

WE ARE PEOPLE OF THE WAY

An Impression of the Final Session of the Conference

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“What should we do then?” This was the urgent question of the people after hearing the penetrative message of the prophet John the Baptist (Luke 3). The same question was inevitable after hearing all the preceding papers and discussions that treated our situation as Christians in our time from different angles. A final plenary session with the 160 participants out of 25 different nations was held to address, summarize and connect the most important issues brought up during the conference. A panel prepared and presented an outline for this final session. Panel members were: conference chairman Henk Geertsema (The Netherlands), Bob Goudzwaard (The Netherlands), Elsa de Powell (Argentina) and Bong Ho Son (Korea). Their outline consisted of two main points: 1. Analysis and understanding, and 2. Calling and perspective. Both points were subdivided in three aspects. Henk Geertsema chaired this final session. Not a full transcription but an impression is provided here of the presentation of the six points by the panel as well as the subsequent discussion.

1. *Analysis and understanding*

1a. *In how far are technology, the market-economy and the idea of democracy the core of the Western world and of the global situation? In how far is this an ideology from a Western perspective?*

Son (Korea): This first point has to provide an analysis of our current situation to get grips on what are the important issues. The scheme of core and periphery was raised in my opening lecture. It tries to characterize the global development. The core of the societies in all countries with a certain degree of development consists of democracy, market-economy and technology. They became the main instruments of power. These powers make up the core of every culture. Are they inevitably wrong? No, since they also provide liberation, e.g., technology in the kitchen and in medicine. Technology as such is not evil. This is especially true for democracy, because it helps to prevent corruption. However, the powers have an inherent temptation to become corrupt. They are highly competitive and therefore also other parties want power, and consequently a process starts with its own dynamics. Powers become idols. A fair distribution of wealth is prevented by this idolatry and it therefore causes misery.

Maggay (Philippines): I criticize this scheme. Not as a social description of how the world is, but as a conceptual framework to analyze the present

situation. There are other important things in culture than economy and technology. Those 'softer' aspects do not belong to the periphery of a culture but are essential.

Wendy Helleman (Russia): The point is that there is a deep struggle going on, for example in Russia between Eastern and Western elements. What Son identified as the core is true for the Western world. It can also be recognized in a similar way in Russia, but it is primarily the case in the West.

Turaki (Nigeria): Yes, it is true that the Western notion of time, democracy and technology became normative for the whole world. It ranks cultures from primitive to complex. I cannot accept this. We cannot impose our own culture on others.

Son (Korea): I want to distinguish between a *de facto* description and a *de jure* statement. I do not want to say that I like the core. It is simply there and **undeniable** for all societies. However, it is certainly not normative.

1b. *In relation to development a distinction is necessary between what is a historical norm (cf. Dooyeweerd about differentiation, integration and individualization) and the realization of these norms.*

Geertsema (The Netherlands): This thesis is necessary to understand our calling, for our right perspective. The common theory of development was for a long time a modernization theory that could be applied everywhere. The West was simply ahead, and the others would follow. This theory faced a strong critique: How is it possible in combination with a diversity of cultures? And is the alternative for this thesis the plurality of cultures? In that case the globalization as it is taking place must be considered as evil. But also other cultures want to share our progress. We have a notion of the dynamics of creation with elements like integration. However, integration became dominance by the West. Unity of mankind, which is intended in creation, is different from the integration that we face today. The importance of the individual has biblical roots: individualization is therefore not purely negative, but the way it has been developed was perverse. Dooyeweerd's theory of cultural differentiation, integration and individualization can not be identified with the real development since it tries to express norms. There is a relation between this normative aspect and the actual development, which is the perspective of the Kingdom of God, of the future when norms will be fully realized. What is now happening are the labour pains of the coming of the Kingdom. This perspective can not be understood by only focusing on the diversity of cultures.

