

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php

- **The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope**
- ***L'Église comme communauté prophétique et signe d'espérance***
- ***Die Gemeinde als prophetische Gemeinschaft und als Zeichen der Hoffnung***

Miroslav Volf, Professor, Evangelical Theological Faculty, Osijek, Croatia

SUMMARY

I. In various Christian communities, reflection on the nature of the relationship between the church and the world has converged around the idea of the church as a 'sign'. The Protestant Reformation understood the church to have a prophetic role; and the church as sign and instrument of salvation, born within the Roman Catholic Church, began to be accepted in Protestantism post Vatican II.

The ambiguous role of churches in Europe during years of oppression obscured the church's 'sign' function despite the positive role of churches in the 1989 revolution. Churches cannot be worshipping communities alone: only prophetic communities can truly worship, and only worshipping communities can be truly prophetic. (In what follows, 'church' means the various churches, especially at the local level).

II. The prophetic ministry of the church is 'to relate the gospel to the critical events and issues of the day' (WCC paper on Unity/Renewal). However, there is a danger of reduction of prophetic proclamation to social critique, and of mimicry of secular critiques.

The theological foundation of the sign-character of the church is its relation to the new creation. This is easily obscured by the inconsistency of Christian's lives. But past failures should not lead to despair; rather, it is necessary to establish a better theological basis for thinking of the church as a sign.

III. God's new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the Triune God and God's glorified people in the new heavens and the new earth. The historical life of the church should manifest its future unity with God, as an expression of the present experience of the Holy Spirit as the power of the new creation.

The church should neither be confused with nor separated from the new creation: not separated, because it receives its life from the Spirit of creation; not confused, because the new Jerusalem is an eschatological city. The church anticipates the new creation; it is not the first fruits of it.

IV. We need to clarify the language of 'sign'. 'Sign', like 'anticipation', conveys both the difference and the connection between the church and the new creation. The church is the kind of sign that is intrinsic to the thing to which it points—like 'signs' in John's Gospel.

The church as sign also mediates the new creation. Catholic ecclesiology stresses the sacramental character of the church as sign; this must be qualified: the Holy Spirit alone gives faith. Protestant theology prefers the socio-ethical model of the church as 'sign'.

There should be no misplaced optimism about what the church is and can do. In the church, the old has become new without however ceasing to be the old. Yet the church's 'homelessness' in the world is paradoxically no impediment to its character as a sign of hope. The church is not to speak of itself as a sign, but to be it.

V. OT prophecy is a stimulus to 'sign' language; essentially, prophecy is declaring the word of God. OT prophecy is not transferable as a whole to the church; yet the activity of the church in the world takes place in the power of the same Spirit. The manner of OT prophecy is instructive.

Prophecy itself is a sign (Acts 2:17); there is a union between the church's being and its speaking. There are two consequences: first,

since the spirit of prophecy is given to the whole church, no single pronouncement can be the 'last word'; second, its prophecy has the form of 'witness'.

The prophetic message calls both to friendship with God and to do justice; this is clear from the association of worship and justice in the OT. Neither evangelism nor social critique can stand alone. There is need for dynamic relation to God and sympathy with people; for a revival of a 'tearful tradition'—'orthopathy'.

While there is a need to challenge the privatisation of religion in modern public life, yet the first mission of the prophet is to the church—to help it understand itself in the pandemonium of the world.

VI. A 'communication model' of prophecy is inadequate. Rather, the church itself needs to have vision, its own understanding of the message, which it must always itself hear anew. The first need of the church as prophetic community, therefore, is to pray: *veni creator Spiritus*.

RÉSUMÉ

1. Dans diverses communautés chrétiennes, les réflexions menées au sujet des rapports entre l'Église et le monde ont abouti à la notion de l'Église comme 'signe'. La Réforme protestante a compris que l'Église avait un rôle prophétique. L'idée que l'Église était un signe et un moyen de salut, une idée née au sein de l'Église catholique romaine, commence à être acceptée dans les milieux protestants depuis Vatican II.

Le rôle ambigu des Églises en Europe pendant des années d'oppression a obscurci la fonction de signe que doit avoir l'Église, malgré le rôle positif des Églises dans le revirement qui s'est produit en 1989. Les Églises ne peuvent pas être des communautés où l'on se borne à l'adoration; seules des communautés qui jouent un rôle prophétique peuvent vraiment adorer le Seigneur, et seules des communautés vouées à l'adoration peuvent jouer un rôle vraiment prophétique (par 'Église', nous entendons les diverses Églises, en particulier sur le plan local).

2. Le ministère prophétique de l'Église consiste à 'mettre en lumière les implications de l'Évangile pour les événements et les problèmes importants du jour' (déclaration du COE sur l'unité et le renouveau). Il faut cependant prendre garde au danger de réduire la proclamation prophétique à une critique sociale, et de se contenter d'imiter les critiques faites par les gens du monde.

Le fondement théologique du caractère de signe de l'Église se trouve dans sa relation avec la nouvelle création. Les inconséquences dans la vie des chrétiens obscurcissent trop souvent ce fait. Mais les défaillances du passé ne

doivent pas nous amener à désespérer. Il faut plutôt nous attacher à poser un meilleur fondement théologique pour considérer l'Église comme un signe.

3. La nouvelle création de Dieu est faite d'une communion entre le Dieu trinitaire et le peuple de Dieu glorifié, dans les nouveaux cieux et la nouvelle terre. La vie de l'Église dans l'histoire devrait manifester quelque chose de son unité future avec Dieu par l'expérience qu'elle fait dès à présent de la puissance du Saint-Esprit comme agent de la nouvelle création.

Entre l'Église et la nouvelle création, il ne doit y avoir ni confusion, ni séparation: pas de séparation, parce que l'Église reçoit sa vie de l'Esprit créateur; ni de confusion, parce que la nouvelle Jérusalem est une cité eschatologique. L'Église est une anticipation de la nouvelle création: elle n'en est pas les prémices.

4. Nous devons clarifier la notion de 'signe'. Ce terme, comme le terme 'anticipation', implique à la fois la différence et le lien qui existe entre l'Église et la nouvelle création. L'Église est un signe lié d'une manière intrinsèque à la réalité signifiée, comme les signes dans l'évangile de Jean.

En tant que signe, l'Église est médiatrice de la nouvelle création. L'ecclésiologie catholique insiste sur le caractère sacramental de l'Église en tant que signe. Ceci appelle des réserves: c'est l'Esprit seul qui communique la foi. C'est d'un point de vue socio-éthique que la théologie protestante considère l'Église comme un signe.

Il ne devrait pas y avoir d'optimisme déplacé quant à ce qu'est l'Église et ce qu'elle peut accomplir. Dans l'Église, ce qui était ancien est

devenu nouveau, sans cesser d'être ancien. Paradoxalement, le fait que l'Église soit 'étrangère dans le monde' ne l'empêche pas d'être un signe d'espérance. L'Église ne doit pas parler d'elle comme signe; elle doit en être un.

5. Le rôle des prophètes dans l'A.T. nous engage à parler de signes. La prophétie est essentiellement une transmission de la Parole de Dieu. On ne peut pas transférer sans autre à l'Église le ministère prophétique de l'A.T. Pourtant, l'activité de l'Église dans le monde s'exerce par la puissance du même Esprit. Ainsi, la manière dont s'exerçait le ministère prophétique de l'A.T. est instructive pour nous.

La prophétie constitue elle-même un signe (Ac. 2:17). Il y a union entre l'être de l'Église et sa parole. Il en résulte une double conséquence: d'abord, puisque l'Esprit de prophétie est donné à l'Église tout entière, aucune déclaration particulière ne peut constituer le 'dernier mot'; d'autre part, la prophétie consiste en un témoignage.

Le message prophétique appelle à la réconciliation avec Dieu et à l'exercice de la

justice. D'ailleurs, adoration et justice sont étroitement associées dans l'A.T.

L'évangélisation et la critique sociale ne peuvent pas être mises en oeuvre l'une sans l'autre. Il faut une relation dynamique avec Dieu et de la sympathie pour les hommes. Il faut renouer avec une tradition qui inclut des larmes, ce qu'on pourrait appeler une 'orthopathie'.

Il est nécessaire de contester la tendance moderne à considérer la religion comme une affaire privée; cependant, le premier devoir du prophète est de s'adresser à l'Église, pour l'aider à comprendre ce qu'elle est au sein d'un monde livré au désordre.

6. Aborder le rôle prophétique sous l'angle d'un modèle de communication est inadéquat. Il convient plutôt que l'Église elle-même ait une vision, qu'elle comprenne, elle la première, le message qu'elle transmet et qu'elle doit toujours entendre à nouveau. Le premier besoin de l'Église, en tant que communauté prophétique, est donc de prier: 'Viens, Esprit créateur'.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

I. In verschiedenen christlichen Gemeinschaften sind die Überlegungen über das Verhältnis von Gemeinde und Welt auf den Gedanken hinausgelaufen, der die Gemeinde als 'Zeichen' versteht. Die protestantische Reformation hatte einen Blick für die prophetische Rolle der Gemeinde. Die Kirche als Zeichen und Mittel der Erlösung zu verstehen, ein Gedanke aus der römisch-katholischen Kirche, diese Sicht gewann im Protestantismus erst nach dem 2. Vatikanischen Konzil an Akzeptanz.

Die zweideutige Rolle der Gemeinden in Europa während der Jahre der Unterdrückung verdunkelte die Funktion der Gemeinde als 'Zeichen' trotz der positiven Rolle der Kirchen während der Revolution von 1989. Die Gemeinden können nicht nur anbetende Gemeinschaften sein: Nur prophetische Gemeinschaften können in Wahrheit anbeten, und nur anbetende Gemeinschaften können in Wahrheit prophetisch sein. (Im Folgenden meint Gemeinde/Kirche die verschiedenen Arten von Gemeinden, besonders auf der örtlichen Ebene.)

II. Das prophetische Amt der Gemeinde 'hat die Aufgabe, das Evangelium in Beziehung zu den kritischen Ereignissen und Fragen des Tages zu setzen' (Schrift des ÖRK zu Einheit/Erneuerung). Hierbei besteht die Gefahr, daß die prophetische Verkündigung zu sozialer Kritik reduziert wird oder nur säkulare Kritiken nachahmt.

