

Church in Society: A FUTURE & A HOPE

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I. INTRODUCTION

God has given the world His Church both as a *missional* and *eschatological* community, in that the mission of the church is to actively witness for Christ while patiently waiting for the second coming of Christ. The Church as the people of God in Christ is *in via* to the City of God (cf. Heb. 11:10). When Christ prayed that His people will not be taken out of this world but be preserved from the evil one (Jn. 17:15), it was not meant to be a static or withdrawn evangelical life. As God's pilgrim people, they have to live out their life through "the structures of history."¹ This fact assumes not socio-political distance or indifference of the church to society. Rather, it recognizes that our world is the theater of His glory and that His people are to engage their society to transform. In this process, the people are to be equipped for engagement in two worlds – the visible and invisible. The Church is dealing with structures and evil, with cultures and people. Paul spoke of this in terms of the Gospel work of delivering people from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). The world is created for the Church and the Church in Christ must recapture its mandate and work with God to liberate all creation. Thus, the Church has to be salt that must permeate society with good to arrest its decay and to be light to open people to a life beyond death. Where the Church is truly His Church, there is light and there is hope in our darkened world. Christ also offers the possibility of His "joy made full in" His disciples in the here and now.

We live today in a world that is in chaos and life is becoming most uncertain. People are paranoid about terrorism. The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon last September 11, the rising cases of HIV and AIDS in Asia and the World, rising criminality, the drug cartels, graft and corruption, the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in the age of globalization, the disintegrating family, and many more. We are even losing our capacity to blush. Jeremiah points out: "...they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush" (Jer. 6:15). Everywhere we turn, we hear cries of pain from the aging and the children. There is so much injustice and oppression, with the powerful few squeezing the life out of the many so that they can enjoy so much affluence and feed the rest with crumbs from their table. This is not God's design for creation. And man and woman are not destined for the ignominies that they are silently bearing.

With a world like this, it is difficult to declare that God created it. One can identify with a tourist who wanted to go on vacation with his wife. His travel agent brought him in front of a huge globe and asked him where he wanted to go. But each time he pointed to a country, the agent would say: there are terrorists there or the place is unsafe due to kidnapping for ransom or HIV and AIDS are very high or the crime rate is too high. In exasperation the tourist asked his agent: Do you have another globe? How we wish we had another globe. There is none. We are stuck with the one we have. Yet this is the very essence of the argument of the writer of Hebrews: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, *the conviction of things not seen*" (11:1). We are encouraged not to abandon the world that we have but to see through the eye of faith yet another world of reality beyond the realm of the visible. God has a better world to come, not visible as yet, but the very goal against which all of history is going. God has a plan and it is our "future and our hope" (Jer. 29:11). In other words, the church's agenda to transform society is not beating the air. Biblical faith, after all, is grounded in God's capacity to keep His promises. God expects His people to work with all of their might in advancing the message of the Kingdom for the night is coming when no man can work (Jn. 9:4).

II. MESSAGE

The main thesis of this paper is this: The Church should accept their socio-political realities and to totally engage their societies towards transformation in Christ's name. In this engagement, all activities must be directed towards a new and alternative socio-political imagination as described by Isaiah (65: 17-25). This imagination in the New Testament is embodied in the Kingdom of God, which, in biblical faith, is the central metaphor in the teaching of our Lord.² The New Testament, says Brueggemann, puts the "kingdom of God" at the "center of the social imagination of Jesus."³ To explicate this theme, I have chosen teachings from Jeremiah and Isaiah. The reason, I trust, will be made obvious as we move along.

¹ George F. Knight, *Isaiah 56.66* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 100.

² John Bright cited by Walter Brueggemann, 1983: 22.

³ Walter Brueggemann: 1983, 22.

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The young prophet Jeremiah was *hurled by God* to minister during the last days of Judah that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 B.C. His book contains his anguished explanation about the cause of Israel's end and his poetic reflection on the destiny of those deported to Babylon. He was talking to exiles. While the fact of exile is not denied with all its attendant pain and sorrow, the prophet also affirms that exile is not final. Jeremiah insisted that God has a plan for his people and this plan is to be their future and hope (Jer. 29:11). The social realities of crisis – of coercion and oppression – will eventually yield to an amazing social imagination of the future – of Torah obedience and neighborliness – expressed by Isaiah as “the new heaven and the new earth” (Isa. 65:17). In this sense, Jeremiah is a history-maker, someone that the Church can learn from. This promissory vision is not going to be the result of political arrangements but will be brought about by God who is active in history and is free to act as He wills.

The outline of this paper will be: (1) the call of Jeremiah, (2) the commands for God's people in exile, and (3) the consummation of hope. If the church is to transform society, then it must have members with the conviction and courage of Jeremiah, a church totally engaging society holistically, and a church with a future vision of God's plan for His people and the world.

The call of Jeremiah is foundational because the task of social transformation requires a *theonomous* perspective of God's relationship with His people and His agenda for the future. The intricacies of power and politics, both visible and invisible, are enormous and can overwhelm His people in the struggle. Thus, to begin with an understanding of God's call and to see ourselves and the task through His eyes will be refreshing and reassuring. A poem in the movie “Prince of Egypt” captures this well.

“A lake of gold in the desert sand
Is less than cool, fresh spring
And to one lost sheep, a shepherd boy
Is greater than the richest king.
Should a man lose ev' rything he owns,
Has he truly lost his worth?
Or is it the beginning
Of a new and brighter birth?
So how do you measure the worth of a man?
In wealth or strength or size?
In how much he gained or how much he gave?
The answer will come,
The answer will come to him who tries
To look at life through heaven' s eyes.

So how do you judge what a man is worth?
By what he builds or buys?
You can never see with your eyes on earth.
Look through heaven' s eyes.
Look at your life
Through heaven' s eyes!”

To transform society, there is a need to recognize our sense of powerlessness to engage society with its entrenched powers and gods and to see our lives through heaven's eyes. These are the starting points of our struggle. We need a change of paradigm concerning God's method and mission. Can a Christian really make a difference?

1. The Call of Jeremiah: Towards a Recovery of Calling and Mission

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5)*

Given the subject of this paper, why begin with the rugged Jeremiah? Because I am convinced that unless our churches have members like Jeremiah, discussions on Church in Society will remain cerebral as it was generally so over the last many decades. Jeremiah had been compared to Jesus Christ. They were both prophets, unmarried, rejected by their people, and totally obedient to the will of the Father to the very end. When Jesus asked his disciples who people think He was, they answered: “Some say John the Baptist, and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah....” (Matt. 16:14). Jeremiah is a man for all seasons – someone who speaks not just from a distant past but one who is thundering the same prophetic word today. The unique relationship between the Caller and the called, the demand for holiness and obedience – are compounds of the life that every Christian should exhibit in his witness to society today. Insights into God’s call of Jeremiah as His spokesman during a degenerate era in Judah are critical to understand our own calling in our time.

A. *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you”* (v.5). This grand statement presupposes God’s sovereign initiative of grace. He is prevenient – always before. God knew Jeremiah’s *before*...and also his *now*. And His knowing before forming gives both dignity and design to His creatures. Man and woman are not accidents of history nor are they random products of a mindless universe. Rather, humans are the crowning glory of His creative acts (Ps. 8). In today’s quest for human value, God is saying: Jeremiah, in the vastness of the universe, you are not nothing, you are not a nobody, you are not an “it”. You are not a useless speck of dust floating in the galaxies. You are somebody, you are someone, you are a being impressed with the image of God from whom you derived not just humanity but meaning. This is the content of “before” from where we find understanding of our “now.” As Peterson puts it: “We are known before we know.”⁴ In this sense, our knowledge of God is derived not just from His image in us but also as a response to what He already knew about us. We are important to God before we even discover that God is important to us.

