

Sharing in the Birth Pangs of God's New Creation

Theological Reflections on Serving in Disaster Areas

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Introduction

The United Methodist Church, along with much of the church worldwide, is experiencing a time of spiritual disturbance. This is good. Spiritual disturbance reminds us who is really in charge, and provides us with a salutary turning upside down and inside out. The Bible is full of such examples. Who would have thought that Gideon would accomplish his task with a force of 300 rather than the 32,000 who initially volunteered? Yet God showed that 300 who know what they are doing are far more effective than 32,000 with merely good intentions (Judges 7:2-7). Who would have thought that the crisis of God's redemption of the world would come, not from the intellect of Athens or the power of Rome, but the backwater of Jerusalem? And not even from the city but, as Orlando Costas titles his classic book, at the place of execution outside the gate.¹ Or who would have thought that the New Creation inaugurated by this prophet, priest and king² would be entrusted in the first instance to a motley group of men who deserted him while the women stood by him?

The Holy Spirit does not, however, disturb us just for the sake of disturbing us. The Third Person of the Trinity is no mischief maker, stirring things up to get some divine amusement at our expense. There is always a purpose to spiritual unrest. It is a way of pointing us in new directions, to give us fresh and exciting compass headings. These will surely emerge as we engage together in this time of what John Wesley described as *Christian Conference*, "right conversation, always in grace, seasoned with salt, meet to minister grace to the hearers."³

But first, it will be helpful to identify some of the ways in which we are being disturbed. Certainly those involved in Disaster Relief cannot feel undisturbed by events in recent years, and as if to make the point incontrovertibly, with all the preparations for this gathering at their most intensive, there comes the Florida tornado – at night time, wouldn't you know. So we will look at how we are being unsettled, and then at some possible compass headings toward new horizons and new hopes.

¹ Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

² Sermon, "The Law Established through Faith, Discourse II," in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2, Sermons II: 34-70*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp.37f.

³ In *The Large Minutes*, published during John Wesley's lifetime as a summary of Methodist discipline, he identified *Christian Conference* as an instituted means of grace, asking his preachers: "Are you convinced how important and how difficult it is to 'order your conversation right?'" (*The Works of John Wesley, Jackson Edition*: 8:323).

Disturbance #1: “Programitis” and the Body of Christ

One major upheaval, especially for those of us who are United Methodists, is what on earth is happening to our oneness in the Body of Christ. Let it quickly be said that United Methodist congregations are noted for the warmth of their fellowship, the openness of their hearts, minds and doors, and that as a church we are the envy of other denominations for our connectional polity and programs. In so many ways there is ample testimony that “United” is no empty word.

At the same time, however, there is a growing concern about theological differences, social issues, ordinations, and even murmurs of separation. There are many reasons for this, but let me lift up one, best described as the pitfall of *programitis*. This does not refer to programs *per se*, but rather the programmatic climate in which so many of our congregations function today. While the last forty years have seen some of the best written, best executed, and best promoted church programs surely of all time, too many of our present resources seem to be utilized, if not designed, to attract the short-term participation of church members in the hope of developing or enriching their long-term discipleship.

The pitfall is that these programs tend to target particular constituencies, and often prove to be a respectable means of procrastination over the real long-term challenge of discipleship, namely, to follow the commandments of Jesus. The teachings of this young Jewish rabbi are not really all that difficult, but they are certainly inconvenient, and few church leaders today wish to advocate something that involves discipline and even drudgery, neither of which can be successfully marketed in a church dominated by the cultural criteria of one-stop shopping and customer satisfaction.

Thus we find it more conducive and comfortable to keep looking for additional programs rather than following the Risen Christ. We prefer to talk about him rather than walk with him. Instead of the oneness of spirit that is intuitive and spontaneous when we are colleagues of Christ in the world, we find ourselves toiling to achieve unity -- efforts that can distract from or even undermine our discipleship. Our unity should be a gracious gift from God received in joyful obedience, but we labor like a Frankenstein to stitch and bolt together the various constituencies of our programmatic body parts, which we then present to God with the outrageous request for the spiritual voltage necessary to give it life. “Give *this* thing life?” says the Holy Spirit incredulously. You must be joking!

