



## **World Evangelization or World Transformation?**

A call to revive the Biblical understanding of evangelism

***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth.”*** (Acts 1:8)

On 1 and 2 March 2013, a symposium was held in Gomaringen near Tübingen. It was sponsored by the *International Christian Network* (ICN) and dedicated to the memory of Prelate **Rolf Scheffbuch**, a promoter of the missions movement, who had been called home on 10 November 2012. The following mission-theological declaration was issued. Now, at Pentecost, we address ourselves to all Christians who are committed to world evangelization.

Ever since the beginning of church history, **Pentecost** has meant world evangelization. The ascended Lord sent – as He had promised (John 15:26; Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8) – the Holy Spirit from the Father to His disciples to equip them for the Great Commission. They were to take the Gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20), so that the gentiles, too, should receive salvation from sin, death and the devil which Christ accomplished at the cross and by His resurrection.

We welcome the increasing worldwide search for new ways of mission for our time. We rejoice at reports from all parts of the world which mark an awakening of evangelistic responsibility in winning so far unreached societies for Christ as their Lord and Redeemer. We especially think of the martyrs who gave their lives for their courageous testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and still do so today.

At the same time, we are concerned that the evangelical theology of mission, as it seems, is beginning to neglect its own foundations in the Biblical history of salvation. Step by step, it is aligning itself with the modernist view of missions held by the *World Council of Churches*, interpreting the history of redemption within the framework of a theological view of world history, and inadmissibly amalgamating the two. In the past two decades, the WCC has used a

language more in line with the Biblical one of the evangelicals. At the same time, certain parts of the Evangelical movement have also followed this new trend, both worldwide and in the German realm.

With the following public declaration we now wish to raise a warning voice against this, as we did during previous mission crises through the Frankfurt Declaration of 1970 and the Lausanne Commitment of 1974.

### **1. “Transformation” as the new topic of evangelical mission theology**

Ever since the Third General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, 1961, a modern understanding of missions has developed through the influence of secular ecumenical theologies and political ideologies. Due to the influence of “radical evangelicals”, originally from Latin America, this view is increasingly being adopted also by the evangelical side.

The contemporary theological thinking of evangelicals ranges between the proclamation of salvation in Christ on the one hand, and the changing of society as the surmised goal of evangelism on the other. The latter understanding of mission is called “holistic” or “incarnatory”. Many missiologists now call their discipline “Missional Theology”, based on the view that all functions of the church, including her social and political responsibilities, plus the dialogue with other religions, are determined by her total mission in the world which is to establish the promised “Kingdom of God”.

In this connection, the word “*transformation*”, so far unknown to many Christians, has become a key concept. Today it is a leading idea not only in the WCC but also in the worldwide evangelical mission movement. Because of its increasing prevalence, it urgently needs to be clarified. The word “transformation” as such comes from the Latin ‘*transformare*’ (remodel, recast, redesign). “Transformation” in the specific sense of changing social and political structures is not a Biblical concept. Its Biblical meaning most closely corresponds to the Greek *metamorphóo* [change] (Matthew 17:2; Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18). However, in the New Testament, this term signifies the change of those who have been born again, brought about by the Holy Spirit, i.e. their sanctification and “transfiguration”, but not a change of earthly social conditions.

In recent times, the Biblical and Early Church concept of “transformation” was taken up again and willfully reinterpreted by the *New Age Movement* in an evolutionary sense. In a “New Age”, mankind is to be developed into a higher race, and a new world order is to be established. This development, so the adherents claim, will take place automatically; but enlightened people can and should accelerate it by helping to bring about the “transformation” of all areas of life, i.e. of society, politics, culture, psychology, marketing and medicine.

It is deemed important to have a worldwide network of individuals and groups who will work for transformation through a meditative “widening of consciousness.” At the end of this universal transformation, a world government would be established, which would bring universal peace on earth. Hence, the concept of “transformation” which was first adopted by the Neo-Evangelical movement in North America, is dangerously loaded.

The reason why the Neo-Evangelicals found the concept of a societal transformation useful is because, since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “*Kingdom Theology*” had asserted itself in major parts of the American mission movement, while the missions theology which focused on personal conversion and the planting of churches was pushed aside. One facet of this “Kingdom of God Theology” is *Dominion Theology*. It arose from the older tradition of post-millennialism, i.e. the conviction that Jesus would return after the messianic kingdom of peace which he had proclaimed and initiated, the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6, had been established on earth.