God not only knew Jeremiah by name but also knew what the name means in His plan. Thus, we are not just a number in the calculus of God. When I was a freshman at the University of the Philippines – Iloilo College, we had a required subject called “Eastern Thought.” Because it was a big class, our professor would assign each student a “number.” When he wished to call on a student for recitation, he just shouted a number! It was funny on one hand but dehumanizing on the other hand. Who would like 666 for a name? A person’s name represents his identity, his personality, his character. It is a means of communication – a word, a sound that arrests attention. The Hebrew word is *yada* meaning beyond intellectual knowledge to personal commitment in life.⁵ The Genesis metaphor is of Adam knowing his wife [Gen. 4:1 cf. Amos 3:2; Hos. 4:1, 6:6]. By calling a person’s name, God invites that person to a personal and intimate relationship. We don’t have to pretend or to hide anything. Before Him, we are transparent ... naked. In the end, we are called not because of merit but out of His mercy and grace.

But it is also of utmost significance that God gave us His name. We are not created by, nor do we worship, a generic God. God is a personal Being who desires that we know Him. And this conception of a deity seeking relationship with humanity is an idea that can come only from God before we were aware of it. God gave us a name that we may know Him. He revealed Himself, as the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, Jesus Christ. He is the “I Am that I Am” the “Alpha and Omega,” “the First and the Last.” His name is above every name (Phil. 2:9). And God gave us His name so that we can call upon Him. He said: “Call upon Me and come and pray and I will listen to you” (Jer. 29:12). God never loses a calling card of His people. Because God has given us His name and commands us to call upon Him, then we are never lost and never without hope.

B. *“I consecrated you”* (v.5). To consecrate is to **set us apart** for a nobler purpose. The root word for consecration is *qadosh*, holy. It is a call to be holy (1 Pet. 1:15). The noun form of the verb “consecrate” is the word “saint.” Sainthood is not a statement of quality of life or of performance... but a mark that one is on God’s side. It refers to the “kind of life to which they had been chosen, life in a battlefield.”⁶ In a larger picture, it is to stand by God’s side to participate in what He is doing in the world. And what is He doing? He is saving, healing, comforting,

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, 1983: 38.

⁵ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 1980; 145.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, 1983: 40.

providing, judging, illuminating, recreating! He is also engaged in spiritual and moral battles in high and low places. There is a war in progress. Jeremiah was enlisted by God for this war. There are sides to choose from: life or death, love or hate, order or chaos, justice or oppression, peace or strife, hope or despair, good or evil, heaven or hell. God is on the side of life, love, order, justice, peace, hope, good and heaven. Christians are set apart to be on the side of God on these issues. Thus, the idea is someone who is reconciled to God to be recruited by God for His service. Christianity is not an escape from but an engagement in the world. To borrow the vision of Habakkuk, a Christian is set apart to stand, to march, and to conquer the enemy by the side of Christ.

Consecration is also a process that God continues to do in the life of His saints. Jeremiah's acted parable on the potter recreating his design on broken vases illustrates this amply (Jer. 18). God wants His people to be better. Of course, to speak of "better" assumes a point of reference. In this sense, consecration is a process to be Christlike. This is pre-requisite when the saints fight with God in the battlefield. The word consecrated can also mean **chosen**. Again, the initiative of grace is from God. We are chosen first by God before we chose Him (Jn. 15:16). This choice of God is in Christ Jesus. Jeremiah is chosen for God's own sole use – to be on His side as He brings the world under His dominion. Saints are chosen by God to Christ for Christ.

C. *"I have appointed you a prophet to the nations"* (v.5). The word "appointed" is *ponere* in Hebrew and means "not only to appoint, but to install."⁷ The phrase "to the nations" indicates the "universality of Hebrew prophecy."⁸ This appointment is grounded on God's foreknowledge of Jeremiah – his being and his abilities. God appointed and installed Jeremiah as His prophet from "conception to consecration with intimate awareness."⁹ Jeremiah who may have been between sixteen to eighteen years old at that time, like Moses, tried to escape Yahweh's call: "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" (v.6). But an excuse is not an option because the choosing is based on divine foreknowledge of Jeremiah and the appointment was done before the prophet was even conceived in his mother's womb. God knows our lives – their negatives and positives, minuses and pluses. This complete transparency before God is so liberating and His call so humbling. No man can replace or substitute the one whom God appoints. As far as God is concerned we are good for what He wants us to do. And Jeremiah "preached persistently to the people for twenty-three years...."¹⁰ Two other issues arise out of Jeremiah's public call. Indeed, God rebuked the prophet: "Do not say 'I am only a child'.... say whatever I command you." (v.7).

(a) *Employment*. Because God appointed and installed Jeremiah to the office, then God is Jeremiah's ultimate employer. The Church and Christian Organizations can be His means to provide for the needs and the structure within which ministry is to be carried out, but it is still God who is in control. The source of resources then should be focused on God as the God who will provide, the God who calls Himself "I am that I am" (Ex. 3:14).

(b) *Given*. The word *appointed* is, literally, "gave" (*nathan*).¹¹ Jeremiah was given by God before he was borne, was given away to the nations to carry out His plan to bless the families of the earth. God is lavishly generous. God is a giver. He gave His only begotten Son Jesus to the world (Jn. 3:16). Therefore, if God is a giver, then we His people must not be consumers! The Christian faith is not about getting but about giving. This is the design of the universe. The people of God should give of themselves to God and to His work. Just as Christ's life is for others, so are the lives of His people. The appointment was to be a prophet to the nations (plural) not just to Judah. "Clearly," as J.A. Thompson points out, "if Yahweh was the God of the whole earth one would expect some of Yahweh's servants to express Yahweh's mind about the nations. It was an essential aspect of a monotheistic theology."¹²

D. *"... everywhere I send you, you shall go, And all that I command you, you shall speak"* (v.7). After the installation, God voiced His demand for explicit and heart-felt obedience from Jeremiah. He was to go where God wants Him to serve. The prophet was hurled into the public limelight to announce the warning and the judgment of God before kings, priests, and people. Jeremiah moved among governmental and ecclesiastical circles. Yet he was also in the market place. He was concerned with the spiritual relationship of the people to Jehovah as well as with their political fate with Nebuchadnezzar. He did so without compromise but with so much suffering and at great risk to his life. But he had no choice. He was to speak a message to a people that hated him in places that will not welcome him. The

⁷ C. F. Keil, 1973), 48.

⁸ Roland Kenneth Harrison, "Jeremiah and Lamentations," *Tyndale OT Commentaries*, D.J. Wiseman, gen. ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 49.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 99.

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, 1983: 41.

¹² J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 146.

anthropomorphism of Yahweh touching Jeremiah's mouth, as in Isaiah, "was a powerful way of saying that Yahweh was to be personally involved and identified with all that Jeremiah would undertake."¹³ God's word became his word in a chemistry that the medium and the message were one. God's word shaped his life. And his word determined the destiny of the nation.

Jeremiah's prophetic preaching was to use six action verbs (1:10). Four are: "to pluck and to break down, to destroy and overthrow," and the two "to build and plant." True transformation takes place only in the context of judgment, repentance of sin, covenant loyalty to God, empowerment of the Holy Spirit, and Torah obedience in life. This is spirituality – not just personal piety but social ethics as well.

E. "They will fight against you but they will not overcome...." (v.19). In verse 17, God told Jeremiah, "Get yourself ready." The work that God called Jeremiah to do will hurl him into the public limelight. He will "stand against the whole land - against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land" (v.18). Not a very comforting thought for a young prophet. And then God said: "They will fight against you...." He will be persecuted for his loyal service to Yahweh. What is God's work becomes dangerous human work. This commission will put Jeremiah's resolve to test. The leaders and people will reject him just as they did Jesus Christ centuries later. They will seek his life for his prophetic denunciation of their sins and unfaithfulness to Jehovah and scream for his blood as he pronounces judgment. But they could not silence his voice nor stop his prolific pen from writing God's word to His people.