Die theologische Grundlage des Zeichencharakters der Gemeinde besteht in der Beziehung zur neuen Schöpfung. Dies wird leicht verdunkelt durch die Ungereimtheiten im Leben von Christen. Aber Fehler der Vergangenheit sollten nicht zur Verzweiflung führen; vielmehr ist es notwendig, eine bessere theologische Grundlage aufzubauen, wenn man von der Gemeinde als Zeichen denkt.

III. Gottes neue Schöpfung ist die gemeinsame persönliche Innewohnung des dreieinigen Gottes und des verherrlichten Volkes Gottes in dem neuen Himmel und der neuen Erde. Das geschichtliche Leben der Gemeinde sollte die zukünftige Einheit mit Gott sichtbar machen, und zwar als Ausdruck der gegenwärtigen Erfahrung mit dem Heiligen

Geist als der Kraft der neuen Schöpfung.

Die Gemeinde sollte weder mit der neuen Schöpfung verwechselt noch von ihr getrennt werden. Nicht getrennt, weil sie vom Geist der Schöpfung Leben erhält. Nicht verwechselt, weil das neue Jerusalem eine eschatologische Stadt ist. Die Gemeinde antizipiert die neue Schöpfung, sie ist nicht deren erste Frucht.

IV. Wir müssen den Begriff 'Zeichen' näher klären. 'Zeichen' wie 'Antizipation' tragen beides in sich, sowohl den Unterschied als auch die Verbindung zwischen Gemeinde und neuer Schöpfung. Die Gemeinde ist ein Zeichen solcher Art, daß sie in Übereinstimmung ist mit dem, worauf sie eigentlich hinweist — ähnlich den 'Zeichen' im Johannesevangelium.

Die Gemeinde als Zeichen vermittelt auch die neue Schöpfung. Die katholische Ekklesiologie betont den sakramentalen Charakter der Gemeind als Zeichen; dies muß eingeschränkt werden: der Heilige Geist allein gibt Glauben. Die protestantische Theologie bevorzugt, das sozio-ethische Modell von der Gemeinde als 'Zeichen'.

Es sollte keinen falschen Optimismus im Blick auf das geben, was die Gemeinde ist und was sie tun kann. In der Gemeinde ist das Alte neu geworden, wenngleich es auch nicht aufhört, das Alte zu sein. Und dennoch ist die 'Heimatlosigkeit' der Gemeinde in dieser Welt paradoxerweise doch kein Hindernis für ihre Rolle als Zeichen der Hoffnung. Die Gemeinde hat nicht von sich selbst als Zeichen zu sprechen, sondern es zu sein.

V. Die alttestamentliche Prophetie stimuliert diese 'Zeichen'—Begrifflichkeit. Im Wesentlichen ist Prophetie Verkündigung des Wortes Gottes. Die alttestamentliche

Prophetie läßt sich nicht als Ganzes auf die Gemeinde übertragen. Dennoch geschieht das Handeln der Gemeinde in dieser Welt in der Kraft des gleichen Geistes. Die Art der alttestamentlichen Prophetie ist daher aufschlußreich.

Die Prophetie selbst ist ein Zeichen (Apg 2, 17). Hier gibt es eine Einheit zwischen dem Wesen der Gemeinde und ihrer Verkündigung. Dies hat zwei Konsequenzen: weil erstens der Geist der Prophetie der ganzen Gemeinde gegeben ist, kann keine einzelne Äußerung das 'letzte Wort' sein; zweitens hat die Prophetie die Form eines 'Zeugnisses'.

Die prophetische Botschaft ruft sowohl zur Freundschaft mit Gott auf als auch zum gerechten Handeln. Dies wird deutlich aus der Verbindung von Gottesdienst und Gerechtigkeit im Alten Testament. Weder Evangelisation noch Sozialkritik können alleine stehen. Es braucht die dynamische Beziehung zu Gott und Mitgefühl mit den Menschen. Es braucht die Belebung der 'tränenreichen Tradition'—'Orthopathie'.

Während es nötig ist, die Privatisierung der Religion im modernen öffentlichen Leben zu hinterfragen, so gilt doch der erste Auftrag des Propheten der Gemeinde: ihr zu helfen, sich im Höllenlärm dieser Welt zu verstehen.

VI. Ein 'Kommunikationsmodell' für Prophetie ist unzureichend. Vielmehr braucht die Gemeinde selbst die Vision, das eigene Verständnis der Botschaft, welche sie immer wieder neu hören muß. Das größte Bedürfnis für die Gemeinde als prophetische Gemeinschaft ist deshalb das Gebet: Veni creator spiritus (Komm, Schöpfer Geist).

1 In various Christian communities, theological reflection on the relation between the church and the world has increasingly in recent decades revolved around the double notions of 'prophecy' and 'sign'. The convergence is a significant ecumenical achievement, since these notions touch the very heart of what the church is and what its mission in the world should be.

Over against theologies in the Middle Ages, which tended to lock up the prophets in the past by thinking of them exclusively

as precursors of Christ, the Protestant Reformation rediscovered the prophetic dimensions of the present ministry of the Word, and hence also the prophetic calling of the whole church. Zwingli in particular stressed what has been aptly termed 'the universal prophethood of the Christian church' (H.-J. Kraus).¹ Under the influence of the Christology and ecclesiology of the Reformers, at Vatican II the Catholic Church applied Christ's threefold ministry of Prophet, King, and Priest to the church²—the trilogy

is even the organizing principle of the new Canon law—and thus ascribed the prophetic ministry to the whole people of God.³

The understanding of the church as a sign and instrument of salvation—'veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum'⁴—was born within the Catholic Church and at Vatican II became a part of its official teaching. The idea that the Church is a sign and instrument was not completely foreign to the Protestant tradition, but there it played a marginal role, partly because of well-known Protestant hesitations about the word 'sacrament'.⁵ A conscious and broad reception of this idea in Protestant circles began under the direct influence of formulations of Vatican II at the *Fourth Assembly of the WCC* at Uppsala (1968). The *Sixth Assembly of the WCC* at Vancouver (1983) made the theological exploration of the church as an effective 'sign' a central part of its programme on the Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community.⁶ Though the term 'sacrament' as applied to the church is still suspect in Protestant circles because of its possible implications for the nature of the instrumentality of the church,⁷ the idea of the church as 'sign and instrument of salvation' has become current in Protestant ecclesiology.

With the Catholic rediscovery of the prophetic role of the whole church and Protestant rediscovery of the sign-character of the church a broad ecumenical consensus seems to be emerging on the relation of the church to the world: the church should be thought of as a prophetic community and an effective sign of hope.

2. The theological wisdom enshrined in the consensus of 'all the saints' notwithstanding, my first reaction when asked to speak on the church as a prophetic community and a sign of hope was to write a paper on why the church should cut back on such self-congratulatory talk. The invitation to speak came at the time of the inglorious ending of the Seoul conference on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (March 1990).⁸ The intention of the organizers of the Seoul conference was for a word to go out from Seoul 'that the world could not fail to hear' (C. F. von Weizsäcker). But the prophets, divided amongst themselves, were

struck with dumbness and a self-styled sign of hope turned into a cause for despair. The convergence on the great issues of the day at the global level sufficed only for pronouncing some impotent platitudes. One might object that this description is too bleak a picture of what actually took place at the conference. But if one is to judge by press reports (at least in Germany), this is what the world *has heard* from Seoul.

When the Seoul fiasco was in the making another event took place which pumped new blood into the talk about the church as a prophetic community and a sign of hope. The event was the drama of the '1989 revolution'. In it the Eastern European churches were assigned some of the key roles. It would be too much to claim that these churches carried out the revolution; it was a revolution of Gorbachev and of the Eastern European peoples, not of the churches. Indeed, with some notable exceptions, the indigenous churches were silent in the face of economic, political, and cultural oppression; they were 'worshipping' communities, not prophetic communities. Moreover, their silence spoke often of complicity. Yet it also spoke of protest against a seemingly omnipotent oppressor. In spite of the ambiguity of their social role during the years of communist rule, the worship and life of the Eastern European churches were prophetic and the oppressed peoples of these countries recognized in them communities of living hope, at least in a time of revolutionary crisis.

There are, of course, worshipping communities that remain irrelevant for the problems of the world and there are prophetic communities which are more successful than the Seoul conference was. The above two examples are not meant to suggest that we should side with the worshipping communities against the prophetic communities. We do not need to choose between the liturgical forms of Christianity and activist ones. Indeed, *only prophetic communities can truly worship and only worshipping communities can truly be prophetic*. One of the purposes of the present article is to develop this thesis. This is also what we should learn from the double experience of churches striving to be 'prophetic' but failing to have an impact on the world and of

churches hindered from exercising 'prophetic' ministry but being thrust into the forefront of the struggle for liberation.

I will first critique the explicit or implicit dominant understandings of prophetic ministry of the church and its function as a sign (Section II). Taking as my starting-point reflection on the relation between the church and the new creation (Section III), I will then suggest how our thinking about the role of the church in the world—its living before the world and speaking to the world—can be recast to avoid the criticisms noted (Sections IV–V). In conclusion I will ponder what it takes for the church to be a prophetic community and a sign of hope.

Before proceeding, let me make two remarks, one terminological and one about the scope of this essay. First, sociologically *the* church is a fiction. Only multiple concrete Christian churches actually exist and can interact with the world. When I speak in the following in the singular about 'the church' I mean always this plurality of churches: *they* are prophetic communities and signs of hope to the extent that each of them individually and in relation to the others is a prophetic community and a sign of hope. Theologically I believe that the primary locus of ecclesiality is the local church.⁹ So the 'church' means to me above all a concrete local community of believers. But I suspect that nothing in the argument here changes if one wishes to place the primary locus of ecclesiality on a level higher than the local church.

Second, churches are obviously not the only Christian groups that are prophetic. Much too often they complacently blend in with their surroundings. So the prophetic Spirit finds a domicile among the groups that live on the fringes of ecclesiastical life, challenging both the unjust world and the chameleon-like churches. If I reflect here only on the churches as prophetic communities and signs of hope, this is not to encourage the arrogance of the church but to challenge its frequent infidelity.

