The Biblical basis for social ethics

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Many years ago I was a member of the Tyndale Fellowship. I keep pleasant memories of a couple of opportunities I had to attend meetings held under its prestigious sponsorship at Tyndale House in Cambridge. It was quite a privilege for me as a PhD student at the University of Manchester to be able to sit at the same table with scholars who had made a name for themselves in the academic world. Now that I have been invited as a speaker, over four decades later, I still feel highly privileged to attend a conference of this Fellowship, but with the added responsibility to read a paper at a plenary meeting. I view this invitation as a great honor indeed.

At the same time, I view this occasion as an opportunity to make a heartfelt plea to a distinguished audience made up of scholars committed to biblical research. In synthesis, my plea is for much more biblical research that, without renouncing loyalty to the historical Christian faith, will make a real difference to the way in which Christians, especially in the wealthy world, listen to what God requires of us: “To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Mic 6.8). My basic assumption here is that one of the most important aspects of the raison d’être of theology is to help the people of God to discern the meaning of this ethical injunction in order to live up to it, in the power of the Spirit, in concrete situations and to the glory of God.

Think of the situations that the following data reflect—situations that cry out for responsible responses shaped by justice, mercy, and humility before God on the part of the Church today. Over 1,200 million people today have no access to a public water supply; 1,000 million lack adequate housing; 840 million (95% in the so-called developing countries, 75% in rural areas), 200 million of them children less than five years old, are undernourished; 880 million have no access to basic health care. The world produces over 10% more than all the food required to feed humankind, but an average of 35,000 children die of hunger every day. And yet, between 1990 and 2000, the investment of the wealthy countries in development aid was reduced by 50%.

What do we, as Christians, have to say and what are we to do in this world in which, as Alan Storkey has put it, “The right to property becomes the right to grossly unequal economic power”? To raise that question is to raise what may be regarded as the key question of Christian social ethics today

The theology with which I grew up in my Christian home in Colombia and Ecuador did not ask that type of question. To say the least, it was rather limited in its scope. It reflected the kind of teaching that my parents, both of them converts from Roman Catholicism, had received from Protestant missionaries from the United States and Australia. Already in high school I began to realize the inadequacies of that theology when I found myself unable to answer a number of questions posed by Marxist professors. Six years of studies at a Christian

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1 This data is taken from P. Gregorio Iriarte, Análisis crítico de la realidad: Compendio de datos actualizado., Cochabamba: Grupo Editorial Kipus, 2004, 15th ed. and from various web pages, including that of the World Bank.

college and graduate school in the United States led to my attainment of a B.A. in Philosophy and an M.A. in Theology. When I came back to Latin America with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), however, I felt ill prepared to answer questions posed by Christian students who found themselves challenged by their Marxist peers. I had been trained in the common ways of doing theology in the West. It took a few years for me to realize that, if I was to equip Christian university students to fulfill their vocation as “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” upon graduation, I needed to learn and to teach what Gustavo Gutiérrez of Perú has called “a new way of doing theology”—a theology engaged with socioeconomic and political reality, a theology inseparably united to social ethics. My exploration in the early 1960s into the relation between the Church and the world in the Pauline epistles did not only lead to a PhD from the University of Manchester, but also laid the basis for a long pilgrimage in search of the social dimensions of the Gospel and the role of the Church as the sign of the Kingdom in the midst of the kingdoms of this world.

The present paper may be regarded as an effort to synthesize the convictions that have been shaped in me during more than four decades of struggle (first as a student worker with the IFES, and then with the Latin American Theological Fellowship and the Kairos Foundation), for the sake of the Gospel, to relate Scripture to life in a world deeply affected by injustice and poverty, exploitation and abuse of power. More than an academic essay on the biblical basis for social ethics, this chapter represents a sharing—from the Majority World—of insights related to that subject and, at the same time, an invitation to biblical scholars in the wealthy world to focus on a new way of doing theology in the service of the Kingdom of God in today’s global world.