We should not be surprised, therefore, that God, as with the City of Babel, is judging these self-serving efforts by depriving us of a common language (Genesis 11:1-9). Notwithstanding the expertise of our theologians, our biblical scholars, our ethicists, our pastoral pundits, and our leadership gurus, we find ourselves talking past each other. I was in an ecumenical discussion group recently, when the question was raised by a Roman Catholic nun about the new birth. “I have never really understood what you Methodists mean by being *born again*,” she said. I find a great deal in common when we talk about the spiritual life, but not about your conversion experiences I have always believed that I was born again at my baptism.” “Not to worry,” I replied “A great many of us Methodists don’t understand the new birth *or* our baptism.”

So the Holy Spirit is disturbing us and moving mysteriously among us, prompting, cajoling, prodding, pressing us to leave off trying to create the Body of Christ, and instead accept what Christ has already given us, pointing out in the process that his body is by no means limited to the church.

Disturbance #2: The Call to Discipleship

As our Bishops call us to make disciples, it is becoming clear that we first of all need to rescue the word from the loose and sometimes thoughtless way in which it has been appropriated to promote church membership recruitment. Going back to Scripture – never a bad idea, but in this instance a particularly good one – we should note that there were two tracks to Jesus’ ministry. First, he ministered to the people. He fed them, he healed them, he taught them, and he loved them, unconditionally, grace upon grace. But his tone changed when he talked about being his disciple. To answer *this* call meant counting the cost, being prepared for ridicule, rejection, persecution, sacrifice of family and friends, and even the surrender of one’s life (Matthew 10:34-39). In fact, there were memorable occasions when he discouraged people from even contemplating such a step (Luke 14:25-33, 18:18-25).

This does much to explain the nature and purpose of our congregations. The great majority of church members are like the people who followed Jesus in their hundreds and thousands, to be fed and healed and taught and loved. This is what happens week by week in our churches, and we must extend grace upon grace to our people just as Jesus did, not least because it is his grace we are sharing.

But also in every congregation there are those who are called to a deeper, more disciplined commitment to Christ, who *are* ready to count the cost, and who feel short-changed by their pastoral leaders if they are not given the opportunity to answer such a call. We must learn how to recognize this distinction among our church members without feeling superior on the one hand, or awkward on the other. The distinction is self-evident, of course, in the ritual of welcoming new church members, where the cost of discipleship as explained by Jesus is not even mentioned. As we know very well, to do so would be to lose not only new members, but also most of our existing ones. However, this should not deter us from extending the invitation to a more disciplined walk with Christ, frequently and consistently, so that the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives can be recognized, affirmed and, most important of all, released.

It is reassuring that those of us assembled here have clearly made such a commitment and taken this step beyond church membership.⁴ Accordingly, we will be able to talk freely about what it means to toil alongside Jesus during the heat of the day. We will also share the intimacy of those evenings at Bethany, with good company, good victuals, and the deep conversation that drop-ins cannot really appreciate.

But with this level of discipleship comes the cautionary word that we are still part of the Body of Christ along with everyone else in the church. We sometimes hear of clergy who act like “lone rangers” in ministry, but there are “lone ranger” laity as well. A disciplined discipleship does not bring favored access to God, but rather the privilege and the obligation to labor with Christ in tending his larger flock in the church, and thence his wider flock in the world (John 10:16).

⁴ This was the theme of a Wesleyan Institute sponsored by the General Board of Discipleship and the Council for Accountable Discipleship in September, 2006. Another Wesleyan Institute sponsored by the CFAD and the Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church on the theme “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ” will be held at Klein UMC in Houston, Texas, in October, 2007. For more information, see www.gbod.org/small_group/cd.

