

From Messiah to Messianic Community

Herman C. Waetjen

“King of Kings and Lord of Lords!” In the context of the persecution that Christians suffered during the reign of Domitian at the end of the first century C.E. as the result of their refusal to engage in the worship of the emperor, that title was right and necessary to establish Jesus’ sovereignty over every potentate on earth. Grounded in his resurrection from the dead, Jesus was acknowledged in John’s benediction in Revelation 1:5 as “the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth,” and therefore also in 19:16 as “the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.”

But now in the 21st century, as the age of kings and regents continues to be superseded by forms of parliamentary democracy in the emerging world of globalization, it is right and necessary to reexamine the Christian Church’s two thousand year accentuation of the kingship of Jesus in the light of the biblical witness to the relationship between Jesus the Messiah and the status of his disciples in relation to the sovereignty of his messiahship. The reign of God, that Jesus inaugurated, according to the attestation of the Apostle Paul and the four Gospels is a horizontally constituted commonwealth, not a hierarchical or patriarchal kingship that is restricted to Jesus as the messianic King. In Romans 5:17 Paul affirms the legacy that Jesus established for his followers, “For if by the transgression of one, death *ruled* through the one, how much more those receiving the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will *rule in life* through the one Jesus Christ.” *To rule in life* is the destiny of all those who have become active participants in the Rule of God that Jesus inaugurated during his ministry and constituted through his death and resurrection. *To rule in life* is to lay claim to the ownership of the world that God originally willed to all human beings who were created in God’s image and likeness. But to lay claim to it on God’s terms in justice and reconciliation! Consequently Paul is able to assure the Corinthian Christians, “For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.”

All four Gospels maintain a christological tension between Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus as “the Son of the Human Being.” The former appellation qualifies him as the royal Son of David *par excellence* and implies his kingship over God’s people Israel. The latter designation is a christological derivation from Daniel’s vision of an eschatological figure, “one like a son of a human being” who rides a cloud into heaven to receive sovereignty, rule and glory (7:13-14). Daniel’s interpretation of “one like a son of a human being” in 7:27 indicates that this figure is in fact a community, “The kingship and sovereignty and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High.” Jesus’ use of this designation as a title in the Gospels is more than a substitute for the first person singular pronoun

“I”. It is inclusive of both him and his disciples. This is never explicitly stated; it is simply presupposed. Matt 9:6-8 offers the most unambiguous reference to its corporate sense. When Jesus pronounces forgiveness to a paralytic and concurrently raises him up to walk, “so that you may know that the Son of the Human Being has authority on earth to forgive sins,” the crowds are filled with awe and glorify God “who gave this authority to human beings.” As an eschatologically oriented title, a title that refers to a future reality that has become embodied in Jesus, it is equivalent to Paul’s identification of Jesus as “the last Adam” in 1 Cor 15:45, the one who inaugurates a New Humanity.

“The first Adam became a living soul, the last Adam a life-giving spirit.”

In the narrative worlds of the Gospels, Jesus’ messiahship culminates in the establishment of a horizontally constituted messianic community that is divinely empowered to continue the work that he initiated. His kingship is culminated in his crucifixion, published by Pilate’s superscription, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.” He is the Messiah in death! The reign of God that he has inaugurated and exercised is transferred to the New Israel that is called into being after his resurrection from the dead and commissioned to follow him in discharging God’s sovereignty and power in the transformation of the world.

A close reading of Matthew’s conclusion elucidates the divine objective that emerges in conjunction with Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (28:16-20). Eleven disciples, obedient to Jesus’ instructions, ascend the prescribed mountain in Galilee. Like its three previous occurrences in the narrative world of the Gospel (5:1; 14:23; 15:29), this mountain is a Sinai-like architectonic center at which a New Israel is generated. Here the eleven encounter the resurrected Jesus and fall down in worship, but as the narrator acknowledges, “some of them doubted.” Jesus, apparently unaware of their doubts, announces his appointment to the office of God’s vicegerent: “All authority in heaven and on earth was given to me.” In the light of his resurrection from the dead, Dan 7:13-14 has been fulfilled. His co-enthronement with God that he enunciated at his trial before the Sanhedrin empowers him to exercise God’s sovereignty and rule on God’s behalf. On that basis he proceeds to issue his final instructions to the Eleven: “Going into the world, make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all the things I commanded you.” At this point the relationship between Jesus and the Eleven still appears to be hierarchical. He has been raised from the dead and the first half of his paradoxical confession of 26:64 has been fulfilled: he is “seated on the right hand of power.”