God gave Jeremiah two related visions of "confirmatory tokens."¹⁴ The first was that of the Almond tree (vv.11-12). The tree was "the first to bud in spring" ... illustrates the promptness with which God keeps His promises."¹⁵ It suggests God's timely provisions for His servants. "The figure of the almond rod," says C. F. Keil, "was meant only to afford to the prophet surety for the speedy and certain fulfillment of the word of God proclaimed by him."¹⁶ But it is also that of judgment. As the tree is the "harbinger of spring, as though it watches over the beginning of the season so the Lord is watching to bring judgment on Israel's sins."¹⁷ The "rod" symbolizes judgment "which was to overtake Israel (cf. Mic. 6:9)."¹⁸

The second was the sinister vision of the boiling pot (vv.13-14). The pot was "facing away from the north" implying that "its contents would spill southwards from Syria into Palestine."¹⁹ The boiling pot represents evil that would be spilled out towards Jerusalem passing by Jeremiah's hometown of "Anathoth". God is summoning the kingdoms from the North as "agents of His judgment ... carrying out God's sentence upon Judeans for their crime of following pagan gods rather than the ideals of the Sinai covenant."²⁰ God will be permitting these northern powers, by violent conquest, "to set up their lordship before the gates of Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah."²¹ This would imply "complete subjugation."²² The Babylonians under Nebucadnezzar, according to Charles L. Feinberg, would fit the description of the Northern Kingdom.²³ Jeremiah, as Christ did, is making it clear that it is impossible to serve God and mammon (Matt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13). Moreover, those who serve mammon will have their future in question because of the certainty of judgment that will come to be averted only by true repentance. If the theme of Isaiah is the salvation of the Lord, of Ezekiel is the glory of the Lord, of Daniel is the kingdom of the Lord, then that of Jeremiah would be the judgment of the Lord.

The two visions may be viewed from two other perspectives. The almond tree symbolizes the resurrection – the rising from the wintry ground into light. Thus, Christ is risen. The pot reminds all that evil is real. Thus, the pot, a container, contains the "boiling" liquid symbolizing evil. But evil is also limited. It is not omnipresent, omniscient, or omnipotent. The visions seem to serve as pillars to encourage Jeremiah as he served the Lord. On one hand, God is provident. On the other hand, evil is limited. On one hand, Jesus is Lord. On the other hand, Satan is defeated! This is also for our own encouragement.

¹³ Ibid, 150.

¹⁴ C. F. Keil, 1973: 42.

¹⁵ Roland Kenneth Harrison, "Jeremiah and Lamentations," 51.

¹⁶ C. F. Keil, 1973: 43.

¹⁷ Charles L. Feinberg, 1986: 385.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Roland Kenneth Harrison, "Jeremiah and Lamentations," 51.

²⁰ Ibid, 52.

²¹ C. F. Keil, 1973: 45.

²² Charles F. Feinberg, 1986:386.

²³ Ibid.

The prophetic ministry then is realistic and optimistic but never triumphalistic. Obedience to God has a high price to pay. But until God's purpose is done for His servant, Jeremiah will be invincible. He will be "a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land..." (v.18). Here is God's rich assurance to His servant that his witness will not be impaired for He is the author and finisher of the faith delivered to the saints (Heb. 12:2).

Jeremiah was called by God as His prophet to the nations. Christians today are called to make disciples of the nations. They can persevere and honor God with their service if they can learn from Jeremiah and look at their lives through heaven's eyes! Then they will find their meaning and destiny.

2. The Commands: Towards a Total Engagement of Society

"Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare...."

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. (Jer. 29:5-7,11)

God spoke through Jeremiah concerning how His people should live. And God continues to speak through Jeremiah to the Church today. It is a very pastoral but well articulated action plan for the Church in society today.

The context is that of exile. The diaspora began in 722 B.C. when the Assyrians captured the Ten Tribes of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kg. 17:6). Later, Jeremiah foretold that Judah would be under Babylon (Jer. 35:9). In 597 B.C. the Chaldeans invaded Judah.²⁴ Jeremiah, the social analyst, warned King Zedekiah not to rebel against the Chaldeans (Jer. 37:6 ff). The King aligned with Egypt against the counsel of Jeremiah and as a consequence the Chaldeans swept down upon Southern Palestine in 587 B.C.²⁵ During the second captivity, the Temple was pillaged and the land of Judah was ravaged. Jeremiah himself stayed in Jerusalem. During the first invasion the "elders, priests and prophets were the whole community of exiles."²⁶ The first group of exiles, then, to whom Jeremiah 29 was specifically addressed was the religious and political leaders. In today's language, this would include the intellectuals, the professionals and the economic mandarins. Moreover, it appears that during their captivity the exiles had a degree of autonomy with their own structures in place though in check by the Babylonians as inferred by Ezekiel (6:7).

When Jeremiah wrote his letter to the exiles through diplomatic couriers from King Zedekiah, the Jewish exiles were depressed and in askance: Why did the Covenant God of Judah allow her defeat and humiliation before a pagan power? For assuming that Judah sinned, still they were not as evil as the Babylonians. And why they alone and not all of the Jewish people? Were those left in Jerusalem less sinful? So where is the justice of God? In exile, how can they worship God when they are away from the Temple? The people failed to realize that their exile was a theological event. It was God Himself who brought them to Babylon as an act of chastisement because of their rebellion against God (Jer. 27:22). Since the people will not serve God with all of their heart and mind and soul, then they were to serve the King of Babylon and his slaves (Jer. 27:8,17). This remains the unlearned lesson in all human history – that humanity can either live under the kingdom of this world or under the kingdom of the Lord. Christ Jesus is the great divide between these kingdoms. And each person must make a choice as to which kingdom he will spend his life now and hereafter. Neutrality is a non-option because to be neutral is to choose for Satan and the kingdom of darkness. Therefore, one can only choose Christ to escape the bondage of the status quo and one cannot do it unless, as earlier intimated, God chooses him first.

In exilic conditions, the Jews were subject to "harlot emotions" and false prophets could easily manipulate them. False prophets arose saying that their exile will end soon – in two years (Jer. 28:3). It is against such conditions – exile and despondency – that God through Jeremiah gave His imperatives to the people. How should they live in a land not their own, under godless rulers who enslaved them, among people they don't love and whose culture and language they don't share and understand? This is the very question that the Church of Jesus is asking, whether in

²⁴ Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 807.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ R. K. Harrison, "Jeremiah and Lamentations," 131.

their homelands or in the diaspora. It is against such a backdrop that the commands came – a very articulate, integrated, practical and doable series of **imperatives**.

A. Build houses and live in them (29:5). Jeremiah was saying, you are in this exile for a long time. Accept your socio-political reality. Stop feeling sorry for yourselves by yearning for what is not. Exile, conditions that you don't like, is the fabric of your new life. Under such conditions, rebuild your lives and communities. Begin anew. This, in effect is a dramatic contrast to the psyche of exiles – tentative, aimless, purposeless. The instruction to build homes is suggestive of permanency – of settling down – of commitment. The people were not to disconnect themselves from their community. Get involved! This is the place where God brought you. He is sovereign and He is among His people whether they be in their homeland or in a foreign land. His presence is not to be defined in geographic or ethnic terms but in terms of recognizing His sovereignty and obedience to His laws. Since it was God who brought them to Babylon (29:4) then He will restore them to their own land in due time. Under difficult circumstances, deepen relationships and live fully.

Yet, exile is not a permanent residency. Long term, yes. But terminal. And God desires a difficult balance from His people. John Calvin refers to this balancing as a “state of suspense” in that “they were at home ... yet think of their return”²⁷ They are to live in a new land but they are not to succumb to the seduction of pagan cultures and secular materialism. They are to maintain their distinct identity as the people of Yahweh, not to be absorbed by Babylonian culture but leaven this new culture with the values of God. Brueggemann speaks of this need as a “*discipline of readiness*” to move when the divine moment comes. The people were to do as much good up to the very last seconds before departure.

1. Cultivate your elemental memories of God as He acted in history and in your life. Remember calvary ... the empty tomb. The evangelical faith is a historical faith. If we have no past, the present can be absolutized.

2. Appropriate the promises of God. The promises are centered on the sovereign faithfulness and the faithful sovereignty of Yahweh who will do what Yahweh says (Isa. 54:1-3). Here is the awesome inversion of historical reality. The new life that is promised to this community of exiles will spread everywhere, beyond all limits and boundaries, rich with blessings. The poem acknowledges hopelessness, abandonment, and despair. It concedes that the present moment is a moment of God's angry abuse and painful silence. That, however, is only for a moment; then the *hesed* of God will be activated and life will be restored²⁸ And that love, the *hesed* of God, came in its finality in Christ Jesus. For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son (Jn. 3:16).