Maggay (Philippines): Reformational thinking as founded by Dooyeweerd helped me a lot. But his concept of development is an unfortunate way of looking. In Scripture we find that also other cultures develop. The Tower of

Babel was an organized way of integration, but we find also Pentecost with its different languages. God has given boundaries between cultures. The direction of the development of the West would not have had the same impact if other cultures could also develop. This was the worst effect of industrialization. The reality of colonialization implies that we can not simply turn back the clock. But that does not mean that there is only one way of development.

Quadros Gouvea (Brazil): No, integration is inevitable, but at the same time we do not want to loose diversity because of its inherent richness. We need unity and diversity to work together. We should not leave cultures to develop by themselves. It should work via integration. We all want to have the same standard of living, but in our own cultural way of doing it. Different ethnic groups want to be heard and respected. We should reach toward unity, but the question is how.

Turaki (Nigeria): The gospel helps us to affirm who we are. Therefore during the struggle for independence in the colonies, the leading figures were Christians. For integration development theories did never work. What we are looking for is not theory but dialogue, in the way of listening to what is good and bad in ourselves and in the other. In this way we can cross the boundaries between cultures.

Geertsema (The Netherlands): I do not want the Western theoretical model to be unified, but we should also not only look from the perspective of the diversity of cultures and how this is under tension because of Western imperialism, because in that way we can not move forward. Diversity should not become a goal in itself since this will lame us.

1c. *What are the core issues in our global situation: poverty, political oppression, unjust economic relationships, the thrive for technical control of every aspect of reality, the power of the international corporations?*

3:18 *Goudzwaard (The Netherlands)*: This week I was reminded again and again about the passage in the letter of Paul to the Ephesians about the understanding of Gods will. He wrote there, in Chapter 4, that only with all God's people, that only with all saints, you begin to understand something of the breadth and the length and the height and the depth of the Kingdom of God and of the love of Christ. One person or one culture can obviously not grasp the glory of God. There is no monopoly on wisdom; we need each other to know the dimensions. This can perhaps be illustrated by noticing that already in the art of singing an African choir differs from a European choir. Africans sing as a community while in European choirs individuals sing together and try to produce harmony. The community perspective is a legitimate perspective in God's creation, while the self-perspective is typical for the West. Communities are needed to show the richness of God's Kingdom. As the book of Revelation also states: The nations will bring in

their specific treasures in the Kingdom. Every culture therefore has its own dignity. A well-known cultural antropologist of the Free University of Amsterdam, professor Onvlee, however once, made the correct remark that you can only make such a statement if you are willing to add at the same time that every culture has also its own lack of dignity. 'For all alike have sinned, and are derived from the divine splendour' (Romans 3). I think that only in that double awareness you can really begin to communicate with each other, because it creates openness to listen to corrections.

Globalization is the highest expression of modernization. And it goes on in this modern way. Modernity itself is however a clear expression of Western culture. Modernity is built on the security based on human rational insight. It tends therefore to exploit nature to assure the self-perspective. Rational construction is so to say the landmark of modern Western culture. But in such a dynamistic program of self-realisation easily something new occurs which you can compare with the situation within a space ship: If the dynamic situation becomes the normal situation, it seems that the environment (the others) is lagging behind. In this way old cultures are seen from the viewpoint of modern Western culture as less developed, because development itself has become the final yardstick. This attitude is also evident in the way elderly persons are usually seen in the West: as so-called 'in-active' people, less in worth because they are less productive. From this perspective also an expression like "Limits to growth" becomes understandable: nature is no longer seen as a life-giving mother, but primarily seen as something that constrains you. Also families and communities are often treated as hindrances for real progress. This all illustrates that Western culture has also a lack of dignity, and that we can trace this back in the present dominant style of globalization.

