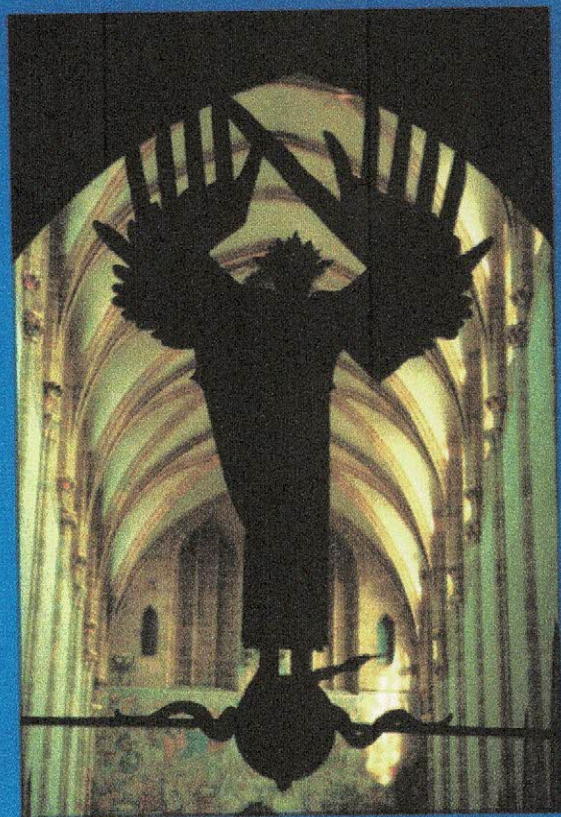


Turn To God

Rejoice in Hope

*Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation
Hamburg, 30 March-4 April, 1998*

*Edited by
Huibert van Beek
and Georges Lemopoulos*



Turn To God Rejoice in Hope

*Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation
Hamburg, 30 March-4 April, 1998*

*Edited by
Huibert van Beek
and Georges Lemopoulos*

*World Council of Churches
Geneva*

Produced by the WCC's Office of Church and Ecumenical Relations

Edited by Huibert van Beek and Georges Lemopoulos

Printed in November 1998 by the Orthdruk, Orthodox Printing House, Bialystok, Poland

Further copies of this book may be ordered from:

World Council of Churches
Office of Church and Ecumenical Relations
150, route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Tel: + 41 22 791 6111
Fax: + 41 22 791 0361
E-mail: hvb@wcc-coe.org

Front cover illustration: Ulm Cathedral, FRG, WCC Archives, Photo: Peter Williams

Contents

Foreword	7
The Report of the Consultation.....	9
<i>Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope: Bible Study on Philippians 1:1-30</i> Rev. Albrecht Hauser	15
<i>Turn To God: Bible Meditation on Isaiah 45:20-25</i> Rev. Fr John Mathews	23
<i>Rejoice in Hope: Bible Meditation on Revelation 22:1-5</i> Rev. Fr John Mathews	28
<i>Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope:</i> <i>The Joyful Cry of a Witnessing Eucharistic Community</i> Prof. Petros Vassiliadis	36
<i>Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope:</i> Rev. Canon Vinay Samuel	54
<i>Orthodox-Evangelical Dialogue: A MECC Perspective</i> Dr George Sabra	61
<i>Discussions between Orthodox and Evangelicals</i> <i>at the level of the CEC</i> Rev. Prof. Viorel Ionita	65
<i>Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism in Dialogue</i> Dr Bradley Nassif	69
<i>The WCC Statement on Mission: A Paper for Discussion</i> Dr Elaine Storkey	75
Participants in the Consultation	80

Appendix 1:
The Message of the Alexandria Consultation 84

Appendix 2:
Insights from the Groups(Alexandria Consultation)..... 89

Appendix 3:
Evangelicals: Who are we?
Historic Summary and Traits of Identification
Bishop Björn Bue 99

Foreword

The process of informal conversations between Orthodox and Evangelicals began after the seventh assembly of the WCC in Canberra. Some years later and after a series of preliminary contacts and encounters, the WCC's Office of Church and Ecumenical Relations organised a first meeting between representatives of Orthodox churches and people of evangelical commitment. This first "Orthodox-Evangelical" consultation took place in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1995.

The preparation towards the eighth assembly of the WCC (Harare, Zimbabwe, December 1998), offered an appropriate opportunity for a second consultation of the same kind which took place in the Mission Academy of Hamburg (30 March - 4 April 1998).

Participants in this second encounter studied together the theme of the forthcoming assembly, *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*, from a theological and missiological perspective, keeping in mind some areas of continued tension between Evangelicals and Orthodox identified in the Alexandria Report and listed there as "areas where further work needs to be done." In this sense, the three Bible studies and the two presentations included in this publication constitute not only a theological contribution to the assembly theme, but also a missiological reflection with particular emphasis on Orthodox-Evangelical relations.

The sensitive issue of relationships in mission, however, has been explored during the consultation also from a contextual perspective and through concrete examples. Three presentations, inspired respectively from the reality prevailing in the Middle East, the efforts deployed by the Conference of European Churches, and the rather new situation emerging in the United States, encouraged a sincere exchange not only on conflictual situations, but also on cases of productive missiological dialogue and, even, a promising cooperation.

Finally, Orthodox and Evangelical participants, as a tangible sign of their commitment to the WCC, have tried to offer their contribution to the *Mission Statement* which is currently formulated by Unit II of the WCC. The discussion on the statement allowed a common reflection on major missiological issues and concerns of our times, as well as on the deeper meaning and the concrete

missiological implications of participating together in the same "fellowship of churches."

The present volume comprises the presentations made during the second Orthodox-Evangelical consultation. Obviously, it would be inaccurate to pretend that there have been final conclusions or definitive results. Certainly, the dialogical exchange certified, once again, that the common theological ground between Orthodox and Evangelicals is much broader than usually realised. Yet, it has also confirmed that there are many examples of continuing conflicts and areas of theological divergence where future dialogue and clarification are needed. The particular strength of this consultation may well have been the intensity of the exchange on concrete local situations, and the realisation that much can and should be done to encourage the dialogue in these places where it is most needed.

Referring to encouraging facts, it would be probably significant to mention here that the Alexandria Report has received a very positive response and is already out of print. For this reason, its message and some insights from its group reports are appended to the present volume.

Appended also to the present volume is an introductory presentation made in Alexandria by the late Bishop Björn Bue. For technical reasons it was not included in the first publication. As an expression of gratitude for his contribution to the life and work of the WCC and to the Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue, it is now incorporated in this publication.