Disturbance #3: The Mystery of the Gospel

This next disturbance goes even further. Those of us gathered here, committed to reaching out to those most affected by disaster, are at the cutting edge of discipleship because we know better than most that the gospel is a profound mystery. Those involved in UMCOR and UMVIM understand that God's redemption in Christ is much greater than our personal salvation. Yes, Christ atones for human sin, yours and mine, but his atonement is not limited to human sin, quite simply because human sin is not the only thing wrong with planet Earth. Too much else in the world is incompatible with the loving, parental God revealed to us in Jesus. Too much of our planet contradicts the house rules of the Kingdom that he promised, the coming Reign of God, on earth as in heaven (Luke 11:2-4).

Let me illustrate. Some of us may recall from the 1980s the news reports of a young girl in Midland, Texas, who fell down a deep well. The only way to rescue her was to dig a parallel well, and then reach through to lift her out. This took several days, during which there was maximum press coverage, and tremendous rejoicing as the girl was rescued, a little battered and bruised, but otherwise unharmed. Many prayers of thanksgiving were offered to the good and gracious God who had answered so many prayers.

That same week another little girl in New York City was beaten to death by her foster father. This too received press coverage, including the subsequent prosecution not only of the foster father, but also of the mother who herself had been systematically beaten, but had apparently done nothing to prevent the suffering of her child. The New York Times published a picture of the girl taken at her school. She is staring into the nothingness of her life; just glad to be in the safety of the classroom that she would have to leave that evening, and each evening, for what awaited her at home. Did the girl in Midland have some inside track with God? Was the girl in New York more of a sinner, and loved less by her heavenly Father? Did either of them know Jesus Christ as her personal Savior?

History is likewise full of such anomalies and mysteries. To give just one instance, a little-known vignette from the Battle of Borodino, waged outside the city of Moscow in 1812 between the invading army of Napoleon and the defending army of the Tsar. As an aside, when I was a high school exchange student in Williamsville, New York in 1955, the history teacher saw an opportunity for some humor at my expense. "Tell, us Mr. Watson, about the War of 1812." I replied that Napoleon had set out for Moscow with 600,000 troops, and made good progress, finally winning the Battle of Borodino . . ." Mr. Schnirrel (I still remember his name) interjected, "I mean the real War of 1812." I replied, "You mean there was another one? Not in our history books." "Of course not," retorted Mr. Schnirrel. "You lost." I realized afterwards that this was my introduction to corporate sin!

But I digress. Napoleon occupied Moscow after the battle, and then waited for the Russian surrender, which never came. The Russian generals had torched most of the city before retreating, and knew that the weather would soon defeat Napoleon. Sure enough, the French had to withdraw westward with winter setting in, and as they passed through the wreckage and slaughter of Borodino, the army making little noise except the ominous clinking of horses and weapons, they heard a cry for help from a soldier who had been wounded in the battle weeks earlier and left behind for dead. He could not walk, but had managed to survive by scavenging scraps of rotting food and drinking from brackish and bloody pools of water. We can imagine the emotion of being reunited with his comrades, but in fact his rescue was

short-lived. Along with most of the army, he did not survive the journey back to France. Out of 600,000 who had invaded Russia, only 20,000 returned, of whom only 2,000 were able to fight again.

We could illustrate with countless similar stories, including battles of the American Civil War, to say nothing of Vietnam, Iraq, Bosnia and genocides like Darfur. But the point is the same: this particular Frenchman's suffering. Weeks of hunger, thirst, agonizing wounds, the joy of being rescued, then finally death by exposure. Was he a worse sinner than anyone else? We have no idea. Did he know Jesus Christ as his personal Savior? Again, we don't have the answer. But if we ask the more profound theological question, "Was Jesus Christ with him in his suffering?" the answer has to be a resounding Yes.

Disturbance #4: Pressing Questions for a Parental God

Which brings us to the next disturbance. The technical term is *theodicy*, usually expressed in the familiar questions, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" or "Why does God allow so much suffering in the world?"