The urgent need of social ethics

My inability to respond to the questions posed by my Marxist professors in high school and, later on, by Christian university students who felt cornered by their peers was closely related to the common way of conceiving Christianity—and indeed of doing theology—in the West. I lacked a Christian social ethics because I grew up in a Christian home and studied at a Christian college that saw God’s justice as the basis for the individual’s “justification by faith” in terms of freedom from guilt graciously granted by God to law-breakers rather than as the basis for God’s acceptance of the individual as God’s child and hence a member of God’s covenant community—a community of grace and freedom. In other words, justice had been cut off from shalom, without taking into account that, as Christopher D. Marshall has put it:

The central concern of biblical law was the creation of shalom, a state of soundness or “all rightness” within the community. The law provided a pattern for living in covenant, for living in shalom. Specific laws were considered just, not because they corresponded in some abstract ethical norm or reflected the will of the king or protected the welfare of the state, but because they sustained shalom within the

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3 There is no intention here to ignore or minimize the importance of the valuable contributions made in the West in the field of social ethics from a biblical perspective, especially in the last two decades or so. That this is the case is demonstrated here—much of the bibliography intentionally referred to in this essay was written by Western authors. Special mention should be made of John Howard Yoder’s ground-breaking work on The Politics of Jesus, originally published in 1972. The fact remains, however, that these contributions are praiseworthy exceptions to the common captivity of Western theology to the privatization of religion.

community. This, in view of Israel’s origins as liberated slaves, necessarily required provisions for the impoverished and oppressed, which is why so much of biblical legislation is devoted to “social justice” concerns, such as care for widows, orphans, aliens and the poor, the remission of debts, the manumission of slaves, and the protection of land rights. In this connection, covenant justice could be understood as positive succor for, and intervention on behalf of, the poor and the oppressed.⁵

One of the main criticisms of the Western approach to theology coming from the Majority World has to do with its strong bent toward the kind of individualism which has oftentimes obstructed the development of social ethics. According to the Enlightenment creed, each individual is free to pursue personal happiness without allowing others to invade his or her privacy. That creed found theological support in a doctrine of salvation that emphasized the individual’s relationship to God but left aside the social dimensions of the Gospel and, consequently emaciated Christian discipleship.

Writing from the perspective of liberation theology, Jon Sobrino (1981) claims that, in general terms, the basic difference between European theology and Latin American theology is derived from the real interest behind each of them. Both are related to the Enlightenment, but while European theology is concerned with the liberation of individual reason from every form of dogmatism and authoritarianism, Latin American theology is oriented towards the liberation of people from socioeconomic misery. The former aims at explaining reality that threatens faith, where the individual is in need of understanding the meaning of life; the latter aims at transforming reality dominated by structural sin, where the masses are unable to satisfy basic bodily needs. The former is concerned, we may add, with orthodoxy; the latter is concerned with orthopraxis.⁶

In light of Sobrino’s analysis of the common Western approach to theology we should not be surprised at the relative scarcity of contributions made in the West to social ethics especially from a biblical perspective. In the field of economics, the rampant individualism of Western culture has created “some of the problems that have plagued the developed countries: special interests that clothe self-serving arguments behind a veil of market ideology”.⁷ In the field of theology, it has reduced salvation to an individual and subjective experience, which may include ethics for the private life but is oftentimes totally oblivious of social ethics. How can a church without social ethics speak to the world prophetically? How can she prevent her message from becoming to a large extent a religious version of the ideology of the day?

A dramatic illustration of what may happen to the church in the absence of social ethics rooted in Scripture is what happened in Germany during the Nazi period, from 1933 to 1945. To be sure, the German resistance to Hitler, nobly exemplified by the Confessing Church, must not be forgotten.⁸ The fact remains, however, that Hitler succeeded to a large extent in keeping the church “intact as a subservient instrument, furthering his policy and proclaiming his doctrines”.⁹ With this precedent, we should not be surprised by the way in which the large majority of Christians in the United States have been co-opted by the nationalist ideology of

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9 Ibid. p.8
the Republican party to support a war waged on the basis of lies—the war in Iraq. The big gulf between private faith and socioeconomic and political life has rendered them totally unable to see the nefarious nature of this armed conflict.