Huibert van Beek

Georges Lemopoulos

The Report of the Consultation

Hamburg, 30 March - 4 April 1998

Participants in the second Evangelical-Orthodox Consultation held at the Missionsakademie, Hamburg, are grateful to God for the opportunity of meeting together and making a new step in a process aiming at strengthening Orthodox-Evangelical understanding on issues of Christian witness to our world.

This consultation was a follow-up to an earlier encounter in Alexandria, Egypt in July 1995 which had focused on the theme: *Proclaiming Christ Today*.¹ Coming from Albania, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Netherlands, Rumania, Russia, Syria, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine, and the United States of America, participants in this consultation expressed their appreciation to the WCC for organizing this encounter, to the Evangelical Church of Württemberg and particularly to the Rev. Albrecht Hauser for their moral and financial support, and to the Rev. Dr Dietrich Werner, staff of the Missionsakademie, for his precious contribution in organizing and hosting this consultation.

Hosted by the Missionsakademie, this second consultation offered the possibility of visiting and listening to the local Lutheran-Evangelical Church of Hamburg, meeting with representatives of the local ecumenical council, as well as sharing views and experiences with the Evangelisches Missionswerk.

The witness of the local church within a highly secularized and religiously plural society on the one hand, and the structural changes an important missionary organization such as the "Evangelisches Missionswerk" of the Evangelical Church in Germany has to undergo in order to face a rapidly changing national and global situation on the other, provided a stimulating input to the discussions.

¹ cf. Huibert van Beek - Georges Lemopoulos (ed.), *Proclaiming Christ Today. Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation Alexandria, 10-15 July 1995*, WCC and Syndesmos, 1995.

Participants in the consultation listened together to the word of God, heard plenary presentations, had Bible studies and held small group discussions. Together they worked with a background of the Alexandria consultation, particularly its recommendations to further explore areas of continued tension such as divergent ecclesiologies, the sacraments and their respective understanding of salvation. As was the case with the encounter in Alexandria, this consultation had an informal character.

Participants, therefore, did not intend to make formally agreed recommendations but wished to share their experience and the results of their frank and open discussions with the conviction that such encounters can largely contribute to ecumenical understanding and cooperation.

Reflecting together on the Assembly theme

In discussing the mission strategy of the various churches, an effort was made to connect it to the theme of the upcoming WCC assembly in Harare: *Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope*. A first group worked on the missionary dimension of the assembly theme.

The Triune God always revealed his love to humankind and his concern for the transformation of creation. However, humankind in its sinfulness had turned away from his loving God with the consequent destruction of creation. Hence it was imperative for the churches to realize the urgency of mission and to intensify their efforts to proclaim a return to God -- to convey the message that God the Father calls us to turn to him, to rejoice in the salvation offered to the world in Jesus Christ and to hope in the final transformation of all creation through the Holy Spirit.

It was noted with satisfaction that the first part of the assembly theme, *Turn to God*, helpfully echoes the historic Christian call to repentance -- *metanoia*. Turning to God is a response to God's call. The living God, who in his great love sent Jesus Christ into our world, revealed himself identifiably in the community of faith. We are thus called to turn to God, who is the source of hope for all the nations. At a time when some hold almost unbounded optimism about the world economy and prospects for peace, and others despair over the continuing injustices and apparent indifference to the spiritual dimension of economic and political life, the invitation to turn to God goes out to all.

Turning to God includes repentance from personal and corporate sin and towards faith in Jesus Christ. We do not understand it to be either an atomistic individualism which seeks gratification and prosperity, nor an escapist turning away from the sufferings of our world. Rather we turn towards God to be incorporated into the ecclesial community and undergo a radical reorientation, to have a new way of looking at all things. When we turn to God, our vision is broadened: we see all people, all creation. The invitation to turn to God ever

reminds us that God has already turned towards us. Our turning to God is a response to the steadfast love of God which seeks and welcomes us.

As to the second part of the theme as Christians we ought to rejoice in hope. This hope, however, is not a wishful thinking, a hope grounded in or responding to human uncertainties. Christian hope proceeds from what God has done, is doing and has promised to do.

This is our understanding when we celebrate the coming of the kingdom. Although we recognize that the tragedy of life is greater than we can comprehend, at the same time our certainty for redemption is greater than we can express. Our hope thus is not simply a wishful thinking arising from insecurity or fear. We believe that by the work of the Holy Spirit we experience this joy through the word and sacraments.

As the WCC celebrates its jubilee we recall the biblical concept of jubilee which promises hope and relief in the present, yet at the same time points forward to a time of complete wholeness and righteousness.

Discussing together the WCC Mission Statement

Within the context of the Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue and in the light of the Policy Statement on *The Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* (CUV), which seeks for ways to widen participation and involvement in the ecumenical movement beyond WCC member churches, another group worked on the draft of a *Mission Statement* which is currently formulated by Unit II of the WCC.

This statement is meant to provide a fresh affirmation of the missionary commitment of the churches today as they are equally confronted with common challenges. The consultation affirmed the structure of the future document as it was presented in draft and expressed satisfaction with its direction and content. The discussions themselves built a new bridge between the Evangelicals and Orthodox as they discovered one another within the same searches and concerns and helped some to discover and appreciate a new feature of the WCC unknown to them before this meeting.

The consultation offered a number of suggestions to be taken into account in the drafting process of the Mission Statement. In particular it underlined the need:

- (i) To urge local, national, regional church councils or churches in a given area to develop a structure for facilitating the mission work of the churches in specific locations.
- (ii) To work towards an understanding of mission to the aim that despite the confessional divergences of the various churches, there is a great deal of common ground of confessional unity.

- (iii) That churches as God's instrument in his plan of salvation should in spite of the urgency of the missionary mandate aim not only at short term success for their own denomination but recognize the need for mission in unity.

Sharing experiences on Orthodox-Evangelical relations

A third group discussed the issue of Orthodox-Evangelical relations as experienced today by Christians from the two traditions in various situations.

Sharing experiences from regional or local situations and exploring together methodological procedures for future dialogue between Christians of Orthodox and Evangelical commitments, participants with both positive and negative experiences depicted their respective situations from around the world -- from Russia and Ukraine; Bulgaria, Albania and Armenia; Scandinavia and the Middle East; as well as North America.

Positive examples of respect and even cooperation were found to exist between Orthodox and Evangelicals in such places as Scandinavia and North America. These were areas where an attempt to understand one another and to even develop an attitude of trust existed. But more often discussions focused on the difficulties revealing fear, mistrust, perceived betrayal, and a lack of theological and missiological understanding or agreement in many of the other lands.

In their efforts to describe and better understand the situation, participants tried to take into consideration relationships with other Christian churches and ecumenical partners, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church, as well as with other religious faiths, e.g. Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. In their attempt to identify our common missiological challenges, they highlighted the ultimate danger of disunity among Christians, especially in the face of the countless and dangerous new non-Christian sects entering the respective countries.