B. Plant gardens and eat their produce (29:5). Live with the rhythm of the season. Don't be indolent parasites surviving through dole out in some refugee camps. Rise up with the break of dawn, celebrate each new day and be creatively productive. Fulfill your destiny in creation. God commands you to be “fruitful and multiply; and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This creation mandate has no expiration date nor defined by your passports or visas. Exercise your vocation. Restore the dignity of labor. Work. This is a holy calling to advance the blessings of the Kingdom to all creatures – friends or foes.

1. *Be productive.* Such a responsibility does not exclude higher education and skills training to be competitive in the market places. Go to school. Send your children to universities. Learn of Me not just in the Torah but in the area of the common. All truth is God's truth. Develop competencies and compete. Go for self-reliance and provide for your families (1 Tim. 5:8), share with those who are needy (Eph. 4:28) but do not limit yourself to the household of faith (Gal. 6:10), and give to the Lord's work (Mal. 3:10).

2. *Be a contributor.* Be subject to the King of Babylon for it is God who wills it (Jer. 27:17 cf. Rom. 13:1-6). As far as the laws of the land will allow you, excel in business (and the Jews have done great in this area for centuries while in exile). Provide jobs for others when you can. Pay your duties and taxes (Rom. 13:7). Support the infrastructure of your host society. Civic consciousness is part of citizenship or being a Christian.

Man in Scriptures cannot be extricated from his world. The prayer of Jesus is for God's will in heaven to be done on earth. The present anticipates the future that is both a new heaven and a new earth. Rightly, the creation mandate is a valid basis for holistic ministries where the people of God must deal with matter and spirit in God's created universe.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and The Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 418.

²⁸ Walter Brueggemann, 1998; 125.

C. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters (29:6). In their new country, the command to “multiply” is in force. This process of multiplying is to take place in the context of marriage as indicated by the taking of wives and the giving of husbands to daughters. It is also to be noted that these marriages are not to disregard God’s injunction against non-believers. The people were to preserve their Jewishness as the Covenant people. Today, the teaching on marriage among the equally yoked is to be observed by the Church (2 Cor. 6:14). The family is the building block of every society. Thus, the people of God should serve as a blessing and as a warning to their community. As someone observed, whenever the trinity of father, mother and child is tampered with, civilization begins to decay. And civilization is an instrument of God to preserve order, thus life, which is a presupposition to the preaching of the Gospel.

Marriage is a sign that reminds us of God’s redemptive plan. In the garden, when Adam and Eve fell, the initial social tragedy was awareness of nakedness and shame. In marriage, this shame is removed and a degree of restoration takes place (Gen. 2:25). Marriage, the most intimate of all human unions, is a metaphor of the relationship between Christ and the Church – the Bride and the Groom. Thus, marriage points to a future consummation when Christ comes again. The intimacy of relationship and the compass of happiness in Christ are exemplified by marriage.

Marriage has an evangelistic message as well. Notice the command to multiply (29:6) which is a repetition of God’s command in the garden. Of course, such a command invites further theological reflection on quality of life and number of lives. But in a world that is becoming a fatherless society, the young needs to find models of earthly fathers before they can believe in a heavenly Father. Our families are bridges to understanding the truth about the Fatherhood and Family of God. It is then critical that we ground Christian families in basic doctrines (theology) resulting in the strengthening of kingdom values in their spheres and then flow as faith expressions in community and culture. The idea then of marriage and of children addresses the issue of continuity of God’s witness in His plan to bless the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).

Spiritual parenting can be an extension of meaning. The families referred to are to be part of the larger Jewish community that must keep on growing. This is reminiscent of the growth of the Jews in the womb of Egypt in Exodus. But this growth was not to be limited along ethnic bloodlines. Proselytes were accepted into this family as well. Caleb is an example. Paul spoke of this when he spoke of Israel as not only from the physical line of Abraham, rather the new Israel is made up of those who have the righteousness (faith) of Abraham in Christ. During such exile, the Church should grow as well. Somehow, the Church has done a better job of multiplication under conditions of duress and persecution than during times of abundance and relative freedom. Clearly, the task of evangelism and church planting continues under all conditions.

It is not a digression to point out that such multiplication of number should not exclude multiplication of values in society. This is a crucial challenge in today’s world, which is referred to as the Age of Democracy. Increasingly, governments are pressured by the community of nations to be more democratic where the government governs by the consent of the governed. This issue is highlighted in Islamic countries that are multi-racial such as Malaysia. In the 1960’s, there were more non-Malays than Malays (Muslims). Today, there are more Malays than non-Malays. While the non-Malays opted for family planning, the Malays find no such restrictions. To be more specific, Christians grow by conversion, and Islam grows by conversion and biologically. Given the trends, it can be predicted in a curve at what point the non-Malays will be outvoted in government and *suriah* law implemented by parliament.

D. Seek the welfare of the City. The command “seek” is not just desire or wish but it connotes a struggle and hard work. Welfare here is *shalom* – wholeness, the dynamic, vibrating health of society that surges with divine purpose and transformed by love. City is *polis*. The meaning is broader than just “city”. It means politics. [Politics is from the word *polis*]. It is also wider than the term politics as used today. It means “the whole of life in the public domain of the city.” This imperative for the Jewish exiles was to get involved in all areas of public life – *not in Babylonian terms but in God’s terms*. This is hard teaching to swallow for the Jews. It is more natural for the Jews to wish ill of Babylon and to topple down the tyrants that enslaved them. This is the same struggle of present-day Christians who live under repressive rules as they look at Romans 13. But God is commanding His people to do the opposite of their instincts. In looking at the text, three lessons can be gleaned: (1) the blessings of the Jews depend upon the blessings of the Babylonians (in all areas), (2) that God is the sole ground for stability, and (3) the convergence of OT and NT teachings.

The command to engage society in all spheres of political and public life is to achieve a double *shalom*. There is a *shalom* for Babylon and a *shalom* for God’s people. But the latter was to depend on the former! The text is clear “for in its welfare you will have welfare” (v.7). The *shalom* of the Jews is contingent on the *shalom* of the

Babylonians. Obviously, this is common sense and we are to love God with our minds. This is a taste of hard-nosed realism even in our times. There is a responsibility for the small community to enlarge and influence the life of the larger community.

To the Jews, this teaching can be anachronistic. They have always understood their security and prosperity to lie on their being a chosen nation-state of God, with their kingship, army and national borders.²⁹ This revolutionary suggestion puts in a different light the situs of our stability. Now God is saying: your well being depends on the well being of the Community where I have brought you. At the core of it all is a lesson in spirituality. The stability of the Jews in Judah was made to depend on obedience to God. By that same obedience, God will take care of them as the apple of His eyes in a foreign land. The people of God are to live under His life-giving Word, which will also serve as the Constitution of the Church in our times.

The language in verse 7 finds convergence in 1 Pet 2:9-10. Peter, addressing the early church in the diaspora, wanted them to develop a heavenly and an earthly focus.³⁰ The welfare of the city was seen to be two-fold. It was 'physical' and 'spiritual'. It linked wealthy Christian members of the city into the civic benefaction convention in the 1st Century. At the same time it expanded the definition of 'benefactor' to encompass all those in the Christian community who had the capacity to meet the needs of others from self-generated resources. It required all to be doers of good.... Unlike the secular trends of the first century with the development of a welfare syndrome favoring those with status and/or wealth (or who can vote for us in today's third world democracies), the Christian community was to be discriminating in the distribution of 'benefactions' to its members, 'honoring' only those who were genuinely needy.³¹

The commentary of Peter on Jeremiah 29 provides a broader explanation of "seek the welfare of the city." To the scattered churches, the call was a reminder that the Church is a "holy nation." It is to declare the virtues and characteristics of the One who called them into being. As they live in a specific geography, regardless of the socio-political condition in which they may find themselves, they are to follow the example of the patiently suffering Messiah (2:21). *Imitatio Christi*. In their community life, they are to relate with others in and outside of their immediate community in the same way that God related to them and to the world (v.20).

