BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF HOPE IN A DESPAIRING WORLD
By Berten A. Waggoner

A Yellow Submarine

Ours is a world without hope. The rosy colored optimism of the enlightenment is buried beneath the ashes of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Gulag, two world wars, Vietnam, the World Trade Center, Afghanistan and now Iraq. The promises made by modernity’s prophets - the promises of a wonderful life to be acquired through the trinity of science, technology and education - has proven to be clouds filled with the putrid acids of disillusionment. This toxic rain is finding its way into every segment of our society causing despair and the stench of death. There is a growing sense that we really do “live in a yellow submarine” as the Beatles once prophesied.

Modernism was so presumptuous. It promised so much more than it could produce. It raised our hopes so high. Presumption is, as Joseph Pieper (On Hope) says, “a perverse anticipation of the fulfillment of hope.” Modernity’s presumption has led to post-modernity’s despair. But despair is also a perversity - it is the “perverse anticipation of the non-fulfillment of hope.” And the people around us are filled with the “perverse anticipation of the non-fulfillment of hope.” Despair is everywhere.

Science promised so much. It promised us a world free of disease. Just give science time and even death would be conquered; but the greater the progress, the greater the destruction. Science did make many advancements for our well-being, but the question is whether those advancements are being outweighed by science’s dark side. There is a growing murmur in our post-modern world that the once enthroned queen is quite ill.

Technology too made its boast. This child of modernity assumed that any problem could be resolved if the right tool, method, or technology could be found. No need for God. No need for revelation. Man’s problems are man-sized problems. He can handle them. All he needs is a little more time to find the right stuff to fix them. Has technology given us good things? Certainly. None of us would want to turn back to the “good old days” before modern technology. We have all benefited from the tools technology has placed in our hands. But, in spite of all of technology’s advancements, it is beginning to dawn on all but the most optimistic that the promises technology made were greatly exaggerated and the downside could be greater than the good.

The third member of modernity’s trinity was education. The twentieth century was to be the century when the West was to remove ignorance through education and thus eradicate evil in the world. Proponents of this enthronement of education saw the most basic problem in society as ignorance, not sin. They thought, “If we can just get people to think right, they will live right.” Even the church was caught up in this euphoric and Pollyanna-like hope of education’s saving power so clearly expressed in the title of the popular magazine of fifty years ago, Christian Century. Again, education promised so much, but fell far short of creating the Christian century. Modernity enthroned it. Over the years we have discovered that education works well as a servant, but makes a very poor king. When it becomes king, it establishes a kingdom of despair.

We thought they could save us: science, technology, education. These have been our gods - our sources of hope in a modern world. But a half a dozen wars, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, AIDS, poverty, bloated and evil cities have exposed these idols for what they are - presumptuous gods promoted by deceiving prophets. Now clouds of dark, sulfuric pessimism are suffocating humankind.

The signs of hopelessness are everywhere. The youth suicide rate continues to escalate. Increased drug addiction and alcoholism are clearly attempts to dull the pain of the inner ache of living in a world where there is “no escape.”

This despair exists even among Christians. The eschatology of some is so negative that the only hope they have is that some day Jesus will come and take us out of this mess. The church will fail in reaching the nations and the anticipated end is one of the world’s getting darker and darker. There is a hope, but not in this life or world.

I find hopelessness even among kingdom-oriented people. Hope fades when we don’t see as many healings as we want. Hope fades when our national leader dies at a much earlier age than he should have. Hope fades when our expectations exceed the real blessings we’ve received. I remember attending a Vineyard conference in Anaheim...
back in the middle 80’s. The theme was “The Kingdom of God and the Last Days.” In the middle of the evening teaching John Wimber came by and motioned for me to go with him. We walked to the back of the room where John stopped and said something to the effect, “Look at them. They have so little hope.” He was talking about the people in attendance at a Vineyard conference. I said to myself, “If they have so little hope - the people in this Kingdom of God conference - what about those in the church or the world who have never heard the message of the Kingdom of God?”