In all areas of difficulty, both the Orthodox and Evangelical sides expressed their fears that the other was not properly understanding or respecting their side. For example, in Russia, the Orthodox Church has experienced an invasion from foreign missionaries into their land from the beginning of this decade -- not only from non-Christians, but also from Christian denominations, even such ecumenical partners like the United Methodist Church in the USA which has opened 40 new churches.

From the Evangelical side, fear was expressed that the Orthodox Church was limiting the existence and practice of other churches. A special matter of concern is the activity of the right wing nationalist groups within the Orthodox Church. Evangelicals think that they are automatically accused of proselytism in every case of conversion to another Christian church or denomination. Protestants insist on the fact that many people are still atheists, including those who may have been baptized into the Orthodox Church but continue not to believe in God.

Therefore, there exists the need for all Christians to preach the gospel and bring people into communion with God. The Evangelical side expressed its concern about the new religious law recently passed in Russia. Although -- as stated -- its goal would not affect historical Protestant churches, the law could be interpreted in different ways which would have a real, negative effect on the Evangelical churches.

Another area of concern for Evangelicals was in Bulgaria, where the Evangelical churches felt the Orthodox viewed every other Christian church as a sect. Despite the continued existence of many professed atheists, and the shortage of priests and teachers within the Orthodox Church, still, a fear existed in the coexistence of the two respective Christian traditions. The Orthodox representative of Bulgaria noted confusion and problems created by such extreme evangelical groups like *Word of Life International* and *Soldiers for Christ*.

Albania provided a unique situation for the Orthodox Church. Although Albania centuries ago was a Christian land (divided between a majority Orthodox south and a Roman Catholic north), it is now predominantly a non-Christian country. Although some tensions exist between the traditional Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches with the many foreign missionaries and new evangelical churches, in general a spirit of tolerance with respect for one another is emphasized by the church leaders. A problem, however, is the lack of unity and agreement even among the evangelical groups themselves.

In the Middle East, there is still some tension between the non-ecumenical Evangelicals and Orthodox churches. This is due to the fact that some non-ecumenical Evangelicals are carrying out aggressive proselytizing activities. However, the Middle East Council of Churches has taken steps to establish a dialogue that involves Orthodox and Evangelicals, including Western Evangelicals who have activities in the Middle East.

The Armenian situation, both in Armenia and the Diaspora, reflects a positive and respectful experience between the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church; the experience varies with other Evangelical churches in different contexts and under different conditions.

Orthodox and Evangelical relations in North America are markedly different from those in Eastern Europe. While Orthodox conversions to Evangelical churches occurred mostly until the 1970's, Evangelical conversions to Orthodoxy have risen markedly from the 1980s to the present. Occasionally this has been accompanied by intentional efforts to proselytize some Evangelicals by Orthodox fundamentalists. These events became the subject of several recent sessions in the *Eastern Orthodox Studies Group* in the American Academy of Religion. Several studies on Orthodox-Evangelical theology have also begun to appear in leading evangelical publishing houses over the past two years. The most serious and sustained effort at mutual understanding, however, has been the formation of the *Society for the Study of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*

which has met annually at the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, since 1990. Their hope has been to serve as a model to the rest of the world for transforming tensions into resources for reconstruction and renewal.

All participants agreed with the beneficial nature of such face to face contact with believers from different churches, and expressed their appreciation to the WCC for organizing such consultations. It is helpful to meet the other in an atmosphere of love and sincere dialogue, trying to find common concerns and paths which help all involved.

At the same time, however, it is acknowledged that no easy solutions exist to solve all the problems faced at the local levels. But we can begin with some small, concrete steps. Some suggested ideas included:

- All discussions and results from the present consultation need to be taken to the local level and made available for the common believer.
- A continuing discussion is needed, with a focus on specific theological problems, so that we can have a clearer perception of how both sides understand various theological terms. Several future topics could include: *ecclesiology; sacraments; canonical territories; mission, proselytizing, conversion and church membership; religion and culture.*
- Encouraging local bodies to have regional meetings with one another so that more members of different churches can get involved, and can dialogue with one another within their own context. (If necessary, with outside partners facilitating and moderating such meetings.)
- Encouraging exchange programmes where believers of different traditions can see first-hand the situation in the other tradition. For example, a start might be among seminarians or students of theology who visit one another's schools.
- Offering presentations to be given at the theological faculties (or another public forum) concerning the two traditions, but in such a way that the positive and constructive elements of the different traditions are given. Focus needs to be on the common beliefs and commitments that exist within the different Christian traditions.
- One of the greatest dangers to the whole process of dialogue between the Orthodox and Evangelicals is the fundamentalist element which exists in the different churches. Within each church efforts should be made to establish a dialogue between this fundamental element and the more ecumenical side so that each may hear the other.

Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope! ***Bible Study on Philippians 1: 1-30***

Rev. Albrecht Hauser

It is always fascinating to study the Bible together. As we do this, we count on the presence of Christ, who is always eager to open our eyes so that we see him more clearly and follow him more nearly, with the aim that our love may increase towards the Lord and towards our fellow human beings.

I would like to draw our attention to Philippians 1:1-30. Here we get an illustration of what it means when a person in adverse circumstances can still rejoice in hope. The apostle Paul is a wonderful example of a person who turned to God and who was living in the reality of joyful hope. He radiates certitude and confidence in the gospel, not because his life's circumstances are ideal but because Christ is real in every situation.

Paul's letters are really *ad hoc* writings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They are written out of concrete life situations and addressing people like you and me, who also find themselves in a given context. The passion of a soul aflame with love, hope and faith is evident in Paul's writings. We encounter here a person who truly illustrates where the source of Christian hope lies. He could say: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). These are no empty words but life reality in the midst of adverse circumstances.

"In Christ" is a key phrase of the apostle Paul, meaning that what the air is for the bird, what the water is for the fish, what the earth is for the root of a tree, Jesus Christ is for a Christian. "In Christ" means for St Paul to be fully alive and alert, experiencing the reality of Christ's presence in the actuality of his life.

The key to understand Paul and his writings is his life-shattering Damascus experience. He had there a personal encounter with the crucified and risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-18). This experience made him compare Christ's coming into our world with a second dawn of creation: "For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus" (2 Cor 4:6). This real encounter made Paul a passionate witness for Christ, in spite of all the upheavals in his day to day life. This passion for Christ kept him on the road and

even made him sing in a Roman prison. He was willing to “declare the whole counsel of God with tears and trembling” (Acts 20:27), namely Christ’s redemptive acts in history.

