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Defining the Kingdom

OVERVIEW

As we have seen, Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God. He described the Kingdom in parables and similes (see Mt 13 and Mk 4) and in concepts like life, glory, joy, and light. Among theologians we still find a naive helplessness when it comes to defining the Kingdom of God. The best biblical description is given in Paul:

> For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).

Some authors regard this text as the only definition of the Kingdom ever attempted in the entire New Testament. The constant danger has been to interpret these words exclusively in a spiritual sense and overlook that its basic concepts like "righteousness, peace, and joy" are equally meant for the life of the Christian in the here and now. In the words of Viviano:

> Strangely, the closest the Bible ever comes to a definition is found where, by all rights, it should not be found, in Rom 14:17. This verse is usually misunderstood to refer exclusively to private, individual, interior, purely spiritual blessings such as a righteous standing of the individual before God, peace of mind and heart due to forgiveness of sins, the joy of the redeemed child. But, while those blessings are not to be excluded, they do not exhaust or even do full justice to the message of these words. After all, peace means primarily the opposite of war, the tranquillity of order, social order; justice means justice, the virtue proper to social relations; and joy, although it has an individual dimension to it, can mean a rejoicing precisely in the blessings brought by peace and justice.[1]

Although Paul uses the symbol *Kingdom of God* only fourteen times (Matthew uses it fifty-five times), the Kingdom remains of major importance in his entire preaching. His use of this symbol should be taken as basically the same as Jesus'. Paul usually translates and expresses the phrase *Kingdom of God* with the "dynamic equivalent" expression "Jesus is Lord."[2] This baptismal profession uniquely expresses the all-pervasive and dynamic sovereignty of Christ now present in the church and in the whole of creation. A number of scholars, therefore, maintain that the phrase, *Kingdom of God*, is not only the center of the synoptics but the center of the whole New Testament, despite the less frequent literal use of the expression.[3]

Concerning Paul's definition of the Kingdom in Romans 14:17, Albert Schweitzer called it "a creed for all times."[4] In his writings, Paul tends to reserve the phrase to refer to the Kingdom in its future aspect. Only here in Romans 14:17 and 1 Corinthians 4:20 does it refer to the present moment. The three qualities (righteousness or justice, peace, and joy) he lists are all important concepts for him. The concluding words, "in the Holy Spirit," are to be attached to all three words.[5] With righteousness (justice), peace, and joy, Paul describes the content of the Kingdom of God, which he sees as already concretely present in the eschatological community.[6] We might call these three characteristics the fundamental values of the Kingdom. The phrase could be seen as a rule of faith or Christian conduct. Black quite rightly says that the

> Kingdom of God is virtually here "regula dei" (like *regula fidei*), as in the rabbinical idea of taking on oneself the "yoke" of the Kingdom of God. In other words, it is here a spiritual absolute, though naturally also eschatologically conceived.[7]

With this brief background in mind, it should not be difficult to discover parallels in Jesus' message, although expressed in a different vocabulary. Some of these include the following: (1) Matthew 6:25-33 and Luke 12:22-31, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink. . . . Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness"; (2) The "yoke" theme as found in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." This sentence brings to mind the rabbinical phrase, "to take upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of God"; (3) the last judgment (Mt 25) as examined in the light of the Kingdom values. Johnston sees the last verdict of Matthew 25:46 as related to the justice demands of the Kingdom now. He writes:

> The ethical imperative that imposes itself on the hearer is that the duty to be kind to the poor, the outcast, the prisoner, and the disadvantaged is for this present life.[8]

The Kingdom, defined in a brief formula, is nothing other than justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are not just feelings or sentiments but realities to be implemented in this world.[9] We might rightly call these three characteristics the fundamental values of the Kingdom. "Striving for the Kingdom of God" or "taking on the yoke," in the words of Paul means, therefore, nothing else than to commit oneself daily to the values of the Kingdom. Just as the pious in the Old Testament would commit themselves daily to the great Shema and in doing so would "take upon themselves the yoke of the Kingdom" so the disciple of Jesus is asked to commit himself or herself to the same Kingdom by living for the values of justice, peace, and joy.

