

## EVANGELISM AND THE WORLD

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The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a personal message — it reveals a God who calls each of his own by name. But it is also a cosmic message — it reveals a God whose purpose includes the whole world. It is not addressed to the individual *per se*, but to the individual as a member of the old humanity in Adam, marked by sin and death, whom God calls to be integrated into the new humanity in Christ, marked by righteousness and eternal life.

The lack of appreciation of the wider dimensions of the Gospel leads inevitably to a misunderstanding of the mission of the church. The result is an evangelism that regards the individual as a self-contained unit — a Robinson Crusoe to whom God's call is addressed as on an island — whose salvation takes place exclusively in terms of a relationship to God. It is not seen that the individual does not exist in isolation, and consequently that it is not possible to speak of salvation with no reference to the world of which he is a part.

In his high priestly prayer Jesus Christ pleaded thus for his disciples: "I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. . . . I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:11, 15-16). The paradox of Christian discipleship in relation to the world is placed before us — to be *in* the world, but not to be *of* the world. The present paper may be regarded as an attempt to explain the meaning of that paradox in its bearing on evangelism. The study is divided into three parts. The first is an analysis of the various usages of the term "world" in the New Testament. The second shows in what sense evangelism deals with a separation from the world, inasmuch as the disciples of Christ are not *of* the world. The third, finally, views evangelism from the perspective of involvement with the world, an involvement which reflects the fact that the disciples of Christ are *in* the world.

### PART ONE: THE WORLD IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

A simple observation of the important place that the term *world* (Greek: *cosmos*) has in the New Testament (especially in the Johannine and Pauline writings, and passages relating to the history of salvation) should suffice to demonstrate the cosmic dimension of the Gospel. God's work in Jesus Christ deals directly with the world as a whole, not simply with the individual. Thus, a soteriology that does not take into account the relationship between the Gospel and the world, does not do justice to the teaching of the Bible.

But, what is the world?

I cannot here attempt an exhaustive study of the topic, but by way of introduction will briefly try to sort out the various strands of meaning of the complex term *cosmos* in the New Testament.

1. *The world is the sum total of creation, the universe, "the heavens and the earth" that God created in the beginning and that one day he will recreate.*<sup>1</sup>

What is most distinctive in the New Testament concept of the universe is its christological emphasis. The world was created by God through the Word (John 1:10), and without him nothing that has been made was made (John 1:3). The Christ whom the Gospel proclaims as the agent of redemption is also the agent of God's creation. And he is at the same time the goal toward which all creation is directed (Col. 1:16) and the principle of coherence of all reality, material and spiritual (Col. 1:17).

In the light of the universal significance of Jesus Christ, the Christian cannot be pessimistic concerning the final destiny of the world. In the midst of the changes of history, he knows that God has not abdicated his throne and that at the proper time all things will be placed under the rule of Christ (Eph. 1:10; cf. I Cor. 15:24ff.). The Gospel implies the hope of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21; cf. II Pet. 3:13)<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the only true evangelism is that which is oriented toward that final goal of "the restoration of all things" in Christ Jesus, promised by the prophets and proclaimed by the apostles (Acts 3:21). Eschatology centered in the future salvation of the soul turns out to be too limited in the face of secular eschatologies of our day, the most important of which — the Marxist — looks forward to the establishment of the ideal society and the creation of a new man. Today more than ever the Christian hope in its fullest dimensions must be proclaimed with such conviction and with such force that the falseness of every other hope should not need to be demonstrated.

2. *In a more limited sense, the world is the present order of human existence, the space-time context of man's life.*<sup>3</sup>

This is the world of material possessions, where men are concerned for "things" that are necessary but that easily become an end in themselves (Luke 12:30). "Anxiety" for these things is incompatible with seeking the Kingdom of God (Luke 12:22-31). The treasures that man can store up on earth are perishable (Matt. 6:19). It is useless for him to gain "the whole world" and lose or forfeit his own self (Luke 9:25; cf. John 12:25). There is a Christian realism that demands that we take seriously that "we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world" (I Tim. 6:7). All material possessions lie under the sign of the transitoriness of a world that advances inexorably toward the end. In the light of the end everything that belongs solely to the present order becomes relative; it cannot be considered the totality of human existence (I Cor. 7:29-31; cf. I John 2:17). On the contrary, it forms part of that system of man's rebellion against God that will be discussed later in this study.

To proclaim the Gospel is to proclaim the message of a Kingdom that is not of this world (John 18:36) and whose politics therefore cannot conform to the politics of the kingdoms of this world. This is

a Kingdom whose sovereign rejected "the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matt. 4:8; cf. Luke 4:5), in order to establish his own kingdom on the basis of love. It is a kingdom that is made present among men, here and now (Matt. 12:28), in the person of one who does not come from *this world* (*tou kosmou toutou*), but "from above," from an order beyond the transitory scene of human existence (John 8:23).