I have reflected many times on that moment. It seemed to have a significance greater than the event justified. Over time, the casual remark became a prophetic command. It was a command to the Vineyard: “Pay close attention to hopelessness; it is everywhere, so pay attention to it. The great need of the hour is hope.” This defines our vision. We are to be a community of hope, a beacon of light, in a world of despair and darkness.

But then this should not surprise us. The message we bear is the message of the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God is a message of hope. Our message is that already the Kingdom of God has come - that’s a cause for hope. Our message is that the strategic event that guarantees the future has already happened in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead - that’s a cause for hope. Our message is that the powers of the age to come are already at work in our world and will bring to successful conclusion all that has begun - that’s a cause for hope. We are the people who bear the message of hope.

But the concept “Kingdom of God” is too abstract. We must go further in our understanding. What visible reality will the Kingdom of God produce, here and now, to show that the hope of the Kingdom has come? Is there any supreme sign that gives evidence that the Kingdom of God is present and in which we can put our hope? Yes, there is. The eschatological community is the great and overriding sign of the presence of the Kingdom. How do we know the Kingdom is present? What is our object of hope? The eschatological community.

The Primary Signs of the Kingdom

The eschatological community has always been the primary instrument through which God has promised to bring hope.

You might challenge this by saying that it is not the eschatological community that is the object of hope. That’s the role of the Kingdom of God. When the Kingdom of God comes it will be the source of hope. And, in a sense, you would be right. Though the phrase “Kingdom of God” is never used in the Old Testament, the concept bleeds through every page from Genesis to Malachi. “The hope of Israel was the hope of the coming Kingdom of God.” (John Bright, The Kingdom of God, p.18)

But, the Kingdom of God, in the Hebrew mind, was not an abstraction. Hebrew thought patterns were less given to abstractions than are those in the Western world. Hebrews thought very concretely. So, when they thought “Kingdom of God,” they thought in concrete terms. The Kingdom of God was something they could see, feel, describe and point to.

The question I want to answer is, “What were the primary forms the Kingdom of God would take when it came in its eschatological fulfillment? How would the Hebrews know it had come? What would they point to and say, “There, right there, that is the Kingdom of God.”

My study leads me to believe that the Kingdom of God takes primary and secondary forms. It is important to recognize this lest secondary forms be made primary and primary forms be made secondary. It’s not that the secondary forms are not essential to the expression of the Kingdom of God. They are absolutely essential. The Kingdom of God cannot be realized without them. But theirs is an instrumental function. They are penult, not ultima.

What is ultimate? I can think of no Old Testament scripture that would better answer this question than Isaiah 61:1-3. This is the prophecy Jesus quoted in the synagogue in Nazareth. It begins with signs of the Kingdom that give evidence that the Messiah is at work. The good news is preached, the hearts of the brokenhearted are bound up, freedom is proclaimed to the captives, and prisoners are released from darkness. The Messiah gives to these who grieve a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of
a spirit of despair. All of these blessings are penult - the thing before the last thing. They serve a functional role. They are not the end, but a means to an end.

The ultimate expression or sign of the Kingdom is found in verse 3b: “They shall be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” All of the other “signs of the Kingdom,” though vital and essential, are secondary to the manifestation of the “planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendor.” The planting of the Lord is the people of God. In a sense, the “planting of the Lord” is not the absolute; the “display of his splendor” is. So we see that the ultimate goal of the Kingdom of God is the splendor of his glory. The primary means for achieving this is the “planting of the Lord.” The blessings are the secondary instruments used to plant and grow this planting of the Lord. The blessings are never ends in themselves - they are of instrumental value.

There are many secondary signs of the Kingdom, but, in my judgment there are only two primary evidences: the coming of Messiah and the emergence of the people of God - God’s community. The king and his people. John Bright captures the essence of these two objects of hope when he defines the Kingdom: “It involves the whole notion of the rule of God over his people, and particularly the vindication of that rule and people in glory at the end of history.” (Kingdom of God, p. 18)

It goes without saying that the coming of the King - the Messiah - is the greatest evidence that the Kingdom has come. He is not just a sign -- he is the Kingdom. Most would agree to this. That the gathering of the people of God is a primary source of hope and a primary sign of the Kingdom, could be a little more problematic. Though this idea has not been emphasized in Charismatic or Pentecostal preaching and theology, I believe the whole of the revelation in the Old Testament points this direction, and that the ultimate goal of history in the eschatological future is the revealing of God’s eschatological community at the consummation of the age (Revelation 21).