A church without social ethics rooted in the moral vision of Scripture with its emphasis on justice, mercy, and humility before God is in no condition to avoid irrelevance in relation to the great problems that affect humankind. At best it will concentrate on empty ritualism and private morality, but will remain indifferent to the plight of the poor and the rape of God’s creation. At worst it will fail to recognize its own captivity to the culture-ideology of consumerism and will be used by the powerful to provide religious legitimization to their unjust socioeconomic and political system and even to war.

**A new way of doing theology**

Justo L. González (1999), in a masterpiece that only a church historian of his caliber could write, expounds and compares three streams of theology that have informed Christian thought throughout its history. Without denying that the three types share certain common elements, he claims that each one has emphases and perspectives that make it distinct: *Type A*, centered in Carthage, is represented by Tertullian (born around 193 A.D.). He was probably a lawyer and has been regarded as the father of Latin theology. Strongly influenced by Stoicism, he conceived Christianity as “superior to any human philosophy, since in it one receives the revelation of the ultimate law of the universe, the law of God”.10 *Type B*, developed in Alexandria, has Origen (born around 185 A.D.) as its main exponent. Living in an environment permeated by Platonism, he dedicated himself to the search for “immutable truths, realities that would not be dependent upon sensory perception and scriptural interpretations to show that the Bible sets forth a series of unalterable metaphysical and moral principles” (11).11 *Type C* had as its center the geographical area roughly comprising Asia Minor and Syria, with Antioch as the main city. The most outstanding exponent of it was Irenaeus (born around 130 A.D.). In contrast with Tertullian and Origen, he was not a prolific writer, but he was a pastor and had closer links with the sub-apostolic tradition. His interest was not in immutable truths but in the New Testament events that had taken place in Palestine, Antioch, and Asia Minor. Taking salvation history as his starting point, he sought to equip the believers with an ethical basis for a life worthy of the Gospel.12

González’s typology shows how the prominent feature of each type of theology—Law in type A, Truth in type B, and History in type C—colors the understanding of every theological theme, from creation to consummation, in patristic and in medieval theology, in the Reformation and beyond. He claims that, although type A and type B are better known to Western Christians, type C is the oldest of the three. Originally, the three types were regarded as orthodox. After the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century, however, type A, revised with elements of type B, became the standard theology, especially in the West, while type C was generally set aside and ignored in theological creeds.

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11 Ibid., p. 11
The relevance of this historical analysis to our subject lies in the fact that today, with the demise of modernity, there is, especially in the Majority World, a rediscovery of type C theology, and that opens the door for a return of social ethics as an essential aspect of the theological task. The “new way of doing theology” which is being explored by most theologians in the Majority World is not, after all, so new! It is rather the unearthing of a pre-Constantine approach to theology—an approach that gives proper weight to the historical nature of biblical revelation, including the incarnation, and understands the church and its mission in light of God’s action in history to manifest his Kingdom, his power, and his glory in the midst of the kingdoms of this world.

From this point of view, biblical social ethics is neither an optional theological task nor a mere appendix to theology. Rather, it is a theology in search of discernment—in light of Scripture and under the guidance of the Spirit—of the times and of concrete ways in which the church can manifest the relevance of God’s justice and peace in the socioeconomic and political realm.

Hermeneutics and social ethics - the hermeneutical task

My initiation in the formal study of biblical hermeneutics took place at Wheaton College over half a century ago. My professor was Dr. A. Berkeley Mickelsen, who (a few years after I took his course) wrote *Interpreting the Bible.* I could hardly have had a more brilliant expositor of the historical-grammatical approach to Bible study. I deeply appreciated his combination of sincere belief in the trustworthiness of Scripture, rigorous scholarship, and warmhearted commitment to biblical truth.