3. *The world is humanity, claimed by the Gospel, but hostile to God and enslaved by the powers of darkness.*<sup>4</sup>

Occasionally *cosmos* denotes humanity, with no reference to its position before God.<sup>5</sup> Much more frequently, though, it denotes humanity in its relation to the history of salvation that culminates in Jesus Christ, by whom it is judged.

a. *The world claimed by the Gospel.* The most categorical affirmation of God's will to save the world is made in the person and work of his Son Jesus Christ. Our difficulties in explaining how it is possible that, in spite of the fact that God's will is that his salvation reach all men (I Tim. 2:4), not all are actually saved, should not lead us to deny the universal scope of New Testament soteriology. According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ is not the Savior of a sect, but rather "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; I John 4:14; I Tim. 4:10). The world is the object of God's love (John 3:16). Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), the light of the world (John 1:9, 8:12, 9:5), the propitiation not only for the sins of his own people but "also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:2; cf. II Cor. 5:19). To this end he was sent by the Father — not to condemn the world, but "that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

Obviously, God's salvation in Christ Jesus is universal in scope. But the universality of the Gospel must not be confused with the universalism of contemporary theologians who hold that, on the basis of the work of Christ, all men have received eternal life, whatever their position before Christ. The benefits obtained by Christ are inseparable from the Gospel and, consequently, can only be received *in and through* the Gospel. To preach the Gospel is not only to proclaim an accomplished fact, but rather to proclaim the accomplished fact and, *simultaneously*, to make a call to faith. The proclamation of Jesus as "the Savior of the world" is not an affirmation that all men are automatically saved, but rather an invitation to all men to put their confidence in the one who gave his life for the sin of the world. "Christ does not save us apart from faith, faith does not restore us apart from Christ. He became one with us, we have to become one with him. Without the affirmation of this double process of self-identification and of the results that follow it, there is no complete exposition of the Gospel."<sup>6</sup>

From the universality of the Gospel is derived the universality of the evangelizing mission of the church. The Gospel's claim on the world, initiated in Jesus Christ, is continued through his followers. As the Father sent him, so he has sent them into the world (John 17:18). Repentance and forgiveness of sin in his name must be announced to all nations (Luke 24:47; cf. Matt. 28:19; Mark. 16:15). And it is

this demand of the Gospel that gives meaning to history until the end of the present era (Matt 24:14).

b. *The world hostile to God and enslaved by the powers of darkness.* The most distinctive usage of *cosmos* in the New Testament is predominantly negative. It refers to humanity, but to humanity in open hostility against God, personified as the enemy of Jesus Christ and his followers. The Word through whom all things were made came into the world, but "the world knew him not" (John 1:10). He came as the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5), to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37), but "men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). It was collective rejection. But it was the only attitude consistent with the nature of the world alienated from God — the world *cannot* receive the Spirit of truth (John 14:17), the carnal mind *cannot* submit to God's law (Rom. 8:7). This is the tragedy of the world — it is caught up in the vicious circle of a rejection that leads it to hate Christ and his followers (John 15:18, 24; I John 3:1, 13) and that at the same time leaves it incapable of recognizing the truth of the Gospel (John 9:39-41). The condition of the world in its rebellion against God is such that Jesus Christ does not even pray for it (John 17:9).

But if we dig a bit deeper in our analysis of the concept of the world in the Johannine and Pauline writings, it becomes obvious that behind this rejection of Jesus Christ lies the influence of spiritual powers hostile to man and to God. "The whole world is in the power of the evil one" (I John 5:19). The "wisdom of the world," characterized by its ignorance of God, reflects the wisdom of "the rulers of this age" — the powers of darkness — that crucified Christ (I Cor. 1:20, 2:6, 8). Unbelievers' blindness to the Gospel is the result of the action of Satan, "the god of this world" (II Cor. 4:4). Apart from faith, men are in subjection to the spirit of the age (the *zeitgeist*) controlled by the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). The world is under the domination of the "elemental spirits" (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20), the principalities and powers (Rom. 8:38f.; I Cor. 15:24, 26; Eph. 1:21, 3:10, 6:12; Col. 1:16, 2:10, 15).

The picture of the world that emerges from the texts mentioned is confirmed by the rest of the New Testament. In it, as in first-century Judaism, the present age is conceived of as the period in which Satan and his hosts have received the authority to rule the world. The universe is not a closed universe, in which everything can be explained by an appeal to natural causes. It is, rather, the arena in which God — a God who acts in history — is engaged in a battle with the spiritual powers that enslave men and hinder their perception of the truth revealed in Jesus Christ.

This diagnosis of man's plight in the world cannot simply be thrown into the wastebasket as stemming out of the apocalyptic speculation that was common among the Jews of New Testament times. As E. Stauffer says, "In primitive Christianity there is no theology without demonology." And without demonology the answer to the problem of sin must be found exclusively in man, without giving due attention to the fact that man himself is the victim of an order that transcends him and imposes on him a detrimental way of life. Sin (singular) is not the sum total of the individual sins (plural) of man. It is, on the contrary, an

objective situation that conditions men and forces them to commit sin: "Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). The essence of sin is the lie ("You will be like God" — Gen. 3:5), and lying has its origin in the devil, the "liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Sin, then, is a social and even a cosmic, not merely an individual, problem. Personal sins — those that according to Jesus come "from within, out of the heart of man" (Mark 7:21-22) — are the echo of a voice that comes from the creation, the creation that "was subjected to futility" and that will be "set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:20-21).