Somehow the Christians' position in the early centuries to "take part in everything as citizens," as part of their temporal and spiritual self-definition, does not reflect much of 20th Century perception of politics. To the early church, evangelism was indispensable. But social action was not an option for the Church. Paul, in his letter to the Christians in the Roman city of Philippi, reminded them of their dual citizenship (heaven and earth) and that they are to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27). Many scholars relate this instruction to civic life, i.e., conduct themselves as citizens of a country in a manner worthy of a citizen of heaven or of the gospel of Christ. This still remains the standard of the evangelical faith – total engagement to transform society.

E. Pray for the peace of the City. The general idea behind "peace" is "a state of tranquility... freedom from civil disturbance; a state of security or order within a community provided for by law or custom; harmony in personal relations." The idea of peace, however, includes "prosperity."³² The prayer list is comprehensive: absence of conflicts, harmonious relationships, no public disorder, release of hostages, eradication of graft and corruption, greater safety from criminals, no oppression, economic well-being, rapid development." It will include prayer for policies and legislations that would promote peace. The Lordship of Christ in a community can be expressed under these conditions whether recognized or not. And since prayer is not a passive activity, to pray for the peace of the city also means to be an activist in achieving peace in society. Perhaps, this is why the public prayer meetings of many Christians to address issues of peace in the country have turned into parliaments of the streets advocating for change of policy (even politicians in office).

The prayer offered for peace recognizes the mystical reality of God's involvement in the process. In the commands of God, Yahweh was to be personally involved.³³ The discussion inevitably goes back to the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. The Church is asked to do all that it can as if everything depends on his labor but at the same time the Church must pray as if nothing will happen without it. God says, "not by might nor by power but by My Spirit says the Lord (Zech. 4:6). This affirmation of tension between prayer and political action is illustrated well by Joshua who was

²⁹ J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 546.

³⁰ Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 201.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² John Calvin, *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and The Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 420.

³³ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 150.

valiantly fighting the Amalekites in Rephidim but who is also aware that Moses was interceding in the Mountain. The reported transformation of Almolonga, Guatemala; Cali, Columbia; and Kiambu, Kenya gave emphasis on the role of prayer and church unity. Undeniably, as the lyric of a song composed by a Malaysian brother goes: "When we pray, we move the Hands of God." The transformation of these cities has marks of revival as demonstrated in history. But this should not be interpreted to mean that we drop all other Christian ministries and focus on prayer alone. In fact, we should be careful in recognizing the work of others – public officials, men of good will – who have contributed to the changes as well. Of course, God's providence curves excesses and uses His public deacons to serve His purpose. Our primary calling is to be obedient to the whole counsel of God and not just expedient to do the convenient. As Augustine once said: without God we cannot, without us God will not. Again, it is this balance that we conveniently forget in our ministries leading to an *either or* and away from *both and*. "To pray," says Calvin, "is not to neglect other duties."³⁴

These imperatives are interactive, interdependent activities designed to achieve wholeness of life in the community. They are basic activities of a holistic Church that truly engages Society. The force of the imperatives put the burden on the side of God's people to have "responsibility for the larger community."³⁵

At the end of this section one may ask, in what way is it relevant to the church today since the imperatives were addressed to the Jewish exiles? Brueggemann provides a helpful theological sketch in providing this linkage.

Covenant. From the Genesis genealogy, we find that the entire world is in covenant with God (Gen. 9:8-17), that the covenant of God with Noah and his progenitors include the nations and, therefore, all nations are bound together to live under the life-giving covenant and all are recipients of God's blessings for life.

Rebellion. But the nations insisted on their autonomy, rejected God and refused His terms of blessings. For this reason they were scattered and "the coherence and unity of mankind was irreversibly violated"³⁶ (Gen. 11:8). Nevertheless, the nations are subjects of God's attention. Will they have a future?

Israel. It is for this that Israel's unsolicited testimony offers the nations an opportunity to see God in the life of Israel, to know Him, experience His saving power, and join Israel in thanksgiving and praise (Ps. 117:1-2).

Church. The church³⁷ as a continuity of Israel's mission has the same duty to the nations that they "may see your good work and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). The Psalmist says, "All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you" (86:9-10). His desire is that "a whole earth and all its peoples shall now be gladly affirming Yahweh's sovereignty and gratefully receiving from Yahweh all the blessings of a rightly governed creation."³⁸

This link will make God's imperatives applicable to the Church and makes the role of the church in society today as a continuation of the task of failed Israel to bless the nations of the earth. There is a parallelism between the call of Jeremiah and the call of the Church.

The Church is known by God before the foundation of the world. This is the mystery revealed, as Paul says (Eph. 3:2-3).

The Church is chosen by God in Christ, His Body of which He is the Head. Here the concept of organic fellowship is balanced by Headship or kingdom.

The Church is given the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 19ff). Jesus was equivocal in his command: As the Father has sent Me, so send I you (Jn. 20:21).

³⁴ John Calvin, *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and The Lamentations*, 421.

³⁵ Walter Brueggemann: 1998, 258.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 494.

³⁷ Here are the tenets of what I believe. * The Church's essential and indispensable constitutive element is faith in Christ Jesus our Lord - yet this Faith is never private. * The Church is the Body of Christ and encompasses all who are in Christ - past, present and future. * The Word of God is the constitution of the Body through which she organizes her life and mission. * The Holy Spirit is the power of the Church for illumination and ministry. * The Church is a spiritual organism that must grow and is an organization to do the work of God in our world as the primary agent of His Kingdom. * The Church is God's eschatological community and the ethics of this community which is coming should be the basis for present social ethics of the church. * The Church is not the only place where God is, but He is in the World as Lord of the nations desirous to bless every family of the earth.

³⁸ Brueggemann, 150.

The church is the gathered people of God to proclaim and practice the message of the Kingdom of God that has already come and is still coming in the world. The critical question then is whether in fact there is a description of this Kingdom that is now present in the church and is at the same time future for mankind.

3. Consummation: Towards a New Social Arrangement

“Behold, I will bring to it healing, and I will heal them; and I will reveal to them an abundance of peace and truth. And I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel.... And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me... And it shall be to Me a name of joy, praise, and glory before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear of all the good that I do for them” (Jer. 33:6-9).

The people of God were in exile because of their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. It was a time of distress. Yet in the midst of their exile, God assured them of a future and a hope. Exile was not their final destination. Jeremiah spoke of seventy years after which God will act again to restore the people to their homeland (Jer. 29:11). As proof of his faith in the future of his people, Jeremiah purchased a piece of land in Anathoth just before the final invasion of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 32:8-12). Jeremiah “invested” in real estate because of his confidence that the exiles will be repatriated and that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the fortunes of his people will be restored. *Shalom* will one day come in *Jeru salum* and the former things will be forgotten. It will be a time of radical change - from poverty to prosperity, from judgment to blessings. Jeremiah promised for the people “health, restoration, joy and peace.”³⁹ Indeed, beyond the restoration, God spoke of a better future for them.

This future and hope is shared by Isaiah. The parity of ideas is unmistakable. Isaiah elaborated on what Jeremiah promised the people with particular-universal dimensions.

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing, And her people for gladness” (Isaiah 65:17-18).

The vision has two dimensions to it. The micro vision refers to Jerusalem as God's holy city. Isaiah writes: “I create Jerusalem for rejoicing” (Isa. 65:18). The macro vision applies to the world. The preface of the prophecy says I create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17). The word for “create” as used in Genesis and in the Isaiah text is *bara* which is used only with God as the subject.⁴⁰ Man can make things but only God can create. This links back to the earlier comment on this new social arrangement as a “gift” and as a “hope”. For while human responsibility is not denied, in fact, is commanded, God alone can eventually actualize the vision. This responsibility includes grieving over harsh social realities and holistic programs as means of life-saving and developmental interventions preceding the dance of joy. The extension of the micro to the macro provides a strategy to transform the world one community, city or country at a time or beginning with every city or country.

The future vision described. This prophetic vision is the hope of the exiles. Burdened with the yoke of the Babylonians during their captivity, a new social arrangement was offered. This arrangement is described in Isaiah 65. In this chapter, notice the similarity of language between Jeremiah and Isaiah as they dealt with the same subject. Jeremiah spoke of present Jewish activities while Isaiah points to a definitive future event.

“And they shall build houses and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit... for as the lifetime of a tree, so shall My people, And My chosen ones shall wear out the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children of calamity; For they are the offspring of the Lord, and their descendants with them” (vv. 21-23).