JUSTICE

The literature on the issue of justice in recent years is overwhelming. Nonetheless, justice as a biblical concept could best be translated as *right relations*. These relations extend in four directions: to God, to oneself, to one's neighbor both as individual and as part of society, and to creation as a whole. To be just means first to respect all of one's relationships with others; namely, in the family, in the clan, in the land, in the world, and in nature. There is justice when everyone respects his or her commitment to others and when everyone is respected and treated fairly in society. Justice in the Bible is therefore primarily a matter of relationship:

> To live in Old Testament terms is to be open to relationships. For the Israelite death is not simply the cessation of life but the end of a relation to Yahweh, to fellow Israelites and to the land. In most general terms justice is fidelity to this threefold relationship by which life is maintained.[10]

Or, in other words:

> Justice in the Bible is preeminently a relational bond which links persons together in a community of mutual responsibility and mutual rights. It is the prime characteristic of the Covenant relationship which binds God to the people of Israel and the people to each other.[11]

The scale on which the justice of the whole society is weighed is the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the aliens. When they are exploited and oppressed, neither worship of God nor knowledge of God can be true religion.[12]

Justice and Worship

The issue of justice in the Old Testament is often linked with the question of true worship. The relationship of justice between the human being and neighbor, on the one hand, and between the human being and God, on the other, easily come into conflict within the context of worship. Worship of God can conceal deficiencies in relationships with fellow human beings. The prophets, in no way against worship as such, uncovered and attacked the discrepancy between the worshiper's devotion and his or her concrete behavior toward a neighbor in dire need. The only worship pleasing to Yahweh is one that is integrated into a cohesive whole, consisting of a just relationship with God, one that would affect social life globally.

The underlying argument runs like this. In worship one turns to a God whom one believes that one knows. To turn to Yahweh and to express one's devotion becomes a lie if this worship is carried out while ignoring the essential connection between knowing Yahweh and doing justice. How can anyone dare to turn to Yahweh in devotion and in search of help while oppressing and exploiting his or her neighbor? And what is worse, to believe that such exploitation will go unnoticed? This connection between knowing Yahweh and practicing justice is expressed in the famous text of Jeremiah 22:16, which equates knowledge of Yahweh with doing justice:

> He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
> then it was well.
> Is not this to know me?
> says the LORD.

The critique of the prophets is located here. It is directed precisely against elaborate liturgical feasts, the construction of altars and temples, the practice of fasting, and of pilgrimages to traditional shrines. These are no longer seen as expressing true religion. Rather, they are used to avoid the real issues and to soothe the conscience by believing that Yahweh might genuinely be pleased with this kind of relationship. Isaiah writes:

> What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
> says the LORD;
> I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
> and the fat of fed beasts; . . .
> Bringing offerings is futile;
> incense is an abomination to me. . . .
> Your new moons and your appointed festivals
> my soul hates; . . .

> learn to do good;
> seek justice,
> rescue the oppressed,
> defend the orphan,
> plead for the widow (Is 1:11-17).

In summary, we could say that according to the prophets, knowledge of Yahweh depends on the practice of justice. God cannot be deceived by sacrifice and worship. Justice toward one's neighbor is the primary human responsibility and, therefore, of first importance, even before the duty of worship.[13]

W. Brueggemann, in his article "Voices of the Night—Against Justice," expresses it this way:

> In biblical faith, *the doing of justice* is the primary expectation of God. Everything else by way of ethical norm and Covenantal requirement derives from this, for God is indeed a "lover of justice" (Ps 99:4). Israel is here commanded to attend to the very thing which God most values, namely justice.[14]

Brueggemann, admitting that there are various definitions and conflicting understandings of justice, offers this biblical description of justice: "Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them." Then he comments:

> Such an understanding implies that there is a right distribution of goods and access to the sources of life. There are certain elements that cannot be mocked. Yet through the uneven workings of the historical process, some come to have access to or control of what belongs to others. If we control what belongs to others long enough, we come to think of it as rightly ours, and to forget it belonged to someone else. So the work of liberation, redemption, salvation, is the work of *giving things back*. The Bible knows that when things are alienated from those to whom they belong, there can only be trouble, disorder and death. So God's justice at the outset has a dynamic, transformative quality. It causes things to change, and it expects that things must need change if there is to be abundant life.[15]

Justice as a Gift from God

It is important to realize that justice is a gift, something we as humans do not know. Only God is just, and in the measure we open ourselves and get to know God, we become just: "He judged the cause

of the poor and needy; . . . Is not this to know me? says the LORD" (Jer 22:16).[16]

The Bible is not very interested in justice in the abstract. It gives concrete instances of justice and injustice in the lives of people. In consulting the scriptures about justice we need to ask: What relationship to particular persons or groups does scripture characterize as just or unjust? What relationships does scripture approve or disapprove so that we may apply them to our modern categories of justice? For what specific reason are these relationships endorsed or condemned?

The Jacob story in Genesis 25:19—33:20 serves as a beautiful illustration of the fact that justice is not something we know naturally, but something we need to learn by encountering God. The story is the history of an ambitious person so completely taken up with his own interests that he is ready to fight for them even with illegitimate means. The name *Jacob*, which literally means "cheat," perfectly characterizes that person.[17] Only after he has fought with Yahweh and has been given a new name, *Israel* (Gn 32:28), which means "God perseveres" or "prevails," is he ready to reconcile himself with his brother (Gn 33:1-17). For once, Jacob acts with generosity. The relationship of justice toward his brother, corrupted since their birth, is reestablished now, but only because of Jacob's wrestling with God.[18]

The same observation holds with regard to nature. God gave us this world and we must enter into the right relationship with it. To be master over all creation does not include the right to destroy it as a result of greed or lack of concern for life. Only a right relationship with God will enable us to find the right relationship to nature as well. Jean Louis Ska describes the task of human beings in God's creation as to "subdue" the earth, which means to "take possession."[19] But the word means also to "accompany," to "pasture," to "guide," and refers to the function of a shepherd. We are responsible for the animals like a shepherd for the flock. Our power is not absolute; we are God's representatives. We are called to "care for the living creatures." Thus, all violence is excluded. The issue of the environment and the integrity of creation so much talked about in our days is, therefore, ultimately an issue of justice.

Justice in the New Testament

In the New Testament the concept of justice is linked to the Kingdom theme insofar as justice refers to right relationships. The whole ministry of Jesus is geared toward reestablishing those relationships on which the Covenant was built. His image of God as the Compassionate One concerned with justice, his constant critique of his opponents for having ostracized whole groups, and his untiring effort to bring those marginalized back into the Covenant community indicate

how Jesus understood his mission in terms of justice. In whatever way we may describe Jesus' challenge to his contemporaries, one element of his behavior and actions is most obvious: he was extremely sensitive to any kind of discrimination, be it religious, moral, social, cultural, racial, national, or sexual. Since he understood his mission to make all human beings children of our common Father and brothers and sisters among ourselves, he struck at anything that would not let this community come about. This is often, however, easily overlooked. It is not so much the individual acts of justice Jesus performed that we must consider here, but rather his whole character that would not tolerate injustice. Instead he demanded establishing God-willed relationships, worthy of the Kingdom which was coming with him.