Unfortunately, much too frequently it has been taken for granted that the concrete manifestation of satanic action among men takes place primarily or even exclusively in those phenomena that fall within the sphere of demonic possession or the occult. Thus we have lost sight of the demonic nature of the whole spiritual environment that conditions man's thought and conduct. The individualistic concept of redemption is the logical consequence of an individualistic concept of sin which ignores "all that is in the world" (not simply in the heart of man), namely, "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (I John 2:15-16). In one word, it ignores the reality of *materialism*, that is, the absolutization of the present age in all it offers — consumer goods, money, political power, philosophy, science, social class, race, nationality, sex, religion, tradition, etc.; the "collective egoism" (to borrow Niebuhr's phrase) that conditions man to seek his realization in "the desirable things" of life; the Great Lie that man derives his meaning from "being like God," in independence from God.

Under the domination of the powers of darkness, the world stands at the same time under the judgment of God. Though God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:17, cf. 12:47), the world is judged by its own rejection of the light of life that has made its appearance among men. "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19, cf. 12:48).

In conclusion, man's problem in the world is not simply that he commits isolated sins or gives in to the temptation of particular vices. It is, rather, that he is imprisoned within a closed system of rebellion against God, a system that conditions him to absolutize the relative and to relativize the absolute, a system whose mechanism of self-sufficiency deprives him of eternal life and subjects him to the judgment of God. This is one of the reasons why evangelism cannot be reduced to the verbal communication of doctrinal content, with no reference to specific forms of man's involvement in the world. It is also one of the reasons why the evangelist's confidence cannot rest in the efficiency of his methods. As the Apostle Paul taught, "We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). The proclamation of the Gospel does take seriously the necessity of divine resources for the battle.

## PART TWO: EVANGELISM AND SEPARATION FROM THE WORLD

The Gospel does not come from man, but from God. Its entrance into the world necessarily leads to conflict, because it questions the absolute nature of "the desirable things" of the old era. Its presence alone means crisis, because it demands that man discern between God and the false gods, between light and darkness, between truth and error. Those who bear the Gospel, then, are "the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (II Cor. 2:15-16). The Gospel unites, but it also separates. And out of this separation created by the Gospel springs the church as a community called to be not of the world but to be *in* the world.

The concept of the church as an entity "separated" from the world lends itself to all kinds of false interpretations. At the one extreme is the position which holds that there is no real separation but only a simple epistemological difference; the church knows that it has been reconciled to God, while the world does not know — and that is all. At the other extreme is the position which holds that the separation is an impassable chasm between two cities that only communicate with each other as the one sets out on a crusade to conquer the other. Our concept of the nature of the separation between the church and the world inevitably influences our definition of the Gospel and our methods of evangelism. We urgently need to recover an evangelism that takes seriously the distinction between the church and the world, seen from the perspective of the Gospel; an evangelism that is oriented toward breaking man's slavery in the world and does not itself become an expression of the church's enslavement to the world.

### 1. *Evangelism and the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord of all*

A brief study of the New Testament is sufficient to show that the essentials of its message are summarized in the oldest creed of the church: "Jesus Christ is the *Kyrios*." Though it is true that only after the resurrection were the disciples able to grasp the importance of this title as applied to Jesus Christ, there is no doubt that for them the one whom God had *made* "Lord and Christ" was none other than the Jesus who had been crucified (Acts 2:36). To say that Jesus Christ is Lord is to say that the same Jesus whom God put forward "as a propitiatory offering by his blood" (Rom. 3:25) is now "Lord of all" (Rom. 10:12). Having provided the basis for the forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of himself, he has occupied the place that is rightly his as mediator in the government of the world (Heb. 1:4).

On the basis of the texts mentioned, to which several others could be added, it is obvious that it is impossible to separate the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ from his kingly ministry. From the New Testament perspective the work of God in his Son cannot be limited to cleansing from the guilt of sin; it is also a liberation from the powers of darkness, a transference to the Messianic Kingdom which, in anticipation of the end, has been made present in Christ (Col. 1:13). The Christ who wrought forgiveness of sins is also the Christ who wrought liberation from slavery to the world. The hour of the Cross was the hour of the judgment of this world and of its "ruler" (John

12:31, 16:11); the hour in which Christ disarmed the principalities and powers and proclaimed their defeat, leading them as prisoners in a triumphal parade (Col. 2:15). Jesus Christ has been exalted as the *Kyrios* of all the universe (Eph. 1:20-22; Phil. 2:9-11; I Pet. 3:22) and it is as such that he is able to save all those who call on his name (Rom. 10:12-13). Salvation in Christ involves both forgiveness of sin (I John 1:9) and victory over the world (John 5:4), by faith.

To evangelize, then, is not to offer an experience of freedom from feelings of guilt, as if Christ were a super-psychiatrist and his saving power could be separated from his Lordship. To evangelize is to proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, by whose work man is delivered from both the guilt and the power of sin and integrated into God's plans to put all things under the rule of Christ. As Walter Kunneth<sup>8</sup> has pointed out, an individualistic Christology — a Christology that views Christ only in his relation to the individual — leaves the door open to a denial of creation, for the world must then be understood as if it existed apart from the Word of God which gives it meaning. The Christ proclaimed by the Gospel is the Lord of all, in whom God has acted decisively in history in order to form a new humanity. The one who places his confidence *in him* is delivered from "the present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) and from the powers by which it is characterized; the world is crucified to him, and he to the world (Gal. 6:14); he cannot submit to false gods, as if he still belonged to the sphere of their influence (Col. 2:20).