The evidence for this thesis is found in the objects in which the Old Testament places its hope. In the Old Testament we find both primary and secondary objects of hope. We must distinguish between them. It is logical to believe that the primary objects of hope will be more evident than those that are secondary.

Now, a Jew living before the coming of Jesus might have expressed it differently even as non-believing Jews do today. They would have said, “We will know that the Kingdom has come, that the exile is over, when the Messiah comes, when Israel is returned to its place of prominence, when the temple is rebuilt, and when Jerusalem is restored and filled with the glory that was there when David was king.”

Those of us who are followers of Christ agree. We too believe that when the exile is over (the remnant of Israel returns) this will be clear evidence that the Kingdom has come. When the King returns and builds his temple and restores Israel and Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God has come. The difference between us and non-believing Jews is that we believe this has already taken place - at least in earnest. The fullness of the Kingdom has not come, but the essence of the Kingdom has come. The result of the Kingdom coming and the evidence that it has come is in the appearance of the Messiah and in the eschatological community - the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church is the promised Temple that the King is building, Zion the City/nation of God, and the remnant people that are God’s last people.

When something is “eschatological” it is the last of a kind. There will not be anything of that kind beyond it. A people who are “eschatological” are the final people. That is what the church of Jesus Christ is. It is God’s final temple, final remnant and final Israel/city.

The primary sign of the Kingdom, other than the coming of the Messiah, is the community of God. The most important symbols of this sign are the temple, Israel/city on a hill, and the gathering of the remnant people of God. When would the people know that the Kingdom of God had arrived? The temple would be built by the King, the remnant would be gathered in, and Jerusalem/Zion/Israel would be restored. The temple, the people, and the city/Israel - these are the great eschatological symbols that will let us know that the Kingdom of God has come.

The Eschatological Temple

David looked forward to the coming Kingdom. What he looked forward to more than anything else, that would let him know that the Kingdom of God had come, that the new age had begun, was that the house God promised him
his son would build, had been built. He did not know what this house would look like. He didn’t understand that it was going to be a people - not rock, mortar and wood. But he knew God had promised a temple where he would dwell among his people. That was David’s sign of the presence of the Kingdom. The promise was clear:

“I will also give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his Kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his Kingdom forever.” (II Samuel 7:11-13)

The prophets picked up on this theme, and David’s hope became their hope. Through them this hope became the hope of the people of God and a primary sign of the presence of the Kingdom. The Messiah, the Branch, will build a house, a glorious house, and when he does, we will know that the Kingdom of God has arrived:

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the LORD Almighty.” (Haggai 2:6-9)

“Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says. ‘Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.’” (Zechariah 6:12-13)

N.T. Wright, in Jesus and the Victory of God, gives careful attention to the significance of the king coming to rebuild his temple as a primary sign of the coming of the Kingdom. He helps us see how significant the temple was to the hope of the Jews in the time of Jesus. In summary he says:

“The longing for return from exile thus contained, as a major component, the equal longing for a return of YHWH to Zion, with, as its concomitants, the defeat of evil (i.e. paganism, typified by Babylon), the rebuilding of the Temple, and the re-establishment of the true Davidic monarchy. This hope for the future sustained itself with the retelling of YHWH’s mighty acts in the past, notably the exodus. As YHWH had been with his people in the wilderness, as he had come to dwell in the first Temple, so he would come back at the last to settle permanently in the midst of Israel.” (Jesus and the Victory of God, p.206)

A City on a Hill/A Holy Nation

The second thing the Jews attached their hopes to as a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God is found in the eschatological “City of God/ Holy Nation.” These two, the nation and the city, are so closely identified that it is difficult to separate them. The title that embraced them both was “Zion.”