Since those days, a burning concern to relate biblical teaching to human life in all its dimensions has led me to see the need to go beyond the historical-grammatical approach to Bible study. In a way, this implies a rather different view of the hermeneutical task—an expanded view that keeps the inextricable link between theology and social ethics in the interpretive process. For my beloved professor, “the task of interpreters is to find out the meaning of a statement (command, question) for the author and for the hearers and readers, and thereupon to transmit that meaning to modern readers.” Upon returning to Latin America as a staff worker with IFES, the questions posed by university students and others forced me to see that the historical-grammatical approach to hermeneutics was a good start, but it did not go far enough.

In the first place, I could not simply assume that I could extract myself from my own historical context, with all its conditioning socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, in order to interpret the text objectively in line with the subject-object scheme inherited from the Enlightenment. I began to see myself and today’s church as actually participating in the story of the people of God which begins in the Old Testament and continues to unfold in the New and throughout the whole Christian era up to the present time. I realized that, without discarding the aim to understand the original historical context and the original meaning of the text, the task of interpreters had to be expanded to include, right from the start, the aim of lifestyle transformation according to the moral vision of Scripture. As I stated in the paper I read at the Willowbank 1979 Consultation on Gospel and Culture convened by the Lausanne Committee’s Theology and Education Group and chaired by John Stott: “The basic problem of biblical hermeneutics is to transpose the biblical message from its original context into the

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14 Ibid., p. 5 ; Mickelsen’s emphasis
context of the modern readers or hearers so as to produce in them the same impact that the message was intended to produce in the original readers or hearers.”

This approach to biblical hermeneutics enabled me to see the importance of keeping tightly together the study of the meaning of the text in its original historical context, on the one hand, and the critical analysis of the situation in which the message is presently delivered, on the other hand. The point was to let the text illuminate the contemporary situation and, at the same time, to let the contemporary situation illuminate the text—a hermeneutical cycle which would make it possible for the contemporary readers or hearers to perceive present-day reality from a biblical perspective, even as the original readers and hearers could perceive their own reality from the perspective of a worldview rooted in revelation.

Since I wrote my Willowbank paper on hermeneutics several scholars have shown the value of sociological analysis in the study of Scripture. Their writings have enabled us to see even more clearly the role that ideas, ideological commitments and constructions of reality played in the formation and transmission of the text. This type of analysis brings out the conflicts that the original readers or hearers of God’s Word had to face in their own environment. What becomes quite clear is that their struggles were not merely on an intellectual level, but had to do with questions of wealth and power, injustice and oppression—the kind of questions that are the subject matter of social ethics. Social ethics was imbedded in a covenantal worldview rooted in the revelation of God as a God of love and justice, totally at odds with other worldviews.

Evidently, the Bible is a political book in which economic and social issues are not tangential but occupy a central place. The unanimous concern of the biblical writers was to enable their readers to be consistent with God’s “covenant of creational restoration” by placing every aspect of life and all their relationships in their historical context under the sovereignty of God. Accordingly, they usually addressed communities—hardly ever individuals—in the vocative case. Their purpose was to lead the people of God, not merely into the right kind of thinking, but into the right kind of living—living according to God’s will for God’s covenant people—in contrast with living according to the ideology of the current establishment. Doctrine, therefore, became subservient to a lifestyle marked by justice, mercy, and humility before God, as well as by love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and non-violence.

The sociological approach to Bible study goes beyond the study of the text in its historical context. In the same vein, the literary analysis of the text goes beyond the grammatical study of it. It enables the interpreters to see the power of language to incisively critique the current socioeconomic and political establishment and to project an alternative to it coherent with the covenantal worldview. It shows how “prophetic imagination” subverts the world created by the official ideology and creates a new world based on hope in the fulfillment of God’s promises. Scripture is full of illustrations of the power of language to deconstruct an oppressive ideological reality and to construct an imagined reality that reflects God’s purpose for human life and for all creation.