These are questions that go beyond theological or philosophical abstraction. The God whom Jesus revealed to us is a heavenly *Father*, whose parental instincts are touched even by the death of a sparrow (Luke 12:6-7). So if we deal with earthly parents who cause or allow the suffering or death of a child by locking them away for a very long time, or worse, how should we regard a heavenly Father who allows tens of thousands of children to die each day?

The philosophical response, of course, is that humanity has freedom and responsibility, with the theological *addendum* that these attributes are given to us by God. But this is a patently inadequate answer, as anyone who has worked in the aftermath of disaster or disease or famine or war can readily attest. To begin with, most of the victims of this so-called "human responsibility" have little if any say in the matter. I cut my pastoring teeth in the inner city of East St. Louis, Illinois in the early 1970s, as it was beginning to experience the serious consequences of social, economic, racial and urban neglect. I first met my Board Chair as he was painting his house to bring it up to par for the realtor's FHA loan. He had lived in that house for 30 years, had loved his wife in that house, had brought up his family in that house, and was selling it for \$10,000. He vowed never again to live in a house. Nor did he. He bought a trailer.

My lay leader was one of those salt-of-the-earth Christian women who nurtured countless classes of youngsters in Sunday School, brokered innumerable yard sales, and preached a pretty good sermon if the pastor was sick. She had never married, and lived in the old family house, full of memorabilia. One night, at 3 a.m., she was awakened by three young men breaking down her bedroom door. She did not have a car, and they thought no one was at home. She screamed so loudly they got scared and ran away. Shortly afterwards she sold the house, all 4,000 square feet of it, for \$7,000. To explain to people like this the socio-economic-racial-urban problems of an inner city – very real problems, let me hasten to add – would have been like saying to residents of New Orleans after Katrina that they should not have been living there in the first place. In other words, abstractions in the face of realities completely miss the point.

The psalmist said it better a long time ago: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest” (Psalm 22:1-2). The placing of the 23rd Psalm immediately following merely compounds the mystery: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” To which we might add, with all due respect, “On a good day, maybe.”

The ramifications are endless. We have only to ask what an earthly parent would do on seeing a curious child poking a finger into a live electrical socket. The freedom of that child would be taken away very quickly, no questions asked. What would earthly parents do if their child was being tormented by the neighborhood bullies, lunch money stolen, clothes muddied and torn, nose bloodied? Would they reason with the bullies, assuring them of respect for their personhood, expressing the hope that they would not feel oppressed by this parental intervention? Would they not rather accost the bullies, and impress on them by whatever means at their disposal that picking on small children is not nice?

Why, then, does this parental God not intervene more often and more directly? Why do the naughty people of this world have such a good time? And more, if this parental God is also the Creator of planet Earth, to say nothing of the universe, why is this corner of the cosmos such a volatile mixture of dependability and unpredictability? Why do so many millions each year cry out with the psalmist, “Why have you forsaken me?”

Disturbance #5: A Protestant Blind Spot

Questions such as these have tended to be a blind spot of Protestant theology. The Reformation was initially a trumpet blast of freedom against an authoritarian church, but the watchwords that emerged – *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* – over time have rendered the incarnation of Jesus Christ a subjective rather than an objective belief. The cross has become predominantly a means of grace for sinners, rendering the wider mysteries of pain, suffering, and death incidental to the saving of individual souls. And planet Earth, that blue and white jewel of the Milky Way, has become a mere staging post for those fortunate enough to be chosen by God for eternal life, or prudent enough to cut themselves a salvific deal, depending on one’s theological perspective.

This personalized concept of salvation has turned many Protestant churches into religious organizations remarkably similar to the Roman Church against which the original Protestants protested. And in the religious culture of North America it deforms countless congregations, founded by the sacrificial labor of our spiritual forebears, into emporiums of customer satisfaction.

The cultural consumerisms are familiar enough: “We know you have a choice when you fly, so thank you for flying our airline.” “We know you have a choice when you shop, so thank you for using our store.” But they are also to be found in our churches: “We know you have a choice when it comes to salvation, so thank you for choosing Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. And thank you for choosing our particular ecclesial franchise to exercise your choice.”