II

1. In the article 'Der prophetische Auftrag der Kirche' the former general secretary of

the WCC, Philip Potter, suggested that we understand the prophetic ministry of the church as the proclamation of the gospel to the world in its significance for the present and the future. Prophetic ministry is rooted in the word of God as it was revealed in God's mighty works in the history of salvation and in the covenant with God's people for the sake of all the peoples, and its purpose is to apply the word of God to the great problems of the world today.¹⁰ There might be some disagreement on what these central problems are but there is a basic consensus on the purpose of prophetic ministry: Its point is 'to relate the gospel to the critical events and issues of the day'.¹¹

Two related tendencies bespeak the malaise of Christian prophetism today. The one is the reduction of prophetic proclamation to social critique. Consider the following description of the Christian prophetic critique by R. R. Reuther:

The theology of prophetic critique [. . .] locates God and the spokespersons for God on the side of those victimized or despised by the social and political elites. The word of God comes as a critique of these elites, calling them to reform their ways in order to be faithful to divine justice or else threatening them with a revolutionary intervention of God in history that will overthrow their power and bring in a new world, where justice and peace will be established.¹²

These remarks purport to express the gist of Christian prophetism. But take the word 'God' out and they become nothing other than a program for left-wing secular social critique. My point is not to call into question the need for Christian social critique, for this, as I will argue later, is an essential dimension of Christian presence in the world. I also do not wish to deny that Christians need to be on the side of the victimized and despised (not least on the side of women suffering under the oppressive patriarchal structures of societies), for I too advocate the preferential option for the poor. Reuther is right, a theology designed to tickle the ears of the social elites—what she brands 'sacred canopy theology'—is a reduction of theology to mere ideology of the oppressive status quo. My point is not to call into question her concern, simply to indicate

that there is very little prophetic about the critique Reuther seems to be calling the church to exercise—unless one wishes to define prophecy as slightly angry social ethics which has taken a religious short-cut.¹³

Christian social critics would have less need for prophetic labels if there were not so much *mimicry* in their pronouncements. Christian prophets tend to forge their messages by clothing the ideas of their favorite secular social critics in religious garb. What Jeffrey Stout observes about theology in general is certainly true of Christian social critique: it has 'often assumed a voice not its own and found itself merely repeating the bromides of secular intellectuals in transparently figurative speech'.¹⁴ Of course, Christians can and should learn from non-Christians. Social analysis, for instance, can provide them with tools for understanding the mechanisms of oppression. But 'there is no more certain way for theology to lose its voice than to imitate that of another'.¹⁵ In any case, if the word 'prophet' is appropriate, then it should describe those secular critics, not Christian theologians who merely echo their ideas.

2. In the 'Report of the First Consultation of the Unity/Renewal Study' of the WCC on the church as mystery and prophetic sign we find the following description of the sign-character of the church:

They [the followers of Christ] are gathered in the church, which is sent into the world in order to be a foretaste of what the world is to become, the first-fruits of the new creation. [...] Accordingly the church is called to be and serve as that part of humanity which is prepared and empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness to and proclaim the kingdom in and for this world through word and deed, life, suffering and dying. [...] To the degree in which this happens the church is, through the Holy Spirit, an effective sign, an instrument of God's rule in this 'aion'.¹⁶

The theological foundation for the sign-character of the church is its relation to the new creation: The church is an effective sign of God's rule to the extent that it is the first fruits of the new creation, because only as such can it be 'the foretaste of what the world is to become'.¹⁷

But the taste of the church has seemed bitter to the world's palate. The would-be appetizer for the feast of the Kingdom turns rather noisome and people walk away from the table in disgust. The churches are too much like the old and sinful creation—there is too much idolatry, immorality, religious intolerance, racism, sexism, and exploitation in them—for the world to take them as the first fruits of the new creation. Much too often they resemble more closely the demonic kingdom than the Kingdom of God.¹⁸ Nowadays, the churches more readily admit the inconsistency of their lives than the sterility of their 'prophetic' utterances. Hence whenever the church is called a sign of hope one will find an accompanying confession of the disobedience and divisions which obscure the sign. But if there is any sincerity to such a confession, some narcissism must lie behind the churches' pointing in the same breath to themselves as effective signs of hope, 'the foretaste of what the world is to become'. A bit more humility about what the churches *are*—and not simply about how they behave—would be called for.

3. One way to ward off the above criticism would be to stop talking about the church as a prophetic community and a sign of hope. Instead of aspiring to make prophetic pronouncements about the great issues of the day, one would then limit oneself, say, to coolheaded Christian social critique. But can the Christian church which was built on the foundation not only of the apostles but also of the prophets give up the prophetic ministry without denying itself (cf. Eph. 2:20)? Indeed, can a religion which believes in a personal God who acts in history for the salvation of all people dispense with prophets as God's spokespersons? Instead of giving up on prophetic ministry we need a better theological foundation for understanding its nature and for its exercise. Putting Christian prophetism on firm ground will help make Christian social critique more recognizably theological and thus rescue its reputation as a serious conversation partner in a pluralistic debate about the fate of our world.

What about the pretentiousness of the talk about the church as a sign of hope? Should it lead us to abandon the notion of the church as a sign or would it suffice to

recast the notion in a different mould? At first glance, exegetical data do not encourage the use of the term 'sign' for the church. Of the 77 usages of *sēmeion* in the New Testament not a single one refers to the church. When the term 'sign' is connected with the church, it designates something the church *does* (healings [cf. Acts 2:43; 5:12] or speaking in tongues [1 Cor. 14:22]), not something the church is. But what is the import of this exegetical finding for ecclesiological reflection about the sign-character of the church? The answer depends on the nature of the relation between the church and the new creation.

III

Both the life of the church before the eyes of the world and its message to the world have their ultimate point of reference in God's new creation. By the term 'new creation' I am referring to the eschatological reality that the Old Testament prophets envisaged (see Isa. 65:17ff.), that Jesus announced and inaugurated through his whole ministry (see Lk. 4:18ff.), and that the writer of the Revelation describes as the ultimate destiny of God's people and God's world (Rev. 21–22). In the present section I will first indicate the nature of the eschatological new creation, and its relation to the present, that is, analyse it as a reality that God gives human beings through the Holy Spirit and that God calls them to anticipate through personal and social action. I will then investigate more specifically the relation between the new creation and the church.

1. God's new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the Triune God and God's glorified people in the new heavens and the new earth.¹⁹ This follows from the description and the location of the New Jerusalem (which describes the people, and not the place where the people live) in the book of Revelation.²⁰ First, the whole city is described as the Holy of Holies filled with the presence of God and of the Lamb (cf. 1 Kings 6:20). At the same time God and the Lamb are portrayed as the temple in which the Holy of Holies (i.e. the people) are situated (cf. Rev 21:22).²¹ Thus the saints dwell in God and the Lamb just as God and the Lamb

dwell in them. The eschatological vision of Revelation suggests that the purpose of all God's dealings with human beings is for them to enjoy fellowship with the Triune God. Second, the New Jerusalem—the people of God—is located in the new heavens and new earth which are freed from transience and from all evil (cf. Rev 21:1; 22:1–5). There can be no eschatological bliss for God's people without eschatological *shalom* for God's world.

The historical life of the church should image its eschatological future in the new creation. The eschatological mutual indwelling of the Triune God and the people of God is the final fulfilment of the high-priestly prayer of Jesus: '[. . .] that they may be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us' (John 17:21). The prayer of Jesus, however, was not only a prayer for the final destiny of the churches, but also for their communal life on the way to this destiny. Hence it is the calling of the church to manifest in this world its future unity with the Triune God. Because the people of God will live in God's new world, striving to deepen fellowship with God and with one another must go hand in hand with resistance to godless and inhuman conditions in the world and an active concern for the integral well-being of the world. Sanctification in the personal life is incomplete without transformation of the world.

The historical life of the church is, however, not a mere imitation of its eschatological future; it is rather an expression of the present experience of the Holy Spirit as the power of the new creation. In the first epistle of John we read: 'that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' (1:3). Through faith in the 'Life' which was with the Father (1 John 1:2), the Spirit gives birth to the fellowship between the believing people and the Triune God and places these people in fellowship with one another. Birth by the Spirit, which makes people Christians, is a birth 'from above' (John 3:3), but it takes place here below: It is a new birth of people who live in this world and with this world make up the

good creation of God. Hence the new birth of persons through the Spirit must be seen as the beginning—ambiguous but nonetheless real beginning—of the rebirth of the whole cosmos (cf. Matt. 19:28; 2 Cor. 5:17),²² and Christians' action in the world through the power of the Spirit as a historical anticipation of the new creation.

2. From the above understanding of the relation between the church and the new creation it follows that the church should neither be confused with nor separated from the new creation. Stated in such a general way, this conclusion sounds like a rather inconsequential commonplace. It needs unpacking to be made fruitful for reflection about the sign-character of the church and its prophetic ministry.

The church may not be *separated* from the new creation. The new creation is in fact the primary point of reference for ecclesiology.²³ The church can be the church only because it receives its life from the Spirit of God who is the power of the new creation. The church does not, of course, have a monopoly on the Spirit of God. The same Spirit who is present in the church (*regnum gratiae*) is also active in the world (*regnum naturae*) with the goal of transforming both into the new creation (*regnum gloriae*); through the Spirit the resurrected Christ is the giver of life to the whole world (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45).²⁴ The activity of the Spirit in the world does not, however, obliterate the distinction between the church and the world. For churches are the communities of those who, in response to the prompting of the Spirit, have believed in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and who confess him as their Lord, communities of those who through the Spirit have personal fellowship with the Triune God and with one another. This is the prerogative of Christians. For this reason the New Testament speaks of them alone as having received the Spirit as the firstfruits and the down-payment of the new creation (cf. Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor 1:22). It is this special presence of the Spirit of the new creation which distinguishes the church from the world.