Obviously, the separation of the church from the world can only take place from a theological, eschatological perspective. It is *before God* that the church takes shape as a community that belongs, not to the present age, but to the coming age. By vocation, it is not *of* the world in the sense that it has rejected the Great Lie implicit in materialism, with its absolutization of "the desirable things" that the world offers. Though the old era is under the dominion of idols that set themselves up as gods and lords, for the church there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, the mediator of creation and of redemption (I Cor. 8:5, 6). Here and now, in anticipation of the universal recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord of all creation (Phil. 2:9-11), the church has received him (Eph. 1:22) and lives by virtue of the blessings and gifts which he as Lord bestows (Eph. 1:3-14, 4:7-16). This is the basic difference between the church and the world.

Without the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord of all, in the light of whose universal authority all values of the present age become relative, there is no true evangelism. To evangelize is to proclaim Jesus Christ as the one who is reigning today and who will continue to reign "until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (I Cor. 15:25). New Testament cosmic Christology is an essential element of the Gospel proclamation.

## 2. *Evangelism and worldliness*

On the Cross Jesus Christ inflicted a decisive defeat on the prince of this world. The enemy has been mortally wounded. The resurrection has demonstrated that the futility to which creation is subjected does

not mean that God has abdicated his rule over it. All creation will be delivered from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:20-21); the whole universe will be placed under the rule of Christ (Eph. 1:10).

Hope in the final triumph of Jesus Christ belongs to the essence of the Christian faith; what God did through the death and resurrection of his Son, he will complete at the end of time.

We cannot, however, fool ourselves about the actual historic situation of the church in relation to the world. A rapid reading of the New Testament points out the crude reality of the conditioning that the world and "the things that are in the world" exercise over man, whether Christian or not. The victory of Christ over the world and the powers is not a mere doctrine requiring intellectual assent; it is a fact that must become concrete reality in Christian experience through faith. To Jesus' claim "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33) corresponds the believer's "victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (I John 5:4). In other words, the Christian is called to *become* what he already *is*. The imperative of the evangelical ethic forms an indissoluble whole with the indicative of the Gospel.

As long as the present age endures, the battle against the powers of darkness continues. Worldliness never ceases to be a threat to the church and its evangelizing mission. In spite of having been delivered from the present evil age (Gal. 1:4), Christians run the risk of returning to the "weak and beggarly elemental spirits" to which this age is subject (Gal. 4:9), the risk of submitting themselves to slavery to human regulations ("Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch") as if they were still *of* the world (Col. 2:20-22). For this reason, Christians need to be reminded of the liberty that has been given them in Christ. Because he died and rose again, the way has been opened to live here and now in the liberty of the children of God that belongs to the new era. All legalism is, therefore, worldliness — a return to slavery to the powers of darkness. And this is applicable to the prohibitions and taboos that today in many places in the world are part of the "evangelical subculture" and that are often so confused with the Gospel that evangelism becomes a call to observe certain religious rules and practices and loses its meaning as proclamation of the message of liberty.

Another form in which worldliness enters the life and mission of the church today is the adaptation of the Gospel to the "spirit of the times." Because of the limits of space, I will cite only two examples:

a. "*Secular Christianity.*" Already in the first century an attempt was made to accommodate the Gospel to the dualism between *spirit* and *matter* that was part of the ideological atmosphere of the day. Thus developed what in the history of Christian thought is known as "Docetism" — in the face of a dualistic interpretation of the world, a new Christology was proposed that would make the Gospel acceptable to those who could not conceive of the possibility that God (good by nature) should enter into direct relation with matter (evil by nature). Such seems to be the heresy to which the Epistles of John refer.

The problem today is not the dualism between spirit and matter, but rather secularism — the concept that the natural world represents the totality of reality and therefore the only possible knowledge is the

"scientific." It is the logical consequence of another type of dualism derived from the philosophy of Descartes — the dualism between *man* (the thinking subject) and the world (the object of thought). There is no place for God as the transcendent being who has the power to act in history and in nature. All that exists or happens in the universe can be explained by the laws of cause and effect; what cannot be investigated by empirical methods cannot be real.

All the versions of "secular Christianity" advocated by modern theologians assume the validity of secularism, sometimes under the garb of mere "secularity." They all take as their starting point a world in which man has supposedly come of age (as seen by Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and has no need for supernatural reality, the basic premise of religion. Their purpose is a "re-statement" of the Gospel for this modern man who has learned to get along in the world and now he has no need of supernatural help. The end of "supernaturalism," the end of that old doctrine of transcendence which is part and parcel of a pre-scientific concept of the universe, has arrived. If the Christian faith is to survive, it must be brought up to date; it must throw off every residue of "transcendentalism" and express itself in secular terms, so that no thinking man has to reject it together with the accompanying pre-scientific ideas. Far from being an enemy of the Christian faith, secularism is an ally, since (as Friedrich Gogarten argued) man's responsibility for the world is the very essence of the Gospel.

Thus the foundation is laid for man to concentrate *all* his effort in building the earthly city, without having to concern himself with reality "beyond" or "above" the natural realm. Man is the author of his own destiny and his vocation is exclusively historical.