This is what Jesus expected of his apostles. In Matthew 19:28 he outlined the mission of the Twelve as that of "judging" the twelve tribes of Israel. The Greek word *krinein* is not correctly translated with "to judge." That is too narrow. Its meaning has to be seen in the light of the prophetic announcements of Yahweh's final coming to "judge" the world. In the prophetic expectation, the phrase "God's coming to judge the nations" means that God will establish justice in the midst of the chosen people and through them among all the nations. God will bring the world into a new relationship of justice and peace. The mission of the Twelve, as described in Matthew 19:28 with the word *krinein*, therefore means "to establish God's eschatological justice in Israel and in all the nations." The mission of the church here is fundamentally geared to the Kingdom value of establishing the justice of the end-time.[20]

Dogmatic theology also supports viewing the Kingdom as relating to justice in the sense of "right relationships." The thinking goes like this: The Kingdom of God is ultimately the Kingdom that exists in God. It "reigns" in God, "among" the three Persons of the one God. But what is it that reigns in and "among" God? In the triune God there reigns a perfect exchange: The Father gives himself totally to the Son, and the Son on his part gives himself totally back to the Father. This personal reciprocal self-giving is the "Person" of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Holy Spirit is the love that reigns in God. The Father is totally related to the Son, and the Son is totally related to the Father. The Holy Spirit is this "right relationship" of self-giving love in the triune God. This life-creating and life-sustaining relationship is, par excellence, the Kingdom of God.

When our creed says "for us and for our salvation," it means that the love reigning in God has gone out toward us and the world, so that all of creation can have a part in God's glory. The whole history of the Old Testament, beginning with Abraham, was and is nothing else but God's unceasing attempt to self-communicate, turning to creation as a self-giving. This relationship is life-giving for us. Only where

the divine relationship, the Spirit, reigns and grows among people and all of creation, can we say "all things are created anew and the face of the earth is renewed." God's Kingdom is present only where the relationship between humanity (and all things) is renewed in the pattern of the relationship that reigns in God. It is only then that we have a "New Heaven and a New Earth." The Kingdom is ultimately relationship. It is the relationship which exists in God between Father and Son. The Kingdom is the extension of this relationship into creation. It is the divine life, which God wants to share with creation by drawing all things in Christ to God.[21]

Justice and the Integrity of Creation

As mentioned earlier, the issue of justice includes ecology, which is moving rapidly into center stage as a question of planetary survival. The ecological crisis has its origin in the "mechanistic" way we symbolize the world process. This metaphor means viewing the environment simply as a source of raw material and as a dump for waste. Nature has value only if it can be forced into our mechanistic imagination. Many regard the mechanistic metaphor as the "culprit" of the ecological crisis. For example, the virgin forest, in the symbol of the mechanistic imagination, is "undeveloped." Yet in its own terms it is "richly developed"; it is full of life and variety.

Are there alternative symbolizations of the world process? The oldest known is what we might call the organic metaphor, which sees the whole world in terms of evolution. Most traditional cultures have lived for ages out of this metaphor. Its strength is in seeing all things as interrelated. Its drawback is in having no concept of development but only experiencing the world as a "cyclic process." Neither our mechanistic metaphor nor the organic metaphor suffices to deal with the crisis of the environment in which we find ourselves today. The hope was that the mechanistic metaphor would free us from the domination of nature. But the mechanistic metaphor places a few in control, treating the rest as mere cogs in the machine. The organic metaphor, on the other hand, makes humans the objects of fate. In other words, while the mechanistic metaphor makes nature the victim, the organic metaphor tends to make humankind the victim of nature.[22]

How can we strike a balance? Although there have already been various responses to this issue, a new cosmology is needed to achieve an integral synthesis. We need a new metaphor, a new symbol, or even a new vision of creation and the world process if all the efforts to save the planet are to get us anywhere. Some have suggested that we must gratefully accept our creative powers in order to comprehend how these powers may be models of cooperation and complementarity with nature rather than models of its domination and exploitation.