Paul illustrates in his own life how the sharing of the gospel does not only encounter a welcoming response but that it could also include open or overt opposition. In spite of this he was willing to remain a faithful witness of Christ, even in the face of suffering. He knew his life under the caring love of the triune God and experienced the leading hand of the Lord and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He learned that when God does close a door of ministry in one place he opens other opportunities for witness in another place.

It was actually at one of these cross-roads in Paul’s life that he heard the Macedonian call (Acts 16:6 ff.), which made him and his party come to Europe. So he and those accompanying him reached Philippi, a Roman garrison town in about AD 50 or 51. There Paul experienced how God opened the heart of a well-to-do business woman, Lydia by name, and a small church started in her house. The church in Philippi is a wonderful example of how the Gospel merges all classes of people and is truly cross-cultural in its redemptive dynamics. After the baptism of Lydia and her household others were added. So, for example, a slave girl, who brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling, was liberated through Christ’s power and love. Her employers lost their source of income. They paid back, therefore, by seeing to it that Paul and Silas got into trouble and finally into prison. Paul and Silas instead of lamenting were singing songs in the night. These earth-shaking hymns proved very liberating and made even an establishment person of the Roman middle class turn to Christ and join the church.

We see, therefore, how in Philippi the gospel brought people together in unity, love and purpose; people who normally would live apart. Paul really did not stay too long in Philippi, but he maintained a special relationship to the church there. Our letter is really a thank you letter for gifts received, out of his prison in Rome towards the end of his first imprisonment there, written about AD 68.

This letter out of prison breathes liberty of mind and heart, clarity of passionate thinking and an overflowing joy of the presence of Christ, who can even make chaotic circumstances serve the cause of the gospel. This letter to the Philippians illustrates the subtle shift and the interrelationship between the message, the messenger and even the context. It illustrates incarnational witness at its best and how this operates in the life of the apostle Paul. I would therefore like to look briefly with you at this passage we were reading together under three headings:

- (a) partnership and confidence in the gospel (v. 1-11);
- (b) agony and triumph in adverse circumstances, and the advance of the gospel (v. 12-18);
- (c) incarnational witness (*martyria*) and the credibility of the gospel (v. 19-30).

Partnership and Confidence in the Gospel

The key note of this prison letter is joy: joy in Christian prayer (1:4); joy in sharing Christ (1:18); joy in the progress of faith (1:25); joy in unity (2:2); joy in participating in Christ's suffering (2:17); joy in all ways (4:4).

These are just a few verses where joy is explicitly referred to. Since we have only one Bible study on this letter, I cannot go into more details. But joy is really the grace of Christ, felt in the most overwhelming situations. Christ's gracious presence in the Holy Spirit will open up a well of joy in the lives of those who trust him. This was brought home to me in a visit to Southern Sudan in January 1997. We met a singing church in the midst of suffering and perplexities. In one place, Ayod, they had rebuilt a burned-down church three times within 5 years. Some time ago I met the Anglican Bishop Nathaniel Garang of the Bor Diocese. He told us that when the Western missionaries had to leave some 18 years ago they had 59 hymns in the Dinka Bor language. Then he was holding two note books up and said: "Now we have more than 800 hymns. God gives us new songs in the midst of suffering. When my people meet for worship, we experience the presence of God and what it means, 'for the joy of the Lord is your strength'" (Neh 8:10).

In Verse 5 and 6 Paul refers to *koinonia*, the *fellowship and partnership in the gospel* as a source of confidence and strength within the body of Christ. In this *koinonia* Paul experiences the presence of the living God and is therefore confident of Christ's fulfilling work not only in his own life but also for the Christians in Philippi. Due to the grace at work in the life of the Christians in Philippi, he is fully assured that the redemptive work of God in their lives will come to a satisfactory conclusion as well. What Christ takes into his hand, he will surely perfect, since he does not leave any unfinished agendas in the life of those who trust him. What a comfort that at the end of the day there will be no unfinished agendas, neither in one's personal life, nor that of the Church nor in the history at large, since all things will be "brought into unity in Christ" (Eph 1:10). "We shall be like him" (1 Jn 3:2) when we will see him face to face and this very hope should be causing us to live lives worthy of Christ. Within Christ's body we are really called to a *syn-koinonia* of sharing our resources as well as being reciprocally responsible to help one another to stay on the road of righteousness and truth and not to succumb to the spirit of relativism so prevailing in our age and time. This *koinonia* expresses itself in:

- (i) Sharing the grace of God (v. 7), which means being drawn together as mutual recipients of the manifold grace of God. Here is the strength of the *koinonia*, that none of us needs to be individually a compendium of God's gifts. In community we can share our resources in Christ.
- (ii) We are also called to share in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (v. 7), thus being called together in a common task to facilitate and

encourage one another in the spread of the gospel in our age and time. The end of mission will only be achieved when nobody needs to tell anybody else to know the Lord, since all will know the living God redemptively from the youngest to the oldest (Jer 31:34). The church as a redemptive fellowship of those whose sins have been forgiven is a foretaste of that which is to come.

Verse 7 refers to apologetics, namely the reasoned defense of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of the age, in post-modernity, suggests that the gospel might be only one possibility in the wide spectrum of religions and that everything is really relative, thus truth is to be only found in relational and not in propositional terms.

Paul counters this position with his very life and teaching and reminds the Philippians (v. 7) that they are called to defend the gospel as well as to participate in its confirmation. This needs always to go hand in hand since the person who defends needs to know reasonably well what and how he should defend in a Christian and spiritually credible way. In other words: Christians need to know what they believe and why they believe it. Here, in my estimation, the mainline churches in the West have in some areas terribly failed.

At the same time we have to recognize that the defence of the gospel has an immense pastoral dimension as well. It touches the issues of reaffirmation, orientation and discernment, as well as pastoral care, confession, absolution and intercessory prayer. Therefore, Paul opens his heart and in confidence shares with the Christians of Philippi how and what he prays for when he thinks about them: "God knows how I yearn for you all, with the deep yearning of Christ Jesus himself" (v. 8). Paul has a very inclusive approach to the community of the saints at Philippi. He longs for them to grow in Christ's design. Paul sees himself together with the Christians in Philippi in this fellowship at the foot of Christ's cross, the place where God dealt in a reconciling way with guilt and power.

"That your love may abound more and more -- with knowledge and discernment," is Paul's prayer for his fellow Christians in Philippi. How is our prayer life in regard to those near and far from us? Is the love of Christ truly the source of our confidence in the gospel as so evident in the life of Paul, suffering in a Roman prison, not pre-occupied with himself but concerned for the spiritual welfare of others. What quality of life marks our ministry? Is it the joyful hope and joy of the gospel, because we, like St Peter, realise that we are "kept by the power of God" (1 Pet 1:15) in all circumstances?

