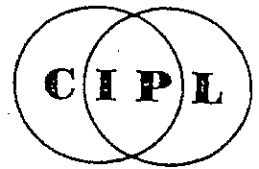




Westhill College,
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Position paper B26
Series four

CHRISTIANS IN PUBLIC LIFE PROGRAMME

THE ABSURDITY OF THE KINGDOM

The task of the Church in the world

Bruce Reed

How seriously does the Church pay attention to the Kingdom of God? My impression is that clergy and congregation as Christian people are almost entirely focused on the Church believing as if they alone are responsible for it! By contrast, in Acts 2:47 it says, "Day by day the Lord added to their number those being saved", a result of the apostles' behaviour in praising God's work and telling the people about its wonderful outcomes among themselves. The problems arising from regulating the membership of the fellowship came later, when the message about the Kingdom became entangled with controversy until either it was absorbed and equated with the Church or the State, or it faded away as a significant reality.

The current position is no better. Rather than the laity of the Church being transformed into working as members of the Kingdom of God to glorify God, they more often want to engage in the machinery of the Church. As if clergy were saying that because they have no way of enabling the laity to glorify God in the world, as compensation they are inviting them to help to run the Church!

The controversy in the Church of England about who can be ordained as priests sharpens this issue. It leads to the notion that the Church is trying to preserve itself - "to save its life" hence, it will "lose it". There are very many people in secular life (ie in institutions other than the churches) who are searching for ways of serving God in their industrial, commercial or professional work. Instead of clergy enabling them to discover and learn ways to tackle strategic moral and economic issues, they are pointed towards the growth of their own spirituality and personal lives. As if their task is to bring God into the world of work, rather than to discern that God is already there, working as Creator, Judge, and Lord as well as Redeemer. They are unable to 'see' the Kingdom, the realm where God is now working, and do not comprehend that their task is to serve God in these places in their work and lives.

As members of God's realm we have responsibility for its well-being. We have accountability for the efficient use of Earth's resources, material, human and spiritual in partnership with God in his work as Creator and Sustainer. As managers of these gifts of divine providence, we are called to exercise justice, equity, truth, humility and love at work, home and in society to sustain the quality of public life.

Knowing that these resources are finite, and vulnerable to irresponsible exploitation, we can now appreciate that this planet is under threat, ultimately to become unfit for human life. A destiny which Amos prophetically declared would be God's judgment on our unrighteousness. Such a possibility compels us to widen our concerns beyond our personal interests and to accept our corporate trusteeship to see that growth in commercial development does not spoil or wreck the future for human survival.

I do recognise there are many Christians struggling to do just this, but without the support of their local churches. To make my point, I suggest that it is not the number of Christians in society that counts, but their effectiveness in transforming society to express the qualities of the Kingdom of God.

'Declaring the Kingdom'

Declaring the Kingdom was the task Jesus accomplished. He spoke little about the Church. That was left to others like St. Paul and St. Luke (in the Acts of the Apostles) who focused on the Church and its message with

much less about the Kingdom of God. Hence my introduction. In the Western world we are prone to individualism rather than to corporate thinking. We emphasise that to become a Christian gives meaning to my life, deepens its purpose and secures my eternal destiny. There is truth to this, but a partial truth which can obscure the whole truth: that new meaning is significant only as I accept my position as a representative of my community, by entering more deeply into its structures in my new found strength and understanding of God. I am accountable to God and to other Christians as a member of the Body of Christ; as a member of the Kingdom I am also accountable to allow God to use me in the world as a means of answering the prayer "Thy Kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven".

One way this can happen is that in worship and sacrament we encounter God, and discern the qualities of Jesus Christ on which our salvation depends. We learn how these qualities are manifest in everyday life through the work of the Holy Spirit. This insight is not only a joyful experience, it can be highly disturbing and excruciatingly painful. The Psalms cover this whole gamut of divine/human experience. Walter Brueggemann in "The Message of the Psalms," has shown they express "orientation", "disorientation", and "re-orientation" in God's relations with the natural world and ourselves.

In the Gospels, Jesus identified with people in their joy, hope, misery, poverty, sinfulness, forgiveness and love. He did this in the face of ignorance, prejudice, treachery, envy, malevolence, and in his own person he suffered the forces of opposition which crushed him to death. The challenge he makes to us is to "take up our cross and to follow him". The Kingdom of Heaven is not a vague joy-ride. The weight of that 'cross' results from the integration of all the various qualities of the Kingdom, not only love and hope but also judgment; not only peace but conflict. Hence the mixture of pleasure and pain when we hear Jesus telling us to take authority not only to pronounce people's sins to be "forgiven", but to pronounce them "unforgiven" (John 20:21). We may gladly exercise the former but are decidedly uncomfortable about what the latter means for us in practice. While the pronouncement formally may be the task of the clergy, this responsibility applies to the Church as a whole.

The Church for the Kingdom

This paper maintains that the purpose of the Church is to serve the Kingdom. When we reflect on this we face a paradox. For the Kingdom is both here and now, but not yet here. It has come and is coming. On the one hand Jesus tells the Jews that 'The Kingdom of God is among you' (Luke 17:21). It is not remote, seen only through signs and wonders. Yet he says it is also awaited, when Jesus the King will bring it with clouds of glory. The paradox applies to Jesus himself. He is here now in the little children, the poor, the impoverished, the naked and the stranger, but he also will come in judgment to commend those who unknowingly served him in those disadvantaged ones even though they did not see him there; and reject those who did not serve him because they could not see him there. (Matthew 25:34,46)

This graphic story of the separation of the sheep and the goats, makes for uncomfortable reading in the post-modern era. If we believe that being a Christian is to feel secure, then the Kingdom of God will not appeal to us. There is something absurd and beyond rationality about it. Christians are not exempted from raging at the awfulness of this predicament, and from trying to understand it in our experience. Though we might have the "peace which passes understanding", in serving the Kingdom we are at the heart of human tragedy with its inevitable pain, suffering, and exaltation, and revelation. No wonder we want the Church as a source of comfort and a refuge against this Unknown. Members of the Kingdom take a different approach, sharing the faith of Abraham who "...set out without knowing where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8)

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The Christians in Public Life Programme has been set up under the auspices of Westhill College, Birmingham, one of the Selly Oak Colleges. Its Co-ordinator, the Revd. Dr. David Clark, would appreciate comments about this 'position paper'. Further information concerning the programme and the position papers can be obtained from CIPL, Westhill College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 6LL (Tel. 0121-472 7245).

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