The search for a sustainable environment, one that will enable the world to maintain and enhance life on this earth now and for the future, has raised several issues that are amazingly close to the concerns of the Kingdom of God as well. Here are some insights that ecology and the Kingdom hold in common as essential for this world.[23]

1) Ecology, as well as the Bible, views the world in a long-range perspective. The world must be seen in terms of a time scheme that cannot be measured and approached in a short period. Life on this planet evolved over billions of years. The effects of the misuse of the environment, for example, are not immediately felt or seen but will definitely manifest themselves later. It is equally true that it will take considerable time before the damage done to the environment can be healed and the balance restored. The Bible in a similar way sees history as a long-range plan that God has with the world. Each human being is important, fitting into this long-range plan. Each human being can hinder or advance God's design for creation. The effects of human actions on nature and history are often not immediately visible but reveal themselves only over a long period of time.

2) Human beings of all times possess an inner respect for nature and know instinctively that they form part of an integrated life organism. This sense—partly lost in modern times because of technological thinking and consumerism—forces itself once again on us today. Natural sciences show us ever more clearly that all things are interrelated and are intrinsically interconnected. Ecology speaks of the web of life, of diversity and mutuality, of dynamism and change. The Bible grounds this interrelatedness of the world in the fact that all created things come from the hand of God and are good, even very good. All creatures have a right to live because God wants them to live. According to the Bible God did not make us "masters" of nature but appointed us "stewards" of creation. We do not have the right to determine which species of life are beneficial to us and which should be wiped out. We are part of creation, bonded together with all that lives. In scripture this view is presented in various ways but finds its most vivid expression in the psalms (e.g., Ps 8 and Ps 114). To interpret and to see everything in purely anthropocentric terms is unbiblical and can only lead to total destruction. At the present a profound shift is occurring from an anthropological view of theology toward a view which takes nature as a context for Christian theology. This shift is more apparent in less academic theology than in the writing of most scholarly theologians. The Bible, however, supports such a way of doing theology. Here the natural world is taken very seriously. Human beings are seen as part of creation, and creation is the context within which God's salvation and redemption is accomplished. Although the story of redemption focuses on human beings, it does not exclude the rest of creation.[24] The value of other creatures besides human beings is as-

serted in the first chapter of Genesis where God is said to *see* that they are good without any reference to human beings. Cobb explains the point as follows:

> When the creation is completed, God views the whole and sees that it is very good. The implication is not only that species and their members are of value in themselves individually, but also that the total creation with all its complex patterns of interdependence has a value greater that the sum of its individual members.[25]

The world is God's creation and not ours. We must substitute Descartes's pernicious words—that we are the masters of creation and therefore can use the world and its plants and animals at our convenience—with those of Albert Schweitzer: "We want to live together with all life that wants to live." Sharing our planet with all that lives restricts the pattern of our life and our use of land, air, water, and the natural resources. In the words of Chief Seattle, a Native American leader:

> This we know. The earth does not belong to people. People belong to the earth. This we know. *All things are connected.* Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the people of the earth. We did not weave the web of life. We are but a mere strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.[26]

Technological progress at all cost cannot remain the ultimate norm of human creativity. A commonly held anthropological view of theology, which sees everything as being subordinated to human beings, does not do justice to creation as a whole. This approach obscures or ignores those right relationships to nature that human beings must establish to respond to the biblical demand for justice. Nature as a whole, not humankind as set apart, must be taken as the context of theology.

3) The Bible gives particular significance to the idea of land. Land is a central theme of biblical faith. Human beings are regarded as deeply rooted in the land. In the Old Testament the People of God and the land are firmly joined. There is no way to choose one without the other: either they care for the land on which they live or they ruin it and with it themselves. To be human in biblical terms means to have one's feet firmly on the ground. This truth should prevent us from any excessive spiritualization of the human person. The yearning of people for land has always been a driving force in history. Land has given people the feeling of belonging and of power. The biblical ideal of a human being is one who lives on the land in an environment of balance, harmony, and mutual dependence. This ideal is found throughout the whole Old Testament, though most vividly expressed in the prophet Micah, as we will see in the next section.