Someone said that to a post-modern intellectual, God is a mere idea. We have to watch that in theological discussions we do not just play with theological ideas but realise that we encounter the living God, who meets us in redemptive love. Paul illustrates what this means, since he was captivated by the true and living God and wanted to share his life in Christ with everyone, even with his captors in a Roman prison.

Agony and Triumph in Adverse Circumstances and the Advance of the Gospel

Paul's imprisonment could have easily meant an end to his missionary career, yet it was not the case. In Philippi the head jailer and his household found Christ and during the Roman imprisonment Paul perfected a special kind of "friendship evangelism." He found himself again and again chained to another soldier of the Praetorian guard and these fellows became Christians. His authentic life and witness must have had a life changing effect on many of these elite guards of the Praetorium. Would anybody being so close to us like these "chained soldiers" still want to become a Christian? Paul mentions (v. 12) that even his imprisonment serves the advance of the gospel. He shares how through his imprisonment and the way Paul argued and lived many had realised that he was really a prisoner for Christ's sake and that others got bold and found new courage while realising and seeing how Paul was bearing his cross: "most of the brethren have been made confident by my imprisonment" (v. 14).

Paul's life is an illustration of incarnational witness at its best in the worst circumstances. All circumstances can be a means of personal growth and maturity, and so Paul can be an encouragement for us. Paul could say even out of his prison: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (4:13). That is easier to say when life goes smooth but not when it is as rough as a Roman prison. Christian hope, however, is not for a pie in the sky, nor a flight from the realities of life, but when there are spells of despair and perplexities beyond our ability to handle them; when doubt comes about God's providential leading; when at times doubt and darkness and the question of what it means that God is love is challenged by the evil and injustice in our world. Are we not tempted to cry out with Henry Francis Lyte:

Change and decay in all around I see;

O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

In the midst of rather hopeless situations the God of hope can give us stability and tranquillity, since history is not slipping out of his hand. On the one hand we face a shrinking world thanks to the global media. Yet we also live in a confused and wounded world full of strife and all kinds of dehumanising forces; a world of smashed hopes and despair for many.

The old and new myths of progress do not deliver their promised goods. The relevance of the Christian faith is challenged as the claim of many other faiths knock at the human heart to offer us their solutions. Christianity, particularly in the West, goes through the rough waters of post-modernity, and confidence in the gospel is really shaken. What can we therefore learn from Paul, bound in a Roman prison? Does Paul not remind us that over the canvas of history it is still written: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zech 4:6)?

Look at Paul's life. When he was not in prison he spent much of his time in exhausting and dangerous travels. At times he encountered disappointing labours, yet found himself like his master under the will of divine love. Look at

Christian history. It may look glorious in retrospect, but is it not really most of the time made up of constant hard choices and unattractive tasks, accepted under the pressure of divine will? Adverse circumstances may at times cloud the vision and make one wonder where history is moving. But it still holds true what Matthew Arnold once expressed beautifully:

We cannot kindle when we will
The fire that in the heart resides,
The Spirit bloweth and is still,
In mystery our soul abides;
But tasks in hours of insight willed,
Can be through hours of gloom fulfilled.

Paul exemplifies the truly creative person who does not cease to be creative even in adverse and miserable circumstances. He never allowed bitterness, malice, envy and resentments to block up the springs of life. Adversity showed Paul who his friends really were. Some even took advantage of his prison situation, preaching Christ even out of envy, rivalry; some from good will and love, while others had motives not worthy of the gospel.

The question of mixed motives is a serious one, not only in the sharing of the gospel but also in inter-church relations. How on earth could Paul say: "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed and in it I rejoice" (v. 18). Paul did not say something like that in Galatians where he was concerned for the purity of the gospel. How could he now mellow and be more conciliar with such mixed motives and the clouding of the gospel due to ulterior motives? What did it take for Paul to mellow so considerably? He was so consumed for the honour of Christ and by the love of God, that he accepted the pain of messy, early ecumenical relations for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ.

What lessons do we draw for today and how inclusive are we with those who cause us pain? Does to rejoice in hope also mean that because we know Christ, who truly is, that we do not give up hope for one another?

Incarnational Witness (Martyria) and the Credibility of the Gospel

"For to me to live is Christ (v.21) ...only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ (v.27)... You have been granted the privilege that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for his sake" (v.29).

For Paul, Christ was the beginning and Christ the end. Therefore it did not matter to him what was the outcome of his trial, whether he would get free or whether he would be honoured by paying the ultimate witness, namely to die in the cause of Christ. All Christians, whether events turn out that way or not, bear within themselves the seed of martyrdom, namely the life of the crucified and risen

Lord. He could therefore say to the Galatian Christians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 20:20).

There was no morbid death wish in Paul, but rather the power of an age to come already operative in his life and witness, pointing all men and women around him to the one who came to bring us life abundantly. Paul vividly illustrates in his letters and in his ministry, that incarnational witness takes the interrelationship between the message, the messenger and those who bear and receive the message seriously. Therefore he raises the question of credibility: "Only let the manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ" (v. 27).

The way we live does matter. People around us should recognise that we belong to Jesus Christ. Our message should flow out of a living relationship with the triune God. We are called to live in the light of the gospel we preach. If we do want to avoid that our preaching is not just another noise added to the already many noises in this world; if our words are not to be just empty of meaning and power, then we have to look more carefully into the question of credibility and the willingness that the gospel we preach to renew and reshape our lives is in Christ's design. For example, large sections of Western Christianity have accepted a kind of post-modern theology and a situational ethic which conforms more to the spirit of the age than to biblical standards. Our theological and ethical presuppositions need to be challenged by those in the ecumenical family who are concerned for the honour and vindication of Jesus Christ in history.

If turning to God and rejoicing in hope will make a difference in our time and age, it calls for a believing community, which across all ecclesiological boundaries is still concerned for the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Where the church worships him as he truly is, a longing for Jesus Christ is created amongst those whose hearts are still restless. Where Christ is reflected in and through the life and witness of Christian communities today, there we can be sure that the misunderstandings as to who Jesus Christ is will be overcome, since men and women are given an opportunity to encounter him afresh.

There is a prayer which I frequently pray out of a deep concern for the gospel in our time and age:

O Lord and Father of humankind;
when we look into the lives of your greatest Saints,
we sometimes wonder
how you could achieve such remarkable results
with such inferior material.
Could it be you could do something similar like that with us,
if we only would let you?
Cleanse, O Lord, the motivations of our hearts
and renew us in your Holy Spirit.

