

Kingdom Perspective for Church Community and Civil Society¹

Mt 6:9, “Pray then like this, ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’”

1Pe 2:9, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Sunday after Sunday, we pray the Lord’s prayer, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This prayer implies that God’s reign is breaking in this world that is not yet fully redeemed. We Christians experience not only joy but also sorrows and injustice. Actually, since we have experienced the kingdom of God in Jesus, we are waiting and longing for the full redemption of our bodies and of all creation. In light of the coming kingdom of God, we not only see the darkness of this corrupt world, but also we are called to actively participate in the in-breaking kingdom of God. But the reality is that we are often heavy-hearted and frustrated when we hear the news of the war in Ukraine; sometimes we feel overwhelmed by war atrocities and injustice. Frankly, it is very hard for us to fully understand the distress and sufferings that our brothers and sisters in Ukraine have been going through because of the war, which includes the recent passing of our brother Vlad Mazan of Kyiv. In view of the kingdom of God, we don’t despair, but we fight and pray for the kingdom of God to come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

For gospel workers to properly engage in gospel work in our sociopolitical context, we should ask some fundamental questions, such as: Who are we in this troublesome world? What is the relationship between the kingdom of God, the Christian community and civil society? How are we to understand the current events/war in view of the kingdom of God? What should we do as a Christian community?

Who are we as a church? As Apostle Peter put it, as a Christian community, we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1Pe 2:9). We are “sojourners and exiles” in this world (1Pe 2:11). Apostle Paul testified that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Php 3:20). Though having earthly nationalities, our primary identity is in Jesus our Savior and Lord. Our identity is a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the kingdom people,

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belonging to God. So, our primary loyalty is to Jesus our Savior who died for our sins and was raised from the dead. Our ultimate loyalty is to Christ the King who, through his sacrificial death and the power of his resurrection, defeated the power of sin and death, and has brought about the kingdom of God.

To be biblically correct, in the New Testament era, no nation as a political entity is called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in the sense that Old Testament Israel was a chosen people: not America, not Korea, not Canada, not Russia, not Germany, not Ukraine, not any other nation. Rather, God called his church, his own people bought with the precious blood of his Son, to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a people belonging to God. Now, the church is like a heavenly colony on earth, enjoying the rule of Christ and testifying to the coming kingdom of God. Our ultimate allegiance is to Christ's kingdom, not to this world.

That said, how does the church community relate to civil society? Because of the grace given to her, the church is clearly distinguished from civil society/state. Yet, they are not to be separated from each other. While the church and civil society are in the world which is not yet fully redeemed, they are positively related to the coming kingdom of God. Eph 1:22 says, "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church." We have to think of this relationship fundamentally in terms of Christology and eschatology. In this eschatological age, the kingly rule of Christ serves the coming of the kingdom of God. This relationship is Christological, because Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church as well as the Lord of civil society. The kingly rule of Jesus Christ is the common center that encompasses the church and society. The relationship between the church and society is eschatological, because the church and society are related to the coming of the kingdom of God as the ultimate reality. For both of them are approaching the kingdom of God that has already begun in Christ's kingly rule and will fully come in the future. But there is a critical difference between the two: While the church community knows and confesses Christ as Lord and Savior, submitting to his kingly rule, civil society does not know his Lordship and kingdom yet.

Now, the Christian community is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5:13-14). This can be summarized through a 3-fold Messianic mission corresponding to the 3-fold mission of the Messiah: King, Priest and Prophet. By the grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, the church participates in the mission of the Messiah: 1) As a kingly community, we are not slaves, but children and co-heirs with Christ. The community of all believers are those who receive the wonderful grace to reign with our Lord Jesus (Rev 5:10), not by the sword, but by the blood of the Lamb and our testimony; 2) As a priestly community, we can with confidence draw near to the

throne of God's grace; we can also pray for each other; moreover, we take the sins and burdens of our people to Jesus, intercede for the world, and serve as priestly people through sacrificial service; 3) As a prophetic community, the church is called by the power of the Spirit to proclaim the word of God. The church has become a spokesman of God proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God. The mission of the Christian community is to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1Pe 2:9).