The presence of the Spirit of the new creation in the church should not, however, lead us to *confuse* the church with the new creation. The temptation simply to identify

the church with the kingdom of God or the new creation is not too great at present; the difference between the two strikes us as quite glaring. But there are tendencies to see the church as an enclave of the new creation, as its preliminary stage or its 'earthly realization'.²⁵ Over against such tendencies we need to be reminded that the new heaven and the new earth are not a human creation—not even an ecclesial creation—and that the New Jerusalem is an *eschatological* city 'coming down out of heaven from God' (Rev. 21:1f.).

To describe the experience of the eschatological new life in the church it seems best to use the language of *anticipation*. Anticipation is not yet fulfilment, not even partial fulfilment; it is the presence of the future *under the conditions of history*.²⁶ Inherent characteristics of history as distinct from the eschaton are transitoriness and sinfulness. In the framework of history one can partly prevail over transitoriness and sinfulness but can never fully overcome them: The body can be healed, but it dies and must await the resurrection of the dead; Christians need not be enslaved to sin, yet the struggle between the Spirit and the 'flesh' remains. To say that the church is the anticipation of the new creation is, therefore, to say in one and the same breath that the Spirit of the new creation is indwelling the church and that the church remains inescapably marked by the transitoriness and sinfulness of history.²⁷

It is sometimes thought that the language of anticipation is identical with the Pauline language of 'first-fruits' and 'down-payment'.²⁸ Yet we would do well to distinguish the two. It is striking that Paul never calls the historical mediations of the new creation 'first-fruits' and 'down-payment,' but reserves these terms for the *mediator*; the Spirit of God which Christians have received, not the results of the Spirit's activity in the life of Christians and in the world, is the 'firstfruits' and the 'down-payment'.²⁹ The point of the Pauline *'απαρχή'* language is to underline the *identity* in kind between the first instalment and what follows (cf. Rom. 11:16).³⁰ Therefore, in addition to the Spirit given to Christians by Christ, only the resurrected Christ can appropriately be called 'the first-

fruits of the new creation' (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20, 23). For the church to usurp this title is not only unbiblical but also plays into hands of an *ecclesia gloriae* that is at best ridiculously unrealistic and at worst maliciously ideological.

The church is not the firstfruits of the new creation, but it is the community of those who have tasted the firstfruits of the new creation. It can therefore hope with certainty for the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' and of the whole creation (cf. Rom. 8:21ff.); the church can also live as a sign of this hope before the world and speak of this hope to the world. As it lives before the world the church anticipates the new creation through its being and actions (Section IV); as it speaks to the world the church announces the new creation through its prophetic proclamation (Section V).

IV

'Sign' is one of those accommodating words whose slim core-meaning can be saddled with a wide variety of connotations. It is therefore well capable of fostering convergence between diverse ecclesiological traditions. But its strengths are at the same time its weaknesses. The price of the ecclesiological convergence around the term 'sign' seems to be confusion. I will attempt to bring some clarity to the subject by laying a theological and biblical basis for the ecclesiological use of the term 'sign' and by reflecting on the disputed issue of the instrumentality of the church. Then I will draw some implications from the sign-character of the church for the nature of its presence in the world.

1. Talk about the church as a sign is theologically rooted in the character of the church as the anticipation of the new creation. In fact, the meanings of the terms 'anticipation' and 'sign' as they apply to the church largely overlap. The difference between them lies in the perspective from which they mark the church in its relation to the new creation: The language of anticipation describes the being of the church as (it should be) lived out by the Christian community; the language of sign describes it as (it should be) perceived by the world.

Like 'anticipation', 'sign' implies both the difference and the connection between the church and the new creation. Just as anticipation is not yet fulfilment, so the sign is not what it signifies. The identity of the signifier with the signified reality would destroy the signifier in its specificity. To call the church a sign is, therefore, to say something negative about the relation between the church and the new creation. It is to deny their identity.³¹ At the same time, the term 'sign' underlines the positive relation between the church and the new creation. The function of the sign is to point to the signified reality. With the risk of simplification we can say that the signs fulfil that function in two distinct ways: they can be extrinsic to the reality to which they point (like road signs) or they can be intrinsic to it (like a love letter). The church is this latter kind of a sign: It points to the new creation by being its present realization under the conditions of history; it signifies by *sampling*.³²

The Johannine use of *sêmeion* corroborates this theological understanding of the term 'sign' and it is there that we need to turn for exegetical support for the notion of the church as a sign.³³ In John's Gospel signs are eschatological events that are 'special demonstrations of the character and power of God'.³⁴ Their purpose is not only to strengthen the faith of believers but also to elicit faith in unbelievers. To understand them properly means to apprehend Christ by faith.³⁵ Yet not all who see the signs understand them as signs; they mistake the signifier for the signified reality (cf. 6:26ff.) and hence never come to faith in Christ (cf. 12:37). To say that the purpose of signs is to elicit faith does not mean to spiritualize the signs. For they have this function as 'partial but effective realizations of [. . .] salvation'.³⁶ Precisely because they partly embody what they signify they can point to the fact that Christ gives 'life to the world' (6:33).

How do we get, however, from the signs that Christ did to the church as a sign? John's Gospel expects the disciples to do the kind of miracles that Christ did (14:12). Presumably their miracles would be signs of eschatological salvation too. But by proceeding this way, we arrive only at the signs that the church does, not to a sign that the

church *is*. Is there warrant in John's gospel for speaking about the church as a sign? In his high-priestly prayer Jesus prays 'that they may be one [...] so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me' (17:21). The unity of believers with one another and with the Triune God is not only a present anticipation of eschatological salvation but also has in relation to the world the same effect as the signs do: it elicits faith in Christ. It seems, therefore, legitimate to apply sign terminology to the unity of the believers. The Johannine writings suggest basically the same understanding of the sign-character of the church as does reflection on the church as anticipation of the new creation.³⁷

2. Beyond pointing to the new creation and anticipating it in history, the church as a sign also *mediates* the new creation. Although this third dimension of the sign-character of the church is dominant in the ecumenical debate,³⁸ there is little agreement about the instrumentality of the church with respect to its being and actions.³⁹ Two distinct but not exclusive positions seem to prevail: the sacramental one in which the church mediates the salvation in Jesus Christ to persons and the socio-ethical one in which the church strives to anticipate the new creation in the structures of the world.

Catholic (and in its own way Orthodox⁴⁰) ecclesiology stresses the sacramental understanding of the church as a sign. In *Lumen gentium* the traditional sacramental language is applied analogically to the Church: '[...] the Church, in Christ, is a kind of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men and women'.⁴¹ It is inherent in an instrument that it is unable to act on its own. Just as sacraments are the acts of Christ so also is the church as an effective sign a 'tool in the hands of Christ who is properly speaking the subject of all the action of the Church'.⁴² Yet at the point of the impartation of salvation in Catholic theology the church is not simply a passive instrument in Christ's hands. We are told that '*she* gives birth' to a new and immortal life to the children conceived by the Holy Spirit.⁴³ The church does more than only anticipate eschatological salvation and

testify to it by word and deed; it also cooperates with God in *imparting* this salvation.⁴⁴

Does not this Catholic understanding of the church as an effective sign attribute to the church what belongs to the Holy Spirit alone? Unlike the sacraments, the church cannot impart what it signifies. The church as the mother is not different from the community of the sisters and brothers. The church *is*, therefore, an effective sign of God's salvation in the same sense in which each of its members individually and communally is a sign.⁴⁵ It can elicit faith by embodying the life of the new creation, but the Holy Spirit alone can give the faith. It can, and indeed it must, testify to the new life, but the Spirit alone can conceive the new life and give birth to it.

In Protestant circles the socio-ethical understanding of the church as an effective sign prevails.⁴⁶ The church is the vanguard of the new creation called to anticipate the new creation in the world through social action. This is, of course, true as it stands: A church which was not an anticipation of a new humankind under the rule of God's Spirit would cease to be a church, and a church that did not strive to make the structures of this old creation reflect God's coming new creation would deny its vocation.

Yet we should not fall prey to a theologically misplaced optimism that breeds arrogance about what the church is and what it can do in the world. The old creation is not merely a location where the church, as the vanguard of the new creation, lives. The old creation is also part and parcel of what the church *is*. The statement 'The church is not the new creation', does not simply mean that the behaviour of the church often conflicts with the demands of the new creation. It means what it says: In its being, the church is a mixed reality; the old has become new, without, however, ceasing completely to *be* the old.

In relation to the church's activity in the world we should, therefore, not take anticipations of the new creation to be its realization, not even its partial realization. Although the Spirit is already working in history using human actions to create provisional states of affairs which anticipate

the new creation in a real way, these historical anticipations are as far from the consummation of the new creation as earth is from heaven. The consummation is a work of God alone through which God will transfigure and glorify the creation together with what human beings have done in it in anticipation of the new creation. The new creation is, therefore, fundamentally a gift and the primary human action in relation to it is not doing but prayerful 'waiting' (cf. 2 Pet. 3:12; Matt. 6:10).⁴⁷ It is as this waiting and praying people of God that Christians are called to cooperate with God in anticipation of the eschatological transformation of the world.

3. The church signifies, I have said, by sampling: It is a sign of the new creation by being its anticipation in the old creation. It follows that the church can be a sign of hope for the world only if it is a stranger in the world. Being a stranger is not simply a posture which the church takes in relation to the world; it is rooted in the very being of the church as anticipation of the new creation. Because the kingdom of Christ is 'not of this world' (John 18:36), the world cannot be the commonwealth of Christians (Phil. 3:20); they can only be 'aliens and exiles' in it (1 Pet. 2:11). This has nothing to do with a dualistic depreciation of the world. For though the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, it is a kingdom for this world; the new creation does not come about through a replacement of the present creation by a new one, but through its transformation. This gives the homelessness of the church in this world a strictly eschatological character.