Take all fragmentations of our lives
and mould us afresh in Christ's design,
for the honour and Glory of God the Father,
the Son and the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.

Turn to God!

Bible Meditation on Isaiah 45:20-25

Rev. Dr John Mathews

Introduction

The theme for this second consultation between Orthodox and Evangelicals is also the theme of the forthcoming WCC assembly at Harare, Zimbabwe: *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope!* The focus of this Bible meditation will be on the first part of this theme *Turn to God* with the text being Isaiah 45:20-25.

As Christianity stands on the threshold of a new millennium, so demarcated by its conviction that in the person of Jesus Christ a definitively new reality had been ushered in (Mk 1:15, Mt 4:12-17, Lk 4:18-19), many disturbing trends compel it to review its situation. If Christians easily believed that its crusade of evangelism and witness would effectively contribute to the speedy realization of this conviction on a universal scale, then the contemporary scenario gives us all cause for a re-thinking of this agenda.

First, there has been a significant diminishing in the vitality and vigor of Christian outreach. The post-modern philosophical *Zeitgeist* has sapped the strength of previous decades. Coupled with this is the onslaught by religious fundamentalism against Christianity the world over, especially by Islam and Hinduism. These are the religions that now seek to replicate the success and outreach that Christianity demonstrated earlier.

Second, we are confronted by a near-universal secularized search for economic solutions to our problems. The consequence of this quest has led to an endemic process of self-alienation and disintegration that in reality has served only to aggravate the *angst-ridden* character of the individual and contemporary society.

Context of Isaiah 45:20-25

Our situation does not appear to be radically different from the one the author of this section of the book of Isaiah encountered, if one factors in the differing temporal and cultural situations. Old Testament scholars are in near-

universal agreement that chapters 40-66 are the handiwork of the original prophet's disciple, the outcome of his endeavors to retrieve and re-interpret his teacher's message. The people he addressed were the same as his master's, the remnant of the tribe of Judah who had been led into Babylonian captivity around the sixth century BC. We could well empathize with the author's audience, which had been stripped of its identity, its ancestral forms of worship and compelled now to live in a uni-polar world dominated by Babylon.

In this situation, where his people had lost their sense of direction, held no hopes for a redeeming future and bereft of any consciousness of a role in the world, the prophet proclaimed his Spirit-inspired message. He sought to re-orient them to their future destiny, and more importantly, to God's plan for the redemption of His creation. Thereby, they were to re-learn, or better, retrieve their identity as God's people and how they were to fulfill Yhwh's purpose. Our text constituted, a part of this proclamation, a message that has much significance for us considering the similarities of our own situation and that of the exiles.

The Message

The opening words of our text are an appeal to "gather together and come" (v. 20a). For a disintegrated people deprived of hope and sense of destiny, no task could be more important than to arrive at a collective understanding of their identity and purpose in life. The prophet's objective, therefore, was not only to integrate the exiles as a people, but also to re-constitute them as God's people within the framework of God's plan for the world.

The tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile of the people of Judah lay in the misconception that the ultimate end of history lay in the establishment of Israel as the center of the world. This, in fact, was an inversion of God's purpose, because the original design for the children of Israel was that they should be a "light to the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6). As privileged recipients of God's revelation, and having glimpsed God's love, righteousness, justice and providence, it was to be their goal to lead the rest of the nations into this very same experience.

Christians share this same platform with the author's audience. As the reconstituted people of God, the new Israel (Rom 11:17; Gal 3:26-29; Eph 2:19-22), it should be our goal not to assume that we are the sole objectives of God's concern and love. Rather we must always bear in mind that the primary reason for our existence is to lead all people and all nations to experience and understand God. And it is this very same God who sent his only-begotten Son into the world to guide it into authentic life (Jn 3:16-17). Ultimately, "there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10:16).

But we cannot stop there. Israel's role was not intended to enlighten other nations alone, but also aimed at the integration of all creation into a transformed

world (Isa 11:6-9). Similarly, Christianity's *raison d'être* cannot be determined or circumscribed by an anthropocentric approach. It must be focused to embrace all creation, of which humankind is an integral and intrinsic part, so that we have a vision of God's grand design for all of creation.

Beginning with the second part of v. 20 till the end of v. 21, the prophet calls for the convening of the people of God ("assemble") to evaluate the mistakes of the past. The call should not be viewed as addressed to other nations alone, but must include the Israelites too. In addition, the content of this call was to put aside the futile efforts at finding salvation through either ethnic chauvinism or any other human agency. It was in concluding that God alone was the true and authentic source of life, of righteousness that the world would find salvation.

Again, we have to guard against repeating the mistakes of the past. Israel's fault lay in its obstinate refusal to listen to God's message and to cling stubbornly to mistaken beliefs. In our firm refusal to evaluate our agendas, our paradigms and goals, we too are bent upon iterating Israel's mistakes. Four points come to mind:

(1) *Our continued insistence on working at cross-purposes.* Our agendas are geared to perpetuating the separation between Catholics and Protestants, Orthodox and Reformed, Evangelicals and Pentecostals and the like. Are we not frittering away our valuable energy and assets by such an agenda?

(2) *Our refusal to surrender timeworn concepts and to search for new paradigms.* For instance, the terms *mission* and *missionary* still carry much of the negative freight associated with the tragedies of colonialism. They conjure up the aggressive, arrogant and ignorant attitudes that some Christian churches displayed during the colonial eras. We should add that this is certainly not a biblical term either. Can we not substitute instead the term *witness*, which while biblical and broader in scope yet does not evoke a backlash?

(3) *Our persistent tendency to divide humankind and nature.* It is encouraging to see that Christianity, even if belatedly, has realized the fundamental error of this concept. While Eastern Christianity has always retained a holistic theological paradigm, the West has interpreted Genesis 1:28 as an injunction to subjugate a defiant nature. The history of this confrontation does not make for happy reading!

(4) *Our misguided efforts of evaluating the success of programmes quantitatively rather than qualitatively.* We still underscore the success of our church's programmes by the number of persons that have been added to it. Should we not, instead, emphasize that the church's goal is universal healing and restoration, not the number of persons added? Is it not a fact that the much-vaunted Christian love for others is a thin veneer to cover the selfish agenda for supplementing the membership of our churches? Nithya Chaitanya Yeti compares Christian love as a lovely cobweb. The spider's web, while appealing to insects,

is ultimately intended to trap them for its food! Similar, he notes, is the true character of the love that Christians preach.

These certainly have to be some of the significant issues that we have to deal with in evaluating our situation in the light of what the prophet had to say.