This imagery of the city of hope, which will come when the Kingdom comes, is evident from the time that David built Jerusalem. But no prophet captures its eschatological image better than the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s hope is secured in a city that is to come, the future Zion. The city is a city on a hill:

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the LORD’S temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:1-3)
“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.” (Isaiah 60:1-6)

“The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations.” (Isaiah 60:14-15)

It is this city – the eschatological city – Zion - that receives the full praise poured on it by David and repeated by the exiles in Babylon. This city must never be forgotten. It is better to lose all your skills of warfare and to go thirsty than to forget Zion:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy? (Psalms 137:5-6)

The joys and blessings of eschatological Zion as typified in ancient Jerusalem are very powerfully expressed in Psalms 87:

He has set his foundation on the holy mountain; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God: Selah. “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me - Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush - and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’” Indeed, of Zion it will be said, “This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.” The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: “This one was born in Zion.” Selah. As they make music they will sing, “All my fountains are in you.” (Psalms 87:1-7)

Zion thus becomes a primary symbol of the coming Kingdom of God. In a time of despair and hopelessness, when darkness covers the earth, God will raise up a city. His light will shine in that city on a hill and through it the nations will come to the light.

The Gathering of the Remnant

A third sign that the Kingdom had come, according to the Old Testament, is found in the last days gathering of God’s people. This is probably the predominant sign of the presence of the eschatological kingdom looked for by the Jews of Jesus’ day. As Jeremias concludes:

“To many people, the most urgent task seemed to be for this remnant to be gathered in the present time.” (New Testament Theology, p. 171)

The remnant motif has deep roots in the Old Testament. Elijah is told by God that he has a remnant that has not bowed to Baal. Even here, the idea that the remnant is the true Israel is implied.

Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel - all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him. (I Kings 19:18)

Isaiah develops the promise of the eschatological remnant. Jeremias calls him “the great theologian of the remnant,” (p. 171). The remnant is directly related to the restoration of the eschatological people:
A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. (Isaiah 10:21)

The believers are the remnant: “the one who trusts will never be dismayed.” (Isaiah 28:16).

Zephaniah pictures this remnant as a humble people:

But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD. (Zephaniah 3:12)

Paul builds an elaborate case for God’s righteousness in terms of his faithfulness in that, in the church, God has fulfilled his promise to restore the remnant. Paul quotes Isaiah 10:21 in Romans 11:4 as the basis for his argument that God’s election has always been to the remnant he has chosen.

Through Ezekiel, God makes it very clear that the way he intended to be glorified among the nations was through his people living together in unity. The people, living together in unity, were to be the primary means by which his name would be exalted. Further, he states, his name is defamed and profaned when they do not live this way. Their dispersion leads to the profaning of his name:

“...and wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, ‘These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.' I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.” (Ezekiel 36:20-21)

God then promised that a time would come when they would be taken out of exile and returned to the land. He promised to bring his people out of the desert, out of their dispersion, out of the time of judgment. In the last days, he promised, he would bring an eschatological people out of exile. He would restore the community. He will do this, not for their sake, but for the sake of his glory - for the hallowing of his name:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.’” (Ezekiel 36:22-28)

Gerhard Lohfink notes that “God sanctifies his name” is a formula that is “found practically only in the book of Ezekiel,” and thus Ezekiel’s usage provides the precise content Jesus attached to the formula. His concluding remarks regarding the first and second petition in the Lord’s Prayer are very insightful:

“Recognizing the precise content of “sanctify your name” sheds new light on the connection, previously noted, between the first and second petitions of the Our Father. God is to sanctify his name by acting on Israel and gathering it into the true people of God (first petition). But God is also to bring about his kingdom (second petition). Evidently there is a profound connection between the two. It is precisely in God’s re-creation of Israel, precisely in sanctifying his name in Israel, that the Kingdom of God arrives. It shines forth in the people of God.” (Jesus and the Community, p. 16)

God will restore this remnant community by alluring her into the desert. There in the desert, God will begin a second exodus. As he did when he led her out of Egypt, so he will lead her across the Jordan into the land of promise. But
this time it will be even better than it was in the first exodus.

