



The Kingdom and Realism in Ministry

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A pastor is trained to study the scriptures in their historical setting. After wrestling with the Scripture and the theology which informs the text, the pastor turns to the people who are caught up in the tensions of the moment, and then seeks to speak the Word of the Lord to them. At some time, a pastor should attempt to articulate his or her own formal theology. If the pastor were privileged to teach Scripture at a theological seminary such as the one which publishes this journal, he or she would formulate theological convictions with great intensity. It was my privilege to teach at Luther Theological Seminary for twenty years. Upon returning to the parish ten years ago, I began to ask myself whether my formal theology was identical with my day-to-day operational theology. These pages will attempt to explore this dual relationship.

For many years I have been intrigued by a biblical concept which is rooted in Isaiah 40-66 and the way in which Saint Paul picks it up in Galatians 4. In Isaiah 49 the prophet employs the concept of Zion and Jerusalem as a woman. At times this woman is a mother whose children are in exile. Then again she is a bride or a wife whose husband has departed from her but is about to receive her unto himself again. In Isaiah 49:14 the prophet permits this woman to speak and give expression to her despondency over the immediate situation of exile. The people had been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon. Here the prophet seeks to comfort the woman through promises. He places these promises in the mouth of the Lord, who assures her that his love is greater than the love of a mother. In his mind's eye, the prophet beholds that the builders are at work back at Jerusalem after the departure of the Babylonians, who had reduced the Holy City to ruin and rubble. The prophet contends that the event of the return of the children who have been scattered in dispersion will be far greater than anyone had anticipated. There will not be room to dwell in the Jerusalem which their fathers remembered, and to which they are about to return.

I. THE KINGDOM IN ISRAEL

The woman in this passage is bewildered about a mystery. In the thought of the prophet, this woman is the people of God who are in exile. In other words, this woman is the nation that will dwell again in Judah. But the children who return

from Babylon and elsewhere to Jerusalem will be more numerous than what Zion had anticipated. The prophet places this confession in the woman's mouth: "Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these?" In Isaiah 49:22 and 23, the Lord speaks an answer to the mother who is Zion. He assures her that the kings and queens of the earth will bring these children back to Jerusalem and will carry them on their

shoulders and in their bosoms. Furthermore, these kings and queens will become foster parents in relationship to these children. We meet this same concept in the opening verses of chapter 54. Here there is a relationship of contrast between this woman as a married one, as over against this woman as a barren and desolate one. The married one is Zion before the catastrophe of 587 B.C. The barren or desolate one is Zion at the moment, in the situation of exile. The prophet summons the barren and desolate one to rejoice because of the event which is about to take place. She will have more children than the married one. However, they will not be born according to the natural process of procreation; they will be children of promise. The situation of the barren and desolate one is similar to that of Sarah, who dwelt with Abraham in tents. But when the return to Jerusalem takes place, the children will be so numerous that the tents will not be large enough. The married one is similar to Hagar in the tradition of the patriarchs, whose son was born according to the natural process of procreation.

II. HOW DOES SAINT PAUL UNDERSTAND THE KINGDOM?

The biblical God has never disclosed himself nor accomplished his purpose in a vacuum. Likewise, Saint Paul was familiar with and caught up in the events to which he was heir. Between the prophetic period and the events of the New Testament, a new kind of literature emerged with its own emphases. This intertestamental literature is called apocalyptic. It has many characteristics. For our purpose, we call attention to its distinction between *this age* (the old *aeon*) and the *age-to-come* (the new *aeon*). The world into which Jesus was born thought in terms of this dualism. Jesus began his ministry with the announcement that the *age-to-come* (the Kingdom) was breaking in upon them. When he died, it appeared that the new *aeon* would be eclipsed. It was in the events of the resurrection and Pentecost that the end of the ages proleptically entered into this world of horizontal time.

In chapter 4 of his letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul picks up Isaiah's portrait of Hagar and Sarah. He sees in Hagar a type of the covenant at Sinai. Beyond that, he equates Hagar and the law with the old *aeon* which began with an act of rebellion and is continued by Paul's rebellion. In this perspective, the Jerusalem which stood until A.D. 70 is viewed as an aspect of the old Israel. But this old Israel defected from her calling and did not become a part of the holy nation which the Lord wanted to create. Furthermore, a dynamic of the old *aeon* which activates and intensifies rebellion is the law. Sarah, on the other hand, is the barren and desolate one to whom the prophet of the exile spoke his promises. In the thought of Saint Paul, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise has begun now in the new Israel which the Risen Lord seeks to create. This new Israel is the Jerusalem which is above and which is free and is our mother. The historical expression of this Jerusalem is the church.