16 There is a detailed explanation of the hermeneutical cycle in the “Hermeneutics and Culture” paper quoted above. .
18 This phrase is taken from the title of a book on prophecy by Walter Brueggemann.
In order to transpose the biblical message from its original context into the context of the modern readers or hearers so as to produce in them the same impact that it was intended to produce in the original readers or hearers, the reading of the text has to be accompanied with the reading of their contemporary situation in light of the text. While the cultural and social reading of that situation is necessary and helpful, the text enables the interpreters to discern the factors that make the new situation a reproduction of the same social reality in which the text was originated. Thus the text retains its power as a subverting critique of the ideology of the establishment and as a witness to God’s liberating alternative in every situation.

The hermeneutical cycle between the study of the text and the analysis of the social context of the readers or hearers of the biblical message makes it possible for the interpreters to articulate a theology which is both faithful to biblical revelation and relevant to their own situation at the same time. Faithful in that it seeks to do justice to the meaning of the message in its original socioeconomic and political context, using for that purpose the tools of exegesis and historical analysis. Relevant in that it addresses the questions arising from the contemporary socioeconomic and political context in light of the moral vision of Scripture.

A corollary of this hermeneutical approach is that, without ignoring the problem posed by the conflict of interpretations, we need to go back to Scripture in order to get a glimpse of the way in which God expects the church to do justice, to love mercy and to live in humility before him in today’s world. At the same time, this hermeneutical approach makes it possible for the church to fulfill its prophetic vocation in the world—a God-given task that cannot possibly be carried out without biblically-based social ethics.

Another corollary of this hermeneutical approach is that, without ignoring the fact that in today’s world every socioeconomic and political situation has something in common with every other situation, we need to recognize the need of contextual social ethics in every situation. Gone is the time when it was thought that Western theology and Western ethics were the standard for the whole world, equally valid everywhere outside the West as they were in their original context. The time has come to read Scripture in light of every local situation and to read every local situation in light of Scripture.

The Christ-event as the basis for social ethics
One way to approach the question of the biblical basis for social ethics is to take as the starting point the “Christ-Event,” including Christ’s life and ministry, his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his exaltation. Each of these salvation events points towards the personal and social dimensions of the mission of the church as the community that has been called to prolong Jesus’ mission as salt and light of the world throughout history.

The life and ministry of Jesus and social ethics. As N. T. Wright has cogently argued, historical integrity in talking about Jesus is essential to authentic Christianity; “we cannot retreat into a private world of ‘faith’ which history cannot touch (what sort of a god would we be ‘believing’ in if we did?)” A cursory analysis of the story narrated in the Gospels against its historical background prevents us from conceiving him as a “depoliticized” Jesus, isolated from the imperial realities and the power struggles and conflicts that characterized Palestine at that time, under the dominion of the Roman Empire and the ruling authority of the Temple and its high priesthood in Jerusalem.

19 N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 122
When the historical task is taken seriously, the conclusion is unavoidable that Jesus had a political agenda which stood in sharp contrast with other political agendas open to Jews in his day, such as those of the Sadducees, the sect of Qumran, the Pharisees, and Zealots. He claimed that, in his own person and work as the Servant-Messiah announced by the Old Testament prophets the Kingdom of God was breaking into history—a kingdom of justice and peace to be manifested first in Israel as God’s covenant people, and then in the whole world. The coming of the Kingdom was the substance of the euangelion that he proclaimed, the good news on the basis of which he challenged his hearers to repent and believe and thus become members of the Kingdom movement which was gathering around him. His call was not for people to become religious or to withdraw from the world. His call was to pledge allegiance to him as Israel’s representative sent by God for the renewal of the chosen nation and the salvation of the world, and to participate with him in the task of implementing his political-agenda—an agenda focused on the Kingdom of God and subversive of other political agendas.