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.” (Hosea 2:14-15)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’S hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed (in the new community), and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:1-5)

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” (Isaiah 43:18-21)

When the Kingdom comes and the eschatological people come out of exile, there will be no rejects; no one will necessarily be left outside. This coming community promises hope to the disenfranchised, the sick, the poor, the bound. All are invited to participate fully. “Whosoever will” may come and drink of the rivers of life freely.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.” (Isaiah 55:1-2)

The people that were formerly rejected receive special invitations into the eschatological community. Further, the Messiah comes to this, his community, and brings healing that empowers the members to fully participate in the life of the community.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion - to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. (Isaiah 61:1-3)

The community will be made up of the disenfranchised, the community-less. That community of former misfits will be called “oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord.”

I want to say two things in conclusion to this brief introduction to the idea that the primary signs and purpose of the Kingdom of God is captured in the symbols of the temple, the city/Israel, and the return of the remnant. First, it is clear that the evidence given is not conclusive. Time did not allow me to develop the argument as fully as I would have liked, but I have looked at this subject long and hard and believe that my thesis will stand up under the strictest of investigation. It is supported not only by my study, but by some of the best of both Old and New Testament scholarship. I encourage you to study and research the subject for yourself.

Second, it is probably true that the writers of the Old Testament community seldom, if ever, thought of the temple and the city/Israel as anything other than literal. The Messiah would come and rebuild the physical temple and restore the city of geographical Jerusalem. The literal appearance of these things would be the evidence that indeed the Kingdom had come. But Christians do not read the Old Testament from the same light and with the same historical horizon as the Old Testament community did. We look to Jesus to see what he understood concerning
these symbols. His perspective, I believe, was that “his people” are the city on a hill, the temple, and the promised remnant. He did come as the Messiah king to build his city and temple, but not in the way the Jews understood.

If this is true, if the Jews saw the coming of the eschatological temple, Jerusalem/Israel, the restoration of the remnant as the primary signs of the Kingdom, then the next big question is, “Did Jesus see it this way?” And secondly, “Was it the aim of Jesus to bring these signs of the Kingdom into a reality in his ministry?” It would certainly be strange if he didn’t, but the question still needs to be answered. Dispensationalists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics say, “No,” that these signs apply only to natural Israel. They are the people of God. This position has required them to make secondary signs primary and to totally leave out the primary signs. Let me ask the question again, “Did Jesus have as his primary purpose the building of the temple, the establishing of the eschatological city on a hill/Israel, and the gathering of the remnant, eschatological community?” I believe the answer is yes, and that the evidence is pervasive both in his ministry and in the rest of the New Testament.

**Jesus’ Gathering of the Remnant**

The Synoptics all have John the Baptist coming on the scene announcing that the hope of the Kingdom is no longer future. The Kingdom of God is present. The time of exile is over. The time of fulfillment has come. He positions himself in the wilderness. All of Israel is being allured to him in the desert. He presents himself as the voice in the wilderness announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God and thus the restoration of the eschatological community of God.

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way - a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Mark 1:1-5)

It is quite clear that John saw himself in terms of the voice of Isaiah 40, and his movement as the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise of the restoration of God’s remnant people:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed (in the new community), and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:1-5)

Jesus, the second Moses, who is greater than Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15), joins the little flock in the desert and in his baptism leads the new Israel through the Jordan and into the land of promise. Thus begins the process of raising up the eschatological, remnant community.

Jesus continued to build the promised eschatological community by the selection of the twelve. This choice “exemplified the awakening of Israel and its gathering in the eschatological salvific community, something beginning then through Jesus.” (Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, p.10)

Joachim Jeremias gives a very convincing argument in *New Testament Theology* that the restoration of God’s eschatological people was the overriding purpose of Jesus’ mission. Some of the evidence he offers is:

He calls the new people of God his flock. (Luke 12:32; Mark 14:27; Matthew 26:31f; John 10:1-29 cf.; Matthew 10:16; Luke 10:3; John 16:32). That is language used of the remnant in the Old Testament:

“I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will
tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.” (Ezekiel 34:22-24)


They are God’s planting (Matthew 13:24; 15:13) where it is contrasted with the planting that does not come from God; and in fulfillment of Isaiah 61:3.

