Advancing the Kingdom

1. Introduction: A growing preoccupation with the future

- 60% of adults in England read their horoscope every day.
- There are courses on futurology in university departments.
- There is a growth of "think tanks" at government level.
- There is increased concern about a nuclear holocaust, global warming, energy crises, etc.

We too are looking to the future, for we ***"Wait for His Son from heaven."*** (1 Thess. 1:10) But our calling is not idle speculation on the "end times", but to fulfil our calling to be **now** what the world is called to be ultimately. Together we are the presence of the future.

There has been much speculation as to timetables. Prophetic Scriptures are designed to affect the way we live **now** and enable us to become co-workers with God in achieving His plan of ***"Uniting everything together with Christ as Head"***. (Eph. 1:10)

There is a refreshing emphasis on the Kingdom of God. We rejoice that the Kingdom is a present reality and it is also a future hope. There isn't a thumb's breadth of the universe about which Jesus doesn't say, "It is Mine" and we are committed to reclaiming it all for Him.

We are beginning to understand salvation not only in individualistic terms (forgiveness of my sin, freedom from judgment and eternal life) but also in collective terms – a concern for injustice and dismantling the structures of evil that control societies and the bringing in of a new rule – the Kingdom – the rule of God.

Often our understanding of these things is retarded by a preoccupation with "the church" (church activities, decent behaviour and spiritual things). We have put "the church" as a higher priority than the Kingdom. This has often caused us to settle for the status quo in terms of society. Our focus has not been on the **purpose and goal** of the church, but on what the church **does**. How do we as "the church" (the little flock to whom the Kingdom is given) advance the Kingdom into the world? I would like to outline some answers.

2. An understanding of the cosmic powers – the "principalities and powers"

- **Who they are and what they do?**

The "principalities and powers" are supernatural agencies that resist the advance of the Kingdom of God and oppress human life. The Jews understood the "powers" as personal spiritual beings that influence events on earth. In the New Testament the emphasis is not so much on who the "powers" **are**, but on what they **do**. Paul sees them as great cosmic spiritual forces that condition earthly life by controlling the structures of human existence.

Probably God originally created the "powers" as linkages between Himself and created life on earth. The state, government, culture, law, morality etc. are not just human inventions but **divinely mandated structures** in order to help preserve human life. These structures have the oversight of the great angelic beings. But **now** we don't know the "powers" in the role for which they were originally created, for now they are in rebellion against God and they oppress human beings for we are created in the image of God. They oppress us by controlling the structures and organisations that dominate and condition life in this world. They organise our ability to sin. They have sought to become gods, demanding our allegiance and ultimately our worship.

We human beings don't at **all** times and in all circumstances, show our rebellion against God. The image of God is damaged, but not destroyed – as apparently it is with the "powers". They still partly fulfil their divine mandate, but they do so by holding human life and society **away** from God, rather than **close** to Him. So the "powers" use human tradition,

accepted morality, public opinion, the state, society, political reality, "the good of the nation", patriotism, the economic situation etc. to hold life together and preserve it from falling into chaos. But in so doing they seek to keep people away from God.

It is true that we have much to learn about how human life is controlled by the "spiritual powers". But the Bible is clear, before we can see more of the Kingdom of God come, we have to move or bind these controlling powers – be they religious, intellectual (all the …ologies and …isms), racial, economic (market forces, globalisation), educational or political. If we accept the Biblical worldview of reality, the question is: how do we shift the "powers" at the level of cities/countries?

- **Three approaches to social transformation**

The approach of the Pharisees

In their early history the Pharisees often clashed with the political powers of the day. But after the death of Herod the Great (4 BC) they requested direct Roman rule. Most of them opposed the revolts of AD 66-70 that led to the destruction of Jerusalem. The Pharisees chose to infiltrate the society with truth as they saw it and humanise the harsher aspects of Roman rule.

This is the approach of many sincere Christians today – infiltrate society at different levels and quietly influence and soften contemporary structures and institutions. Jesus rejected this option as inadequate to break the control of the "powers".