What made Jesus’ Kingdom-agenda offensive especially to the leaders of the Jewish establishment was that it claimed that the fulfillment of God’s purpose for Israel—a nation called to be the light of the world in the practice of justice, mercy, and humility before God—had nothing to do with the preservation of Jewish identity or with national liberation; instead, it was being accomplished through his own life and mission. That meant giving up their own agendas and powerful Jewish symbols, such as Sabbath-keeping, dietary laws, land and family, and the Temple, and accepting God’s agenda mediated through his Servant-Messiah and summarized in what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6-7). It meant opting for the power of love instead of the love of power, opting for hunger and thirst for justice instead of the love of money, opting for pleasing God instead of the approval of one’s neighbor. It meant adopting a kingdom lifestyle that would reproduce the image of the Son of Man who “came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Jesus’ cross and social ethics. The cross represents the culmination of Jesus’ surrender in submission to the will of God for the redemption of humankind. “He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). This is at the very heart of the gospel. The theological significance of Jesus´ crucifixion, however, must not be separated from the incidents that preceded that horrid episode. Historically, his crucifixion was the result of the growing hostility that his ministry—which significantly enough was carried out mainly among the poor—provoked on the part of the high-priestly


establishment and the Pharisees. His death was the way to get rid of someone whose prophetic teaching and action was good news to the poor and had thus became a threat to the establishment. And it was the kind of shameful death that Rome reserved for political subversives.

From this perspective, the cross does not only point to the way in which “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8), but also represents the cost of faithfulness to God’s call to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God. During his earthly ministry, when Jesus called people to follow him, he called them to take up the cross, to embrace his vocation, to accept the risk involved in his political alternative—the “upside-down kingdom”—willing even to die. When he sent his disciples out on their mission he warned them that suffering would be a constituent part of their mission even as it was for his (Mt 10:22, 24-25). It would not be fortuitous or accidental, but the logical consequence of membership in the community of followers of the way of the Suffering Servant—the community of cross-bearing people, called to live as Jesus himself lived.

The cross was also the means whereby, according to Paul, Christ broke down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, thus creating a new humanity, one body (Eph 2:14-16). The church therefore is called to provide a glimpse, both in its life and in its message, of a new humanity that in anticipation incarnates God’s plan—the plan which will be brought to fruition in “the fullness of time,” namely, “to gather up all things, things in heaven and things on earth” in Christ (Eph 1:10).

The resurrection of Jesus and social ethics. The resurrection of Jesus is also at the very core of the Christian faith and the Christian life. It was an act of God through which justice was vindicated over against the powers of darkness which were behind Jesus’ crucifixion. By raising Jesus from the dead God not only displayed his power but demonstrated that “the rulers of this age . . . are doomed to perish” (1 Cor 2:6) and that Jesus’ way—his Kingdom politics—is the right way. It was thus confirmed that the coming of the long awaited Kingdom of justice and peace did not depend on human political schemes, but on God’s wisdom and power embodied in his crucified Messiah.

According to God’s plan, the church’s agenda in relation to the world is derived from Jesus’ agenda in relation to Israel in his own day, and the fulfillment of that plan depends on the power with which Jesus was raised from the dead—the power of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the dawn of a new day in the history of salvation. It has confirmed that his sacrifice succeeded in overcoming not only the powers of darkness but also the fatal consequence of sin, which is death. For those who put their trust in him, therefore, death does not have the last word. Because death has been vanquished, Christian hope in God’s final victory has a solid foundation.

The risen Christ is the first fruits of the great harvest, a new humanity. By his resurrection he has begun a new era—a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17); he has introduced into history a principle of life which guarantees the permanent validation of all that the church does through the power of the Spirit for the cause of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God—the only cause that has a future.

The exaltation of Jesus and social ethics. From the perspective of the New Testament, Jesus Christ has been exalted as Lord of all creation. Having been crucified, he has been raised, and “God has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Ac 2:36). As Lord and Messiah, he has sent the
Holy Spirit to make the mission of the church possible. Even after the crucifixion and the resurrection, however, the apostles were still clinging to those nationalist aspirations which had prompted them to follow Jesus from their first encounter and right up to his crucifixion. Jesus’ reply to their question, whether the time had come for him to establish an earthly Jewish kingdom (Acts 1:6), sets in relief the combination of factors which are going to come into play in salvation history after the ascension of Jesus Christ: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7, 8).

