to think in terms of the triad God-church-world or the triad God-world-church. All this is needless bickering, for those whose life and thinking are oriented around the Messiah and his kingdom will learn to see the church within the wider perspective of the kingdom, even though they may differ among themselves on the arrangement of the details. Missiology must always
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save a spot for ecclesiology and for the study of churches in their own environments, but the essential question each of these studies must forever ask remains the same: To what degree do these churches contribute to the messianic kingdom? Numerical and qualitative growth and the equipping of churches must never become ends in themselves, but must always serve the Messiah who is making his way "to the ends of the earth."

The Kingdom and Our Participation in the Struggle against Every Form of Human Ill.

Viewing our missionary task within the wider perspective of the kingdom will lead us to still another insight: participation in the fight against every vestige of evil plaguing mankind is an intrinsic part of our calling. According to the Bible the kingdom does not belong to the future. It is a present reality which, though not yet fully revealed, does nevertheless show definite signs of being underway. When John the Baptist's disciples came to Jesus and asked whether he were 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 and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense 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. Between these two points, said Jesus, one can detect signs of the ongoing fight being waged against those forces and powers spreading human suffering.

The message of the kingdom as Jesus described it makes sense only if we take careful note of these powers and forces and strive to discern the shapes which they take today. Liberation makes sense only if we first understand what keeps men in bondage. And once we realize how deep this evil really is and how profound are the saving acts of God in Jesus the Messiah, we shall inevitably and inescapably hear God calling us to participate in uprooting every vestige of evil and suffering from human society... I shall only make brief mention of the range of human ills and needs.

Physical and psychical distress. In the quotation from Matthew 11 Jesus acted not only as a preacher but also as a healer. Rembrandt's famous "Hundred Guilder Print" catches this aspect of Jesus so well. As the shadows of evening approach, Jesus stands amid children and adults caught in the grip of physical and psychical distress; Jesus' messianic presence and their needs and yearnings seem to interpenetrate; God himself condescends to concern himself with the ills of people, to heal their sicknesses, and to still their confusion.

God calls his messianic people to wage war against sickness and every form of psychic disorder with every weapon in its arsenal. Hence, the call to mission includes an appeal to engage in social and medical work.
The burden of ignorance. Ignorance is an evil which paralyses not only the individual but society as well. People often toss about the easy slogan “What you don’t won’t hurt you,” but that is a lie. Ignorance can hurt. Indonesians have a choice word to describe the plight of those who can neither read nor write; they are “letter-blind.” Indeed, illiteracy is a handicap, and a lack of proper facilities for training and educating people only perpetuates the problem. Therefore, part of our missionary calling is to correct this deficiency and thus to restore sight to the blind and healing to the lame. The very glow of messianic light surrounds this noble enterprise.

The burden of poverty and hunger. Jesus knew that many of the poor people were inexorably bound to that iron wheel of necessity called poverty. He identified with their needs and earnestly desired that the banners of his kingdom be jubilantly unfurled for all the poor and hungry to see. Once again, when we join the war against poverty and hunger we are working in the halo of his messianic light.

The burden of racial discrimination. As this century has progressed, we have gradually opened our eyes to the fact that millions of human beings pass their days caught in social structures which discriminate against them because of their race and thus compromise their human dignity. Jesus himself constantly moved in the midst of those whom others rejected and despised. He solidly identified with them in his own life and earnestly desires his disciples to follow in his path.

The struggle for cultural identity. The Bangkok conference of the World Council of Churches in 1973 paid close heed to the desire of millions of people for cultural identity. Hundreds of societies have inbuilt structures which hinder the people from achieving their own cultural expression and thus rob them of their identity. They feel themselves deprived and others avoid them as though they were leprous. When the liberating power of the gospel is unleashed in such situations, it frees men to be themselves within the kingdom. A black South African commented some time ago: “When I become one with Christ, the new Man, he grants me the freedom to express my new-found humanity in my own way.”

The threat of approaching death. How wonderful that God responded to the deepest and final need of man and through his Son freed us from the threat of even death itself. Hence, we can say in the words of I John 3:2: “What shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that... we shall be like him.” Human beings the world over are crying for a solution to the approaching specter of death, and we as Christians engaged in world mission and evangelism must give them the answer which can allay their fears.

In a Bible study prepared for the Bangkok conference Paul Minear wrote: “The deepest cry which the Holy Spirit arouses in man is the yearning cry for heaven, for direct contact with God’s throne, for a victory of God over his demonic enemies, for an invitation to the marriage feast of the Lamb.”
How remiss we would be if we failed to attend to this heartrending cry and ignored our task of extending invitations to this marriage.

It is gratifying to be able to note at the end of this study of the goal of the missio Dei and our concomitant mission that missiology is more and more coming to see the kingdom of God as the hub around which all of mission work revolves. On can almost speak of a consensus developing on this point. I take the liberty of ... citing several authors who view mission in this perspective.

Max Warren was one of the first to formulate the purpose of mission in this way in his book *The Truth of Vision*, published in 1948 and subtitled “A study in the nature of Christian hope”.

After the Evanston assembly of the World Council of Churches convened in 1954 under the theme “Christ our Hope,” Hans Jochen Margull wrote his book *Hope in Action*. D. T. Niles devoted a chapter to this same theme in his missiological treatise, *Upon the Earth*. Then, of course, there is Jürgen Moltmann, who has written copiously on the theme of hope in essays and books such as “The Aim of Mission,” *Theology of Hope*, and *The Crucified God*. For the Roman Catholic theologian Rütti, hope is the basic theme of his whole theology. I might also mention in this connection Ludwig Wiedemann’s full-length study published in 1963, *Mission and Eschatology*.

The theme which I have been treating is of great practical significance. If it be true that we who practice mission must take the kingdom of God as our constant point of orientation, it is imperative that we pay close heed to the whole range of burdens and evils plaguing mankind. Our priorities may change as the situation demands. At certain times the accent will fall on poverty and hunger; at others, on ignorance; and at still others, on sickness, racial injustice, economic exploitation, or a variety of others.

The churches on all six continents need to be alert to changing needs and set their priorities accordingly. But even so they must present the entire message of the kingdom and not reduce it to just one point. We would be most inhuman if we should treat only the most acute and pressing needs of a people and deprive them of the full range of God’s promises by failing to mention the Messiah himself.

It would be sheer pride and impudence to imagine that we will establish the kingdom and bring it to completion. This is the work of God alone — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the same time, it would be a sign of sinful sloth and indolence if we were not to attempt in faith, together with the children of the kingdom throughout the world, to erect in the midst of the wide range of human burdens and evils signs and signals of that which is coming. He who prays “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done” is thereby called to aid in spreading the kingdom of God over the length and breadth of the earth.
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