The approach of the Zealots

The zealots chose the path of revolution and violence. They were at war against the Roman Empire and they eventually brought about the destruction of the city. Today among some Christians there is a belief in revolutionary theology and a desire to overthrow corrupt states. Again Jesus rejected this as an option.

The approach of the Essenes

Their approach was a non-violent withdrawal from society in order to live pure lives in the desert. The Essenes focused on personal purity and fasting and praying for their generation. The monastic movement began in the 4th century AD as a similar reaction to the worldliness of the church. But withdrawal wasn't the Lord Jesus' answer to the problem of social transformation.

The approach of the Lord Jesus to social transformation

Our Lord Jesus had a unique and breathtaking approach to disarming the "powers"! The political control of the "powers" crumbled as He welcomed both tax collectors and zealots into His apostolic team! The elitism of the Jewish male (with a "power" behind it) withered as women became His ministers (Lk. 8:1-3) and subsequently became apostles of His resurrection (Mt. 28:7-10; Jn. 20:17). The "powers" controlling the veneer of religion (but preventing people coming near to God) were exposed in the Pharisees, as tax collectors and prostitutes were named among His friends. The Lord Jesus had a bias towards the poor and so undermined the false confidence of the rich. As a result He exposed the economic "power" as false.

He refused to take up the sword and so exposed the shallow tactics of the gun and bomb to change societies. And finally, He unilaterally disarmed Himself on the Cross. He waged peace and so wins it for all of us!

The "powers" controlling the Roman Empire, the religious hierarchy and the mob, hated each other. But knowing that their true nature and their assumed false power was about to be exposed, they formed themselves into an alliance against the Lord of Glory. They determined together to destroy Him. They were afraid that the Lord Jesus would profoundly threaten their control on human society. So popular opinion, religion and law and order joined forces.

The scribes crucified Him in the name of the Mosaic Law. The priests crucified Him in the name of the temple in which they served. The Pharisees, personifying piety, crucified Him in the name of piety. Pilate, representing Roman justice and law, showed that these are worthless when called upon to do justice to the Truth Himself. Obviously, ***"None of the rulers of this age"*** understood God's wisdom and God's plan, ***"For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory."*** (1 Cor. 2:8)

But now the "powers" are unmasked as being false gods by their encounter with the True Creator God – The Lord of Glory. Suffering and the Cross disarmed the "powers" (Col. 2:15). In Jesus the "powers" are broken!

Here at the Cross (the symbol of defeat not power) is the Man who loves His enemies; the Man whose righteousness is greater than the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gave His clothes to those who took His cloak and prayed for those who despitefully used Him.

The Cross isn't a detour nor is it even a way into the Kingdom. **It is the Kingdom come!** Thus the Cross becomes not just an instrument of our salvation and liberation. It is a challenge, **"Take up the Cross and follow Me If you would my disciple be."**

3. Our past failures

We have been very naive in our assessment of the "powers". We, like the Pharisees, have tried the approach of the Pharisees and sought to infiltrate into society and ameliorate the negative influence of the "powers" on society. At times we have tried violent revolution – the Crusades, the religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. But we have found ourselves deeper under their control than ever. At times we have withdrawn from the mess like the Essenes.

We have often attacked the **form** of the "power" (i.e. education or lack of it, employment and issues like slavery and exploitation, government, law, media etc.) without attacking the demonic power behind it. We need to focus not only on the **form** but also the **spirituality** of the form. Trying to control just the form is an exercise in futility. It is like trying to eliminate air bubbles under freshly hung wallpaper. You push them down and they pop up in another place. So often we replace an evil regime only to find the next one is just as bad.

So how do we overthrow the influence of the "powers" in society? How should we advance the Kingdom of God in the societies where God has placed us?

The answer is twofold:

- We, as individuals and teams, need to live in personal freedom from the influence of the "powers" over our lives.
- We, as business people involved in social transformation, should advance the Kingdom corporately.