According to Luke these are Jesus’ final words before his ascension. They include the fifth account of the “Great Commission” in which the missiology of the whole book of Acts is summarized in narrative form. Beginning in Jerusalem, the gospel spreads first to the adjacent areas, Judea and Samaria, and then progresses until it arrives in Rome. In the whole process, the church occupies a vital place, but her mission is not merely a human project—it is Jesus’ mission being extended in history in the power of the Holy Spirit. As such it is brought to fruition, not only by what the witnesses to Jesus say, but also by what they are and do on behalf of the Kingdom which was inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

At Pentecost the enthroned “Lord and Messiah” sends his Holy Spirit to equip the church for the purpose of forming in all nations communities of disciples with a Kingdom moral vision. The universal horizons of the mission are foreshadowed by the presence in Jerusalem of “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) on the day of Pentecost. The risen Christ, to whom the Spirit bears witness, has been anointed to reign and put his enemies under his feet. With the exaltation of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a new era has been inaugurated in salvation history—the era of the Spirit, which is at the same time the era of the church called to prolong Jesus’ mission of justice and peace throughout history.

Jesus’ promise to his apostles that he would be with them always, “to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20)—a promise which accompanied his commission to make disciples of all nations—is fulfilled through the presence of the Spirit and the Word, the combination that made possible the existence of the church and the success of her mission as the witness to the politics of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of the world.

Finally, Acts 2:41-47 clearly shows that the result of the Pentecost experience is no ghetto-church, devoted to cultivating individualistic religion. On the contrary, it is a community of the Spirit, a community that becomes a center of attraction, “having the good will of all the people” (v. 47), because it incarnates the values of the Kingdom of God and affirms, by what it is, by what it does, and by what it says, that Jesus Christ has been exalted as Lord over every aspect of life, including economics. It is a missionary community which preaches reconciliation with God and the restoration of all creation by the power of the Spirit. It is a community which provides a glimpse of the birth of a new humanity, and in which can be seen, albeit “in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:12), the fulfillment of God’s plan for all humankind.

From a biblical perspective, the basis for Christian social ethics is the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and with power; who “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38); who died on a cross as a victim of worldly politics; who was raised from the dead and
exalted by God as Lord and King of all creation. Without the political meaning of that story, Christians are left without the narrative through which the Spirit of God enables them to live as the servant people “on whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11), called by God to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

**Social ethics and the subverting of the empire**

It is my considered opinion that one of the most urgent theological tasks today is the articulation of a Christian social ethics which will provide guidance for the life and mission of the church in the context of an empire that has institutionalized injustice on a global scale. The appalling figures that I quoted at the beginning of this lecture are only a symptom of the socioeconomic and political disorder that characterizes today’s world under the *Pax Americana*.

An excellent illustration of the kind of theological work that is needed today in the context of the present world disorder is *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* by Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat—a milestone in the history of biblical commentaries. Serious exegetical work, scholarly knowledge of ancient history, in-depth cultural and political analysis of our contemporary world, and amazingly creative writing are combined to produce in today’s readers the same kind of life-transforming impact that *Colossians* must have produced among its original readers. Already in the Preface the authors clearly express their conviction that “Paul’s letter to the Colossians will only be read with integrity in our time when the radical vision of Christian faith encountered in this text engenders a similarly alternative way of life in our midst.”

The result is a commentary that keeps theology and social ethics closely knit together and succeeds in challenging the readers not merely to an intellectual assent to Christian doctrine but to a life that reflects their submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life. This is accomplished not by discarding the historical-grammatical approach to hermeneutics generally applied in traditional commentaries, but by going beyond it in order to hear Colossians anew in relation to their own cultural context. “Ours is a cultural, political, social and ecological reading of this text,” the authors say, “because these are the kind of questions that our friends and our students ask.”