These ideas have now been taken over by German speaking authors of the Transformation Theology and are being spread through their publications and teachings at evangelical mission seminaries and colleges. Organizations such as the “*Mica Initiative*” are putting them into practice and making them into a new mission programme. This is what *Rolf Scheffbuch* – supported by a few other pietistic theologians – protested against. For here mission would be linked, he felt, to political aims of an utopian nature (e.g. halving world poverty by the year 2015!), which would overtax the missionaries in terms of work and financial resources to the detriment of the more urgent evangelism.

Representatives of the “Transformation Movement” have attracted attention through an impressive series of publications and conferences. Thus they have become widely known. This makes a theological critique of Transformation Theology imperative since it actually affects

missionary practice. Economic and social projects supplant evangelistic preaching, even though most of the Transformation theologians do, in principal, affirm the latter.

In spite of this, we observe with concern that in their publications, next to the proclamation of the Gospel, social and possibly political action is presented as an equally important – if not even preferred – expression of the Gospel and the kingly rule of God. Through this widening of the concept of mission, the soteriological, i.e. the dimension of the Gospel which is focused on eternal life, namely the salvation brought by Jesus through His atoning death, does not remain unaffected. On the contrary: In theory as well as in missionary practice, the salvation of the soul takes second place to the creation of better social and economic conditions.

## **2. The view of Scripture in Transformation Theology**

Transformation theologians do affirm in principle the trustworthiness and reliability of the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, a dangerous change of course concerning the exposition of Scripture can be observed. It is the “contextual hermeneutics” which seeks to understand a text from its context (the context in which people find themselves), in this case the social and political situation. The problem is that Biblical texts are then read using such contextual methods of interpretation, as we have seen from Liberation and Feminist Theologies. The social and political situation of the readers of the Biblical texts thus provides the key to interpretation.

Part of this is a certain view of the relation between the Old and the New Testaments. Arbitrarily chosen historic events of the Old Testament, especially the liberation of Israel from Egypt and the prophetic sermons against misuse of power and injustice are regarded as “paradigmatic” models to be imposed upon today’s mission of the Church.

With this, the basis of the classical evangelical view of the Bible is abandoned. As we know, Jesus Christ and His salvation are at the centre of the Holy Scriptures. He Himself provides the key as to how the Old Testament should be understood in relation to Him (Luke 24:27,45; see Acts 13:47; 2 Corinthians 1:20).

The consequence of a contextual view of the Bible among transformation theologians is that man with his problems and wishes becomes the centre, not God who in the Scriptures reveals His actions in judgment and mercy. When the Biblical text is read only in terms of today’s context, then it can no longer show what it really intended to say.

### 3. The image of Jesus in Transformation Theology

Contextual Bible interpretation has major consequences for *Christology*, i.e. the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus the Christ. The presentation of the central content of the Christian faith determines the total understanding of the church and her “missional” existence.

It is true that, at times, authors of the Transformation Theology are expressing Christological viewpoints. But what interests them most, is the humanness of Jesus and His devoted service in the social needs of this world. At the same time His divinity, as emphasized particularly in the Gospel of John (John 1:1-14; 2:28) and formulated by the early church in its basic Creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon (325 and 451 AD, respectively), is largely obliterated. According to these, the Son of God is of one nature with God the Father and in His Person both natures, the divine and the human, are inseparably united.

Now the miracle of the incarnation of God is called “*incarnatory*” and plays an important role in the contemporary understanding of the Neo-Evangelical movement. However, what is meant is not so much the singular miracle of the incarnation of the eternal Logos in the Person of the Christ. Rather, in what could be called an “Example Christology”, it is emphasized that the Incarnate Jesus Christ has made Himself a servant and led a life of service in the needs of mankind.