4. Moving into victory – living in personal freedom from the influence of the "powers"

We must refuse to yield to subtle attempts to come under the control of the "powers" such as being prejudiced against a nationality or class etc., yielding to materialism, seeking status, being sexist and being nationalistic. If we do this, their hold on our lives is broken. If we refuse to submit to the "Babylonian" lifestyle of those around us, we cease to be puppets manipulated by the "powers" and become sons of our Father who is in heaven (Mt. 5:45).

We defeat the "powers" by an inner renunciation of all the ways the "powers" control us. If we do this, we have nothing to lose.

- If the "powers" take our goods and possessions – no matter, they were only on loan from God. Protecting them is more of His business that ours.
- If the "powers" seek to destroy our influence by false rumours etc. – no matter. Our reputation is not ours to protect.

- If the "powers" threaten us and our loved ones with the fear of death – no matter. We belong to the Lord of Life and He is in control of death. He holds the keys of death and hades. (Rev. 1:18)

So we have nothing to lose. We are position-less and possession-less and completely vulnerable. That is our strength! You can't take something from someone who has nothing!

In essence, this is the message of Romans 6. We have died to the old life controlled by the "powers" and now we are emancipated into the new life of God's Son. We have to know this (Rom. 6:6). We have to reckon/consider it absolutely true (Rom.6:11) and we have to yield ourselves daily to God in His service.

It is helpful to ask ourselves some radical questions relating to how much the "powers" are influencing us. This isn't to produce a spirit of heaviness and condemnation. These questions are best asked in the context of love, humour and acceptance.

The "power" of **materialism** is strong and easily identified, so ask these questions:

- How much am I giving?
- How can I reduce my expenditure on clothes and on food?
- The Lausanne covenant says, *"One way to decide if we need something is to consider whether we use it, for we evidently don't need what we don't use."* What can we do without?
- The lives of those believers who have challenged the "powers" provide a united witness to the fact that simplicity, love and inner renunciation of material rights produces in us a true spirituality. Is this true of us?

The "powers" often have a strategy of "divide and rule". So our lives need to affirm and demonstrate that we won't tolerate divisions. As a result, everyone on a team and at a personal level rejects divisions like:

- Jew-Gentile divide – we are one people – racism and nationalism won't divide us
- Employer-employee divisions – we will work together in unity
- Male and female divisions will not exist
- East and West divisions
- Language divisions
- Age discrimination etc.

These things are not to make any difference in our relationships. So personally and as a team/church/business we will be **resistant** and **attack**. We are to demonstrate as individuals and as a team how people can live freed from the "powers". To 'mammon' our lives will display what a joy it is to be freed from their clutches. We reject nationalism by not allowing it to influence our relationships. Justice and mercy control our relationships with everyone, so we can resist social injustice and social disintegration. It is important to see that electing leaders on the basis of nationality puts us under the control of the powers.

So individually and in small teams/families/businesses/churches we can demonstrate ***"The manifold wisdom of God"*** (Eph. 3:10) to the "powers". We can demonstrate the values of the Kingdom and show that **the Kingdom is here**! These "powers" are doomed and their control of human beings is coming to an end.

5. Moving into victory: corporate advance in our businesses

- **Aggressive love exposes the "powers"**

By our lives and by our lips we will proclaim the power of the Cross. We will "preach" about the Lord Jesus and the fact that we have been emancipated from slavery to the "powers". We represent male and female, East and West etc. and we proclaim that what holds us together is God's love. The "powers" will hate it, but they won't be able to stand against us. As you pray for people, they will back off.