Now how should we address practical justice issues? Most of all, we are to see everything from a kingdom perspective; the ultimate reality is the kingdom of God that is breaking into our broken world to redeem it. We see everything through Christ the Victor who establishes the kingdom of God, defeating the kingdom of darkness by the power of his cross and the Holy Spirit. This kingdom of Christ is not of the world (Jn 18:36). Therefore, "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2Co 10:4). Knowing the nature of our warfare, as a Messianic community we are not to be deceived by the schemes of the devil as we face many struggles, sin and injustice. The conflict is not political in nature; the primary enemy is not wicked people; we are fighting against the devil's schemes behind evil people and systems. Therefore, as a Messianic community "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:11-12). So, we are to be discerning and not to fall into temptations of the devil, who blinds us through political propaganda, our personal or collective self-interest, hatred and fear. As a Messianic community we fight by the cross, not by swords. Regarding social justice issues, the church is called to do her part by proclaiming the kingdom of Christ, praying for our nation and society, and speaking out against injustice. The church that already lives under Christ's lordship, points civil society and state to the kingdom of God through her truthful witnesses in words and deeds. As we do so, a kingdom perspective makes a clear distinction between church and state. The church is to be faithful to Christ, not politicized. The church is not only to recognize governing authorities as established by God for his purposes (Ro 13), but also to remind them of God's justice and judgment. Moreover, as citizens of a country, individual Christians are to do their civic duties for the sake of conscience, such as: obeying the law, paying taxes, and serving in the military. In sum, in engaging in social issues, the church is to value the coming kingdom of God above anything else.

In the public arena, the church community is often tempted to be on the side of a political party, or for a political slogan and agenda. With Christ's kingdom as the ultimate

reality, the church community should be on God's side speaking the truth based on the holiness and love of God in Christ. The church is to be loyal to Christ and testify to His kingdom in words and deeds. We are called to testify to the kingdom of God by the blood of the Lamb and our testimony. However, the church is often tempted to enter "unholy" alliances with worldly powers for the sake of its own safety and survival, which have often paralyzed the church. The ark of God's covenant was misused for a lucky charm for a war; the high priest endorsed an unjust war. The Temple authority and the Romans had an unholy alliance. The medieval church blessed and led the Crusades in the name of God. The German Christians under the Nazis were politicized and supported Hitler's nationalistic/imperialistic idea until it became too late to stop him. Many American Christians are often tempted by many forms of idolatry, including nationalism, which is at first difficult to discern from patriotism. It is mandatory to pray for the nation we are called to serve. But it is a totally different thing if we elevate it to the level of our ultimate commitments. We have to ask the question: What is our highest priority? Do we serve the self-interest of our nation and church or Christ's kingdom?

Negative examples of God's people allying with worldly powers in history are discouraging. But there are many positive examples as well. Historically, the Christian church played a critical role in caring for the weak in society. The early church's care for the poor influenced the society and made differences there. It was Christians who initiated and promoted abolitionist movements in the United Kingdom and in the US, even though often not directly connected with traditional state churches. Christian activists spoke out against the institution of slavery and fought for abolition, based on a biblical conviction that all people are equally made in the image of God. In the US, the civil rights movement was led by Christians. The church also played a significant role in opposing apartheid in South Africa.

Today, regarding the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the Russian orthodox church that unreservedly sides with worldly power, seems not only to have forgotten her mission to be faithful to Christ and testify to his kingdom and truth, but also to have become an unholy ally of the worldly power in justifying its imperialistic idea and war. As a church community we are not to stand on the side of a political party or promote political propaganda. I believe many of us are speaking out against social injustice and human atrocities in this war. But when some look to be silent regarding the heinous war, it doesn't necessarily mean that they would condone injustice. We should consider that people in Russia are facing an unusual situation; there is no freedom of speech for them; anybody who speaks against this war is threatened with jail. Still, the church is to be discerning and to stand on Christ's side, and we pray to testify to his Lordship.

So we are to carry out our calling as a royal priesthood for the suffering world—Ukraine, as well as Russia. We are to weep with those who weep and suffer with those who suffer. As a church community we must guard ourselves not to be deceived by political propaganda, fear, rage, or indifference. We are to engage in spiritual warfare. Our weapons are powerful to destroy the strongholds. Our weapons are the sacrificial blood of Christ and his love that dispels anger and hatred; our weapon is truth that dispels lies, forgiveness that heals wounds, hope that replaces despair; resurrection that replaces death. We are to pray to be discerning and speak out against injustice calling evil evil. We are to pray that God may deal with the evil regime and replace it with God-fearing and people-caring leaders. We are to pray to stop the evil aggression and to protect the innocent and vulnerable. We are to pray that these human atrocities may turn out to be God's victory by spreading the gospel of the kingdom. We are also to pray for the church in Russia to rise and shine the gospel truth against lies, greed and murder. We are to pray for the church in Ukraine to share the gospel of hope for the glorious future. Only the gospel can give us courage for the truth. Only the gospel can give us hope for the kingdom that will not perish. It is God's kingdom that will ultimately prevail. May God look upon the Ukrainians and stop the war. May God protect and use his church there to share the gospel of the kingdom. May God use human failings to bring his reign in Ukraine and in Russia. Heavenly Father, Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come!