III. ANOTHER MODEL OF THE KINGDOM

There is another passage in Isaiah which sheds light on the biblical dualism in the whole Scripture. In Isaiah 49:24 the prophet raises the question: "Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?" In the verses that follow, the prophet gives a very positive answer to this question. In terms of the immediate situation, who are these captives, and who is this tyrant? The prey or the captives are the exiles, and the mighty one or tyrant is Babylon. The exiles ask their question out of the anguish of their own existence. The prophet

gives them a positive answer in the name of the Lord.

In terms of the listener today, who is it that is one with the captives, and who with the tyrant? An assumption of the New Testament is that the Messiah is one with the nation of Israel. The captives or the prey, then, is one with the Messiah and ultimately one with every believer. Who then is one with this mighty one—the tyrant? In Isaiah 47 Babylon represents an isolated city-state. In terms of the biblical witness as a whole, Babylon is the city of this world. Babylon represents the demonic world, as well as the forces and powers which are opposed to God. On the basis of passages like Isaiah 49, the Messiah becomes conscious of the fact that his ministry will involve miracles of exorcism. The historical Jesus becomes conscious of his mission from the Old Testament, and he is the authentic basis for the theological interpretation which the early church placed upon him. This is the central thrust of *The Riddle of the New Testament* by Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey.¹ Furthermore, out of the anguish of our own existence, we raise the question that the exiles asked: “Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?” The Scriptures have a positive answer: “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant shall be rescued. I, the Lord, shall contend in Christ with those who contend with you, and I shall save your children.”

IV. THE KINGDOM IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH

Government is an historical value. There have been moments in history when the government has lifted itself above criticism and has made itself into an absolute. Whenever something relative and historical is absolutized, the demonic enters history. In the ancient world, this happened under the rule of men like Nero, Domitian, and Diocletian. The book of Revelation understood the government of Nero and Domitian in terms of a beast with seven heads and ten horns. Furthermore, this beast was the agent of the demonic in this world. In Africa, Tertullian and Cyprian continued to understand the political state in apocalyptic terms. These are the historical roots of the Donatist movement in Africa. Within this church there were both radical and more conservative elements. The best known of the more conservative leaders was Tyconius, who had a very positive influence on Saint Augustine. There was a basic dualism about the Donatist point of view, and it made a rather definite distinction between the people of God and the political state.

¹Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (3rd ed.; London: Faber & Faber, 1947).

As the fourth century began, Constantine was converted to Christianity. In 313, Constantine in the west and Licinius, emperor in the east, issued the Edict of Milan, which gave freedom to the Christians for the first time. Under Theodosius, who ruled from 378 until 395, paganism was outlawed. This meant that Christianity had become a part of the political establishment. The historian Eusebius saw in this development a fulfillment of God’s purpose and asserted that this Constantinian and Theodosian establishment constituted the Christian times (*tempora christiana*). Now many people felt that Rome would stand forever. Under the rule of these men, the sacralization of the political establishment had taken place.

Then in 410, when the Goths pillaged Rome, many concluded that Christianity must be only a fraud. Others declared that the pagan gods had awakened and permitted this to happen to

Rome because there had been too many conversions to Christianity over the past century. It was imperative that someone attempt to speak to this situation. This is the occasion to which Saint Augustine addressed himself as he ventured to distinguish between the city of this world and the city of God. His own classic that he wrote at this time is called *The City of God*. There is a kind of dualism that pervades this work.²

The city of God, in the thinking of Saint Augustine, is the new *aeon* which has entered into this world of horizontal time. It is the new *aeon* which is hidden among real people. Its expression is the historical church. It is a dynamic that is in constant conflict with the old and is restless for change. In this world, the city of God is in endless conflict with the city of this world. Each city seeks my love and my loyalty. The two cities intersect in this world. As a believer, I live in the tension between the two of them. In his monograph, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms*, Heinrich Bornkamm points out that Luther was much indebted to Saint Augustine when he began to wrestle with the relevance of God's demands to the society of his day. This is the way Bornkamm formulated the task with which Luther struggled: "How God continues to keep alive a world which has fallen prey to death, after the new *aeon* in Christ has already been inaugurated in its midst and has become a reality in the life of Christians through the Holy Spirit."³

V. THE KINGDOM IN OUR DAY

Some years ago I wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr and asked him whether his intention, when he distinguished between "moral man and immoral society," was the same as that of Saint Augustine and Martin Luther. I had discovered by then that if I read Niebuhr's books with sufficient care so that I could ask a question that interested him, he would reply in a prompt and gracious manner. On August 26, 1961, he replied to my question that his intention was the same as that of Saint Augustine and Martin Luther, and that we would have no profound social ethic unless we made such a distinction. He proceeded to point out the danger when-

²One of the most stimulating and helpful books on this topic is R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970).

³Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 33. For a primary source, see Luther's "The Sermon on the Mount," *Luther's Works* 21 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956) 105ff.

ever we go beyond the distinction and make a separation between the two cities or the two realms of Luther.

In his books Reinhold Niebuhr elaborates his understanding of history. This is always predicated upon his understanding of human nature, as it is in every significant thinker. Niebuhr takes seriously the biblical witness that God created humankind from the dust of the earth. In this way the Scriptures affirm that I am a creature. The same Scriptures assert that the biblical God created us in his image. Furthermore, it is the person whom God created in his image to whom he gave the whole creation and said: "Have dominion over it, subdue it and use it." In other words, the image of God in Genesis 1 and 2 means the unique creative freedom that he has given to us. This is the double nature of the human condition as met within the biblical witness, i.e., that the human being is always both a creature and a kind of creator. Niebuhr points out that if we are to understand human nature as the Scriptures do, we must take this creative freedom seriously even

when it plays tricks upon us.

Against this background, Niebuhr explores the question of history. The past is constantly projecting itself into the present. It does so in a twofold way. On the one hand, the past projects itself into the present with an irrevocable finality. History can be very stubborn. There are factors in the past, as they project themselves into the present, that cannot be changed in a simple way. On the other hand, there are items that project themselves into the present with a revocable tentativity, and these can be changed. At this point, he concludes that it is urgent that we have the wisdom to distinguish between these two aspects of experience. What then is history? It is a mixture of nature and humankind's creative freedom; furthermore, this mixture is constantly projecting itself into the present in the twofold way that we have indicated. In some ways, *Faith and History* is the most biblical of Niebuhr's books.⁴ On these topics, it is most helpful.

In his writings, Niebuhr does not elaborate his doctrine of grace as fully as one would hope. Nevertheless, his understanding of grace is a most significant aspect of his thought. For him, the grace of Christ is pardon and power and is the basis of indeterminate renewals in human life. The biblical God discloses his wrath and his mercy in history, and the biblical witness asserts that we live every moment before his face. This conviction gives moral content to history. Our past will catch up with us. It also raises the question of the relation between wrath and mercy. It is not easy for the biblical God to forgive. Only as God takes our rebellion into himself, as he does in the event of Christ, is God able to forgive us. The death and resurrection of Christ are the basis of the grace that believers encounter as pardon and power. Niebuhr also attaches much importance to common grace, which is essential for renewals. By common grace, he means all the securities of the natural life that sustain people. It is against this background that Niebuhr could encounter life and history with a realism which embraced both tragedy and optimism. These convictions propelled him to set forth this aphorism, which has become well known: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."⁵

⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner, 1949).

⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Scribners, 1950) xi.

In his busy life, Reinhold Niebuhr gave serious attention to this question: How does the biblical God create justice in this world? He sought to answer this question in terms of two regulative principles. The one he called liberty, and by this he meant our God-given right to own property and develop it. He called the other regulative principle equality, and he often pointed out that the laws of Israel and the prophets had a great concern for this principle. Justice, he maintained, is created when these two factors are balanced off against each other. In the name of liberty, industry had become a strong center of power, not only in Detroit but throughout our nation. This meant that in the name of equality, labor must become another center of power. It is as the one is balanced off against the other that justice is created. Quite early he pointed out that this tension within society as a whole had become a problem right within the labor unions.

In our day, voices are raised in criticism that Niebuhr's realism is too conservative. In his book *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, Dennis P. McCann tackles this question.⁶ In a careful way, he points out the economic and political roots of liberation theology. Then he points

out the subtle ways in which salvation loses its substance in liberation theology and becomes a matter of economic and political freedom. Niebuhr, on the other hand, would affirm that economic and political deliverance are a necessary by-product of authentic salvation when taught and experienced in a given society.