Certainly, Jesus of Nazareth called on men to follow Him, and in His sermons and teachings he did lay the foundations of a Christian ethic. However, we need to understand that the matchless incarnation of the eternal Word of God (John 1:14), His once for all sacrificial death, and His ascension to the throne of God set up a barrier against any “*imitatio Christi*”. For His atoning sacrifice on the cross to take away our guilt cannot be imitated. This would contradict the Biblical understanding of salvation as taught by the Reformers. Indeed, it is inadmissible to change the message of “Christ for us” to the slogan, “Let us act like Christ”, thereby making the Gospel a new law.

Today, the Christian missionary movement is in danger, through such contextualization, to be led to follow a false Jesus. That is why we warn in the words of the Apostle Paul:

*“But I fear... your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if someone comes who preaches another Jesus, not the Jesus whom we preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.”*

(2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

#### 4. Church for the World

The way in which the Theology of Transformation is dealing with Christology, the teaching on the nature and work of God's Son Jesus Christ, also directly affects *ecclesiology*, the doctrine of the Church. Where Jesus Christ is primarily regarded as the servant of the world in its needs, there the church is also regarded only in terms of her service to world transformation. That means that the *function* of the Church becomes more important than its nature.

As we know from the New Testament, the nature of the Church consists in her intimate relationship with the ascended Christ, like the relation of members of a body to their head (1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18). Through the new birth, believers have become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), escaping the corruptions of the world. Through God the Son the Church is also in close communion with the two other Persons of God. She is the People of God and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

In the Transformation Theology, however, the Church is seen and valued in another perspective. Here she is called to devote herself totally to service in the world, striving for economic, social and political change, so that in this way the kingdom of God might be made manifest step by step.

Among the Neo-Evangelicals of the USA, there has been a similar development earlier already. There, the *Dominion Theology* claims that churches and Christians are tasked to build the kingdom of God already in this dispensation. This idea is also held by the "*Emergent Church*", considering itself as the new "paradigm" of a "missional church" for the post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is true that the Church is seen as God's instrument of His plan to establish His kingdom. However, by this view, He could just as well use other instruments for this goal, such as non-Christian religions and political-social movements whose members might be atheists!

*Transformation Theologians* formally hold to the threefold basic task of the Church: *leiturgia*, *diakonia* and *martyria* [worship, charity, and witness]. But one notices that even in this the worship of the Church is being redefined to mean involvement in changing the world to bring about the Kingdom of God. Likewise, mission is not so much understood as inviting people alienated from God to receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life through repentance and faith in the atoning work of Christ at the cross. Instead, it becomes a call to aid the building of the

Kingdom of God here and now. How differently do the New Testament Scriptures describe the nature and task of the Church:

*“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people claimed by God for His own, to proclaim the triumphs of Him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9)

### **5. God’s Kingdom growing visibly now**

Within the context of Transformation Theology, the concept of the Kingdom of God has a central place, albeit in almost exclusively this-worldly dimensions. God’s Kingly rule, it claims, would be extended here and now, in this world, by the *“social transformatory task”* of missions. The Kingdom of God could be seen wherever the *“values of the Kingdom”* are asserting themselves, overcoming injustice, oppression, exploitation, and structures hostile to life. This applies, so it is claimed, even to non- and extra-Christian processes.

By such claims, the *“eschatological realism”* of the Bible is being overlooked, i.e. the prophecies about concrete events to be expected to happen at the end of times: the maturation of evil, the empire of the Antichrist, the end of this world and the Last Judgment. If all this is changed into this-worldly programmes, then the Church is deprived of her chief missionary task of proclaiming the Gospel to those who are far from Christ.

### **6. Evangelistic preaching and social responsibility of Missions in the past and today**

Our criticism of Transformation Theology is not directed against its call to the social responsibility of Missions. We are in no way against works of love, but well against the massive shift of priority from preaching to social responsibility; for by this the Gospel threatens to become an ideological programme. We grant the theologians of Transformation their justified concern that conversion, change of mind and discipleship should have social, ethical and structural consequences. But we oppose their projected impression that man is the *“maker”* of the kingdom of God and that his salvation would be, as it were, made manifest only through his deeds. This would amount to a new *“salvation by works”*.

Certainly, Christian Mission should let people who are suffering poverty and other needs also feel God’s mercy and care through kindly deeds of love. Certainly, through tangible Christian social and welfare acts, the kingdom of God can sometimes be demonstrated visibly. However, such positive changes can, in the changing course of world history, also disappear

again. Alarminglly this is shown by the present rapid decline of values in the formerly Christian western world.