Griffioen (The Netherlands): It is important to stress the burden of diversity. This is evident in Babel that shows the curse of diversity. The problem is that this burden seems to be a blessing. This idolatry is the core issue. It is true that there is a liberating power in universality. However, true universality is only given in Christ, as we can read in Galatians 3:28. We have to surrender our diversity and receive it back in another quality. What we see world-wide is a bunking of diversity but this is also idolatry. We can only transcend it, in Christ as is expressed in Galatians. This should be our answer to the Tower of Babel.

Alan Storkey (United Kingdom): The core issue is the spreading of the gospel in the different cultures. The gospel is spreading in the Third World, which is good news. The West appears to be strong. However, according to the gospel the West is very weak indeed. Let's identify it. Many Western people are addicted to television. This is a weak position. The West is selling arms, which is also a weak position. Families in the West fall to pieces, which reveals cultural weakness. The West seems strong through a control of other economies: This is a weak position. Democracy became a passive

consumer democracy. The spreading of the good news finds many obstacles in the West. We are over-impressed by the West. It is a myth. It is the gospel which is strong in the East and in the West.

Vingo (Philippines): The gospel, the good news is Christ himself, not what is declared by white missionaries. We should focus on Christ.

Goudzwaard (The Netherlands): Self-chosen growth may be an object of idolatry, especially if it is achieved at all cost. Versus extreme goal-orientations like these, Christians have always to remember, that their first name, mentioned in the Acts was not 'Christians', but "People of the way". This implies the relativity of self-set targets, the target of growth included. The extreme goal-orientation is indeed not the strength but a weakness of the West, and it comes back in all its ideologies. An absolutized orientation on economic and technological progress, as we see now, ruins however in the long run its own presuppositions because it affects and dismantels the care which exists in family structures and can even erode the sense of morality. Therefore dynamics comes in a deadlock. In contrast to this autonomous type of self-chosen dynamics the church should in my view not preach one or another kind of idealism. She should be found at the side of realism, warning against the dangerous risks of this in fact very idealistic type of development.

Son (Korea): This is still abstract to me. Technology, market-economy and democracy are realities. People are starving and are being tortured. That is the real problem. To liberate them we need power, but that is not possible. We have only our moral power and ideals, but hard reality does not leave space for us. We should not lose sight of this.

2. *Calling and perspective*

2a. *How can we find a balance between the needed radical prophetic critique and doing justice to the complexity of the situation?*

De Powell (Argentina): In this community of Christians I feel free to speak since I know that I will be forgiven. My husband and I invited university students to our home. We discussed the complexity of church life and the difficult situations within the university. We faced the problem of surviving, but the church community is still strong. I believe in the church. She provides community as well as individuality in relationships. The complexity of life creates for us challenges. Different factors are involved in a strong critique of Western life. It is true that modern civilization is one of the fruits of Christianity which produced technology. Critique has to think from the meaning of the risen Christ for all cultures. Postmodernity holds many views on history, but in Christ there is one. From this core all our individual small stories can be linked together.

Geertsema (The Netherlands): Heidegger's thinking is an illustration of a radical critique. Also Christian critique is radical. However, here there are different stories that have different elements with one common theme. This diversity expresses the complexity of life. There is not a single verdict. You need different narratives with different angles to make the situation clear.

Schuurman (The Netherlands): I have a personal struggle as a Christian philosopher. How can I get a balance? I am often interpreted as critical, but that is not the case. Our technological society has a deficit of ethics and is ruled by the ethics of control, the norms of technology, of efficiency and effectivity. Therefore I want to stress the ethics of love. It is very important to strive for different motives, to provide other answers. Love is not aiming at uniformity or universality but is always related to the minority and to diversity. We can not love mass man but only individuals. The ethics of love helps us not to look negative to technology and to provide a more holistic approach to overcome one-sidedness to bring more diversity in technological development: loving God, our neighbour and creation.

Hiemstra (Canada): We have not yet talked about the growing power of organizations like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Their bureaucrats are sometimes Christians and friends of us that work in those organizations. We have a connection with them. Some sat in my class at Calvin College and now sometimes approach the throne of Alan Greenspan. How do we talk to them? How do we treat their concerns?