But the final sentence that Jesus speaks as the conclusion of the Gospel transforms the bond between him and the Eleven into a relationship of interdependence and therefore also equality. According to the syntactical wording of the Greek text, he promises, “**I** with you **AM** all the days unto the consummation of the age.” At the beginning of the Gospel, the fulfillment quotation of the Septuagint text of Isa 7:14 that the narrator recited prophesied that the son of the virgin would be named “Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us’.” Subsequently in the course of his ministry Jesus utilized God’s self-identification in the Septuagint text of Ex 3:6 and 14, **I**

AM, as he walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee and approached the Twelve in the boat. Now, after his resurrection, he unites his disciples with himself by embracing them in his divine **I AM**. Throughout his ministry he was Emmanuel, “God with us.” In his post-resurrection he draws the Eleven into his co-enthronement with God and therefore also into its sovereignty, rule and glory. For if he is “**I** with you **AM**,” he does not leave them by ascension into heaven. Nor does he remain on the mountain. He unites himself with the Eleven as the Twelfth, and on this Sinai-like *axis mundi*, he constitutes a New Israel. Henceforth, all the authority in heaven and on earth that he was given will also be theirs. They will be full participants in the sovereignty, rule and glory that belong to him in his co-enthronement with God, and as they go forth to fulfill his commission, their doubts about the reality of his resurrection will be resolved.

Consequently, as members of “the Son of Man” community, they are “seated on the right hand of power.” Yet paradoxically, like Jesus, they are only coming to be “seated on the right hand of power.” They will not be co-enthroned until all of humanity is co-enthroned with them. That is the paradoxical condition of discipleship in the New Humanity: “seated on the right hand of power” and yet only “coming to be seated.”

The beginning of the narrative world of Luke’s Gospel intimates that Israel’s history has come full circle. Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Abraham and Sarah, are given a son in their old age. John the Baptizer concludes the Time of the Law and the Prophets (16:16). Jesus, the son born of Mary, a virgin, and therefore the beginning of a new Israel, inaugurates the reign of God, the new moral order that has been anticipated by Israel’s apocalyptic visionaries. But it must be transferred to his disciples so that the work of Jesus can continue, “Little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom (12:32).” Through their exercise of its sovereignty and power all the nations of the world can be drawn into its realities of justice and peace. At the celebration of the Passover, before he constitutes a new Exodus (9:31), Jesus transfers the reign of God to his disciples (22:29). The fulfillment of the new Exodus is validated by “two men in dazzling clothes” (24:4), Moses and Elijah, who certify to the women on Easter morning that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Forty days after the new Exodus Jesus leads his disciples to the top of the Mount of Olives and rides a cloud into heaven, fulfilling Daniel’s vision of “one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven,” who, after being presented to the Ancient One, was given sovereignty, glory and kingship.” Ten days later, at Pentecost, his disciples are empowered with the same Spirit that Jesus received at his baptism in 3:22. Moreover, they are endowed with “tongues of fire,” the supra-cephalic flame that in the political world of the Roman Empire signified deification. A new Exodus has occurred, the disciples have inherited God’s reign, and they have become God’s messianic community. As the Acts of the Apostles reports, these heavenly endowed people begin to exercise God’s sovereignty and power on God’s behalf, as they fulfill their commission to serve as Jesus’ surrogates in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

At the very beginning of the Gospel according to John Jesus substitutes his physical body in place of the Temple's sanctuary that houses God's presence. Consequently, throughout the narrative world of the Gospel Jesus is "the Father's house" functioning as the living Temple of God and sanctifying time and space and effecting healing wherever he goes. As he approaches his death he informs his disciples that "the Father's house" must be enlarged to include more rooms. "In my Father's house are many rooms. And if not, I would tell you, for I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go away and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and I shall receive you to myself, so that where **I AM** you also are." That is not a reference to his ascension, and it is not oriented toward the preparation of "heavenly mansions!" On the basis of a close reading of the text and the literary critical exercise of consistency building, Jesus' farewell promise to his disciples must be construed as their eventual incorporation into the living Temple of God that he himself embodies. He is going away into death and resurrection so that by his redemptive work they will be sanctified to serve as bearers of God's presence and continue the transformation of the world that he has initiated. On Easter evening, after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus reappears to his disciples, as he had promised and breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. At that moment they become "rooms in the Father's house" and they are empowered to fulfill his pledge of 14:12. "Amen, amen I say to you, the one who believes into me, that one will do the works which I do and greater than these he/she will do because I am going to the Father."