4) If there is anything that we have come to realize today, it is our limits. This world is limited, and we are required to work toward a human society that accepts limits and seeks a decent life for all within these limits. Humankind has reached ecological limits in society and politics. There are no unlimited resources available for the human race. The dream of lasting material growth proclaimed by short-term thinkers will not come true. This kind of utopia is unattainable. We are living on a finite planet with finite possibilities for material growth and with a finite resistance to abuse. Ecologists tell us in unison that we must live with less and use the available resources sparingly, prudently, and in a way that supports the environment. This means we have to live in balance with other species, and first and foremost, we must live on the renewable resources of the planet. The Bible reminds us in the creation story that God put limits to land and water. God gave humankind limits, saying: "Live by them according to my purpose, and you will live. Spurn them and you will die." As physical creatures, human beings live within limits to which they must adapt or perish.

5) All human behavior has consequences. Every breath breathed, every dollar spent, and every relationship created modifies the universe. Every person's behavior is ecologically significant in all its dimensions. This is an insight which, when taken to heart, will demand far-reaching changes in all sectors of human behavior. From the biblical view we can say that all human behavior has consequences because of the nature of the physical-spiritual universe in which God has placed us. The universe is subject to a moral order that cannot be disregarded without serious consequences. We will have to bear the effects of our actions because of the nature of the physical, spiritual, and moral universe God has created—which reflects, of course, the very character of God. The universe is ordered not just logically, psychologically, or sociologically, but also ecologically. The ecological perspective affirms and encompasses all other dimensions. The relationship between humanity and its environment is symbiotic—a mutually supportive, interdependent living with—rather than parasitic. Thus Snyder remarks:

> According to the Bible, we do not really understand the ecology of the world until we recognize its source, the Lord God and that the space-time physical world is interpreted and held together by a spiritual world and by spiritual energy that comes from God. From this standpoint, we really are not thinking ecologically—even from a scientific point of view—if we do not include the dimension of the Spirit.[27]

The Kingdom of God transcends all ecological concern since it aims at the transformation of the whole of creation. This world is the object of God's ultimate plan, and therefore, the search for an ecological balance of nature is at the very heart of the Kingdom of God as well. It is because of God's design and purpose that, according to Snyder,

> economics must recognize the finiteness and vulnerability of our ecosystem and the seriousness of environmental issues, seeking to preserve and protect the earth's biosphere. It must recognize the genius of human community as a key factor in economic policy and organization. This means, among other things, working to support and encourage human-scale economic arrangements that build neighborhoods, local communities, and families. . . . Economics must give special attention to the poor and oppressed recognizing that every person has moral, ecological, and economic significance and that all our lives are interdependent. Kingdom economics will demonstrate that, when the full ecology of our world is understood, caring for the poor and oppressed is actually economic wisdom as well as sense.[28]

What kind of a change is needed and how long the road to success will be is most vividly expressed in these words by Cobb:

> As long as we collectively suppose that meeting economic needs and having full employment require a growing economy, we will collectively support policies that put greater and greater pressure on an already overstressed environment. We will also continue to support policies whose results are greater and greater injustice, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer both within each country and among the world's nations. Only when we see that our real economic needs can be met more adequately with quite a different economic practice will we make the changes needed to avoid worse and worse catastrophes. In this sense, showing that Christian theology opposes both injustice and ruthless exploitation of the earth is not enough. As Christians we are called to lead in envisioning a more livable world.[29]

To avoid despair, we need a realistic view of the world situation today and a firm belief that God's Kingdom is active, transforming creation into his final design. That is the source of the courage to work creatively for alternate solutions to the present crisis. Or, in the words of Cobb:

> If we are to deal realistically and responsibly with our global situation, we need both spiritual deepening and a renewed sense of hope. If this hope is only a private or other-worldly one, it will not undergird wise policies. Hence, we need a vision of a possible hopeful future for the planet even if we cannot avoid catastrophes. The New Testament image of hope is the Kingdom of God. Throughout Christian history a great variety of meanings have been read into that image. We need to give it a content that is fashioned in the teeth of the fullest recognition of the limits of our human situation.[30]

The issue of ecology, with its concern of justice for the planet and the species of this earth, calls into question every theological topic dealt with in purely anthropocentric terms. If nature becomes the context of theology, a biblical basis for the issues of ecology can be easily developed.