Goudzwaard (The Netherlands): In several international organizations and multinationals we can see the wish for normativity and disclosure. That companies do have an own inalienable social responsibility is now more accepted than, let us say, ten years ago. Several firms are willing to open themselves, and also the attitude of churches looks to be changed. In the General Assembly of Canberra the Ecumenical movement for instance coined the expression: 'mission in foreign structures', instead of just taking the line of protest or open confrontation against specific entrepreneurial activities.

Son (Korea): Complexity should surely be taken into account. But suppose that somebody is thrown into the water and is drowning. In that urgent situation we have no time to examine the complexity of all different aspects but we will pull him out of the water. People are suffering. It is clear what the priority is and what we should do.

Geertsema (The Netherlands): Helping the poor and the starving structurally is in practice difficult. A lot of powers have to be fought. To help them is our concern but also how to be effective. We have to find a balance and radical critique is not sufficient. This balance depends on our own specific calling and situation.

2b. *What does it imply for our Christian life style? What is exactly the practical Christian life that is needed? In what sense should we as Christians especially in the West, distanciate us from the Western culture and its powers to be credible as a witness to the gospel of Christ? Do we need inner asceticism; how does this affect our involvement in all areas of life and on the different levels of involvement (globally and locally)?*

Goudzwaard (The Netherlands): The most important point is how and how far to take distance. My first reaction to this question is that, how controversial it may look, indeed some degree of real distance from our acquisitive societies is needed in this time: The gospel came in Western culture. It had thousand years to show to the world what it could imply. But Europe became as a consequence of that not only the continent of good medical care, democracies and beautiful music. It became also a continent of the rise of two world wars and of the origins of colonial imperialism. Apparently the gospel not only mobilized possibilities of the good but also, by creating freedom and liberty, deepens the possibilities for evil. Therefore the primary question for Western Christians should not be: How to contribute together to the coming of a somewhat better world and to produce plans to realise that. After a thousand years we have first to start with a confession. Namely that there is and has been a solidarity in sinning, which Christians share with others. We can not only point to Renaissance and Enlightenment. Christianity knew the gospel but did not really listen. If you are not including yourself in this situation, you cannot find a solution. — So there is no reason for pride. Western culture received a thousand years of possibilities to form a responsible, God-and-man-answering culture, but failed in many ways in the fulfilment of that task. We have to see Christ not only as a saviour for Christians, but as a saviour of the whole world: 'Nun komm der Heiden Heiland', now comes the saviour of the heathens, is the title of one of the most beautiful chorales of Bach.

This also leads me to connect the importance of a renewed 'way-orientation' with the theme of asceticism. The orientation on a Way or a Road is not blind for where you may end, but nevertheless very different from usual projects to construct a better modern world. For it is primarily listening and considering how to be or to become more obedient in this moment and in relation to sometimes very complex situations. The first step of this orientation is to listen to what justice and God's love asks from us in our current situation and also in the present global setting. This first step will give us information which adds to our stock of information and thus make new steps possible. Therefore a real Way-orientation always implies: going step by step. Because Someone is guiding us on that way. This is different from the logic of this world. The logic of the Way-orientation is: Trust that if you begin in justice and love, than a follow-up will be possible.

Let me give an example. The reduction of the debt of the poorest nations is more than a moral obligation. These societies can not continue in this way, captured under the pressure of almost eternal burdens. Rich countries have

therefore to provide space for these other countries, just by doing themselves a step backwards. But that is not only an element of healthy economic logic. For similar elements of withholding love or restraint are visible in the life and work of Jesus Christ, who was willing to give his life to us. Therefore this has also to be the style of Christian persons and nations. C.S. Lewis wrote the book *Till We Have Faces*. In this book someone wants to accuse the gods about all what they did wrong in life. However, at the very moment that she gets the chance to formulate her accusation she begins to understand that she herself needs a face to deliver such an address. You need a face to be able to address God. In my opinion, Western society lost most of its face. As an adult you should have a face and thus stand in maturity for the consequences of all our actions. Western people and Western society try however to escape most of these consequences by saying: "The market has done its job". Or: "The wrong structures of society have to be abused". But in this way we hide our face, our responsibility.