On the one hand, on the basis of careful historical study, the authors make an effort to discern the worldview of Asia Minor in the first century. The usual approach to the study of the letter to the Colossians has given a great deal of attention to the nature of the “Colossian heresy”—described in 2:8 as “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” against which the recipients of the letter are warned. In contrast, Walsh and Keesmaat take as their starting point that “All Christians [including those living in Colossae] at this time would have found themselves confronted with the worldview of empire.” The conscious awareness of that historical fact makes possible for them what Hays has called “an integrative act of the imagination,” necessary for “the task of hermeneutical appropriation.”

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23 Ibid. p.8
24 Ibid. p. 58
According to Walsh and Keesmaat the marks of empire, illustrated by the Roman Empire, are four: (1) Systemic centralization of power. (2) Socioeconomic and military control: an economics of oppression. (3) Powerful myths: the Pax Romana. (4) Imperial images that capture the people’s imagination. A deep knowledge of the original context of Colossians, including the historical background of daily life bearing these marks of empire, provides the basis for the authors’ explanation of the meaning that certain words and images in Paul’s letter, such as “peace”, “hope”, “gospel”, “image of God”, “the whole world”, and “fruitfulness” probably had for the original readers. It becomes clear that these readers were challenged by the Apostle not to live according to the worldview of empire shaped by the story of Rome, but according to “an alternative imagination” shaped by the story of Israel and the story of Jesus, “who was crucified by the empire and rose to proclaim God’s new rule, manifest in communities that sold all they had so that none would have need”. These stories gripped their imaginations and provided them “a compelling critique of life in the empire.”

This critique constitutes the core of this socially perceptive reading of Colossians. Such reading, however, is not restricted to the reading of the text in its own historical context, but it is also, on the other hand, the reading of the text in the context of contemporary imperial realities. Quite rightly, the authors claim that we, as biblical interpreters, are not called to repeat, line by line and over and over, a completed script. Rather, we are called to see ourselves as participants in a continuing story—the story of the people of God.

This hermeneutical approach succeeds in keeping theology and social ethics together. There is in it a dialectical interplay between the past and the present—between the meaning of the text for the Colossian Christians living under the Roman Empire and the meaning of the text for Christians living under the American Empire. From this interplay emerges a moral vision which is just as subversive to the worldview of Pax Americana in the twentieth-first century as it was to the worldview of Pax Romana in the first century.

What makes this fusion of horizons possible is that the study of the historical past goes hand in hand with the critical analysis of today’s cultural context. On the basis of this analysis the authors discern in today’s predominant worldview the same old marks of empire. Read in light of this worldview of empire Colossians becomes again “an explosive and subversive tract.”

Walsh’s and Keesmaat’s commentary is a good demonstration that there is not possible to have a biblical social ethic without the risk involved in naming the powers. All throughout it the readers are challenged to discern the “dynamic analogies” between life in Paul’s world under Caesar’s rule and life in a world under the thrall of the Pentagon, the transnational corporations, the international financial organizations and many other “contemporary parallels to the rulers and authorities that put Jesus on the cross.” For the authors, these “systemic centralizations of power”, which foster the imperial globalization that marks the world today, “dictate the social policy of dependent countries, ensuring that it favors the corporations of the North to the detriment of local people, economies and land.” The myth of Pax Romana, based on economic and military control, is replaced in our day by Pax Americana with its myth of progress and “its clear distinction between good and evil and its self-righteous and aggressive foreign policy.” The “Corporate logos and corporate advertising [that] not only

26 Walsh and Keesmaat, ibid., p.64.
27 Ibid. p.7.
28 Ibid. p.8.
29 Ibid. p. 61
shape the public space in our culture but also permeate our private lives” have taken the place of the imperial images, including the images of the Caesar, which “dominated both private and public space in the Roman empire.”

Christians in the first century were called to subvert the empire through an alternative imagination based on the stories of Israel and Jesus. We are called to do the same today in our own situation. The question is whether we are prepared to let our lives be molded not by the idolatrous lies of the empire but by the biblical story—the story of God’s dealings with humankind to create a world where people embody justice, mercy, and humility before God.

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30 Ibid. p.62, 63.