Since the church should not desire to fly from the world but should strive to bring the eschatological new creation to bear on this world, being a stranger in the world always involves conflict with the world. The conflict is not simply between one supplier on the market of individual and communal life-projects and others. It is a conflict between light and darkness, justice and arbitrariness, life and death (with the firing-line running often not simply between the church and the world, but also through both church and world).⁴⁸ This is why there can be no church without martyrdom. The very new life that God gives the church sets it in opposition to the oppressive powers of the world and there-

fore on the road to suffering (cf. 1 Pet. 4:2-4,12).⁴⁹

The eschatological homelessness of the church in the world and its resulting suffering are not impediments to the church's being a sign of hope for the world. They are a precondition of it. The celebrated tension between the eschatological identity and historical relevance of the church is a false one for the simple reason that relevance presupposes identity. A church that has become part of this world will at best be able to give the world lessons about ideological and institutional survival, possibly even about success. But it will never be a sign of living hope. Hope is born where the Spirit of the new creation is seen at work in the conflicts of the church with the spirits of this world (or in the 'prophetic withdrawals' of the church from the world⁵⁰). Following in the footsteps of its Lord, the church needs to go the way of the cross in the power of the Spirit. The cross is the sign of the church; the church under the cross is a sign of hope for the world.⁵¹

4. The sign-character of the church is not a part of the church's message to the world. The church is not called to proclaim itself as a sign; it is called to *be* a sign before the watching world. For the church to direct attention to itself as a sign of hope would not only be arrogant in relation to the world but also misplaced in relation to its own character as a sign. The purpose of the sign is to point to the reality it signifies, not to itself; the sign confirms itself as a sign by pointing away from itself. Moreover, if the church signifies by sampling, then the reality of the church as a sign is none other than the reality of the new creation anticipated through the presence of the Spirit. The church has nothing of its own to which to draw the attention of the world.⁵² Like the light of the moon, the light of the church is not its own light, but a reflection of the Light that has come into the world to enlighten every person (cf. John 1:9).⁵³

When we encounter in the New Testament the exalted designations of the church as 'the light of the world,' 'a city set on a hill' (Matt. 5:14; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10) they appear in statements in the second person plural directed to the church, not in statements in

the first person plural directed to the world. These designations are not the self-congratulatory and self-commendatory talk of an established church. They are words of comfort and challenge to a persecuted church. If the light shines it will be seen, and if a city is on a hill it will be noticed. The more the church becomes a sign of the new creation, the less it will need to clamour self-advertisingly for the attention of the world. It will then have the inner strength to let the nations be drawn near to it, saying: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his ways' (Isa. 2:3; cf. Isa. 25:6–8; Mic. 4:1ff.).⁵⁴

It is not a task of the church to talk to the world about itself. This, of course, does not mean that it should not talk to the world at all. Rather, as the church is called to point the world to the new creation through its being, so the church is also called to point to the new creation through its speaking. As a sign of hope the church is called to exercise prophetic ministry.

V

The ecclesiological popularity of the word 'prophetic' owes much to the positive emotional charge that it draws from the venerable tradition of the Old Testament prophets. Emotional connotations are an important dimension of religious language, but they must feed on its denotative content whose ingredients come from the biblical traditions. Guided by the above reflection on the relation between the church and the new creation (Section III) I will draw some implications from the biblical prophetic traditions—from the Old Testament prophets and from Jesus—for the way in which the church should address the great issues of today. But first we need to look at the gap that separates biblical prophets from us today and search for a way to bridge it.

1. When one compares prophecy in the biblical traditions and in the church today one gets the impression that the only thing they have in common is the designation. Except in the Pentecostal and charismatic segments of the Christian church (which are

too often blind to the socio-economic dimensions of Christian prophecy), prophecy today means either the interpretation of the word of God for the church (in more conservative circles) or its application to the problems of the world accompanied by righteous indignation (in more liberal circles). The prophetess and her activity seems to stand at the centre of the prophetic ministry: her task is to activate the deepest symbols of the community in order to challenge the 'regnant consciousness' and sinful and oppressive practices. In the biblical traditions the accent is rather different: God and God's message to the sinful structures and individuals stand at the centre. Both in the New and the Old Testament the prophets understand themselves to be declaring the word of God imparted to them directly by God.⁵⁵ The reflection of the prophets on religious tradition and their observation of the historical situation—the prophets were keenly aware of both!—were, of course, informing their prophetic message. But this message was not perceived as a result of their own intellectual efforts but as the word coming from God.

If we presuppose this biblical understanding of prophecy, is it valid theologically to speak of the church as a prophetic community? Can we learn from the prophets anything about the church's presence in the world? In the New Testament the gift of prophecy (a gift of receiving messages directly from God) is but a specific expression of the broader phenomenon of prophecy that applies to the whole Christian community. The gift of the Spirit which the church received on the day of Pentecost was the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise that all God's people will know God as immediately as the prophets did (cf. Num. 11:16ff.; Jer. 31:34). In the new eschatological community the Spirit has been poured out 'on all flesh' and the *whole* community has become a prophetic community (Acts 2:17f. as an interpretation of Acts 2:1ff.). In this sense the Spirit that the whole church received at Pentecost can appropriately be described as the 'Spirit of prophecy'.⁵⁶ The Spirit of the new creation is the link between the specific gift of prophecy and of the prophetic calling of the whole church because the Spirit is the origin of both.

The church as a whole is not prophetic in the strict biblical sense of the word. We cannot therefore simply transpose the phenomenon of biblical prophetism to the Christian community. Yet because the activity of the church in the world takes place in the power and under the guidance of the Spirit of prophecy, the church can learn from the biblical prophets more than just a few important socio-ethical norms. It can also learn something about the way in which it should assert itself in the world. On the assumption that one can speak about the *prophethood of all believers*, in the following paragraphs I will take the biblical prophetic traditions as the basis for reflection both about the content of the church's message to the world and about the nature of its prophetic existence.

2. The Spirit of prophecy has been poured out 'in the last days' as a sign of the dawning of the new age (Acts 2:17). It is the same Spirit—the first fruits of the new creation—that constitutes the church as an anticipation of the new creation. There is therefore an indissoluble union between the church's being and its speaking: the sign-character of the church and its prophetic ministry have their origin in the present gift of the Spirit and their norm in the vision of the promised new creation. In its prophetic proclamation the church speaks of the same reality from which it lives as a sign of hope.

Two important consequences follow from the nature of the prophetic ministry and its relation to the being of the church. First, since the 'Spirit of prophecy' is given to the whole community, a prophetic pronouncement cannot be 'the last word after which no discussion is possible'.⁵⁷ Rather, each prophetic statement is subject to the continual discernment of the whole Christian community (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20f.).⁵⁸ Unlike Old Testament prophecy, Christian prophecy is essentially a *communal phenomenon*. (This is true even in the case of the gift of prophecy). Second, since the church as a prophetic community can bring to bear on the problems of the world only that same reality in which it itself 'lives and breathes', its prophetic proclamation has to take the form of witnessing.⁵⁹ Authentic Christian prophetic criticisms can be made only if framed by the proclamation of what God has done in Christ

and what God promises to do in the world on the one hand, and the testimony to what God has done in the church on the other (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9f.). Without this element of witness, prophecy degenerates into arrogant and impotent moralizing.

3. The Spirit of prophecy is the Spirit of the new creation. The prophetic message addresses the issues of the world from the perspective of the promised new creation. Given the nature of the new creation (see Section III), the prophetic message must include both a call to friendship with God and the summons to do justice.⁶⁰ In the grand summary of the prophetic proclamation about what constitutes good life—a summary that finds a clear echo in the teaching of Jesus (cf. Mk. 12:28–31) and of Paul (cf. Rom. 13:8–10)—Micah combines both appeals: God requires human beings 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (6:8).

Justice can be described as the ordering of the social relations which secures for each person life with dignity and integration into the community.⁶¹ Doing justice is therefore particularly required with respect to the poor and marginalized, 'fatherless', 'widow', and 'sojourner' (cf. Deut. 10:18). It presupposes both exposing the unjust and oppressive social arrangements and suggesting alternative visions of social life.⁶² Doing justice is essential but not sufficient, however. By adding to the requirement to do justice the requirement to 'love kindness', Micah points beyond the way of just social arrangements to the way of personal, non-legislatable love. Social institutions need to satisfy the requirements of justice—not only of compensatory but also of communitarian justice—but people also need to learn to do acts of kindness to one another. For without personal expressions of love there is no humane society.

The Old Testament prophets were far more than simply inspired social critics. They were concerned with Israel's relation to Yahweh just as they were with justice and kindness; indeed, they were concerned with justice and kindness *because* Israel's relation to Yahweh mattered to them. The two concerns, of course, overlapped. For the prophets believed that to know Yahweh is to strive for justice (cf. Jer. 22:13–16) and that worship without justice is no worship at all but the detestable idolatry of

seeking to sanctify injustice religiously (cf. Isa. 1:11–17; 58:6–7).⁶³ Justice is not simply the secular outworking of religious faith but an integral part of that faith: ‘The one who oppresses a poor person insults his Maker, but the one who is kind to the needy honours him’ (Prov. 14:31; cf. James 1:27).

Yet for all their criticism of false worship, the prophets never condemned the cult as such. Indeed, they considered it the way of entering into and maintaining communion with God.⁶⁴ Justice and kindness are not the only requirements of God. Yahweh desired also to ‘walk with’ Israel. Israel was to love Yahweh (cf. Deut. 10:12ff.) and when she ‘went after other gods’ Yahweh was yearning for God’s estranged people (cf. Jer. 2:1–13). ‘Life for Israel was understood as fellowship with Yahweh who had entered a covenant with this people, and the fulfilment of Yahweh’s commandments was to be an expression of this fellowship. Hence keeping the commandments can be described as loving Yahweh’.⁶⁵ Because the relationship to Yahweh is so central, prophetic proclamation must contain the announcement of God’s ‘forgiving expurgation of previous sin’ and ‘re-creation of a people’ able to walk with God observing God’s ordinances (cf. Jer. 31:31ff.; Ezek. 36:25ff.)⁶⁶—not least the requirements to ‘do justice’ and ‘love kindness’.

The two prophetic demands for walking with God and for doing justice and kindness are inseparable but they cannot be identified with each other. We should neither be so socially naive as to believe that when people have peace with God social arrangements will take care of themselves, nor so theologically blind as to assume that when people live in peace with one another they thereby live in peace with God. Prophecy can neither be replaced by evangelism nor dispense with it. They belong together because personal fellowship with God and the new world in which every tear shall be wiped away are two aspects of the single reality of the new creation. Prophecy is the social (and ecological) dimension of evangelism and evangelism is the personal dimension of prophecy.

