

A critical evaluation and evangelical proposal to the WCC-Assembly 2013 in Busan

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In 2010, the National Christian Council of Korea decided to invite the World Council of Churches to convene its 10th Assembly in 2013 in the Korean city of Busan. It will be the first time when a WCC Assembly is held in the Far East. There are several reasons for this option; some lie in the interest of the NCC of Korea, others in considerations of the Geneva Staff of the WCC. Probably the latter is hoping that the hosting of the Assembly in a country known for the spiritual vitality of its Christian community will exercise a reviving influence on the future development of the WCC.

I. The present situation of the World Council of Churches

At present, the WCC finds itself in a rather ailing condition. Its former drive during the era of the famous Assemblies at New Delhi in 1961 and Uppsala in 1968 under energetic and visionary leaders like the former General Secretaries *W. A. Visser 't Hooft* and *Philip Potter* as well as the Indian Moderator of the Central Committee *Mr. M. M. Thomas* was halted after the 7th Assembly held in Canberra in 1991. A whole block of important member churches, i. e. the Orthodox, were extremely dissatisfied with some spectacular events in the programme, especially the performance of a Shamanist ritual by the Korean feminist theologian *Dr. Chung, Hyun-Kyung* who invoked the *han* spirits of the dead in the name of the Assembly theme: "*Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation!*"

The Orthodox took this as a proof that the WCC had embarked on an openly syncretistic course. Moreover, they complained that the procedure of ecumenical decision making was in the hands of Staff members and Council authorities who followed Western parliamentary rules and ideological concepts. Therefore they threatened to quit their membership, unless the whole system of the WCC was thoroughly reformed. During the last term of General Secretary *Konrad Raiser*, the WCC yielded to the Orthodox demands that the former authoritarian style should be replaced by a more democratic resp. conciliar one. Since then, the Geneva leadership has become rather restrained in making bold pronouncements and enforcing its own preconceived agenda on the member churches. As a consequence, the WCC has lost much of public interest in the secular press and even in its member churches in Western countries.

II.

Traditional evangelical concerns regarding the theological course of the WCC

Evangelical churches and mission societies all over the world did early express their theological concerns about the shaky biblical basis of WCC pronouncements and the ecumenical activities. They deplored especially that soul winning evangelism and church planting in unreached geographical areas within the 20/40 window was given very subordinate places in the official agenda. I remember the critical challenge which the late *Dr. Donald McGavran* in 1968 publicly put to the planning group in Geneva: “Will Uppsala betray the 2 Billion?” By this, he referred to those peoples on earth who never had got the chance to hear the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. In the Section Drafts for Uppsala was little room given to world evangelization because the major concern in Uppsala was to be the “humanization” of socio-political structures in the Two-Thirds-World.

The leadership of the WCC would deny that they had given up the missionary vocation of the Church. But they had developed a new concept of mission and evangelization which was propagated under the term “*Missio Dei*”. The implication of this concept is that “mission” is not a task primarily assigned to the Church. It is understood to rather be the work of the Triune God Himself who is present in the world. According to this view God, Christ or the Spirit are leading the world to its appointed goal, the “Kingdom of God”.

The churches can or should be human instruments in this process; but if they failed, God would use alternative instruments, both other religions and political liberation movements. Here two essential distinctions were removed: the one between sacred and the secular and the other between the history of salvation and the history of mankind.

On a closer look, it was strange to observe that the spokesmen of the WCC included also **communist** groups in their understanding of *Missio Dei*. This resulted in the fact that until the world-wide turn-over through the downfall of the Soviet system in 1989/90 the political pronouncements given by WCC officials and meetings under prophetic claim very seldom addressed the acts of suppression and persecution committed by communist rulers. They were spared out so that only a “selective indignation” was uttered. This phenomenon can also be observed in the apparent silence with regard to the persecution of Christians in North Korea. Up to now it seems to be a “non-issue” in the preparatory documents for Busan 2013.

III.