A few cheap shots in that last paragraph perhaps, and a modicum of exaggeration; but also, alas, a measure of truth. Which is why the Holy Spirit is telling us, at the outset of this new century and in a world vastly and irrevocably changed by the photographs taken through the Hubble telescope, that it is time to break out of our anthropocentric view of Christ’s atonement, and to see afresh the awesome scope of God’s redemption.

Charles Wesley put it well:

Let earth and heaven combine,
Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine,
The Incarnate Deity,
Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.⁵

Just as human sin, disastrous though it is, is not all that is wrong with planet Earth, so our personal salvation, important though it is, is not the extent of God's redemption. Listen again to the words of Charles Wesley, in the original of his famous Christmas hymn:

Hark how all the welkin rings,
“Glory to the King of Kings,
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
Universal Nature, say,
“Christ the Lord is born today!”⁶

I would venture to say that none can sing this better than those involved in Disaster Response. It is not only a matter of joining with the psalmist in protest against a God who allows so much pain, suffering, and death.

It is also the question of whether this God, whose world manifests so many contradictions of love and hate, of goodness and evil, of creation and destruction, of life and death, all endlessly side by side, whether *this* God can be trusted.

In answer to our questions, our protest, and yes, our rage, God asks us to wait and to be patient. The parable of the weeds among the wheat is the closest we have to an explanation for the time being (Mt

5 Nativity Hymns, 1746, in John and Charles Wesley: Selected Writings and Hymns, ed. & intro. Frank Whaling. The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p.282.

6 Hymns and Sacred Poems, Part II, 1739. In John and Charles Wesley: Selected Writings and Hymns, ed. & intro. Frank Whaling. The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p.279. The word *welkin* comes from the Old English, meaning the sky, the firmament, the vault of heaven.

13:24-30). The laborers, you will recall, wanted to pull up the weeds that an enemy had planted, but the householder would not allow it, lest the wheat be uprooted as well. "Wait," he said, "until harvest, when it will all be sorted out." To which our response might well be, "What kind of an answer is that? Why was an enemy allowed to plant weeds in the first place?"

"I cannot tell you yet," says our heavenly Father. "You're going to have to trust me." "Trust *you*, with your track record, dispensing pleasure and pain, life and death, indiscriminately? Why should we trust *you*?" The final answer is unanswerable, and is the very heart of the gospel:

"Why should you trust me? Here's my Son."

Impeccable Divine Credentials

In the Incarnation God makes conclusively clear that the mystery of the gospel is not a game being played by a capricious deity. Jesus Christ came to share in the mystery of planet Earth, and to experience not only the joy of living (he was obviously a welcome guest at weddings and parties) but also the worst that a wayward planet and a twisted human race can dispense. This daring act of redemption ultimately cost the Son of God his life, and until all things are revealed – which they will be – we have these impeccable divine credentials. Moreover, as he joins with us in this gospel mystery, Jesus asks for our help and our partnership. Remember, before he died for us, a lot of little boys in Bethlehem died for him.⁷

The *Letter to the Romans* states it succinctly in what is really the Gospel according to Paul:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:18-25).

And this, with its promise of redemption for creation as well as humanity, is the glorious Good News of the Gospel we can take with us into the worst of disaster, disease, depravity, and despair. Katrina is not God's last word, any more than Auschwitz.

⁷ Emilio Castro, "The WCC's Ecumenical Affirmation: Mission & Evangelism," in *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium*, ed. Wm. Jenkinson and H. O'Sullivan, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, p.296.

New Compass Headings

What does this mean, then, for those of us who answer the call of Christ to serve in Disaster Response? Let me suggest three ways in which the Holy Spirit may be providing us with new compass headings: as a church, as disciples of Jesus Christ, and as members of the human race.

Compass Heading #1: This is God's mission, not ours.