Robert J. Blaikie<sup>10</sup> has demonstrated in detail that in the Cartesian system of reality that underlies "secular Christianity" there really is no place for the concept of man as an "agent" — a person capable of acting freely and introducing intentional changes in the world. Action is the basic characteristic of personal reality. But if man is no more than the thinking subject and the world only the object of his thought, completely determined within a closed system of causes and effects, it follows that man is not personal reality and cannot be considered an active agent. Common sense tells us, nevertheless, that we are in effect beings living and acting in the world and that the concept of reality as something that can only be known "objectively" by means of the scientific method, is an incomplete view of reality based on philosophical premises that, as such, cannot be proven scientifically. In conclusion, "secular Christianity" is not a mere "re-statement" of the Gospel, but rather a capitulation in favor of a distorted concept of reality that is part of modern secularism.

Man's responsibility for creation is an essential aspect of his vocation, according to the biblical definition; the exclusion of God, as the personal God who acts in nature and in human history, is a compromise with "the spirit of the age." It is a form of worldliness. "Secular Christianity" is a man-centered religion that says man hears only what he wants to hear — that he is his own boss, that the future is in his hands, that God can only be tolerated as something impersonal that he can manipu-

late. It is a denial of the biblical message whose basic presupposition is that God transcends the universe and acts freely within it.

In the final analysis, what "secular Christianity" does is to sanctify the secular, replacing God's love manifested in Jesus Christ by love for *the things* of the secular city, as if the present order, to which they belong, had absolute value. John's admonition to a first-century church threatened by Docetism is relevant today, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

b. "Culture Christianity." No less harmful to the cause of the Gospel than "secular Christianity" is the identification of Christianity with a culture or a cultural expression. In the sixteenth century, Latin America was conquered in the name of the Catholic king and queen of Spain. This conquest was not only military but religious as well. It was concerned with implanting not merely Spanish culture, but a "Christian culture." Only in recent years has Rome become aware that the Christianity of the people of Latin America is almost purely nominal. In the nineteenth century, the Christian missionary outreach was so closely connected with European colonialism that in Africa and Asia Christianity would become identified as the white man's religion.

Today, however, there is another form of "culture Christianity" that has come to dominate the world scene — the "American Way of Life." This phenomenon is described by a North American Christian writer in these terms, "A major source of the rigid equation of socio-political conservatism with evangelicalism is conformity with the world. We have equated 'Americanism' with Christianity to such an extent that we are tempted to believe that people in other cultures must adopt American institutional patterns when they are converted. We are led through natural psychological processes to an unconscious belief that the essence of our American Way of Life is basically, if not entirely, Christian."<sup>11</sup> This equation in the United States insures the presence of a large number of middle class whites in the church. But the price the church has had to pay for quantity is to forfeit its prophetic role in society. What Tillich called "the Protestant principle," that is, the capacity to denounce every historic absolutization, is impossible for "culture Christianity." And this explains the confusion of Christian orthodoxy with socio-economic and political conservatism present in Evangelicalism in the United States.

In the light of the powerful influence that this type of Christianity has had in what is known as "the mission field," the Gospel that is preached today in the majority of countries of the world bears the marks of "the American Way of Life." It is not surprising that at least in Latin America today the evangelist often has to face innumerable prejudices that reflect the identification of Americansim with the Gospel in the minds of his listeners. The image of a Christian that has been projected by some forms of United States Christianity is that of a successful businessman who has found the formula for happiness, a formula he wants to share with others freely. The basic problem is that, in a market of "free consumers" of religion in which the church has no possibility of maintaining its monopoly on religion, this Christianity



has resorted to reducing its message to a minimum in order to make all men *want* to become Christians. The Gospel thus becomes a type of merchandise, the acquisition of which guarantees to the consumer the highest values — *success* in life and personal *happiness* now and forever. The act of “accepting Christ” is the means to reach the ideal of “the good life,” at no cost. The Cross has lost its offense, since it simply points to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us, but it is not a call to discipleship. The God of this type of Christianity is the God of “cheap grace,” the God who constantly gives but never demands, the God fashioned expressly for mass-man, who is controlled by the law of least possible effort and seeks easy solutions, the God who gives his attention to those who will not reject him because they need him as an analgesic.

In order to gain the greatest possible number of followers, it is not enough for “culture Christianity” to turn the Gospel into a product; it also has to distribute it among the greatest number of consumers of religion. For this, the twentieth century has provided it with the perfect tool — technology. The strategy for the evangelization of the world thus becomes a question of mathematical calculation. The problem is to produce the greatest number of Christians at the least possible cost in the shortest possible time, and for this the strategists can depend on the work of the computer. Thanks to computers, never in the modern era have we been closer to the reestablishment of one culture unified by the Christian faith — the *Corpus Christianum*. The “culture Christianity” of our day has at its disposal the most sophisticated technological resources to propagate its message of success throughout the world and to do it *efficiently!*

Obviously, what is objectionable in this approach to evangelism is not the use of technology in itself. Viewed alone, technology, like science or money, is morally neutral. Nor is the concern that there be more Christians in the world to be questioned. God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2:4). The problem with this “culture Christianity” lies in that it reduces the Gospel to a formula for success and equates the triumph of Christ with obtaining the highest number of “conversions.” This is a man-centered Christianity that clearly shows itself to be conditioned by the “technological mentality” — that mentality that, as Jacques Ellul has pointed out,<sup>12</sup> regards efficiency as the absolute criterion and on this basis seeks, in all areas of human life, the systematization of methods and resources to obtain preestablished results. It is the “religious” product of a civilization in which *nothing*, not even man himself, escapes technology — a civilization obsessed with its search for the “one best way” that inevitably leads to automation. This is another form of worldliness. The manipulation of the Gospel to achieve successful results inevitably leads to slavery to the world and its powers.