John Wesley: the established church was spiritually impotent – safe and protected behind its walls. In 1739 Wesley was invited by George Whitfield to Bristol to preach to miners in the open air. They had just risen against their employers. Soldiers had suppressed this uprising and many had been imprisoned. Wesley preached on that first occasion with the keen consciousness that he could be killed. About 3000 roughhewn coal miners stood before him. He preached on ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."***(Lk. 4:18)

He continued for the rest of his life in open air preaching, but they were never safe. He was frequently arrested. He preached over 50,000 times! Together with others he began to dislodge the "powers" from England. The new believers were told:

- Not to buy or sell women, men or children
- Not to return evil with evil
- Not to put on gold or expensive clothes
- Not to lay up treasure on earth

Such teaching was a major blow to the "powers" that gripped the nation. It saved England from the blood bath of a "French Revolution".

- **Wrestling with the "powers"**

The Lord Jesus has disarmed the "powers" (Col. 2:15), but we must wrestle with them. How do we do that?

- **By prayer**

  Before we can adequately shift the "powers", intercessory prayer must be a priority in our churches and our teams – including fasting. As we live in ***"holiness and godliness"*** (2 Pet. 3:11) and authority, **we** hold the balance of power and **we alone** can restrain the forces of destruction threatening to engulf us all.

  Edwin Orr said, *"History is silent about any great revivals that did not begin with prayer."* The church in Korea has grown dramatically in the last 100 years. In-depth analysis of the reasons identified a number of factors, but one factor alone seemed to be the secret – prayer. One Korean pastor said that anyone can plant a church in Korea simply because the "powers" have been broken by fervent prayer.
  [This may not be quite so true today.]

  In cities and towns we need to have continuous intercessory prayer if we are going to see breakthroughs. There is much more to discover about this – understanding how the "powers" are controlling people and specifically targeting those areas. This brings breakthroughs – people have visions – sometimes healing is the result.

- **By enduring suffering and persecution**

  If handled well, suffering and hardship can be a mechanism for defeating the "powers" and advancing the Kingdom. Paul taught us, "***Through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom."*** (Acts 14:22) This isn't gloomy pessimism, but an understanding of how the "powers" are driven back as believers pass through the fire of persecution.

  Sorrows must not be wasted. Events like disease, financial loss, betrayal, failure, unemployment, loneliness, imprisonment, persecution – all for Jesus' sake – are often used by the Holy Spirit as a guided missile against the "powers". Biographies of believers are often full of wisdom on responding well to suffering, affliction and persecution.

  These "tribulations" are not viewed as being sent by God. The Book of Job is designed to help us understand the dynamics of how tribulations defeat the "powers". Job's life becomes a battlefield. Fundamentally the issue revolves around the satanic charge that God's people love Him for what they can get out of Him. The scene opens in Heaven after Satan has been strutting to and fro in the earth. He had inspected the "powers" of

greed and violence that control the planet and he is pleased that nearly the whole world lies in his control. Satan's sneering response to God's words, ***"Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil?"*** (Job 1:8) is simply, ***"Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not made a hedge about him and about his house and about all he has on every side?"***

His accusation is that Job's commitment to God is just the obedience of expediency. He obeys God because the dividends are worth it. Satan's accusation is that such obedience is no different from that of the wicked who choose to sin and rebel because it pays well. What is his conclusion? God's Kingdom is no different to Satan's kingdom! He goes on to assert that he can prove his claim if God will withdraw His hand of blessing. Then all will see that Job's righteousness is simple expediency.

God did an amazingly risky thing. He threw down the gauntlet and challenged Satan to prove it. ***"All that he has is in your power."*** The stage is now set and Satan is confident that Job will curse God to His face.

But Job is totally ignorant of this high drama taking place in the courts of heaven and the fact that God has staked His reputation on him, until one day his world collapses. In a single afternoon the powers unleash destruction on Job. His property is destroyed. He is financially ruined. His ten children are all killed in an accident. Job's life is in tatters – his family dead and his heart broken. Stripped and naked, confused and bewildered, he affirms the goodness of God whom he has always served. The "powers" reel back under the impact of that confession. Round One!

The battle continues for the next 41 chapters. He loses his health and his friends hardly recognise him. His three "comforters" appeal to him to bend to the orthodoxy of the day and confess that God is punishing him and he is suffering as a result of his own sin.