Already at the beginning of the modern missionary movement Lutheran, pietistic and evangelical missions acknowledged, both in theology and practice, the importance of social and ethical action. However they held to Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, i.e., God is ruling by the Church on His right and by the State on His left. They also were aware of the Reformed distinction between the two mandates, the missionary and the cultural. This kept them safely protected from the error of mixing up social well-being and spiritual redemption, as the revolutionary fanatics did at the time of the Reformation.

Under these presuppositions, Christian missionaries of all denominations have achieved outstanding results in Africa and Asia in the fields of education, medical care and economic development. They produced fruit also by remarkable social improvements, right up to the ordering of state structures. Yet for all of them the desire to call lost people to conversion and faith in the Gospel, and opening for them the way to eternal life, was their first priority.

Therefore we, too, must, in our missionary work, never neglect the most important gift that we as messengers of Jesus have to bring to all men: the offer of reconciliation with God on the basis of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross and the assurance of eternal life through His resurrection from the dead.

Thus, the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation in Christ remains the primary task of Missions and Evangelization. Rolf Scheffbuch was once asked: Is the deed as important as the word? He pointedly replied:

“Good works must never become a showpiece for Christians who hope to be more respected. Rather, let us point men to the saving *work of Christ*, and let that be the deciding factor. The ‘word’ of the Jesus message cannot be replaced by anything – not even by the most loving deed of mercy.”

## **7. The coming of the Kingdom of God in Biblical perspective**

*“The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* (Romans 14:17)

*“Up to the present, we know, the whole created universe groans in all its parts as if in the pangs of childbirth. Not only so, but even we, to whom the spirit is given as first fruits of the*

*harvest, are groaning inwardly while we wait for God to make us His children and set our whole body free. For we are saved by hope.” (Romans 8:22-24a)*

The promised Kingdom of God cannot yet be fully realized under the conditions of fallen creation. To overlook this, was the error of the Social Gospel Movement at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, the ecumenical humanitarian programmes later went the wrong way. For in their association with liberal theology and the programme of demythologization, they did not take seriously the basic affirmations of Biblical redemption.

This tendency was bound to lead to a cooling off of evangelistic zeal. Today, evangelical missions are in the same danger if they embrace programmes which are called “*holistic*”, “*incarnatory*” or, as mentioned already, “*transforming*” mission. Here *the* concerns for the physical and social well-being of man threaten to outshine eternal salvation.

This is no judgment on the good intentions of these advocates of evangelical missions. However, we must seriously consider what the Holy Scriptures say about the sinfulness of the human heart and the residual destructive power of the devil, the prince of this world. That is why a salvation-oriented mission must, in the face of utopian, progress-oriented ideologies, assert the truths of Biblical prophecy. Only the returning Christ will completely remove the present influence of the remaining demonic “powers and principalities” (2 Thessalonians 2:8; Revelation 19:20).

In Ephesians 6:10-17, Paul describes his mission as a fight in which the church must take part. Therefore, our participation in God’s Trinitarian mission has, apart from its soteriological [promoting salvation] task, also a fighting, “exorcist” side, in which it declares the victory of Christ over all powers of destruction (Matthew 10:1; Mark 16:17; 2 Corinthians 10:4).

Positively, however, we can rely on the bright Biblical promises regarding the end times. The returning Christ shall, after the destruction of the world domination of the Antichrist, establish His Kingdom on this earth, and the Father will create the new heaven and the new earth where all suffering has ceased and justice will reign (Revelation 21:1-8; 22:1-5).

In 2 Peter 3:11-13, we read:

*“Seeing then that the entire whole universe is to break up in this way, think what sort of people you ought to be, what devout and dedicated lives you should live! Look eagerly for the coming of the day of God and work to hasten it on. That day will set heavens ablaze until they fall apart, and will melt the elements in flames. But we have this promise, and look forward to new heavens and a new earth, the home of justice.”*

## *Call*

We encourage, motivate and call all Christians to renew the established Biblical view of evangelism, based on the history of salvation. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German Protestant Missiology has tried again and again to fulfill its calling by contributing its salvation-based understanding of missions in critical and constructive ways to the international missions movement, both in its ecumenical and – increasingly today – in its evangelical form.