As is the case with “secular Christianity,” the basic question in relation to “culture Christianity” is the very significance of the Gospel. I am afraid, nevertheless, that the proponents of this type of Christianity are those least able to see the problem, since the majority of them live in the land where the technological mentality exerts its greatest influence. It is not surprising that any criticism of this approach

to evangelism should fall on deaf ears or be interpreted as a lack of interest in the propagation of the Gospel. At this rate we may ask if the day is not close when missionary strategists employ B.F. Skinner’s “behavior conditioning”<sup>13</sup> and “Christianize” the world through the scientific control of environmental conditions and human genetics.

The proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord of all is a call to turn to God from idols, to serve a living and true God (I Thess. 1:9). Where there is no concept of the universal sovereignty of God there is no repentance; and where there is no repentance there is no salvation. Christian salvation is, among other things, liberation *from* the world as a closed system, *from* the world that has room only for a god bound by sociology, *from* the “consistent” world that rules out God’s free, unpredictable action. One cannot be a friend of this world without being an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4). To love this world is to reject the love of God (I John 2:15). The Gospel, then, is a call not only to faith, but also to repentance, to break with the world. And it is only in the extent to which we are free from this world that we are able to serve our fellowmen.

### PART THREE:

#### EVANGELISM AND INVOLVEMENT WITH THE WORLD

The Kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. Eschatology has invaded history. God has clearly expressed his plan to place all things under the rule of Christ. The powers of darkness have been defeated. Here and now, in union with Jesus Christ, man has within his reach the blessings of the new era.

However, the Kingdom of God has not yet arrived in all its fullness. Our salvation is “in hope” (Rom. 8:24). According to God’s promise, “we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (II Pet. 3:13). Ours is the time of the patience of God, who does not wish “that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (II Pet. 3:9).

#### 1. *Evangelism and repentance ethics*

The Gospel is always proclaimed in opposition to an organized lie — the Great Lie that man realizes himself by pretending to be God, in autonomy from God; that his life consists in the things he possesses; that he lives for himself alone and is the owner of his destiny. All history is the history of this Lie and of the destruction it has brought upon man — the history of how man (as C.S. Lewis would aptly express it) has enjoyed the horrible liberty he has demanded and consequently has been enslaved.

The Gospel involves a call to repentance from this Lie. The relation between the Gospel and repentance is such that preaching the Gospel is equivalent to preaching “repentance and forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:47), or to testifying “of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). Without this call to repentance there is no Gospel. And repentance is not merely a bad conscience — the “worldly grief” that produces death (II Cor. 7:10) — but a change of attitude, a restructuring of one’s scale of values, a reorientation of the whole

personality. It is not simply giving up habits condemned by a moralistic ethic, but rather laying down the weapons of rebellion against God, to return to him. It is not simply recognizing a psychological necessity, but rather accepting the Cross of Christ as death to the world in order to live before God.

This call to repentance throws into relief the social dimension of the Gospel. It comes to man enslaved by sin in a specific social situation, not to a "sinner," in the abstract. It is a change of attitude that becomes concrete in history. It is a turning from sin to God, not only in the individual's subjective consciousness, but *in the world*. This truth is clearly illustrated in John the Baptist's proclamation of the Kingdom (Matt. 3:1-12, Luke 3:7-14), concerning which I will simply make the following observations: (i) It has a strong eschatological note. The time of fulfillment of God's promises given through his prophets has come. The presence of Jesus Christ among men is the evidence that God is active in history to accomplish his purposes: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). (ii) This new reality places men in a position of crisis — they cannot continue to live as if nothing had happened; the Kingdom of God demands a new mentality, a reorientation of all their values, repentance (Matt. 3:2). Repentance has an eschatological significance — it marks the boundary between the old age and the new, between judgment and promise. (iii) The change imposed involves a new life-style: "Bear fruits that befit repentance" (Luke 3:8). Without ethics there is no real repentance. (iv) Repentance ethics is more than generalizations — it has to do with specific acts of self-sacrifice in concrete situations. To each one who becomes convicted by his message, John the Baptist has a fitting word, and in each case his ethical demand touches the point at which the man is enslaved to the powers of the old age and closed to God's action. To the people in general he says, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." To the tax collectors, "Collect no more than is appointed you." To the soldiers, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:11-14). The crisis created by the Kingdom cannot be resolved by accepting concepts handed down by tradition ("We are descendants of Abraham"), but rather by obedience to the ethics of the Kingdom.