The future and the hope of God's people was not just the return of the Jews to their homeland after 70 years of exile (Jer. 29:10-11). Their hope was in a future where “everything shall be fully restored”⁴¹ not just for Jerusalem but also for the whole earth. This hope is more than just religious escapism to endure the pain (or evangelical embarrassment) of exile. This hope is profoundly crucial in our society that is beginning to despair in hopelessness except the rhetoric of politicians and marketing ads. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann gives a lucid

³⁹ Charles L. Feinbert, 1986, 589.

⁴⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Book Of Isaiah*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 513.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Dr. William Pringle, trans. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 405.

summary as to this hope:

- “(1) The *function of this hope* is to keep the present open and provisional, under scrutiny.
- (2) The *natural setting of hope* is among those who have grief and process it in community.
- (3) The *enemies of hope* include muteness, fulfillment, and technique, all ways of trying to keep life on our own terms.”⁴²

I would add to this a fourth element to the realization of this hope, i.e., Christian faith in action and the faithfulness of God. At the heart of this new social arrangement, is *Yahweh* who is the God allied with the poor (cf. Jer. 2:24; 5:28; 22:16).

This vision of the future for the exiles and for the Church today has been the subject of many interpretations. “This new infrastructure of the city will be marked by peace, justice, righteousness, and faithfulness.”⁴³ Evangelical author Alec Motyer writes on these same passages: Isaiah uses aspects of present life to create impressions of the life that is yet to come. It will be a life totally provided for (v.13), totally happy (v.19), totally secure (vv.22-23) and totally at peace (vv.24-25).⁴⁴ In the DNA Vision⁴⁵ I related this set of verses to Isaiah 9 and described a disciplined nation as one where there is economic sufficiency, social peace, public justice, national righteousness and where Christ is the Lord of all life and spheres (or increasing Christian influence in society). This, as Motyer points out, is the “real reality.” I believe that we all yearn for this society where there is no more poverty but economic stability above and beyond the whims of market forces or weather conditions. Notice also the building and living, the planting and eating descriptions. It can only be understood as a society where there is justice to guarantee that each gets what is due him. And there is peace where there is oneness of the people with God, with each other, with other created beings and with nature.

In this new future, the prophet is pre-visioning a society where there are no HIVs or AIDS or diseases. There is a reversal of natural process from pain to joy. The time of bearing children will be joy and bliss⁴⁶ (contrast Gen. 3:16). In fact, Calvin says that God will not deprive (parents) of their children.⁴⁷ Every one “shall arrive at a mature age so as to be always vigorous, like persons in the prime of life, always healthful and robust.”⁴⁸ Then everyone will enjoy the “blessings of the law to build and to dwell (Lev. 26:10).”⁴⁹ Young’s summary says it all: “the blessings of labor characterizes the Messianic Age.”⁵⁰ No more labor unrest. Poverty will be eradicated. People will have “life and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). At that time “nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war” (Isa. 2:4). That which is the hope of the United Nations as inscribed on its walls shall be fulfilled. The nations shall live under the reign of God and stream towards the “mountain of the house of the Lord” (Isa. 2:2) and no longer at the United Nations. The war in Afghanistan or Sri Lanka and many others will be no more. Mankind under the rule of God will have peace and prosperity.

The vision, however, is “blessed but not ideal” as yet. In this passage, death is still mentioned and the “youth will die” though at a very ripe age (Isa. 65:20). And this longevity of life is not simply because of “medical advances” but the result of God’s gracious work of restoring ecological balance and universal harmony (Isa. 65:25). John, however, hopes for a state where there is no more tears nor death (Rev. 21:1-4). Perhaps, the Isaiah text refers to the blessings of a millennial reign that anticipates the fullness of the coming Kingdom after the white throne judgment. At any rate, the vision is utopian in its scope and simply mind-boggling in its final consummation. Of course, the realization of this *eschaton*, this blessed future, will be made possible only through the suffering Servant (Isaiah 53).

The vision achieved. The *shalom* for the exiles is both a *task* (v.7) and a *gift from God to the exiles* (v. 11). Here, God is available to the exiles and will act for the exile. For even though it is Yahweh who caused the exile: I have driven you, I sent you into exile, yet He also promised: I will restore, I will gather, I will bring you back. It anticipates

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1987), 90.

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, 247.

⁴⁴ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 530.

⁴⁵ See Jun Vencer, *The DNA Vision: Transforming the Nations*.

⁴⁶ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 516.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 404.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 400.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 401.

⁵⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 516.

the possibility of *shalom* for Israel and for the world.⁵¹ Here we are reminded of John at Patmos: “And the kingdom of the world will become the Kingdom of the Lord” (Rev. 11:15).

As a **gift** from God, we are reminded again of the spiritual nature of our ministry. In fact, the amazing claim of Jeremiah that out of the failure of the exiles to honor their covenant with God and out of the judgment that logically followed their failure, there is a future for them, which is their hope. This future out of failure is grounded in the “sense that the failure of the order is not equivalent to or co-terminal with the defeat of God. God’s purpose abides in the midst of historical chaos and will finally work through the chaos to create a fresh social possibility.”⁵² God is resolved to realize this new creation out of crisis. The plan of God is to bless the families of the earth – a horizon beyond just Israel. For this reason, Israel was chosen in grace and the Church chosen in Christ to continue the task of failed Israel. This failure will not limit God for He is free and is able to accomplish His decrees. This vision will come to mankind not from America or China. This future “is given to us by God known fully in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.”⁵³ This Eden restored will not be accomplished by social analysis and activism, though they are not excluded, but by our Triune God who is resolved to bless His people and creation.

As a missionary **task**, it is a Christian and church responsibility. The imperatives of Jeremiah are consistent with that which is future. “The social imagination of liberated Israel,” says Brueggemann, “is not only a *liturgic* act (The Song of Moses) or a *political* act (of changing sovereigns at Sinai). It is also a *legislative* act. Social imagination cannot forever stay impressionistic and fanciful. It may begin in dreams, but it leads to acts of public shaping derived from the dreams. Israel could begin by a new joyous dance, but then it had to translate the power of intention of the dance into concrete economic and political terms.”⁵⁴ For this purpose the people of God are endowed by various spiritual gifts and abilities and the Church was called as a “refueling station” for God’s people to leaven, salt and light the society (cf. Eph. 4:11-13). In carrying out its mandate, the church should realize that the status quo is not final because of the *God of newness*, who is always doing something new in our midst and who is determined to fulfill His plan. This newness is also available in the now: IF My people... then I will heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14). God is pushing for ‘newness’ beyond the former, which is old, overcoming the despair of Israel or the exiles.

In the performance of our task, the church must (1) articulate a biblical global vision, (2) grieve over the chaos of sinfulness, (3) repent and live in Torah-obedience and gracious neighborliness, (4) undertake social analysis, (5) increase capacity for co-belligerency and ecumenism in the trenches, and (6) totally engage society. The church must develop a degree of sophistication in dealing with Government and Society. This collaboration with unbelievers in the creation of civilization and culture, in nation building, in transforming society is grounded on our **creation mandate**, common **grace** and **natural revelation**. “By creation,” writes Michael S. Horton, “we are engaged in a common task, joined in common experiences, and linked by common bonds with unbelievers... Regardless of one’s calling, then, each of us is expected to pursue excellence in the realm of creation, alongside unbelievers, and this secular calling is just as noble as the sacred calling to the ministry of Word and sacrament.”⁵⁵ Every person is created in the image of God, gifted and held in check by the providence of God. Paul says, “... who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law ... show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness....” (Rom. 2:14-15). Beyond all these, the *church must model* this vision in her own life before a watching world.

The motivation. “The teaching, then, about social ethics by the pilgrim people of God in 1 Peter holds together two crucial, but related biblical doctrines, *eschatology* (1 Pet. 1:13) and *social ethics*.

1. The first is grounded in our **hope in God** (Jer. 29:11). This hope, in the New Testament, is envisaged and embodied in Christ Jesus and its fulfillment in His second coming to consummate the Kingdom that has already come. The reality of the *parousia* was a motivating reason and not an escape for seeking the welfare of the city because of the eschatological judgment. This hope is so critical for modern man whose present social construct of coercion and exploitation have been convinced by oppressive and greedy powers that they have to be resigned to and accept the reality that there is no way out for them. This hope was in the heart of Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

⁵¹ Walter Brueggemann, 1998: 259.