If Christians would indeed take their responsibility for what is now going on in the world, and acknowledge the consequences of what for instance is now happening with our natural environment, and would be willing to see that there is a relationship between the increasing poverty of several nations and the continuous enrichment of other, richer nations, then they also would agree that this implies for them in honesty elements of restraint, of withholding in their now usually far too consumeristic lifestyles. Because only in that way you can become obedient to a path, in which also 'the spirality of life' gets a chance. We are now in a spirality of death: The environmental problem deepens the poverty problem, poverty leads to migration, migration leads to destruction of the environment, et cetera. But there exists for the same reason also a spirality of life. In this dynamics of disclosure the willingness to hear the cries of the poor may also turn out to have beneficial effects for the solution of environmental problems, and will certainly diminish the urgency and the related problems of heavy flows of migration. If problems are linked, then also their solutions do. Steps on the way can support each other, and together lead us out of the present impasse.

Son (Korea): Mammon is the most important power. Christians should to be different from this world by showing in concrete action that they are not worshipping Mammon. That is why I emphasize the simple life style. Not only to save money, but to show the world that we are not slaves of the money. And maybe the poor in other parts in the world will benefit from it. Another thing that I stressed in my opening address was the importance of a network of NDO's. This is to show our solidarity with those who suffer under dictatorship and other powers. In Korea we experienced the benefit of these organizations. In the 60s and 70s, when dictators ruled in Korea, the World Council of Churches did much for the democratization of Korea because they supported freedom. Therefore the government could not suppress the Korean freedom fighters. We can do similar things.

Geertsema (The Netherlands): That means that after thousand years there is still an expectation of Christianity? This responsibility is felt more in North America than in Europe because of a deep disappointment of European Christianity. Christianity in the West can not just launch Christian teaching, but has to recreate it in its basics: What does it mean to live on the basis of mercy and forgiveness? Somehow Christianity has to go through a period of understanding, before it can have the spiritual power that you are looking for.

Son (Korea): I can understand that very well and sometimes I fear that. Christians in the West are always apologising: We have done wrong and we made mistakes in the past, and things like that. I appreciate that and it is very important indeed. However, it should lead to action. There is more potential power in the Western part than in other parts of the world. It is their system that rules the world; they have resources. We have to overcome self-reflection and start to work. It is urgent.

Elaine Storkey (United Kingdom): I want to tell two stories from England. It is meant to concretize the things that you are saying. The first story is about an event that took place in Manchester four weeks ago. Ten thousand young people had a conference in the town. When they got there, the leaders of conference had asked the poorest housing estates: What can we do to help? They send the young people to remove all the garbage from the streets, to paint the doors, et cetera, for the whole week. The youngsters did not expect this from their week conference. Youngsters from that poor estate scorned them first, but at end of the week they went with them to hear the gospel. Eleven hundred from that estate became Christians. It changed their lives.

Story two is about a young student who was in contact with globalization issues for a long time and worked hard for the international scene. He also thought: What can I do to be more effective? He now uses a magazine as a platform for seven thousand students. Now every issue of the magazine contains information on one transnational co-operation. This creates a dialogue.

Haak (The Netherlands): I am impressed by what Goudzwaard said about the Way-orientation. What we need is a perspective of the Kingdom and the way of Christ through reconciliation, resurrection and Pentecost. These three events can lead our rethinking and provide redirection. This is the Way. It is a coming from Christ through Pentecost to the world. We can not predict it.