The content of the prophetic message—be it the critique of idolatry and the call to fellowship with God or the denunciation of oppression and the call to justice—leads the prophet into conflict with the people to whom the message is

addressed. The message of the prophet which draws its content from the revelation of the new creation and is inspired by the Spirit of the new creation is directed *against* the old creation: ‘[. . .] *against* the whole land, *against* the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land’ (Jer. 1:18). When the new is challenging the old, the old has often no intention of giving up its privileged position without a fight. The prophetic call to conflict results in prophetic suffering. For this reason suffering was considered a basic lot of a prophet.⁶⁷

4. A prophet stands in a twofold relation: to God, from whom the prophet brings the message, and to people, to whom God’s message is addressed. What is the nature of each of these relations? In the biblical traditions one becomes a prophet by responding to the call of God and one acts as a prophet by receiving messages from God. But the prophet’s relation to God encompasses much more than the receiving and dispatching of God’s messages. God teaches the prophet also to ‘feel for himself God’s intimate attachment to Israel; he must not only know about it, but experience it from within’.⁶⁸ And the prophet talks to God too. He may lament before God, pouring out his suffering, anger, and longing for God (cf. Jer. 11–20) or sing praises to God (cf. Jer. 20:13).⁶⁹ The prophet is a prophet only because he is involved in a dynamic relationship with God. Spirituality is the soul of prophetic existence.

Christian prophets today have difficulty interlacing spirituality and social involvement. The problem is neither the lack of desire to combine the two in daily life nor to find theological models which do not separate the two.⁷⁰ But all such attempts and models flounder over the contemporary deep-seated feeling that God is absent from the world. The prophets of old had a vivid sense of God’s designs in history: empires were a tool in the hand of Yahweh (cf. Isa. 7:18–20). Modern technological culture, whose goal is ‘to know everything in order to predict everything in order to control everything’,⁷¹ has made it difficult to hold seriously to the belief that God governs history and that the salvation of the world can, let alone must, come from God. And the more distant God is from the world, the more absent God will be from our involvement in the world. Only a fresh discovery of God’s presence and

activity in history will erase a deep seated sense that worship is irrelevant to doing justice.⁷²

A dynamic relationship with God is one pole of prophetic existence. The other is the prophet's identification with the people. Prophetic conflict with the people did not smother prophetic sympathy for the people. "The prophet not only was a man concerned with right and wrong. He also had a soul of extreme sensitivity to human suffering".⁷³ In Jeremiah in particular, the denunciation of misdeeds and announcement of judgment are accompanied by deep anguish over peoples' blindness and hard-heartedness and the suffering that is coming upon them: "O that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (9:1; cf. 4:19f.; 8:18ff.).

The 'tearful tradition' of Jeremiah—but also of Jesus (cf. Lk. 19:41f.) and of Paul (cf. Rom. 9:1ff.)—has virtually disappeared from Christian prophetism. Sorrow has been suppressed by anger. Prophets have become too much like technicians. They explain oppression by one cause-effect nexus and expect liberation from another. Oppression is a moral problem, but they counter it with a technical solution. Technicians are not overly given to sorrow; if the solutions they propose are not accepted or if the mechanisms they design do not function the way they expect, they do not grieve, they are angry. The biblical prophets did grieve because the mechanisms of evil did not blind them to the mystery of evil. The mechanisms of economic, social, racial and sexual oppression need to be exposed and replaced by the structures of justice. But what can be done about the evil hidden in the depths of the human heart? Our strongest weapon against the mystery of evil is tears in the presence of God.

The community of Christian prophets 'desperately needs a revival of orthopathy'⁷⁴—the experience of the personal presence of the Holy Spirit that makes them love both God and God's world. Orthopathy does more than furnish prophets with inspiration and motivation for promoting justice. It aids them also in understanding how one can bring the word of God and the situation into an effective interface. Prophetic social critique is not simply an applied 'science'; it is also an art. It is therefore

'not enough to have commands and general norms, and even living examples and models, for our decision-making. It is also necessary to possess those skills and sensitivities which the New Testament writers associate with the gifts of the Spirit'.⁷⁵ Good prophets are masters of the Christian socio-ethical art. And this art can be learned only in the school of the Spirit who draws prophets into the passion of God and enables them to identify with the suffering of God's world.

5. The prophet's parish is the whole world because the new creation is a universal reality. Inspired by the Spirit of the new creation and guided by the vision of the new creation, prophets need to speak to all dimensions of human existence—from personal to ecological—and direct their message to all locales in which human beings live—from neighbourhood to global community. Powerful social forces hinder prophets in the exercise of their universal calling. Religion is not disappearing from the modern societies as was expected not long ago, but it is increasingly being pushed away from the macroworld of the public square into the microworld of the private life: it is allowed to play a role, but only in the 'spiritual ... homeland for separate spiritual development set up obligingly by the architects of secular society's apartheid'.⁷⁶ One of the most important tasks of Christian prophets in the contemporary world is to work on dismantling the 'secular society's apartheid'.

The primary responsibility of Christian prophets, however, is not for the world but for the people of God. Though the Old Testament prophets were called to prophesy against nations and kingdoms (cf. Jer. 1:9), the focus of their message was the destiny of Israel.⁷⁷ Correspondingly, the critique of the church is the first task of Christian prophets:⁷⁸ they need to tear down the church's religious garmenture that masks its idolatry (wealth and power!) and oppression (racism, sexism, exploitation!) and challenge the church to adorn itself with robes of righteousness and holiness (cf. Eph. 4:24); they need to announce to the church hope in a loving God who forgives and recreates, and threaten it with the judgment of a holy God.

As P. Tillich said, in the prophetic Spirit of the new creation the church has 'in itself the ultimate criterion against itself'.⁷⁹ But as it

pays heed to its own prophets, the church should not self-sufficiently close itself up to criticism from the world. The activity of the Spirit of the new creation is not limited to the church. This is why one can speak with Tillich of 'reverse prophetism'—'an unconsciously prophetic criticism directed toward the church from outside'.⁸⁰ It is the task of Christian prophets to help the church discern the voice of God's Spirit even in the pandemonium of the world.

The point of prophetic care for the church is more than just self-beautification of the church. It serves the mission of the church in the world. For the credibility of the church as a sign of the new creation is the presupposition for the plausibility of its prophetic message. The more the church anticipates the new creation in its life and its structures, the more its message will recover the creative force of the prophetic word of God which does not return empty but accomplishes God's purposes (cf. Isa. 55:10f.).

VI

1. Contemporary theological reflection about the mission of the church in the world seems to follow what might be described as a 'communication model'. The relation between the church and the world is that of a sender to a recipient. The recipient—the world—needs to grasp the prophetic message of the church and perceive the church as a sign of hope. In order for that to happen, the sender—the church—needs to take care to transmit the message so that it is understood and to signify the new creation in such a way that hope is born. The essential elements of this 'communication model' remain intact, of course, when the relation between the church and the world is taken to be a two-way street. The word most commonly used to describe such a relation between the church and the world is 'dialogue', and its very use underlines that one is dealing with a communication situation—only that now recipient and communicator alternate places; the communication (*legein*) does not occur simply from one partner to the other, but between (*dia*) them.

In the communication model the basic problem for the church in relation to the

world is a hermeneutical one. What the church needs is penetrating social analysts who are able to understand both where the world is going and over what problems it is stumbling, it needs creative theologians who know how to translate the Christian message into contemporary cultural languages, skilful and daring prophets who can make the Christian message speak to the great issues of the day. And finally the church needs imagination to know how to symbolize the Christian message in its structures and its life. If the church had all of this, it would be a prophetic community and a sign of hope in the world—so the model suggests. But is the communication model right?

2. No doubt the model is right in what it affirms. Transcultural mission—whether it takes place diachronically or synchronically—is possible only by translating and applying the message in new contexts. The prophets of old were not only conditioned by the traditions but they also 're-interpreted and applied [them] to their own times',⁸¹ notwithstanding their belief to be direct spokespersons for God. The need for creative reinterpretation and fresh application of the Christian message is greater today than ever before. Technological and cultural developments are increasingly widening the gap between the world of the biblical traditions and contemporary situations. Without the church doing its hermeneutical work with skill and imagination its message will not be heard and its sign-character will not be recognized. The communication model rightly underlines this.

But the communication model is wrong in what it leaves out—or at least seriously neglects. It seems to operate tacitly with two mistaken assumptions, one with respect to the recipient and the other with respect to the sender. A genuinely *prophetic model* of the relation between the church and the world will have to discard both of these assumptions. In relation to the recipient the model assumes that the basic problem is a lack of understanding: the world has not grasped the message; it has not recognized the sign, and hence does not respond. Enlightenment, it is expected, will bear fruit in changed behaviour. But this is certainly false. The realism of the biblical traditions

is sobering. The Old Testament prophets not only experienced an 'unchanging pattern of failure' of their proclamation; they were, almost paradoxically, called to failure: the message itself made the people obdurate (cf. Isa. 6:9ff.; Ezek. 2:1ff.; Matt. 13:10ff.).⁸² So also, precisely when the church is seen to be what it really is does the world often refuse to cleave to it as a sign of hope, and instead tries to get rid of it as a thorn in its own flesh (cf. 1 Pet. 4:4).

In relation to the sender the communication model assumes that the church has the message (but fails to translate and communicate it successfully) and that the church is the 'first fruits of the new creation' (but fails to present itself as such before the world). In an important sense this assumption is right: the church *has* the message and it *is* anticipation of the new creation. But it would be false to conclude that the dominant concern of the church should be communicating the message and presenting itself as a sign of hope. As J. V. Taylor observed, what turned a person into a prophet 'was not eloquence but vision, not getting the message across but getting the message'.⁸³ Similarly what makes the church into a sign of hope is not its effort at signifying hope, but the reality of its being anticipation of the new creation. Yes, the church *has* the message, yet it needs to receive the message always anew as a living word to be addressed to the dying world. Yes, the church *is* an anticipation of the new creation, yet it needs to grow in unity and in sanctity in the divided and unjust world. The efforts of the church to communicate and to signify will be futile if it does not *listen* to the voice of the Spirit and strive to be *renewed* into the likeness of the Triune God.