Verses 22-24 now issue the imperative of the implications of what was detailed above. The one avenue for a redemption from humankind's plight is a sincere and genuine return to God: "turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other" (v. 22). The Greek term used to denote this conversion process is *metanoia*, a total re-orientation of mind and heart with a consequent qualitative modification of conduct. Without this change, it will not be possible to provide the genuine Christian witness that is demanded of us.

The regrettable verdict of the many meetings and dialogues that have been held over the past decades can be best summed up by that old saying, "after everything has been said and done, more has been said than done." The commendable suggestions and programmes have somehow been consigned and confined to printed pages, with little being implemented. It is another characteristic of our times that there is such a great gulf between what we say and what we accomplish. There is, therefore, a hollow ring to our pronouncements because our preaching is not undergirded by our practice.

We are summoned, then, to act in concert, to present a united witness to the world. Our myopic and insular perspectives blind us to the reality that we have more points of confessional convergence than divergence. Can we not utilize this common platform to work together to realize our Lord's commission to lead all humankind to the acknowledgment that God alone is the authentic source of life and salvation (vv. 21b, 22)? Or are we committed to perpetuating the divisions within Christianity to the detriment of the goal which Christ has entrusted to us?

That this is no utopian dream is attested to by the situation in Kerala, India, where Christians of every confession have acted in concert to eradicate social evils. Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants have held public meetings against alcoholism, corruption in educational institutions and worked together to alleviate the sufferings of those affected by earthquakes and floods. In these instances, what we have experienced is a strong bond of kinship with the Christian brothers and sisters, despite the fact that they came from differing persuasions. And this has established a bedrock for a united and concerted action by the churches, especially in dealing with sensitive issues raised by their interaction with Hindu religious leaders and institutions. If we could all work together to achieve our common goal of a common witness to the world, could we not bridge, even in a small way, the chasm that separates us? Such must be the vision that provides us with the inspiration and the impetus as we look to the new millennium.

The world desperately yearns for justice and liberty with societies and individuals longing for the right to live a life with dignity. Moreover, this desperation becomes more acute as we witness new forms of colonialism in the

economic, industrial, political and social spheres. To these agonized appeals for redemption and healing Christianity can, and should, present the God who alone is the authentic wellspring of righteousness and anodyne which Christianity has enjoyed, but only if we come together to the understanding that this is the common goal that Christ has entrusted to all of us (Mat 28: 18-20). Indeed, if this is our common vision, then there is certainly the prospect for a bright future for a Christian witness and through it healing and life for the world.

Into that heaven may the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit guide us!

Rejoice in Hope!

Bible Meditation on Revelation 22:1-5

Rev. Dr John Mathews

The second half of the WCC's theme for the forthcoming assembly is prospective. The first half of the theme called for an evaluation of the past, an introspective search into one's life and its conformity to God's design. This process completed, the theme now summons us to look to the future in order to envision anew our participation in God's blueprint for his creation: *Rejoice in Hope!* It is on this half that we now focus our present meditation.

The first issue of *India Today* for 1997 (January 1, 1997) carried as its lead article the interviews conducted over India with pregnant women, living amidst abject poverty and squalor. The question posed to them was, "why do you want to bring into this world a child who is going to experience all the suffering and poverty you have undergone?" And invariably their response was, "the hope and expectation of a better tomorrow." Once again that old adage rings true -- "hope springs eternal" -- as these people, in a sense representatives of all humankind, peer beyond the horizons of their hopeless present predicament to dream of a promising and glorious future. Despite all the injustices meted out to them, despite the economic deprivations they have to experience, despite the physical sufferings and mental anguish they are subjected to, they dream of a better and brighter world their children would inherit.

It is this very dream of a better world that has inspired human efforts to bring about an utopia on earth. And we have sought every avenue to realize this objective, whether it was through education, or social upliftment, and in recent times, free market economics. But in spite of all our best intentions and endeavors, all these attempts have floundered and flopped, and have met the same fate that all philosophies and projects to replicate a paradise on earth have experienced. We need but to look at the contradictions of our globalized economics to see this process substantiated. The premises and hopes for an all-round and universal enhancement of individual's and society's life has been betrayed by the aggravation

of poverty on the one hand, and the aggrandizement of the wealth and assets of the rich on the other. Developed countries push through agendas and treaties embedded in which are hidden loopholes for their own national advancement; the two-thirds world often realizes this form of neo-colonialism only when it is too late! There seems, nonetheless, a justice in all this, as even the developed countries appear vulnerable to economic roller coaster rides (we note the most recent instance in Japan) while the roaring economic tigers of Southeast Asia have been reduced to whimpering cats!

The fundamental flaw in all these efforts, appears to be the deliberate omission of God and his blueprint for the world, a point corroborated by the amazing success and appeal Christianity wielded in its early decades. We observe the amazement of officials who critically evaluated the apostles, but concluded with astonishment: "these men have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The critical ingredient in Christianity's outreach and preaching was the hope of a better future, a brighter tomorrow. And this provided the people with a ray of hope as they confronted an insecure future amidst the tedium of a meaningless existence. Let us recall that there were many other religious options during this time -- Oriental mystery religions, various philosophies such as Neo-Platonism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, not to mention the religious charlatans who preyed on people's insecurity and quest for salvation. But amidst this pervasive failure of nerves, it was the Christian promise of a new age, already inaugurated by Christ, which proved to be the lifeline that rescued the people from an ocean of despair. Indeed, as one author sums it, Christianity succeeded because "Christianity wielded both a bigger stick and a juicier carrot."¹

It is then this time-tested Christian hope that the world seeks today as an anodyne for its ills. In an age governed by post-modernism, with its inherent suspicion and scepticism of every belief and tenet, where the encircling gloom of a meaningless existence and pervasive human suffering and misery, Christianity proffers once again this cure for a world gripped by the failure of nerves. Certainly this situation is not radically different from the human condition that prevailed during the initial decades of Christianity. And yet Christians were able to write an impressive history of success. It is to retrieve the recipe for this story of success that we address the second half of the WCC's theme. The text I have chosen for our meditation is Revelation 22:1-5.

Context of Revelation 22:1-5

The excerpt is taken from the book of Revelation, which belongs to a literary category labeled *apocalyptic*. This literature flourished approximately

¹ E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, NY: Norton, 1965, p. 135.

from 250 BC and waned around AD 200 and its primary objective was to sustain and support believers who were being subjected to intense persecution. In such harsh situations, where people were forced to undergo extreme physical and mental tortures, faith often becomes a casualty. And this is not surprising when we recall the accounts of the persecution Christians were made to bear: crucified and used as targets for archers, immersed in boiling oil, lit up as torches in the night, thrown to ravenous beasts and the like. So to encourage the believers to persevere and cling on to their faith, these authors wrote works to instill the hope in a divine reversal of the resent evil age. This message was presented through Spirit-inspired visions which depicted the blueprint God had designed for the future, the details of which were elaborated through symbolic language and pictures, all obliquely signing the death warrant of the present evil empire. Revelation stands thus in a long series of apocalyptic works, stretching all the way back to the Old Testament, instances being Ezekiel, Zechariah (chapters 1-14), Isaiah (chapters 24-27), Joel (chapters 1-3), Zephaniah (chapters 1-3) and Daniel (chapters 7-12).