Our response to this compass heading might well be, "We know *that*." But do we? The source of our spiritual disturbance comes into focus when we ask, "How much of what we are doing in and through the church is really worth the life of the Son of God?" If the question tends to stop us in our tracks, it should not. The heart of the gospel is a message of incomparable good news, that God became one of us, sharing in the mystery of our sin, suffering, evil, and death, in order to redeem planet Earth. This is why, when we suffer, or experience the suffering of others, we are also deeply at one with Jesus Christ.

Put differently, the church belongs to Jesus Christ, and he must be at the center of our message of good news, the bedrock of our mission and ministry.

This compass heading is important, not only because of the climate of religious consumerism in which we endeavor to be faithful to Christ, but also the idols of action and success that mark our culture. If we view the well-being of the church as more important than the coming Kingdom of God, then we have parted company with the crucified Christ, because the Kingdom was his consuming priority.

Likewise if we shape our mission, our ministry, even our service, to gratify or fulfill our members rather than to follow the risen Christ, then again we have misunderstood the gospel. As seasoned veterans know only too well, mission trips and disaster response cannot be sustained by the euphoria of goodwill or the heightened well-being of fulfilled personhood. There must be a constant flow of grace, and a disciplined use of the means of grace.

Compass Heading #2: A new partnership between clergy and laity

As we have already noted, when we accept the call of Christ to be his disciples, it becomes clear that salvation and discipleship are not the same thing. Salvation is the free gift of God in Christ, received by grace through faith. Discipleship is what we then do for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and this takes a lifetime to learn.

Our Wesleyan doctrine of grace tells us that to believe in Christ is not discipleship *per se*, but merely the *beginning* of discipleship. Of course, the precondition of being a disciple is to accept Jesus Christ for who he is, and to accept ourselves for who we are. The very word connotes a relationship rather than a mere adherence or belief, a relationship built on learning the mind of a particular teacher through dedication and commitment to his teachings. This means that we grow in grace as we walk with Christ, and accordingly there are those in our congregations who will become mature in their discipleship, and whose particular contribution to the church will be to help their fellow Christians also grow in grace.

This was the genius of early Methodism, and it is plain spiritual common sense. It certainly is not religious elitism or virtuosity. Those who have grown in grace have things to share with those who are at an earlier stage in their discipleship. They manifest wisdom tempered by love, courage tempered by

justice, and their role is to make sure that Christ is at the center of their congregations' mission and ministry.

As with the first compass heading, this may seem quite obvious, until we ask how this kind of leadership is to be fostered. It then becomes clear that leaders in discipleship are much more likely to be laity than clergy. Indeed, if we deprive the laity of this leadership role, discipleship becomes just another facet of clergy leadership, which will tend to center on the well-being of the congregation rather than the mission of God, not least because we have forced our pastors to make this their professional priority. From this clergy-led perspective, laity are the visible means of feeding our *programitis*, and in the candor of *Christian Conference* it must also be said that many laity are quite content to have it so.

Orlando Costas described this situation as “a clergy-dominated church with a laity-dominated clergy,”⁸ and it is the sort of power struggle the Holy Spirit is urging us to outgrow. We must rather seek a partnership in which the priority of the clergy is to lead the church in preaching and teaching the gospel, and the priority of the laity is to lead the church in discipleship. Together in the Body of Christ they can exercise pastoral power in the true sense, namely, shaping people's lives according to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. This does not mean dictating to people, nor yet does it mean legalistic guidelines. It does, however, mean an intentional guidance of people, nurturing them in the spiritual life, and helping them to practice the teachings of Jesus, gently, firmly, and lovingly. Such a partnership might recover not only our Methodist tradition of mutual accountability, but also our pristine dynamic as a missionary movement.

Compass Heading #3: Joining with Christ in the redemption of planet Earth

All of which brings us to our final compass heading, the redemption of planet Earth. In considering this it is helpful to note the distinction made by Mortimer Arias between the gospel *about* Jesus and the gospel *of* Jesus.⁹ The gospel *about* Jesus emphasizes his person and his priestly work, bringing people to an awareness of their sin and the need for repentance and conversion. While this is a vital and necessary dimension of our good news, it becomes disproportionately personal if it is not balanced by the gospel *of* Jesus, the announcement of the coming Reign of God. Without this balance, the obligations of discipleship are given a secondary role at the outset of a person's Christian pilgrimage -- a habit-forming mind set that often proves to be a serious handicap for the mission of God and the ministry of the church.