Since the Uppsala Assembly of 1968, this tradition has continued in regards to the General Assemblies and mission conferences of the WCC, and also the three Lausanne Congresses. It was realized, among other activities, through statements issued by the Tübingen Institute of Missiology and Ecumenical Theology and the declarations issued by the *International Christian Network*.

These pronouncements were all based on the salvation-oriented understanding of missions. The aim has always been, to give an answer to utopian trends which confuse the coming of the Kingdom of God in the future with present events in society. Therefore, it was intended to remind the Church of the basic difference between the three comings of the Christ, i.e. firstly what has been achieved by Him once and for ever in His coming in the flesh, secondly what on account of his coming in the Spirit can be achieved by the efforts of His disciples “already now” and, thirdly, what will be accomplished “only then,” at His return in power and glory.

Today, too, much of the confusion with regard to the basis, aim and conduct of missions has a common theological cause: The “view of the end” which used to guide the Protestant mission movement in the past, has been allowed to be forgotten.

This is a great loss, inasmuch as the strength of the Scriptural position and the faithfulness of missionaries to the message of salvation are at stake. For the strength of the salvation-oriented understanding of missions proves itself in that it takes up the Bible's own understanding of God, the world, and time. It centers in the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, and accordingly puts the Old and New Testaments into the right relationship to one another, making the necessary distinctions. Herein originates the tension between the “already now” and the “only then”.

From the position of this view, many of the disputed problems find convincing answers.

This applies *firstly* and especially to the place of the people of Israel among the nations. According to the testimony of Paul in Romans 11:25-36, the ultimate conversion and re-acceptance of Israel will take place when the mission to the nations has been completed, the “fullness of the gentiles” has been gathered, and Christ will return. To open the hearts of the Jews for Him is what mission to Israel wishes to do.

*Secondly*, the question of the nature of non-Christian religions in their relationship to the Christian faith will be answered according to their threefold determination, i.e. through God’s original revelation (Acts 14:17; John 1:9; Romans 1:19-20), through man’s response in obedience and resistance (Acts 17:27f; Isaiah 53:6a), and through the efficacy of demons (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2).

*Thirdly*, the salvation historical view also proves itself in the present struggle for a future in line with the Gospel. The Church of Jesus Christ may, by taking her share of social and political responsibility, set signs of the dawning Kingdom, but without attaching to a false significance to them. She rather trusts in the fulfillment of the Biblical promise of the Kingdom of God at the return of Jesus Christ in power and in glory. In His Kingdom, peace and justice will finally be established (Revelation 21:1.24).

In closing, we want to stress that our criticism of Transformation Theology is not aimed at a single false doctrine and not at individual theologians representing it. Rather, we retain with them the brotherhood in Christ, although, unfortunately, they have been enticed by an erroneous trend. Therefore, we want to struggle for an abiding in the Biblical truth jointly with them. In this, we are also conscious of the fact that we ourselves are in constant need of correction and deepening through the Word of God and are ready, therefore, for Biblical correction on our part.

At the same time, we address our urgent warning to the entire Christian mission movement. May it beware of succumbing to a historical theology which is becoming an ideology! For this, as we can see, replaces eternal salvation with temporal social well-being and forgets that the Kingly rule of Christ is not of this world (John 18:36).

In His end-times address on the Mount of Olives, Jesus warned his disciples of false prophets and false Christs who would come in the last days and lead many astray (Matthew 24:11). As the Ascended One (Revelation 3:10) He warns of the “hour of temptation” which will come upon the whole world [Greek: *oikouméne!*].

But the ascended Christ promised the church of Philadelphia to keep them from the hour of temptation because they had kept the His word steadfastly.

We, too, may likewise firmly trust that He, the Good Shepherd, will even today help His faithful flock through all external and internal temptations. He will do this through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit whom He has given to His own as a pledge of the completed salvation in His Kingdom (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14).

***Holy Spirit, truth divine,  
Dawn upon this soul of mine.  
Word of God, and inward light,  
Wake my spirit, clear my sight.***

Tübingen, Pentecost 2013

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