According to a general understanding, Revelation was authored by a John, most probably a member of the circle of Christian prophets (10:7, 11:18, 18:20, 29, 22:6, 9), during the time of the Emperor Domitian (ca. AD 90-95). The work is addressed to his brothers and sisters in Asia Minor who were experiencing persecution, with John himself being interred on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). One must assume, assessing the course of history in this area, that the author was successful to a high degree in attaining his objective. Christianity was not only able to surmount this adverse situation, but also become a stronghold for centuries to come.

The Message

The immediate fact that grasps our attention is the Seer's vision, or more importantly, the kind of vision imparted to him. At the very outset of the book, the author had informed the reader that it was a Spirit-inspired vision (1:10, 4:2, cf. also 2:11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22). Not that there was any dearth of ostensibly Spirit-inspired visions in the early church, the recipients often being members of the circle of Christian prophets. Evidence would suggest that some of these prophets, far from being a blessing, were often the source of division in some Christian communities (1 Cor 12:12ff; 1 Jn 1:18-29, 4:1-6; Mat 7:15-23). So then how are we to gauge its authenticity, or as 1 John enjoins "to test every spirit?" We could say that a vision is genuinely Spirit-inspired if it possesses three characteristics:

(1) *The vision provides life for all nations.* Authentic Spirit-inspired visions imparted to the prophets, whether belonging to the Old or New covenants, had as their ultimate goal to lead all people to life. By this is meant that the recipients of these proclamations were to turn aside (repent) from their evil ways, worship of false gods and the neglect of their social obligations to a lifestyle

reflective of God's revealed will (Mic 6:8, Am 5:24, Hos 2:19-26, Isa 7:9, 30:15). Divorced from this Source of Life (God), humankind could, at best, only possess a semblance of life; in reality their regression into oblivion (judgement) had already commenced. In a similar vein, St Paul describes all spiritual gifts as being endowed for the up-building of the body of Christ, the Church (1 Cor 8:1, 12:7, 14:4, 5, 12).

At first glance these visions seem to be intended for a specific and limited circle: the Old Testament prophets directed mainly to the Israelites and the New Testament prophets addressing the Christian churches. However, a deeper analysis provides the insight that both Israel and the Church are the media through which God effects the salvation of the whole world. It must be from this vantage point that the election of Israel as "a covenant to the people, a light to the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6, cf. also Isa 60: 1-3) and the establishment of the church as the gateway to the Kingdom of God for all people (Mat 28:20; Lk 2:30.32; Acts 13:47, 26:23) must be viewed. To be sure, God is the Father of all humankind who desires that all be reconciled to him and does not intend that anyone should perish (Jn 3:16-17).

It is appropriate at this juncture to evaluate the type of visions we have, whether as individuals or as collective bodies. Quite often our visions are self-centered, including in their scope only its own members (denominations) or a particular confessional family (Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal). This is not to mean that all denominationally directed developmental programmes are unacceptable. No, rather the emphasis is on whether ultimately they embrace all humankind, to encircle everyone in our love and not to be exclusive in our vision for the future.

(2) *The vision must elevate others to a heavenly experience.* What is again striking about the Seer's vision is its sight of the New Jerusalem. This is all the more significant when we recall that St John was sequestered in a prison on the Patmos Island, exposed to the filth and putrefying conditions prisons provided in those days. Yet the Seer is able to be lifted up to heaven, to envision not his despicable physical surroundings, but the glory of the New Jerusalem. One can appreciate, then, how amidst the flotsam of fragmented and fractured lives, the debris of social and religious disintegration, Christianity was able to offer the hope in a better future. It was this Christian hope that provided a spar on which many swam out of the sea of despondency and despair that characterized the period.

Our prevailing situation appears to reflect a similar condition. The much vaunted economic promises of an utopia, of social progress and betterment of the quality of life seems to be belied by the reversals on all fronts. Economic incertitude, setbacks which defy the tenets of the free-market enterprise, socialism, famine, sickness, wars, enduring poverty, all paint a grim picture of our future. Yet it is here that the Church can present the hope in Christ, of a truly perduring new age which God will usher in at the end of time. Yes! Hope does spring eternal, for God is eternal!

(3) *The vision should be shared by others.* No vision was given for the sole benefit of an individual, but was intended for the life of others. St John directs the churches and all the people who read his apocalypse to share in the vision the risen Christ had given him (1:3, 2:7, 17, 29, 22:10). Every church must be able to share its vision with all others, so that the Body of Christ, the Church Universal, can fulfill its task of leading all humankind to an acknowledgment and worship of God. After all, this is the stated goal of John's revelation -- "worship God" (22:9).

The central focus of John's vision is the slain Lamb of God. This is the paradox of the Christian revelation -- Christ is symbolized as a vulnerable and meek lamb (Isa 53:7-12), the object of all the cruelties inflicted by humankind. Nonetheless, he lovingly bears them so that all may have life (Jn 1:29; cf. Isa 53:4-5). This is the icon John presents: God is a God who lovingly and willingly suffers so as to draw all creation to himself, a point underscored by the fourth gospel -- "and I, when I am lifted up from the earth (crucified), will draw all people to myself" (Jn 12:32). We appreciate the poignancy of Isaiah's description now:

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
Yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
Upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isa 53:4-5)

What a study in contrast is the picture we present to others as the reward for their refusal of the Christian preaching and proclamation! One would assume from our proclamations that our God is one who eagerly anticipates the prospect of judging people and relishing the act of condemning all our non-Christian brothers and sisters into a lake of fire! Is it any wonder, then, that they were alienated by this God? Should not our preaching depict, not a God who descends on the last day to spew out death and destruction, fire and brimstone, but a God who brings nations to the river of life, gives fruits from the trees and heals them of all their diseases (Rev 22:1-5)?

All too frequently Christianity harps on the punitive aspect of its eschatology, of interpreting the term *judgement* in negative terms. However, judgement has the more positive connotation of right ordering and arrangement also. Accordingly, judgement is viewed as God's realignment of creation, so that it reflects his original design. He reduces the arrogant and proud, he humbles the rich, but raises the downtrodden, disadvantaged and deprived. It is in this light that the Magnificat must be interpreted:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,