The concept of mission and evangelism in the preparatory document for Busan A critical assessment

In September this year the WCC Central Committee approved, at its meeting in Crete, Greece, a lengthy statement presented by Bishop *Geevaghese Mor Coorilos*, moderator of the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), under the title:

“Together towards life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes”.

It is the first ecumenical declaration on mission since the one issued in 1982 under the name “Mission and Evangelism – an Ecumenical Affirmation”. According to Coorilos, this new statement is “about seeking vision, concepts and directions for a renewed understanding and practice of mission and evangelism amid changing global landscapes.” As for the theological concern of this statement, it is expected that it will promote a renewed appreciation of the Trinity (*missio Trinitatis*), especially the “mission of the Holy Spirit”, the “life-giver”. To put it more concretely, “it aims at articulating a fresh understanding of a prophetic missiology that affirms ‘life’ in its fullness, in relation to justice, inclusivity and integrity of creation.”

This is a bold and far reaching announcement. It promises to introduce a new understanding of missiology, i. e. the doctrine on the theology and practice of mission, and also to unfold what “life in its fullness is”. Special reference is made to the new widened goal of the ecumenical movement since the start of the s.c. “Conciliar Process” in 1986 which was – or still is “Justice, Peace and integrity of Creation”. Behind this goal stands nothing less but the expectation of a totally renewed world from which all former suffering is removed, a new creation as shown in the biblical prophesies of the Messianic rule or the *Kingdom of God*. M. M. Thomas has called it the “*Utopian Vision*” of the WCC.

Bishop Coorilos claims that the new mission statement has already now gained “enormous attention”. This fact will and must motivate evangelicals to study the document thoroughly in order to find out in what respect the “new missiology” presented to the Busan Assembly still retains the central elements of the former missiology and in which way it introduces a completely new theological understanding of mission and a corresponding new methodology and practice.

The continuity can be found in their taking over of the concept of *Missio Dei*, i. e. God’s mission which was introduced at the 5th world missionary conference held in Willingen in 1952. It was

hailed by missiologists as an important step forward, because it emphasized anew the theocentric basis of missions. But already at Willingen 1952 there were *two contrary concerns* by which the term *Missio Dei* was filled with content.

On the one hand there was the *ecclesio-centric* (church centred) view. According to this God in His mission started His Mission by sending His Son Jesus Christ to redeem mankind from their sins at the Cross. Jesus established the Church as his body which he commissioned to continue His own work of salvation by preaching the Gospel in the whole world to all nations, so that all those who accept it in faith and repentance will find forgiveness of their sins, peace with God and eternal life. When all nations will have heard the Gospel and responded to it either in acceptance or by rejection, the end will come: Jesus will return in great power and glory and set up his messianic kingdom (Math 24:14; Mark13:10).

On the other hand, there was to *cosmo-centric* (world centred) view. According to this, God Himself is present in world history and leads it directly towards His appointed goal, the establishment of His kingdom here on earth. The secularizing consequences for the understanding of the relation between mission and politics I have already pointed out in Part I of this lecture.

This is the reason why after Uppsala 1968 there arose a rivalry between two conflicting concepts and organizations for Mission and Evangelism, symbolized by the names ‘Bangkok ’73’ and ‘Lausanne ’74’. Between these two no cooperation was possible but only a mutual questioning or open denouncement of each other's position.

In recent years, however, the former conflict seems to have lost its vigour. Both sides have tried to listen to each other and even to accommodate their concepts of mission and evangelism. In their mission statements they included some concerns which appeared plausible and legitimate. This can be shown by an analysis of their major documents, the declarations of the three International Congresses of the Lausanne Movement in 1974, 1989 and 2010 on the one hand and the two Mission Statements of the WCC in 1982 and 2012 on the other hand.

Especially the present one, written in preparation of Busan, “*Together towards Life*”, is, on the first glance, written in a rather spiritual language. It takes up some biblical key terms like “Spirit”, “life”, “creation”, “kingdom of God”.