Goudzwaard (The Netherlands): The basic problem is a lack of affirmation. Also by other cultures. There is no inferiority. The mainstream of modernism implies that nature is to be controlled. It states that women as part of nature are in need of guidance by males. Christ speaks in a language of affirmation. The way-orientation implies an enormous relief because the

outcome is guaranteed by Someone other than myself. I have only the responsibility for the first step that I take. The way is under control. It is not our way.

Son (Korea): The reason why Korean leaders tried to copy America is because they were disappointed in their own culture. Communism was both a curse and a blessing to China. A curse, because it suppresses Christians. A blessing, because it has broken the Chinese cultural pride. And only in that way the gospel can come in. In Asia Christians are very disappointed with their own traditional culture. In Korea Christians also worship Mammon, because they see that American churches are prosperous. Prosperity-theology dominates Korea and Asia. America is the model. We should be more critical on American culture and some of their churches.

2c. *Should we understand our calling primarily in terms of creation and redemption or in terms of the coming Kingdom of which we are promised that signs will be given by God if we act faithfully in His service?*

Geertsema (The Netherlands): This theme was not explicit in our conference up to now. I started this conference by reading Revelation 4 and 5 in which you have both the perspective of creation — God on his throne and creation to praise him — and redemption: Christ and His Kingdom. We should end here by putting the whole again in this right perspective. Reformational philosophy has the tendency to think in terms of the creation perspective: Creation is fallen and needs redemption. Unconsciously there might be therefore the idea that somehow with our activity we redeem the world. And in that way you feel powerless against the powers that are around us. Could it not be possible that the perspective of the coming Kingdom brought by God and the corresponding signs can be visible to direct us to what is coming? This can be very liberating as a perspective to live and work as Christians.

Son (Korea): What are the right efforts for the problems? We should be conscious of the dangers of overconsumption. I work with the principle of prophetic pessimism. Like that of the biblical prophets. They did their utmost to preach conversion. They knew very well that they would fail and yet they did their best. I use this to be saved from disappointment. In most cases I will not succeed. You can also call it prophetic optimism, because God will ultimately triumph, not through our efforts, although he uses us as instruments.

Goudzwaard (The Netherlands): In the New Church in Delft that we visited during the conference the Dutch royal family is buried. It happened during the service of queen Wilhelmina's burial that the pastor who lead the service, Rev Forget, held a sermon in which he explained that the belief in Christ falls short if it only speaks about the past and the present, because

Jesus as the King of the Earth stands and will stand at the end or horizon of all of our ways: the personal and the political, the economic and the social. Of all aspects of life — family, economy, technology, politics — the archè and telos is Christ. The unity which is provided by the present style of globalization is different from that, so maybe that we should speak of Gods own globalization, which is the coming of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He stands at the end as the King. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it also in his *Ethics*: we are living in the before-last, “das Vorletzte”, because we should be living from the meaning which is coming from the end and not only that of the beginning. The reign of this coming Shepherd King implies not the survival of the fittest but the rescue of the weakest. It is this stronger globalization which once will conquer the world, and in which light we already have to live now and here. ←

Geertsema (The Netherlands): We will end our conference here. The conclusion of the conference is a kind of witness. An expression of where we live for. We will read Revelation 21.

We were together these days to assess our situations as Christians from different parts of the world. I was sometimes overwhelmed by the suffering, evil and injustice and also by the complexity of the interrelations of economy, family, technology and politics. What shall we do then? We can not provide one universal answer. The concrete answer in our own situation can not be decided for one another. We have to understand one another and our calling in Christ. We were here together to encourage one another and to learn from one another. And also to listen to critique. There was a sense of unity and also of diversity. We were blessed with this conference. We are thankful. The basic thing that we need is to become affirmed in that perspective, that of hope and trust. That can give a real relaxation. The burden to unseal the scroll is not ours, but it is of the Lamb that is on the throne and that was slain.

Let us now pray and after that listen to a choral of Händel’s Messiah: “Worthy is the Lamb”.

After the prayer, we listened, silent and standing. All participants went home.