PEACE

Peace in the Old Testament

Shalom is one of the words in scripture which cannot be translated literally. This word and its derivatives occur more than 350 times in the Old Testament. The root meaning of *shalom* in the Old Testament is "to be sound," "to be safe." It means "well-being" with a strong material emphasis.[31]

Fundamentally *shalom* refers to wholeness, total health, total welfare. Anything that contributes to wholeness can be expressed in terms of shalom. It covers the sum total of God's blessings on a person who belongs to the Covenant community. In a community where shalom reigns, harmony and opportunity for growth exist for every person. Von Rad describes shalom as follows:

> We constrict the term shalom if we equate it with "peace." . . . In many instances shalom really signifies bodily health or well-being and the related satisfaction. More commonly shalom is referred to a group, e.g., a nation enjoying prosperity. . . . This brings us to the great number of passages in which shalom denotes a relationship rather than a state. The relationship may be that of a people. It may naturally exist between individuals too.[32]

In the Greco-Roman world peace does not denote primarily a relationship among several persons, but rather a state or a condition. It is

on earth. It describes what God wants to see happen in the human community. This has been called the Isaiah agenda.[35] Its objectives are clear and specific:

> Children will not die.
> Old people will live in dignity.
> Those who build houses will live in them.
> Those who plant vineyards will eat their fruit.

The vision clearly expresses God's plan and hope for the human community. God desires that children not die, that old people live in dignity, and that those who work enjoy the fruit of their labor. Most astonishing is its seemingly immediate relevance for today. It is not about paradise or a world to come but about human history, about the here and now. In theological terms, the text does not offer what is most pleasing to God, the fully developed and happy person. Rather it insists on what is minimally acceptable to God concerning human behavior toward our brothers and sisters.

Of course, in this agenda we can find many manifestos of political parties and secular governments, but this does not make it less a biblical vision. If we believe that God's Kingdom makes itself felt anywhere, then we have here a clear indication—to use a parable of Jesus—that the "leaven of the Kingdom is penetrating the dough of this world." The beauty of the agenda is that we are assured of what God wants of us, what God's will for us is now. Here is something offered to which everyone can make a contribution and so make the Kingdom of God felt in our midst.

Peace in the New Testament

In the New Testament the word peace is used in at least five different ways:

1. as the absence of war or chaos;
2. as a right relationship with God or with Christ;
3. as a good relationship among people;
4. as an individual state, that is, tranquility or serenity;
5. as part of a greeting formula.

Two, three and four are of particular importance to our discussion. In the New Testament the word *eirene* (peace) occurs ninety-one times, and means, above all, well-being and eschatological salvation. According to the Jesus of the gospels peace means wholeness and comprises the physical, social, and spiritual elements. When Jesus heals a person he says, "Go in peace" (Mk 5:34; Lk 8:48). This peace is not only physical, but often social as well. When Jesus tells the woman

with a hemorrhage, "Go in peace," he indicates that she has been newly reintegrated into society, that she is once again a full member of the community. The same can be observed when he says to the woman with the ointment, "Go in peace" (Lk 7:50). At that moment Jesus rebukes those who had ostracized her and restores her to society.[36]

Peace as right relationship with God or with Christ, the vertical dimension of peace, comes close to reconciliation and harmony. It is God's act which restores people to a right relationship with God (Rom 5:1; Acts 10:36). Peace as good relationships among people is a logical and natural extension of this meaning. The right relationship with God should result in good relationships among people. To live in peace means, positively, to live in harmony, and negatively, to avoid any action that would cause disharmony or contention (Mk 9:50; 2 Cor 13:11; Col 3:15).