Such monumental possibility has appeared to be inconceivable throughout most of the history of the Christian Church. The hierarchical ordering of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples that ecclesiastical interpretation has projected onto the writings of the New Testament has suppressed the robust self-understanding that these very texts ascribe to post-resurrection discipleship. The domination of Good Friday in the Western Church's commemoration of the Christ event has reduced Christian identity to the one-dimensional status of "sinner." Participation in Jesus' resurrection from the dead and its concomitant membership in a New Humanity that is empowered to carry on God's work of world transformation is scarcely an audible whisper in the Church's preaching and teaching. Moreover, the possibility that Jesus pledges to his disciples in John 14:12 is subverted by the Church's captivity to the philosophical ideology of the Age of Enlightenment that has engendered the marvels of Western science and technology. The Aristotelian nominalism of Occam and the Cartesian subject/object split ultimately produced the secularism that has burgeoned into our own time. When the objective world outside of us continues to be presupposed to be ultimate reality, existing independently of us, all truth is constituted on the basis of the five senses and applied to the development of science and technology in order to control the realm of nature for our material advantage. The possibilities that are actualized are astonishing in the power and wealth that are produced, but they promote materialism and consumerism. At the same time, lamentably, the sources of spirituality are left untapped, growth into the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ is stymied, and Christian identity remains dwarf-like in its self-understanding.

The spirituality of much of the Christianity that dominates the United States is captive to the materialism of our scientific and technologically oriented culture. The truth of the Bible as the Word of God is construed on the basis of a one-dimensional literalism that is unknowingly determined by the Age of Enlightenment's ideology of material reality that has produced Western science and technology. Blind to biblical metaphors and symbols and their historical determinations, on the one hand, and theologically accentuating Good Friday over Easter, on the other hand, this impoverished spirituality continues to stunt Christian growth.

A new paradigm for Christian identity and self-understanding is desperately needed! A paradigm that corresponds to the objectives of the New Testament! It should include a movement from Good Friday into the resurrection of Jesus Christ and all its latent possibilities! It should acknowledge the emergence of a New Humanity that is not only reconciled to God and therefore forgiven, but also empowered to fulfill the divine commission of accompanying the risen Christ into the world to continue the work of world transformation! It should accentuate the empowerment of the entire Body of Christ in order to serve God as the messianic community that embodies God's love, rejects all forms of retaliation and works for justice and peace.

It is especially the Gospel according to Mark that communicates such a paradigm shift. Its narrative world culminates in the hoped-for participation of the disciples in the realities of Jesus' resurrection. He has led them into a vicarious participation in his death (10:32-33). But all of them have fled at the moment of his arrest, and only the women return to offer him the consolation of their presence at the cross. There is, however, a youth who symbolically functions as the vanguard of authentic Christian self-understanding. He does not abandon Jesus immediately. When he is seized, however, he slips out of the coarse linen sheet (in Greek, a *sindona*) that he is wearing and streaks into the night naked. He is signaling the reader that Jesus will escape but will leave behind that which the coarse linen sheet symbolizes, his corpse. Joseph of Arimathea purchases a coarse linen sheet (a *sindona*) and prepares Jesus' burial by wrapping his corpse in it. The youth reappears on Easter morning, now "wearing a white robe and seated on the right hand." Once again he mirrors the destiny of Jesus, who, in fulfillment of his confession before the Sanhedrin (14:62), has been glorified [symbolized by the white robe] and seated on the right hand of power. This is the paradigm of the Christian faith: bearing witness to the world by reflecting the destiny of Jesus through participation in both his glory and the empowerment of his co-enthronement with God.

The other disciples, however, specifically the addressees of Mark's Gospel, have not moved beyond the Christ event of Good Friday. They are experiencing its forgiveness and perhaps even its reconciliation. But they have not yet followed Jesus into the Galilee of the world where he is presently engaged in continuing the work of his first career. Will these disciples, the original addressees of Mark's Gospel, follow Jesus into his resurrection and its empowerment? Like them, Christians today must provide the real and final ending to Mark's Gospel. Will they become God's messianic community and collaborate with Jesus in fulfilling God's will for the world?