The reality of the "powers" is unknown to Job. He has no room in his worldview other than to mistakenly attribute his tragedy to God. He felt that something had gone wrong and there was an anomaly of justice in the world. He made that amazing statement, ***"Though He kills me, yet will I trust Him. Nevertheless, I will maintain my ways before Him."*** The God whom he loves seems to have turned away from him. But now without any recompense he continues to walk in faith and love. God's confidence in Job is completely vindicated. Satan is confounded. The "powers" retreat in confusion and the Kingdom of God is revealed as that which will eventually prevail upon the earth!

As the Lord Jesus was stripped naked, hanging in agony on the Cross, the taunt of the enemy was, ***"He committed His cause to Lord; let Him deliver him. Let Him rescue Him for He delights in Him."*** (Ps. 22:48)

Yet even on the Cross, He affirms the goodness of His Father and asserts, ***"Men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generations and proclaim His deliverance to a people yet unborn."*** (Ps. 22:30-31) The "powers" of expediency and violence are disarmed.

Satan and the "powers" of the abyss contend that we are no different from the rest of the people in the world. We are religious for what we can get out of it and indeed it does pay to serve God. And it is true! God has really blessed my family and me. It really pays to serve God! What is the nature of our obedience? Once in a while God removes the hedge of protection and our world collapses – sickness, financial loss, expulsion or the martyrdom of a colleague. All seems to be stripped away and we too are bereft and naked. With Job we are bewildered and numb. Where is God? Why is this happening? **It is at this point** that we too can strike a blow at the enemy. As we affirm the goodness of the Lord and our commitment ***"To follow the Lamb wherever He goes."*** (Rev. 14:4) The nature of our obedience is revealed and the Kingdom of God is advanced.

History demonstrates that our use of power (physical or intellectual) against the "powers" will inevitably be to the advantage of the "powers". In suffering and in persecution **we feel powerless**, but at this very point of personal vulnerability we defeat the "powers" when we maintain our trust, our joy and our peace in our Loving Heavenly Father.

- **Transformation: The Cross is our only model**

We have to stand in faith. Our duty is not to bring the "powers" to their knees. That is the work of the Lord Jesus. But we must not succumb to inactivity since we share His nature through His Spirit. We are involved in His mission and His ministry of reconciliation.

After we rob the structures of society of their demonic power, they can be transformed and shaped by the Holy Spirit into vehicles of justice, well being and peace. **It is quite impossible to dislodge the "powers" by socio-political action or by transformational business or development.** But once we have evacuated them supernaturally, we need to work hard if we intend to bring more of the Kingdom into that people and that culture.

The evangelism and prayer of John Wesley and many others in the Evangelical Awakening in the 18th century broke the spiritual forces lying behind institutions like slavery, child labour and prostitution. This cleared the ground for the parliamentary efforts of William Wilberforce in relation to slavery; Lord Shaftsbury in relation to labour laws relating to children; Robert Raikes in relation to public schools and William Booth in relation to poverty and prostitution.

It is crucial that we are utterly committed to tackle **supernaturally** the **inner essence** of the structures and systems that hold people groups in their power. The external outer form is easily visible – political systems, officials, laws etc. It requires spiritual discernment to identify "the inner spirit" or driving force that animates and regulates the outer form. Only if we attack **both** the outer form – i.e. corruption – and the "inner power" will we see the transformation of society.

So the conflict will continue. The fight will grow fierce. The "powers" are more evil than we can ever comprehend and Satan is angry because he knows his time is getting short. **But** the Holy Spirit within us witnesses that this present evil age is mortally wounded and soon a great voice from the throne will be heard everywhere saying:

"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they will be His people. And God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more; neither shall there be any mourning, nor crying nor pain anymore; for the former things have passed away. And He who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new!' " (Rev. 21:3-5)

"Anyone who wishes to be a follower of Mine must leave self behind. He must take up his cross and come with Me." [Mk. 8:34]