One of the primary signs that the remnant community has come will be that social outcasts will be invited into the community, healed, and empowered as full members of the community. Jesus does exactly that. He invites everyone into the community to drink of the waters of life.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

The primary purpose of the healing and miracles of Jesus (secondary signs of the Kingdom) was to empower and enfold these social rejects, these nobodies, into the remnant community. As N.T. Wright notes:

“One way in which Jesus’ mighty works were evidently understood by some was that they were the signs of the long-awaited fulfillment of prophecy. For a first-century Jew, most if not all of the works of healing, which form the bulk of Jesus’ mighty works, could be seen as the restoration to membership in Israel of those who, through sickness or whatever, had been excluded as ritually unclean. The healings thus function in exact parallel with the welcome of sinners, and this, we may be quite sure, was what Jesus himself intended. He never performed mighty works simply to impress. He saw them as part of the inauguration of the sovereign and healing rule of Israel’s covenant God.” (N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p.191)

Jesus also picked up on Ezekiel’s theme of God gathering a community through which His name would be glorified. The greatest desire of Jesus was the hallowing of the name of His Father. Thus the first petition he placed on the lips of His disciples was “Hallowed be your name.” (Matthew 5:6) What Jesus meant by “Sanctify your name” was “Gather and renew your people! Let them become anew the true people of God.” (Lohfink, Jesus and the Community, p. 17)

The last prayer Jesus prayed before his crucifixion was that the remnant community would be established and preserved so that again the Father’s name would be glorified.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

There should be little doubt that, in His small flock of disciples, Jesus saw the emerging of the eschatological remnant promised by the prophets. He had to see them in this way. He announced that the Kingdom was present and the gathering of the remnant people was the number one evidence that the Kingdom had come. The eschatological Messiah had to have an eschatological community.

Joachim Jeremias, after an extensive study of the purpose of Jesus, concludes:

“Precisely because Jesus believed that the end is near, it had to be his purpose to gather God’s people of the time of salvation. For the people of God belong to the one whom God has sent; the group of disciples belongs to the prophet. Indeed, we must put the point even more sharply: the
only significance of the whole of Jesus’ activity is to gather the eschatological people of God.  
(New Testament Theology, p.170)

**Jesus’ Building the Eschatological Temple**

Jesus came to build the eschatological temple and thus to put an end to the temple in Jerusalem. F.B. Meyer, in *Christus Faber* and in *The Aims of Jesus* gives a strong argument for the thesis that the primary purpose of Jesus was to build the temple of God - a place where God will dwell in fulfillment of the promise made to David. This temple will not be made out of wood and precious stones. Rather, it will be made out of the people of God (John 2:19). Peter and his confession will be the rock on which it will be built (Matthew 16:18). (*Christus Faber*, p. 265)

There should be little doubt that Jesus came with the explicit intent of destroying the temple. The fig tree incident with Mark, the picture of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the Temple, and many others, put this truth in bold relief. “Virtually all the traditions, inside and outside the canonical gospels, which speak of Jesus and the Temple speak of its destruction.” (N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 416)

Then we have the events of the historic drama of the cleansing of the temple. What was Jesus doing? Was he leading a social revolt against the economic abuses of the temple system? Was he claiming the building as his own and thus cleaning it up for his personal use? Or was he giving the final judgment to the temple in Jerusalem?

N.T. Wright, Ben F. Meyer, Joachim Jeremias and many others argue for the latter. I encourage you to read them for further exploration of this subject. Wright captures the heart of their arguments in this conclusion:

> “I conclude that Jesus’ action in the Temple was intended as a dramatic symbol of its imminent destruction; that this is supported by the implicit context of Zechariah’s prophecy, and the quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah; and that Jesus’ specific actions of overturning tables, forbidding the use of the Temple as a short-cut, and the cursing of the fig tree, were likewise all designed as prophetic and eschatological symbolism, indicating both the arrival of the kingdom and the doom of the city and Temple that refused it.” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 424)

It is clear then that Jesus intended to destroy the temple. But was this simply an iconoclastic act to destroy a less than helpful religious icon or was the destruction of the temple in order that he, the eschatological King, could build the house promised to David? Was the temple redundant and thus about to be replaced?