3. The prophetic model of the relation between the church and the world assumes that the mission of the church in the world can be sustained only by the same Spirit of the new creation whose presence makes the church to be the church. To be a prophetic community the church needs the Spirit, who will make its sons and daughters prophesy, its young men see visions and its old men dream dreams (cf. Acts 2:17ff.). To be a sign of hope the church needs the Spirit who will cause flesh to come upon its dry bones, put

breath into it, and make it live (cf. Ezek. 37:6). To sustain its passion for God and its passion for the world even when the ears of the hearers are heavy and their hearts are fat the church needs the Spirit of love who creates hope (cf. Rom. 15:13, 30). And to break the walls of resistance to its message communicated by word and deed the church needs the Spirit who 'will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment' (John 16:8). The first task of the church as a prophetic community and a sign of hope will therefore be to pray: *veni creator Spiritus*.⁸⁴

- 1 See G. W. Locher, 'Prophetie in der Reformation. Elemente, Argumente und Bewegungen', in *Charisma und Institution* (ed. T. Rendtorff; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1985), 102–109.
- 2 For a nuanced historical account of the *munus triplex* of Christ in its relation to the church see L. Schick, *Das dreifache Amt Christi und der Kirche. Zur Entstehung und Entwicklung der Trilogien* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, 171; Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1982).
- 3 See H. Legrand, 'La réalisation de l'Église en un lieu', in *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie* (ed. B. Lauret and F. Refoulé; Paris: Cerf, 1983), 3:145–345, 205f.; H. Legrand, 'A Response to "The Church as a Prophetic Sign"', in *Church, Kingdom, World. The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign* (ed. G. Limouris; Faith and Order Paper 130; Geneva: WCC, 1986), 145–151, 146f.
- 4 *Lumen gentium* 1; see also *Lumen gentium* 9, 48, 59; *Ad gentes* 1, 5; *Gaudium et spes* 42, 45.
- 5 See E. Jüngel, 'Die Kirche als Sakrament?' *ZThK* 80 (1983), 432–457, 436ff.
- 6 See G. Gassmann, 'The Church as Sacrament, Sign and Instrument. The Reception of this Ecclesiological Understanding in Ecumenical Debate', in *Church, Kingdom, World. The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign* (ed. G. Limouris; Faith and Order Paper 130; Geneva: WCC, 1986), 1–17.
- 7 See A. Birmelé, *Le salut en Jésus Christ dans les dialogues Œcuméniques* (Labor et fides 141; Paris: Cerf, 1986), 203–253, 277–315.
- 8 For a brief but perceptive theological assessment of the conference see R. J. Sider, 'Reflections on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation', in *Transformation* 7, no. 3 (1990), 15–17.
- 9 See M. Volf, 'Kirche als Gemeinschaft. Ekklesiologische Überlegungen aus freikirchlicher Perspektive', in *EvTh* 49 (1989), 52–76.

- 10 See P. Potter, 'Der prophetische Auftrag der Kirche', in *Ökumenische Positionen. Der prophetische Auftrag der Kirche, Kirchen und Christen in politischer Verantwortung, den Frieden fördern* (Bad Boll: Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll, 1981), 11–18.
- 11 'Report of the First Consultation of the Unity/Renewal Study', in *Church, Kingdom, World. The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign* (ed. G. Limouris; Faith and Order Paper 130; Geneva: WCC, 1986), 163–175, no. 40.
- 12 R. R. Reuther, 'Religion and Society: Sacred Canopy vs. Prophetic Critique', in *The Future of Liberation Theology. Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (ed. M. H. Ellis and O. Maduro; New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 172–176, 173. My comments here are not a critique of the whole of Reuther's wide-ranging work but only of this article.
- 13 Calling a discourse 'prophetic' is, of course, not simply a matter of linguistic preference. The label 'prophetic' tends to give human speech-acts an aura of special authority. A social critic who understands herself as a prophetess desires to be taken as a 'spokesperson for God'—that is, as more than someone who just expresses her own opinion about the truth of a matter. Sometimes a social critic will clad herself in prophetic garb in order to place one's critique outside the realm of general moral discourse—so that one does not need to specify the presuppositions of one's moral judgments, justify ethically concrete moral decisions in complex situations and reflect on alternative proposals. But even if the prophetic label is not used to immunize a particular social critique from criticism, it is certainly meant to add plausibility to the social critic's message, at least in Christian circles. This is what I mean by saying that social critique which disguises itself as prophetism is 'taking a religious short-cut'.
- 14 J. Stout, *Ethics After Babel. The Language of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 163
- 15 Stout, *Ethics*, 165.
- 16 'Report', nos. 30, 24.
- 17 Cf. also W. Pannenberg, 'The Kingdom of God and the Church', in W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 72–101.
- 18 See P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 375.
- 19 On the relation between the church and Trinity see M. Volf, 'Kirche', 70ff.
- 20 For the following Interpretation of Rev 21:1–22:5, see R. H. Gundry, 'The New Jerusalem. People as Place, not Place for People', in: *NouT* 29 (1987), 254–264.
- 21 It is sometimes suggested that the absence of the temple from the New Jerusalem indicates that the church is something provisional (cf. W. Pannenberg, 'The Kingdom of God', 76). It is not difficult to see the theological reasons for this view, for it allows for people to become part of the eschatological new creation without having to become members of the church. But the view can find support in Rev. 21:22 only either if one confuses the senses of 'church' as building and as people, or if one makes the false assumption that the church can exist only when it can be distinguished from the larger society. The point of the statement that there will be no temple is that in the new creation there will be no distinction between sacred and secular realms, since all the people will be the Holy of Holies and God and the Lamb will be the temple in which the Holy of Holies is placed.
- 22 On 2 Cor. 5:17 see P. Stuhlmacher, 'Erwägungen zum ontologischen Charakter der *kainē ktisis*', *EvTh* 27 (1967), 1–35; U. Mell, *Neue Schöpfung. Eine traditionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Studie zu einem soteriologischen Grundsatz paulinischer Theologie* (BZNW 56; Berlin: Walter der Gruyter, 1989). On the whole issue see J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit. A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (trans. M. Kohl; New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 278ff. On the holistic soteriology implied in such holistic eschatology see M. Volf, 'Materiality of Salvation: An Investigation in the Soteriologies of Liberation and Pentecostal Theologies', in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (1989), 447–467.
- 23 See Pannenberg, 'The Kingdom of God', 73ff.
- 24 See M. Volf, *Work in the Spirit. Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chapter IV. On the relation between realms of grace, nature, and glory see J. Moltmann, 'Christsein, Menschsein und das Reich Gottes. Ein Gespräch mit Karl Rahner', in *Stimmen der Zeit* 203 (1985): 619–631, 626 (though I am not always able to follow Moltmann in the way he determines the relationship of the three to each other).
- 25 E. Käsemann, 'Zur ekklesiologischen Verwendung der Stichworte "Sakrament" und "Zeichen", in *Wandernde Horizonte auf dem Weg zu kirchlicher Einheit* (ed. R. Groscurth; Frankfurt a. M.: Otto Lembeck, 1974), 119–136, 133. Although Käsemann sharply criticizes the pretentiousness of using the term 'sign' to describe the church, he fails to measure his own notion that the church, as *regnum Christi*, is the earthly realization of the coming rule of God against the same standard. On confusion between the Church and the reign of God see H. Küng, *The Church* (Garden City: Image Books, 1976), 135.

- 26 Cf. Moltmann, *The Church*, 193. Cf. also J. Moltmann, *Politische Theologie—Politische Ethik* (Fundamentaltheologische Studien, 9; München: Kaiser, 1984), 162.
- 27 One must distinguish the anticipations of the new creation in the church and in the world. Only in the church is anticipation of the new creation characterized by peoples' confession of faith in Jesus Christ and their conscious allegiance to him as Lord, and does it entail, according to the New Testament, liberation of Christians from the power of sin (cf. Rom. 8:1ff.), notwithstanding the reality of the permanent struggle against sin in their lives. In the church, therefore, the problems of transitoriness and sinfulness are not (or at least should not be) on the same level: the power of sin has been broken but death as the last enemy has not yet been overcome (cf. 1 Cor. 15:26).
- 28 So 'Report', no. 30. Cf. Moltmann, *The Church*, 193 and Moltmann, *Politische Theologie*, 162, not only of the anticipations of the new creation in the church but also in the world. Moltmann seems, however, to be reading his formally correct concept of 'anticipation' into the biblical concepts of the 'firstfruits' and 'down-payment' rather than letting these biblical metaphors inform his concept of anticipation.
- 29 Paul explicitly states that the Spirit is the down-payment (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14). The case of the phrase 'the firstfruits of the Spirit' is somewhat less clear, but 'most agree that the genitive is epexegetic (the firstfruits which is the Spirit)' (J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* [WBC 38a; Dallas: Word, 1988], 473).
- 30 This can be seen from the use of *παροχη* to describe the resurrected Christ in relation to those who 'have fallen asleep' (1 Cor. 15:20, 23), and the first converts of a particular region in relation to the whole church that is later to be established (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Thess. 2:13 [some manuscripts]).
- 31 So Gassmann, 'The Church,' 13. A similar claim is made about the implications of the term 'sacrament' as applied to the church in Roman Catholic ecclesiology by H. Meyer ('Kirche als "Sakrament"' [Paper presented at the 24. International Ecumenical Seminar of the Institute for Ecumenical Research, 3–12 July, 1990, Strasbourg], 6f.) and H. Legrand ('Koinonia, Church and Sacraments. A General Catholic Outline' [Paper presented at the Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue, 1–8 August, 1987, Venice], 17ff.).
- 32 So N. Wolterstorff, 'The Bible and Economics: The Hermeneutical Issues', in *Transformation 4*, no. 3/4 (1987), 11–19, 18. Similarly K. Barth: Because the sanctification of the whole humanity which took place *de jure* in Christ is experience *de facto* in the church, the church can be called the 'preliminary portrayal' ('die vorläufige Darstellung') of this universal sanctification (*KD IV/2*, 695ff.).
- 33 Whatever theological justification and ecumenical usefulness the exegetical grounding of sacramental theology with reference to *mustērion* in Eph. 3:2ff. might have, it does not seem helpful to seek exegetical ground for the sign-character of the church in this text (so seemingly W. Pannenberg, *Thesen zur Theologie der Kirche* [2nd ed. rev.; München: Claudius Verlag, 1974], 39f.; Moltmann, *The Church*, 202ff.; 'Report', no. 39). One gets to the notion of 'sign' in Eph. 3:2ff. only if one has read it into the text because of the text's later association with sacramental theology which defines sacrament as 'sign and instrument'. Paul's point seems to be that the *mustērion* does not speak by itself, but that it needs to be proclaimed so that 'all people' might be 'made to see' (Eph. 3:9) (against R. Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser* [EKK 10; Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1982], 139 and with M. Barth, *Ephesians. Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1–3* [The Anchor Bible 34; Garden City: Doubleday, 1974], 342). That does not mean that the content of the mystery (the creation from Jews and Gentiles of the one people of God in Christ), when lived out before the world, may not be a sign to the world. But the sign-character of the church cannot be established on the basis of what is said about the *mustērion*, at least not the sign-function of the church in relation to the human world (as distinct from 'the principalities and powers in the heavenly places' [cf. Eph. 3:10]).
- 34 Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 76.
- 35 Barrett, *John*, 75.
- 36 Barrett, *John*, 76. On signs as embodiments in the Old Testament see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology II. The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 96f.
- 37 Although without the explicit use of the sign language, Matt. 5:14ff., 1 Pet. 2:12 and Phil. 2:15 express the same understanding of the church in relation to the world.
- 38 See Gassmann, 'The Church', 14. Gassmann does not differentiate clearly between the meanings of sign as 'anticipation' and 'effective mediation'. If we want to avoid conceptual confusion about the church as a sign, we should not only carefully distinguish between these two senses of the word 'sign' but also make further distinctions within the understanding of sign as 'effective mediation'.
- 39 The sense in which the proclamation of the