Where there is no concrete obedience there is no repentance. And without repentance there is no salvation (Mark 1:4; Luke 13:3; Matt. 21:32; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31). Salvation is man's return to God, but it is at the same time *also* man's return to his neighbor. In the presence of Jesus Christ, Zacchaeus the publican renounces the materialism that has enslaved him and accepts responsibility for his neighborism ("Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" — Luke 19:8). This renunciation and this commitment Jesus calls "salvation" ("Today salvation has come to this house" — Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus' response to the Gospel call could not be expressed in more concrete or "worldly" terms. It is not merely a subjective, but a moral experience — an experience that affects his life precisely at that point at which the Great Lie had taken root; an experience that brings him out of himself and turns him toward his neighbor.

The Gospel message, since it was first proclaimed by Jesus Christ, involves a call to repentance (Matt. 4:17). Repentance is much more than a private affair between the individual and God. It is the complete reorientation of life in the world — among men — in response to the work of God in Jesus Christ. When evangelism does not take repentance seriously, it is because it does not take the world seriously, and when it does not take the world seriously it does not take God seriously. The Gospel is not a call to social quietism. Its goal is not to take a man out of the world, but to put him into it, no longer as a slave but as a son of God and a member of the body of Christ.

If Jesus Christ is Lord, men must be confronted with his authority over the totality of life. Evangelism is not, and cannot be, a mere offer of benefits achieved by Jesus Christ. Christ's work is inseparable from his person; the Jesus who died for our sins is the Lord of the whole universe, and the announcement of forgiveness in his name is inseparable from the call to repentance, the call to turn from "the rulers of this world" to the Lord of glory. But "no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3).

## 2. *Evangelism and "otherworldliness"*

To "secular Christianity," obsessed with the life of this world, the only salvation possible is one which fits within the limits of this present age. It is essentially an economic, social and political salvation, although sometimes (as in the case of the Latin American "theology of liberation") an attempt is made to extend the concept to include "the making of a new man," author of his own destiny<sup>14</sup>. Eschatology is absorbed by the Utopia and the Christian hope becomes confused with the worldly hope proclaimed by Marxism.

At the other extreme is the concept of salvation as the future salvation of the soul, in which present life has meaning only as a preparation for the "hereafter." History is assimilated by a futurist eschatology and religion becomes a means of escape from present reality. The result is a total withdrawal from the problems of society in the name of "separation from the world." It is this misunderstanding of the Gospel which has given rise to the Marxist criticism of Christian eschatology as the "opiate of the people."

That this concept of salvation is a misunderstanding of biblical soteriology should not need to be demonstrated. Unfortunately, it is a concept so deep-rooted in the preaching of so many evangelical churches that we must stop to analyze the question.

*In the first place*, for Jesus Christ himself the mission entrusted to him by the Father was not limited to preaching the Gospel. Matthew, for example, summarizes Jesus' earthly ministry in these words, "And he went about all Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues and *preaching* the gospel of the kingdom and *healing* every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Matt. 4:23; cf. 9:35). Even if evangelism is defined solely in terms of *verbal* communication — a definition that would leave much to be desired in the light of the psychology of communication — we still must add, on the basis of the text, that evangelism was only one of the elements of Jesus' mission. Together with the *kerygma* went

the *diaconia* and the *didache*. This presupposes a concept of salvation that includes the whole man and cannot be reduced to the simple forgiveness of sins and assurance of unending life with God in heaven. A comprehensive mission corresponds to a comprehensive view of salvation. Salvation is wholeness. Salvation is total humanization. Salvation is eternal life — the life of the Kingdom of God — life that begins here and now (and this is the meaning of the present tense of the verb “has eternal life” in the Gospel and the letters of John) and touches all aspects of man’s being.

In the second place, Jesus’ work had a social and political dimension. The individualism of “culture Christianity” to which I have referred above sees the Lord with only one eye and consequently sees him as an individualistic Jesus who is concerned with the salvation of individuals. An unprejudiced reading of the Gospels shows us a Jesus who, in the midst of many political alternatives (Pharisaism, Sadduceeism, Zealotism, Essenism) personifies and proclaims a new alternative — the Kingdom of God. To say that Jesus is the Christ is to describe him in political terms, to affirm that he is *king*. His kingdom is not of this world, not in the sense that it has nothing to do with the world, but in the sense that it does not adapt itself to human politics. It is a kingdom with its own politics, marked by sacrifice. Jesus is a king who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). This service to the point of sacrifice belongs to the very essence of his mission. And this must be the distinctive sign of the community that acknowledges him as king. According to the politics of man, “those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them”; in the politics of the Kingdom of God, he who wants to be great “must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44). Thus Jesus confronts the power structures by denouncing their deep-seated ambition to rule, and by proclaiming another alternative, based on love, service, self-dedication to others. He does not take refuge in “religion” or “spiritual things,” as if his kingdom had nothing to do with political and social life; but he demythologizes the politics of man and presents himself as the Servant-King, the creator and model of a community that submits to him as Lord and commits itself to live as he lived. The concrete result of Jesus’ sacrifice for the sake of others, whose culmination was reached in the Cross, is this community patterned after the Servant-King: a community in which each member gives according to his means and receives according to his needs, since “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 2:45, 4:34-35, 20:35); a community in which racial, cultural, social, and even sexual barriers disappear, since “Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28); a community of reconciliation with God and reconciliation among men (Eph. 2:11-22); and a community, finally, that serves as a base for the resistance against the conditioning by “the present evil age” and makes it possible for Jesus’ disciples to live in the world without being of the world.