⁵² Walter Brueggemann, 1983: 67.

⁵³ Ibid, 108.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁵ Michael S. Horton, *Where In The World Is The Church?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 192-193.

A Long Walk To Freedom

In his biography, Nelson Mandela recalls the scene when he first laid eyes on his granddaughter. At that time, he was working at hard labor on Robben Island in almost unbearable conditions, cutting lime in a quarry under a sun so bright it nearly blinded him. The only thing that kept prisoners from despair was the fact that they sang as they worked. The songs reminded them of family and home and tribe and the world outside they might otherwise forget.

During the fourteenth year of his imprisonment, Mandela gained permission for a visit from his daughter. She ran across the room and embraced him. Mandela had not held his daughter since she was a young girl, and it was both poignant and dizzying to hug this fully-grown woman, his child. Then she handed over her own newborn baby, Nelson's granddaughter, into his callused, leathery hands. "To hold a newborn baby, so vulnerable and soft in my rough hands, hands that for too long had held only picks and shovels, was a profound joy.

Mandela's tribal culture had a tradition of letting the grandfather choose a new baby's name, and Nelson toyed with various names as he held that tiny, helpless baby. He settled on Zaziwe, which means Hope. "The name had special meaning for me, for during all my years in prison hope never left me – and now it never would. I was convinced that this child would be a part of a new generation of South Africans for whom apartheid would be a distant memory – that was my dream." [Philip Yancy, *Reaching For The Invisible God*, pp. 78-79]

2. The second is grounded in the **character of God**. To stand in 'the true grace of God' demanded a deep commitment to the welfare of the city within the framework of a living eschatological hope. This means that the present or impending suffering would be no ultimate catastrophe for them (1 Pet. 4:12).⁵⁶ Social ethics is defined in 1 Peter as 'the doing of good works' in all spheres of life and was every Christian's calling and a central theme (2:11ff).⁵⁷ God does good because good needs to be done (23)... and did so without expectation of reciprocity or repayment.⁵⁸ The good works performed by God's people were an expression of holiness. This attribute was based on the character of the God who called them (1:14) and was an essential ingredient of the Christian lifestyle.⁵⁹

Isaiah in the final chapter of his book speaks of a dual motivation for people to come under His sovereignty and to live a life of Torah-obedience. (A) The inclusiveness of His desire that all men will enjoy His goodness and glory. "And they will declare My glory among the nations ... from new moon to new moon and from sabbath to sabbath" (Isa. 66:19-23). But if they reject His glory, if the glory doesn't win us to a life of obedience, then those who reject God will feel the exclusiveness of His anger, the horrible reward of disobedience, stated simply as "for their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind" (Isa. 66:24).

III. Conclusion

The Church today can increasingly transform society by inculturating the values of the Kingdom of God in society and by contributing to the well-being of the people in a given country. This, however, would need churches made up of Jeremiahs committed to work out the promissory vision of Isaiah. The convictions and courage of Jeremiah to engage his own society are the very ones that are needed today in our churches. For as far as the world is concerned, the writer of Ecclesiastes says: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecl. 1:9). Against public opinion and aligned against the powers of his day, he never faltered in his prophetic message. Instead, he ran with the horses and did not faint (Jer. 12:5). The pews need Jeremiahs today whose theological assumptions are translated into action. History reminds us that whenever we have men with the passion of Jeremiah, men such as Abraham Kuyper, Lord Wilberforce, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Lech Walesa or women such as Catherine Booth, Rosa Parks, Molly Blackburn – society will never be the same again.

The Church today can learn from the folly of Israel and Judah. The leaders can avoid the fate of a King Jehoachim who rejected God's word. The Church, too, must recover the vision of Isaiah and reorder its life accordingly. It must release its own Jeremiahs to engage society in all areas of endeavors. It must confront government and people with the vision of God's new society and necessity of Christ in life and community.

⁵⁶ Bruce Winter, *Seek The Welfare Of The City*, 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 60.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 19.

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The Church and the Christians need to recover the tenets of the Reformation again. Going back to the basics of the faith and live their lives consistent with pure doctrines. This mental paradigm shift can result in lives that can have transformative influences in the world. Testimonies of historians would attest to the impact of holism in mission as demonstrated by the 16th Century Reformation. Michael S. Horton has capsulated some of these observations.

University of Paris historian Pierre Chaunu remarks: "Yes, we are fashioned by the world of the Reformation." Harvard historian Steven Ozment credits the Reformation with the recovery of literary and the centrality of the family in social organizations.... Stanford's Lewis Spitz has remarked of the Reformation that "few periods in the long history of Europe have had such a momentous impact upon the western world" and Yale's Roland Bainton noted, "Luther, as no one before him in more than a thousand years, sensed the import of the miracle of divine forgiveness ... the Reformation was a religious revival. Its attempt was to give man a new assurance in the presence of God and a new motivation in the moral life."⁶⁰

The finger of history has written of the contribution of evangelical revivals that led to the establishments of Universities, Hospitals, Orphanages, Relief and Development Agencies. They influenced laws and culture. Crimes and immoralities were down. Communities and people were aware of the awesome presence of God whom they cannot do without. The reaction of America to the terrorist attacks was nothing less than dramatic. President Bush declared that America is on bended knees. Senators and Pastors alike quoted Bible verses. People were praying everywhere and K-Mart and Walmart ran out of flags to sell. God is back in the public square. And, thus far, none have invoked the separation of church and state against such outburst of religious revival. Even the world is reacting recognizing that killing of innocent civilian is morally wrong! The universal outcry only affirms the presence of a universal moral law which in the Christian tradition is best explained by the Apostle Paul in Romans 2:14-15.

The Church needs to recover this vision of the Kingdom and offer this hope to the nations. The world without the Gospel of the Kingdom is just a world. It has no awareness of purpose. But once confronted by the Kingdom or faced with the presence of the church, it becomes aware of its purpose. To ignore such awareness or purpose would be a decline towards nothingness. This awareness is critical in that God's redemption is not just personal but cosmic. It includes the world. Paul spoke of this saying, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). He continued this grand expectation of a future hope knowing that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22). The church is an open door through which the world can see created human community reaching beyond itself and death.⁶¹ After all, the community of the church is the goal of creation. Karl Barth once called the church "God's provisional demonstration of his intention for all humanity."⁶² "Israel was not just a vehicle of redemption," Christopher J.H. Wright points out, "but a 'working model' of a redeemed community in a fallen world – 'a light to the nations'. They, the medium, were themselves part of the message."⁶³ Such a witness now belongs to the community of Jews and Gentiles we call the Christian Church. It is the church's responsibility to the world, whenever it gains hearing in a forum, to debate theology with the world.⁶⁴

In the life arrangement of the New Testament, the church is the center "for the equipping of saints for the work of service" (Eph. 4:12). The saints are the believers. The title does not primarily connote a quality of life as much as a position relative to Christ. Thus a saint is one chosen by the grace of God in Christ so that he or she can stand beside the Lord of the Church in confronting and transforming people and structures towards the Lordship of Jesus. Towards this end, believers are gifted for engagement in the world – each assigned according to gifts and abilities. Church life does not end after the Sunday service. After worship, the church as people (laity) must be scattered like seeds in society to witness for Him. They must call into question "present configurations of power and present arrangements of monopoly."⁶⁵

The sad reality is that our laity today does not have a holistic or transformational worldview. They tend to look at Christianity almost exclusively in terms of special grace - their personal relationship to Christ but not in terms of

⁶⁰ Michael S. Horton, *Where In The World Is The Church?*, 202.

⁶¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Two Cities of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 10.

⁶² Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 125.

⁶³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking In The Ways Of The Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (England: Apollos, 1995), 30.

⁶⁴ Robert W. Jenson, *Two Cities of God*, 9.

⁶⁵ Walter Brueggemann: 1987, 58.

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common grace or of their missional role in society. In fact some missions have frowned at lay people entering politics and business because they are evil and leads to compromise. In turn many national churches have followed this unbiblical paradigm.