The mission statement tries to fit closely to the general theme of the 10th Assembly of the WCC **“God of Life: Lead us to Justice and Peace”**. The divine person whom the general theme calls “God of Life” is identified in the mission statement throughout all its 112 paragraphs mainly with the Spirit, sometimes called “Holy Spirit”. This Spirit is described as being present and acting in world history and in the whole of creation, including the entire cosmos. The Spirit has one central mission in which we are called to participate. It is the mission of the Spirit to bring about justice and peace between all parts of the human society, and to lead the creation towards its goal, the kingdom of God. This ultimate aim is not considered to be reached by an eschatological act of God in which he sovereignly creates a new earth, but rather by a gradual **transformation**.

This word has become a key term in present ecumenical theology which is increasingly used by some groups of evangelicals as well. The presence of the Spirit is recognized wherever a transformation of the present state of injustice and conflict is taking place, and it is the mission of God’s people as well to engage in such transformation. The Statement affirms in § 10: “The church is the gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the kingdom of God.”

According to this view, the mission of the church is far wider than to set out for the salvation of souls. “Both the earth and our bodies have to be transformed through the Spirit’s grace” (§ 20). This means that mission is taking place also in active political involvement, in the form of a readiness to fight against all unjust structures:

“Mission spirituality resists and seeks to transform all life-destroying values and systems wherever these are at work in our economies, our politics, and even our churches.”

That means that Christian missionaries may not confine themselves to fulfil their spiritual task in preaching, worshipping and serving. For the Statement tells them that “God’s free gift of life compels us (sic!) to confront idolatrous assumptions, unjust systems, politics of domination and exploitation in our current world economic order” (§ 30).

What a magnificent task is assigned here to churches, missions and individual Christians, irrespective if they professionally equipped or not! They are expected to solve all those intrinsic problems of our present world with which governments, economists, scientists and other specialists and even the United Nations – mostly in vane – try to cope with.

One other key term which in the Statement plays an important role is the word **“life”**. Its very theme is *“Together towards Life”*. The Assembly theme, too, leads our attention to life by invoking God as the God of Life and imploring Him to lead us to justice and peace. This

indicates that justice and peace primarily are the main gifts of life, and primarily so in the socio-political sense. In the introduction of the statement its authors want us to join them in their confession: “We believe in the Triune God who is creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life.” Especially are we to believe in God, the Holy Spirit, the Life-giver who sustains and empowers life and renews the whole creation. In the following § 2 the mission of the church is described as “to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life-destroying forces, in the Power of the Holy Spirit”. Here the attentive reader will wonder what the essence of this highly acclaimed “life” actually is. It seems to be identical with the creation itself; and the upholding of this life is identical with our responsibility for the sustaining of creation in its integrity. Such concept will easily appeal to adherents of all religions and ideologies, including the tribal religion of the Africans which is centred on the “force vital”, of which all natural beings are dependent.

But in which way does the Statement manage to concentrate on the genuine biblical concept of life? To me it appears that it does not clearly distinguish between two essentially different kinds of life, the one which in Greek is named βίος (*bios*), the other ζωή (*zoe*). A study of a biblical concordance teaches us that whilst *bios* basically means earthly life according to its functions and duration, *zoe* refers to a much higher form: it means the supernatural life that God and Christ possess already and in which believers will share fully after their resurrection but which they enjoy already now if they are closely connected with Jesus Christ in faith and love. It is especially in the Gospel of St. John that the term ζωή occurs most frequently and where it is unfolded as that gift of salvation that Jesus grants to those who believe in him. In John 5:24 Jesus assures his followers: *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*

Unfortunately this genuine christological and soteriological understanding of the very key term “life” is lost in the Mission Statement for Busan. It is generalized into a universal force that easily can be capsized by adherents of any pantheistic religion or ideology, including the gurus of the *New Age* movement.

IV.

Possibilities for evangelicals positively to influence the Busan Assembly

The WCC has thankfully accepted the invitation of the Korean NCC in awareness of the fact that the great majority of Christians and churches in Korea are evangelical in faith and practice. Not all responsible Christians in Korea, however, have been in favour to have the WCC Assembly

take place in their country. For they fear that those features of the Geneva ecumenical movement which they are critical about, may become detrimental to the evangelical character of the hosting churches. Especially they criticize its political one-sidedness, its ideological leaning and its pluralistic treatment of non-Christian religions.