In the third place, the new creation in Jesus Christ becomes history in terms of good works. In Paul’s words, God has “created [us] in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Jesus Christ “gave himself for us to redeem

us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are *zealous for good deeds*” (Tit. 2:14). The New Testament knows nothing of a Gospel that makes a divorce between soteriology and ethics, between communion with God and communion with one’s neighbor, between faith and works. The Cross is not only the negation of the validity of every human effort to gain God’s favor by works of the law; it is *also* the demand for a new quality of life characterized by love — the opposite of an individualistic life, centered on personal ambitions, indifferent to the needs of others. The significance of the Cross is both soteriological and ethical. This is so because in choosing the Cross Jesus not only created the indicative of the Gospel (“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us” — I John 3:16a), but also *simultaneously* provided the pattern for human life here and now (“And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” — I John 3:16b). Just as the Word became man, so also must love become good works if it is to be intelligible to men. This is what gives meaning to “worldly goods” — they can be converted into instruments through which the life of the new age expresses itself. This is what John means when he says, “If any one has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but *in deed and in truth*” (I John 3:17). God’s love expressed in the Cross must be made *visible* in the world through the church. The evidence of eternal life is not the simple confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, but “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Jesus said, “Not every one who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

In the light of the biblical teaching there is no place for an “other-worldliness” that does not result in the Christian’s commitment to his neighbor, rooted in the Gospel. There is no room for “eschatological paralysis” nor for a “social strike.” There is no place for statistics on “how many souls die without Christ every minute,” if they do not take into account how many of those who die, die victims of hunger. There is no place for evangelism that, as it goes by the man who was assaulted by thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, sees in him only a soul that must be saved and ignores the man. “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas. 2:14-17).

Only in the context of a soteriology that takes the world seriously is it possible to speak of the *oral* proclamation of the Gospel. If men are to call on the name of the Lord, they must believe in him; “and how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” (Rom. 10:14). But the “word of reconciliation” entrusted to the church is the prolongation of the act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Cor. 5:21). It was thus — from within the situation of sinners, in an identification with them which he carried to



its final consequences — that God in Christ reconciled the world to himself, once and for all. This was the vertical movement of the Gospel, the movement that in the Cross reached its darkest point. This is the heart of the Gospel. But it is also the standard for evangelism. If God worked out reconciliation from within the human situation, the only fitting evangelism is that in which the Word becomes flesh in the world and the evangelist becomes “the slave of all” in order to win them to Christ (I Cor. 9:19-23). The first condition for genuine evangelism is the crucifixion of the evangelist. Without it the Gospel becomes empty talk and evangelism becomes proselytism.

The church is not an otherworldly religious club that organizes forays into the world in order to gain followers through persuasive techniques. It is the sign of the Kingdom of God; it lives and proclaims the Gospel here and now, *among men*, and waits for the consummation of God's plan to place all things under the rule of Christ. It has been freed *from* the world, but it is *in* the world; it has been sent by Christ into the world *just as Christ* was sent by the Father (John 17:11-18). In other words, it has been given a mission oriented toward the building of a new humanity in which God's plan for man is accomplished, a mission that can be performed only through sacrifice. Its highest ambition cannot and should not be to achieve the success that leads to triumphalism, but rather faithfulness to its Lord, which leads it to confess, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty” (Luke 17:10). The confession can be made only by those who live by God's grace and desire that all their works result in the glory of the one who died for all, “that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (II Cor. 5:15).

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Matt. 24:21; John 1:9, 10, 17:5, 24; Acts 17:24; Rom. 1:20; I Cor. 4:9, 8:4; Eph. 1:4; Phil. 2:15; Heb. 4:3, 9:26.
2. It is noteworthy that the New Testament never uses the term *cosmos* to refer to the eschatological world of the Christian hope, for which other expressions are used.
3. Matt. 4:8; John 8:23, 12:25, 16:33, 18:30; I Cor. 7:31; I John 3:17; I Tim. 6:7.
4. The texts in which *cosmos* with this connotation appears are numerous in Johannine and Pauline writings. The usage of the term with this meaning is peculiar to the New Testament.
5. Matt. 5:14, 13:38, 18:7; I Cor. 1:27f., 3:22, 4:13; II Pet. 2:5, 3:6; Heb. 11:7, 38.
6. Vincent Taylor, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 1941, p. 273.
7. This position is illustrated by Oscar Cullmann's affirmation that “the fundamental distinction . . . between all the members of the lordship of Christ and the members of the Church is that the former do not know that they belong to this lordship, whereas the latter do know it” *The Christology of the New Testament*, 1963, p. 231.
8. *The Theology of the Resurrection*, 1965, pp. 161-62.
9. René Descartes' formula, “I think, therefore I am” failed to take

into account that man is not a mind, but a mind/body (a psychosomatic being), living and acting in the world, and that the “subjective” and “objective” aspects of reality are therefore inseparable in knowledge. The failure resulted in the split of reality into two levels: the upper level of the “subjective” (feelings and religion) and the lower level of the “objective” (facts and science). This split is behind much of modern thinking in the fields of science, philosophy, and theology.

10. *Secular Christianity and the God Who Acts*, 1970.
11. David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal*, 1972, p. 42.
12. *The Technological Society*, 1970.
13. Cf. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, 1971.
14. Cf. Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teologia de la liberacion*, 1973, p. 132.