For the church to engage society towards transformation, the church must inculcate in the laity a biblical worldview. This will be the most significant paradigm shift in the life and mission of the church today. Then equip and support them as each serves the Lord in the area of the common – where, really, the rubber meets the road. This will entail no less than another religious reformation that must be all encompassing – mission, church life and budgets, theological institutions, and release the laity for ministry. The model of transformation must begin in the church and then present the message – in word and deed – to society. The church must arrest its tendency to move from theology to therapy. We should not encourage the laity to look at the church as a bomb shelter – protecting them from the world. At times, I hear workers speaking through Linus: “There is no problem so big I cannot run away from.” The church should not run away from the problems of society. Precisely, the gospel-permeated church faces the problems because by choice and function Christ through the church is God’s panacea for the ills of the world. As Abraham Kuyper points out, concerning the sovereignty of God, that every inch of ground in creation must belong to Christ. God wants us to trust in His power (create, comfort and restore), in His purpose (to love and live for Him), and His character (loving and holy).

Within our protected walls we do not hear the sound of mourning and weeping. Revolutions are being planned in secret places to liberate people from exploitations and to give the innocent in dungeons their freedoms. Our minds are not oblivious to these things. And, we know God’s bias for the disadvantaged and helpless. If the church remains silent and its limbs paralyzed for action, then we might as well harden our hearts to these things because we can’t continue living lies. The song of Valjean in the play *Les Miserables* is both a warning and a supplication for succor.

“At the end of the day, you’re another day older
And that’s all you can say for the life of the poor.
It’s a struggle, it’s a war
And there’s nothing that anyone’s giving
One more day standing about
What is it for?
One day less to the living!”

“Look down and see the beggars at your feet
Look down and show some mercy if you can
Look down and see
The sweepings of the street
Look down, look down
Upon your fellow man!”

“Will you join our crusade
Who will be strong and stand with me?
Somewhere beyond the barricade
Is there a world you long to see?
Do you hear the people sing
Say, do you hear the distant drums?
Is it the future that they bring
When tomorrow comes.”

The world after two millennia had built barricades against tyranny and oppression because deep in every person is the thirst of a utopia for a better life. Revolutions came. Communism, which Brezinsky considered as the most costly of social experiments had sacrificed 60 million lives only to crumble after 75 years. The Christian faith stands against all false prophets and restrains all abuses. Jesus Christ started a greater revolution. “The coming of Jesus,” says Newbiggin, “precipitates the crisis of history. Once a vision has been given of the new age... the question of the meaning and goal of history can no longer be ignored.”⁶⁶ It is not behind the barricade but ... beneath the Cross of Christ is our hope. Christ alone is the future of mankind.

⁶⁶ Leslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 130.

It is perhaps good to remind ourselves that from God's perspective, we will be measured not in terms of outcomes but in terms of obedience. As Samuel reminds us: *Obedience is better than sacrifice*. Moreover, in doing holistic ministries, one recognizes certain limitations such as professional capability, financial capacity, and even *kairos* opportunity. It is here where we insist that the task of transformation is the work of the whole Church and not just the work of one or a few. If the churches in the area work together, each will find a significant part in the total work of transformation. After all, that is consistent with Paul's theology of the Church as a Body with many parts (1 Cor. 12).

Because every believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit and the Church is the Temple of God among us, then to engage society is an exciting enterprise of the Spirit. The sacred invading the secular in all spheres. And if we grant that in Jesus Christ everything that is envisaged is embodied, and that Jesus Himself is the "eschaton," then we can humbly and realistically engage to transform. Because, the vision of the eschaton is our destiny. **Amen.**

Noe: Some aspects to the crisis in our World.

Threats to life. Despite the "medical advances" and the ideological or egalitarian conceptions of ideologues or fanatics, the fact is that life is most uncertain. The hidden face of **terrorists** brings fear to people, traveling or not. To take some recent examples. *Sri Lanka*. In August this year, a 15-man suicide band allegedly from the Tiger Liberation Front attacked the Air Force base and International Airport in Colombo. Six of the twelve commercial jet liners of Sri Lanka Airlines were destroyed and eight fighter jets of the Air Force were blown up. Of the fifteen, twelve committed suicides mostly as human bombs that destroyed the aircrafts. Fortunately, the attackers ensured that no civilian would be killed. *Japan* – We remember the Aum Shinrikyo sect that released the lethal Sarin nerve gas in five separate subway stations in Japan in 1995 killing 12 people and injured 5,500 people. *USA* – We still see vivid images of the terrorists attacks on the World Trade Center (economic center) and the Pentagon (military center) last September 11 causing hundreds of millions of dollars and over 6,000 lives. Speculation had it that the other airlines which crashed minutes after the Pentagon attack was destined for the White House (political center). It was a daring declaration of war against the Americans! *Philippines* – the kidnapping for ransom by the Abu Sayaf in Southern Philippines where even now a number are still held hostage allegedly at \$1 M each, including a missionary couple from the New Tribes Mission. *The Middle East* conflict between Israel and Palestine reminds us with a sense of helplessness that "wars and rumor of wars" will continue and intensify. *Bombings* of shopping malls, buses, homes, and embassies are common CNN news. So are assassinations and even killings by children as in the Columbine High School and recently in Japan. The United Nations with its hope in the prophecy of Isaiah that nations will not war, has not prevented wars among nations. How does one declare war on International Terrorism where are no rules of warfare or respect for the innocent or value for human life on the side of the terrorists?

Scientists are frantic in looking for a magic cure for HIV and AIDS (not to mention other national health "killers"). A high percentage of people are infected in many Continents such as Africa and North America with this "*social diseases*" to use a euphemism for sexual immorality and perverseness in general. This is true of Thailand and Cambodia to bring the example closer to home. This is so widespread that even blood transfusions are not as safe. And even if medical advances were found, it would hardly benefit the poorest of the poor who have no medical insurances or other means to avail of such services in hospitals or expensive medicines.

We abhor the sacrifice of children to Molech and yet over a million unborn babies are murdered every year in abortion for economic and social reasons. In fact, even for business in the guise of medical research. This is referred to now as the *silent holocaust*. It seems that the most unsafe place for a yet undelivered child is the womb of the mother! Now euthanasia is being legalized where the value of life is measured by its productive contribution to society. The postmodern world has redefined life simply as matter and economic values.

Injustice. *Graft and corruption* is a deadly virus that has crippled governments and had consigned millions of people in the third world to be indebted to the World Bank or the IMF far beyond their capacity to pay for many generations. Government officials plunder their national coffers or milk fat transactions with multi-nationals who exploit natural resources. In the third world, only two nations have landed in the list of 20 least corrupt nations (Singapore and Chile). The loss of revenue to Government due to corruption is staggering. One estimate of revenue loss in the Philippines is about 20% - 30% of the national budget. If this amount is not lost, the Philippines need not go on budget deficit every year and use the money for development. There are many factors, but values and culture are contributors to the impoverishment of the nation and people. Cited by economists are values concerning time and close family relationships, lack of savings,

and even indolence and laziness.⁶⁷

Disintegration of family. In the USA only a third of couples living together are legally married. In the so-called Bible States, divorces among Christians are just as high as that of non-Christians. Even in Asia, divorces are rising. Ours is becoming a fatherless society. There is no sanctity to marriage, no love and commitment in sexual relations, and children are simply collateral damages to unbridled lust. More children do not live with their fathers and in many cases do not even know their fathers. Thus, if children grow up without a father image, how can they understand the concept of a Heavenly Father? This is a theological issue. Moreover, whoever tampers with the trinity of Father, Mother and Child, that civilization undermines itself and has doomed itself to destruction.

Poverty. Globalization did not result in a more egalitarian society nor did it check human greed. The number of poor has only increased over the last 30 years.

Secularization / Idolatry. The battle of the mind continues and modernity and post-modernity are secularizing the culture to a point where one may well agree with Andre Malraux, the French existentialist, who explained to the United Nations nearly three decades ago: "The theologians have announced that God is dead, and now the rest of us must announce the death of man." Knowledge explosion seems to result only in improve means towards unimproved ends. Educate the devil and he is the devil still.

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⁶⁷ Huntington, etc. Conflict of Cultures?