Yet two unchangeable facts are that the invitation was sponsored also by well known evangelical pastors and congregations in Korea and that the preparation of the Assembly has fully begun. Therefore it will be wise to deliberate what positive contribution evangelical theologians and ordinary believers can make to the proceedings of the Assembly, so that its partakers from all continents and countries may receive spiritual blessing and biblical orientation.

I believe that such contribution can be rendered in two ways. The one is to provide theological correction of erroneous conceptions, and the other is to let the partakers make an experience of Korean Christian spirituality and church life.

I have already indicated in Part II of my lecture where I see serious shortcomings in the new Mission Statement of the WCC. I especially tried to explore shortly the meaning of some key concepts in the document: Spirit, life, mission, Kingdom of God, transformation. Evangelical Korean theologians, especially leaders and members of the KEF, ought to deal very intensively with this important and widely acclaimed declaration. They should not allow themselves to be fascinated by the evangelical style in which it is written. In spite of the permanent reiteration of its theological key concepts they should not accept them on their face value. Rather they should question whether they really are filled by their genuine biblical content. Partly they are, indeed, and I know that some passages have been written by evangelicals within the WCC.

Yet closely attached to those seemingly biblically orthodox affirmations which resemble statements issued by the Lausanne Movement, there are others that clearly express the political ideology which was dominant in the proceedings, programmes and statements of the WCC in the period between Uppsala 1968 and Canberra 1991.

The most important correction which evangelicals should insert in the new Mission Statement pertains to the confusion between the two forms of history: *World history* and *Salvation history*. It must be pointed out that God works in different ways in these two realms. In world history, God works as Creator, Sustainer and Judge, making the national governments to exercise His rule, as the apostle Paul shows in Romans 13:1-7. But World history as such does not gradually move onwards to change the present state into the Kingdom of God. The concept of

“transformation” is erroneous; in the way it is used here it is no biblical term.¹ It contradicts the Christian doctrine concerning the relation between this present world and the future Kingdom of God and the way in which Jesus Christ Himself already now introduces it.

There is a deep hiatus between the two states which is marked by the Second Coming of Christ. He will end the present world by performing His judgment over it, and He Himself will set up His Messianic rule in power and glory. Therefore evangelical theologians should point out this prophetic truth and to make a strong plea for biblical eschatology – which is almost omitted in the Mission Statement! Yet evangelicals in their engagement in mission have always been inspired by the expectation of the Second Coming of the Lord, which will take place only when the Gospel of the Kingdom will have been proclaimed to all nations on earth (cf. Matthew 24:14 and 28:18-20). This is why the Korean church has always been a missionary church having sent out missionaries virtually to all countries on earth. Korean Christians have to hold on to their priceless spiritual heritage and can never give in to its distortion!

By this observation, I am touching finally the second contribution which evangelicals can make to a constructive course of the 10th WCC Assembly in Busan next year. I am sure that the Korean congregations will extend a wonderful hospitality to the participants from so many sister churches all over the world. And they will share with them the secret why the Church in Korea has become famous for its impressive inner and outer growth. This secret is that it has always been a church marked by prayer, Bible reading, generous offering and evangelistic witness both in the neighbourhood and beyond its geographical borders.

It is also a martyr church which has gone through many persecutions during the Japanese occupation and the communist invasion after the Second World War. Even today ten thousands of Korean Christians are suffering and dying in concentration camps in North Korea. Take the participants of the Busan Assembly to the 38th parallel and let them pray with you for the consolation and final liberation of your persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ.

Then the Assembly will be really blessed; for ***“we all are members of the one Body of Christ, and if one member suffers, all suffer; if when one member is honoured, all members rejoice together”*** (I Corinthians 12:26).

¹ A notion of it is found only in Rom 12:2 and II Cor 3:18, where *metamorphousthai* means something quite different, i. e. the personal sanctification of believers.