Niebuhr was much aware of the criticism which was leveled against two kingdom theology and had participated in discussions of its dangers. At the same time, he openly admired the heroic stand that it had motivated in persons like Eivind Berggrav. When the Nazi conquest of Norway took place, Quisling was set up as Hitler's puppet and ruler of Norway. As the Bishop of Oslo, Berggrav also was the primate of the Norwegian Church. Quisling insisted that Berggrav persuade the clergy of Norway to become subservient to him; otherwise, he would decapitate Berggrav. This was the occasion for Berggrav's famous reply: "Here I stand; cut off my head." When he was asked what impelled him to take this stand in terms of theology, Berggrav replied that it was in terms of a theology which distinguished between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. Ever since this experience, two kingdom theology has had a positive and dynamic influence in Scandinavian circles.⁷

VI. THE KINGDOM AND MY MINISTRY

This has been an attempt to review the formal theology which I have sought to test in my parish situation. The new *aeon* that has entered into this world of horizontal time makes us restless for change. We encounter this need in our economic and political community. For example, one of the most significant items that Robert Bergland and the Agriculture Department produced was called *A Time To*

⁶Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

⁷Eivind Berggrav, *Man and State* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1951) 300 ff. For Niebuhr's review of Berggrav's book, see *Christianity and Society* 16, no. 3 (Summer, 1951) 28. Also see Torleiv Austad, "The Doctrine of God's Twofold Governance in the Norwegian Church Struggle from 1940 to 1945," *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror of Society*, ed. Ulrich Duchrow (Geneva: LWF Department of Studies, 1977) 84ff.

Choose. In this document, Bergland asserts that corporate farms will produce nearly all foods by the end of this century unless major changes are made in tax laws and subsidy programs that endanger family farms. Not only has this warning been ignored by the present administration, but it represents the very direction in which the administration is moving. Centuries ago the prophet Isaiah made the same observation and expressed it in these words: "Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room...in the midst of the land" (Isaiah 5:8). On the one hand, our realism prompts us to respect a concern for financial accountability; but on the other hand, it propels us to struggle for human values in every possible way.

All my life, I have been a part of the institutional church. I no longer attempt to defend the church as institution. I know that I have contributed my part to the sordidness of this institution. In baptism, I was incorporated into the new *aeon* which has broken in upon us. The Lord is concerned about the structure of my existence in this new *aeon*. As justice is the norm of the old *aeon*, so love is the standard and norm of the new *aeon*. In Matthew 5, 6, and 7; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 13; and 1 John 4, the biblical authors elaborate the nature of this love.

Furthermore, there is something unique about the biblical exhortation. The demands of God are rooted in his mighty acts. The Word of the Lord that haunts me is this: “Become now in life what you already are in Christ.” In one sense, my baptism initiates me into an impossible task. Niebuhr liked to call the norm of love God’s “impossible possibilities.” In other words, if I do not take this norm of love seriously, I am a fake who has ceased to strive to live out my baptism. Niebuhr always pointed out, however, that I cannot take this norm into my public life in a simple and direct way.

The biblical norm for the economic and political community is justice. Now justice is not as ultimate as love. Justice will calculate, whereas love will empty itself. Justice is arrived at through compromise. We are caught up in the midst of tremendous change. For this reason, what is arrived at as justice in the name of compromise may soon become an injustice. For this reason, justice must be informed by love if it is to remain strong and vibrant. While love is not relevant in a simple and direct way to our economic and political problems, ultimately it is desperately important. It always sits in judgment on justice and inspires it to greater works.

As a pastor, I am involved in many relationships. Some of them are intimate and private, and others are much more public. These relationships give meaning and purpose to my life. At the same time, they can be a frustration. I am the one who makes them a frustration. In many subtle ways I seek to dominate the communities of which I am a part. In honest moments I discover that this is at the heart and center of my frustrations. It is the intention of biblical and historical realism to illuminate these aspects of experience. On the one hand, the biblical witness affirms that God made me, is the source of my life and the true end of my existence. Yet, in my rebellion, I have made myself into an end of its own. No wonder I am so anxious to secure my life on my terms. This stubborn inclination comes to expression in all my relationships. On the other hand, I can face the future with optimism.

The basis of this optimism is centered in the Kingdom. In a hidden way the Kingdom has entered into this world of horizontal time. Its dynamic is grace,

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which we encounter as pardon and power. This grace can melt my pride and make me so strong in the inner person that I can begin to absorb and adjust to the experiences that threaten me. In unexpected moments I have discovered that some people who threaten me have begun quietly to pull back and push me forward. This has given me a feeling of security, as I also am to become an instrument of security to others. This is what Niebuhr would call common grace. We meet this aspect of grace throughout all of life. This is why Niebuhr saw the mystery of grace as the basis of indeterminate renewals in human life.

Niebuhr had a favorite Bible passage. It was Romans 14:7-8: “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” On the basis of this passage, he would point out that the biblical witness attaches us to this world and the communities of which we are a part. It propels us to an earnest concern for justice. It is our duty and the clear demand of the biblical God that we engage in the struggle for justice. On the other hand, the Kingdom gives us a sense of detachment from this world. It reminds us that we are resident aliens in this world. It seeks to make us grateful but not complacent in the midst of our relationships. Without these convictions, I would find it difficult to engage in any kind of ministry.