The Christian meaning of peace, for example, "serenity," "tranquility," and "peace of mind," is not part of the meaning of the term in either the Hebrew or Greek secular worlds. The peace that Jesus leaves with us and gives to us (Jn 14:27) is clearly contrasted to worry and fear. The verse can be restructured in this way:

> Peace of mind (or serenity) is what I leave with you. The peace of mind that comes from me—this is what I am giving you. Do not be afraid, worried, or upset.

A person who has entered into a right relationship with God and lives in good relationship with people will as a consequence experience peace of mind, serenity, and tranquility.[37]

In short, peace, or the Hebrew word *shalom,* means wholeness, reconciliation, the harmony of having come to full authenticity concerning our four basic relationships: with ourselves, our neighbor, nature, and God. Shalom is the ultimate state of fulfillment and the great gift of the end-time. It means not only the absence of war but the fullness of life.

The gospel of John sees Jesus' entire mission as related to bringing the eschatological peace announced by the prophets. Shalom in John is bound up with Jesus' passion and death. Unlike the synoptic gospels, it is only after the resurrection that Jesus will greet his disciples with the salutation, "Peace!" The shalom that he has gained for them through his suffering and death is the great gift of the risen Lord to his disciples on Easter morning. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (14:27). "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace" (16:33).[38] It is the reconciliation of the world with God, the eschatological peace that Jesus was to bring to this world (20:19, 21, 26). Therefore, whatever concerns the Kingdom concerns peace.

JOY

The basic meaning of *joy*, *chara* (noun) and *charo* (verb), in the Bible is in reference to physical comfort and well-being. The word appears 133 times in the New Testament (including 20 times in Luke; 11 in Acts; 18 in John; 12 in Matthew; 14 in Philippians; 13 in 2 Corinthians; 7 in Romans; and 6 in 1 Thessalonians). It refers most often to the joy of the eschatological fulfillment of the end-time, in short, to the Kingdom that is experienced as already present now.[39]

Joy is a recurring refrain of the parables. It is used, for example, in relation to finding what was lost (Lk 15), a treasure in the field, and a pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-45).[40] Joy in the biblical sense means *life*. It is the expression of fullness, life, and love. The Kingdom of God is a matter of life and love in abundance. After all, *the* image of heaven in the Bible is the wedding feast where the happiness and joy of all are guaranteed.

In concrete terms *joy* means to give to each person the space to unfold and to become creative according to his or her abilities and gifts. Since it is to be understood in a holistic sense, that is, including all aspects of human existence, it refers in the present world to what we call "matters of human rights." Every creature has a right to life on this earth, which God has given us as a common heritage to enjoy and to share in its richness.

JUSTICE, PEACE, AND JOY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

The phrase *in the Holy Spirit* refers to all three characteristics of the Kingdom: justice, peace, and joy.[41] It is the most important aspect of our present discussion. Since the Kingdom on earth is now an anticipation of the New Heaven and the New Earth, it can only be a creation of the Holy Spirit, the one who will bring forth the New Creation. Therefore, we can only possess the gifts of the Kingdom as a "foretaste" or a "foreshadowing" of what is to come. Nevertheless, they can be experienced and identified as the Kingdom present and operative now in the midst of our world.

How these three fundamental characteristics should determine any theological description of the Kingdom can be seen in the following definitions of the Kingdom by Edward Schillebeeckx:

- The Kingdom of God is the saving presence of God, active and encouraging, as it is affirmed or welcomed among men and women. It is a saving presence offered by God and freely accepted by men and women which takes concrete form above all in justice and peaceful relationships among individuals and peoples, in the disappearance of sickness, injustice and oppression in the restoration of life of all that was dead and dying.
- The Kingdom of God is a new world in which suffering is abolished, a world of completely whole or healed men and women in a society where peace reigns and there are no master-slave relationships—quite a different situation from that in the society of the time. As things are there, "not so with you" (Lk 22:24-27).
- The Kingdom of God is a changed new relationship (*metanoia*) of men and women to God, the tangible and visible side of which is a new type of liberating relationship among men and women within a reconciling society in a peaceful natural environment.[42]