By contrast, giving equal measure to the coming Reign of God perforce brings us back to the mystery of the gospel. Were it not a mystery, Christians would be prime candidates for liability under the laws of truth in advertising. After all, Jesus' words carried the power, not only of future promise, but also a present breaking in of God's salvation. His announcement in the synagogue at Nazareth was that of a

8 Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, p.79.

9 Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp.8ff.

new age, a new order, that would bring to fulfillment the promise of God's righteousness:¹⁰ A New Age when time and eternity would be fused into a glorious New Creation (Rev 21:1-4); when there would be neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal 3:28); when the wolf would dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the lion eat straw like the ox (Is 11:6-7); when everyone would know God, from the least to the greatest (Jer 31:34); when justice would roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24); when there would be no more sound of weeping, nor cries of distress; when all children would live beyond infancy, and all old people live out their days; when those who build houses would live in them, not others; when those who plant vineyards would eat of them, not others (Is 65:20-5).

One cursory glance around the world as it is today immediately raises questions about such pronouncements -- unless, that is, the gospel is a deeply mysterious promise, a declaration of what will one day come to pass, accompanied by a foretaste of sufficient richness that the promise rings true; a vision of such fullness and glory that it plumbs the depths of the human spirit with the grace of the Holy Spirit. How will this kingdom come to pass? We do not know. When is this *shalom* to be realized? We do not know that either. But that it *will* come to pass we are impelled to announce with certainty and tenacity, all worldly indifference, hostility, and charges of irrationality notwithstanding. After all, inebriated behavior was the first Christian credential (Acts 2:13).

When we emphasize our personal relationship with Christ to the neglect of this proclamation, there is only one thing to be done with his vision of the Kingdom: we internalize it spiritually. There is of course a profound sense in which the Kingdom of God must be within us if we are to announce it with integrity. But to internalize it to the detriment of its social, global, and cosmic dimensions, is the very blind spot of Protestantism we identified earlier.

Of course the promise of this coming Reign of God makes no sense to the world the way it is. It means that we have to go out on a limb to announce the impossible and affirm the incredible. But that is precisely what we have been called to do; and more, it is precisely what will get us a hearing among those with ears to hear. Just as the promise of this Kingdom is deeply mysterious, so is the response it evokes. Yes, there is resistance and opposition, especially from the powers and principalities of this world. But there is also acceptance when and where we least expect it. The ultimate mystery of the gospel is that the people who have the most right to rage and protest against God, who have lived with little and seen it swept away, who often live with death as their closest companion, will respond to the fullness of this good news far more readily and profoundly than to elusive fantasies of human fulfillment. Those who mock this vision of hope as "pie in the sky" have never taken the time to get to know the people they make such a fuss about serving.

The fact is that the coming Reign of God, with its love and joy and peace and justice, touches people at the deepest level. The vision that the earth will be as full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea takes humanity out of itself and into the awesome cosmos of its Creator (Is 11:8). By the same token, the promise that one day all will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest (Jer 31:34) takes

¹⁰ M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), p.120.

the church out of itself and into a world that God has created and is restoring to its proper place in this glorious cosmos.

This is where the Holy Spirit is directing us to take part, not only as members of the church, not only as Christian disciples, but as fellow human beings with our sisters and brothers everywhere, preparing for the return of Christ, when he will hand over to his heavenly Father a fully redeemed planet Earth. Our supreme privilege will be to have helped with this in some small way.

John Wesley once said, "I look upon all the world as my parish."¹¹ Frederick Herzog went further: "The world is not our parish -- our parish is the world."¹²

11 The Works of John Wesley, Volume 19: Journal and Diaries II (1738-1743), edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p.67.

12 Cited in David Lowes Watson, God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) , p.118.