- church is an instrument of the realization of the new creation seems less disputed.
- 40 See J. D. Zizioulas, 'Le Mystère de l'Église dans la tradition orthodoxe', in *Irénikon* 60 (1987), 323–335, 332ff. His reflection on the church as 'une icône du Royaume à venir' (332) in this article should be read, of course, in the light of his eucharistic ecclesiology (see J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* [Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985]).
- 41 *Lumen gentium* 1.
- 42 See W. Kasper, 'Die Kirche als universales Sakrament des Heils', in *Theologie und Kirche* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1987), 237–254, 242.
- 43 *Lumen gentium* 64.
- 44 So A. Birmelé, *Le salut*, 228. On the issue of the church's cooperation in the impartation of salvation see also J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie* (München: Erichewel Verlag, 1982), 42, where he stresses that being received into the church as a visible community of believers is a dimension of faith itself. It follows that faith is not only a gift of God but at the same time a gift of the church.
- 45 Cf. Volf, 'Kirche', 68. See also 'Perspectives on Koinonia. The Report from the Third Quinquennium of the Dialogue Between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders 1985–1989', no. 94.
- 46 One can encounter a similar understanding of the church as an effective sign in Catholic circles. Latin American Liberation Theology is a case in point. On the soteriology of Latin American Liberation Theology as it relates to the world see Volf, 'Materiality', 454ff.
- 47 See Volf, *Work*, 100.
- 48 See J. Moltmann, *Der Weg Jesu Christi. Christologie in messianischen Dimensionen* (München: Kaiser, 1989), 226. Cf. also J. Moltmann, 'Dient die "pluralistische Theologie" den Dialog der Weltreligionen?' in *EvTh* 49 (1989), 528–536.
- 49 See E. Peterson, 'Zeuge der Wahrheit', in *Theologische Traktate* (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1951), 167–224, 175. In his 'Von den Konzilien und der Kirche' Luther spoke of persecution as a *nota ecclesiae* (cf. WA, 50, 642, 1ff.).
- 50 On 'prophetic withdrawals' see Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 383.
- 51 Similarly Käsemann, 'Sakrament', 130.
- 52 For this reason it is not sufficient to say that the church should not impose itself on the world but offer 'herself to the world for reception' (J. Zizioulas, 'The Theological Problem of "Reception"', in *Bulletin of Centro pro Unione* 26 [Fall 1984], 3–6, 4). The church is offering the new creation as God's gift, not itself.
- 53 So repeatedly Catholic theologians interpreting *Lumen gentium* no 1. See H. de Lubac, *Geheimnis aus dem wir leben* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1967), 33ff.; J. Ratzinger, 'Warum ich noch in der Kirche bin', in H. Urs von Balthasar and J. Ratzinger, *Zwei Plädoyers* (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1971), 57–75, 67.
- 54 On Israel as a sign to which nations come of their own accord see von Rad, *Theology II*, 249.
- 55 For the Old Testament see W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (trans. D. E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 102. For the New Testament see D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), 338.
- 56 For exegetical considerations see M. Turner and D. Mackinder, 'Prophecy and Spiritual Gifts Then and Now', in *Christian Experience in Theology and Life. Papers Read at the 1984 Conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1988), 16–54, 17ff. For a more theological development of the theme see G. Vandervelde, 'The Gift of Prophecy and the Prophetic Church', in *The Holy Spirit. Renewing and Empowering Presence* (ed. G. Vandervelde; Winfield: Wood Lake Books, 1989), 93–118.
- 57 H. Berkhof, 'Zwischen Prophetie und Weisheit', in *EvKom15* (1982), 242–245, 243.
- 58 On the importance of congregational discernment see J. D. G. Dunn, 'The Responsible Congregation (1 Cor. 14:26–40)', in *Charisma und Agape* (1 Ko 10–14) (ed. L. de Lorenzi; Benedictina, 7; Rome: Abtei von St. Paul vor den Mauern, 1983), 201–236.
- 59 On the general character of Christian religious speech as witnessing see J. Fischer, 'Behaupten oder Bezeugen? Zum Modus des Wahrheitsanspruchs christlicher Rede von Gott', in *ZThK* 87 (1990), 224–244.
- 60 For reasons of space I leave out the whole ecological dimension of the prophetic proclamation of the church. It would not be difficult to show both exegetically and theologically that Christians need to place the concern for the protection of creation alongside the concern for justice.
- 61 See J. P. Wogaman, 'Toward a Christian Definition of Justice', in *Transformation* 7, no. 2 (1990), 18–23.
- 62 On both tasks as aspects of prophetic ministry see W. Brueggemann, 'Voices of the Night—Against Justice', in W. Brueggemann et al., *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly. An Agenda for Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 5–28, 6ff.

- 63 Liberation theologians in particular have stressed this point. See G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics and Salvation* (trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson; New York: Orbis Books, 1974), 195f.; J. P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible. A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (trans. J. Eagleson; New York: Orbis Books, 1974), 35–76.
- 64 See A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 195ff.
- 65 E. W. Nicholson, *God and His People. Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 215. The importance of the relationship of Israel to Yahweh explains why some prophets locate Israel's sin more 'in particular offences against sacral orders' and less in 'transgression of the social and moral commandments' (von Rad, *Theology II*, 224).
- 66 Von Rad, *Theology II*, 235.
- 67 See von Rad, *Theology II*, 259.
- 68 Heschel, *Prophets*, 117.
- 69 On prophetic existence see J. Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant. A Study in Jeremiah and Isaiah 40–55* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).
- 70 See, for instance, N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 146–161; L. Boff, 'Mystik und Politik: Kontemplation im Befreiungskampf', in L. Boff, *Aus dem Tal der Tränen ins Gelobte Land. Der Weg der Kirche mit den Unterdrückten* (trans. H. Goldstein; Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1982), 214–227; J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation. Toward Political Holiness* (transl. R. R. Barr; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985).
- 71 O. Guinness, 'Mission in the Face of Modernity. Nine Checkpoints on Mission Without Worldliness in the Modern World', [A paper for the Plenary Session on the Impact of Modernization presented at Lausanne II in Manila, July 11–20, 1989], 5.
- 72 For a discussion of some problems and solutions see P. C. Hodgson, *God in History. Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989). Hodgson ends up affirming what from my perspective amounts to the absence of God from the world: what God 'does' in history is to give, disclose, and in some way be, the 'normative shape' of the transformative praxis (205). Given this understanding of God's action in history the integration of doing justice and prayer is impossible, for the simple reason that on such a view prayer, to which supplication and thanksgiving are essential, is not possible. You can hardly petition a God who relates to history only as the 'normative shape' of historical praxis (in spite of Hodgson's passing remark to the contrary [237]).
- 73 Heschel, *Prophets*, 120. See also Goldingay, *God's Prophet*, 31ff.; W. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination. Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 32ff.
- 74 R. J. Mouw, 'Life in the Spirit in an Unjust World', in *The Holy Spirit. Renewing and Empowering Presence* (ed. G. Vandervelde; Winfield: Wood Lake Books, 1989), 119–140, 140. Mouw rightly pleads for the integration of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy.
- 75 Mouw, 'Life', 140.
- 76 Guinness, 'Mission', 8.
- 77 Cf. Zimmerli, *Old Testament*, 103.
- 78 So also W. Huber, 'Prophetische Kritik und demokratischer Konsens', in *Charisma und Institution* (ed. T. Rendtorff; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1985), 110–127, 118f.
- 79 Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 381.
- 80 Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 213.
- 81 Von Rad, *Theology II*, 4.
- 82 Von Rad, *Theology II*, 206, 41.
- 83 J. V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God. The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 69.
- 84 I want to thank Dr. Judith Gundry Volf for her critical reading of a draft of this paper and for valuable suggestions about improving the style. The responses to my paper by Dr. Elizabeth Barnes and Dr. Paul Simmons and also the general discussion at the conference on 'The Church as Community: Being the People of God' at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville (October 1990) have helped me state my position with greater clarity. I wrote the paper while a Humboldt fellow in Tübingen, and I delivered some sections of it for the Chavasse Lectures at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, November 1990.