Meyer points out that the Old Testament scriptures that promise a house to be built by the King, the son of David, in the last days are open to “signifying God’s eschatologically restored people (*ekklesia*), and since this is precisely the sense of the new sanctuary in Jesus’ word (“Destroy this sanctuary and after three days I will rebuild it.” John 2:19; Mark 14:58), the cleansing itself, as well as this word (which, in the present hypothesis, immediately followed on the cleansing), showed that Jesus understood the restoration of Israel to belong to his mission - indeed it is its central task.” (*Christus Faber*, p. 67)

After cleansing the temple, the Jews asked Jesus by what authority he did these things. They knew that his actions indicated that he believed himself to be a bearer of the eschatological kingdom. “Give us a sign,” they said, “that the Kingdom is present and thus that you are the Messiah who has the right to tamper with the Temple.”

He agreed that he would give them a sign — his resurrection and by extension his people. He would make a new Temple. That would be the great sign that the Kingdom of God was present:

> Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:18-22)

Jesus’ cryptic riddle in Mark 11:23 is a direct claim by Jesus that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it:
I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.

“This mountain,” spoken in the vicinity of the Temple, would have been understood as the mount on which the temple was placed. This allusion suggests a saying from Zechariah (chapters 1-8) about the return from exile and ultimate rebuilding of the temple. Zerubbabel is the Davidic figure who is given the responsibility of rebuilding the Temple. To symbolize the great opposition to Zerubbabel, Zechariah uses the image of a great mountain that stands in the way of Zerubbabel building the temple:

So he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty. What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of ‘God bless it! God bless it!’” (Zechariah 4:6-7)

Jesus in this riddle is clearly laying claim that he is authorized to do at last what Zerubbabel was supposed to do, “that is, to be the true anointed one who would build the true Temple.” (Wright, p. 494). The present Temple was a mount of opposition so it would be “cast into the sea so that he could rebuild another. Jesus is the “true anointed one, who will bring out the capstone of the building and thus complete it” (Wright p. 494) Then the official function of forgiving sins that was the prerogative of the temple would be placed in the new temple made up of God’s people.

Just as the temple was built upon a rock, so the new Temple would be built upon a rock. It would be portable and indestructible for the gates of hell would not be able to prevail against it:

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

The New Testament church certainly understood themselves to be the Temple established by Jesus: They were the temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16-17); the temple in which God lives that is growing into a holy temple unto the Lord (Ephesians 2:21-22). John announces that the coming of the hour of worship of the Father in Spirit and truth will replace the worship both of the temple in Jerusalem and in Samaria. (John 4:16-26) This house is made up of living stones being built into a spiritual house (I Peter 2:5) with Christ as the corner stone, in “whom the whole structure is joined together.” (Ephesians 2:21; I Peter 2:7; Mark 12:10) The apostles had the foundational work of building this house and each living stone is built on top of that foundation (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:12) Pentecost could very well be to the new temple what the dedication of the Temple was to the old. It was the revelation of the shekinah glory of God filling the temple as an indication of God’s taking up residence in his people.

Much, much more could be said about the idea of the church as the eschatological Temple. But, again, time does not allow me to say more. Ben F. Meyer provides an excellent conclusion to what we have been saying here:

“Jesus left a ‘voluntary association’ on earth. This was his work. What kind of work was it? And what does his leaving it tell us? He has answered both questions in the mode of indirection. His work stands in the image of the sanctuary of the last days, built by the royal architect and master-builder. It is the house or dwelling place of God. It is meant for the end of time and the reign of God. This Church, bloodied like its builder for its witness to a divine mission, bears the imprint: Christ made me. For all of its sins, the church bears in its living selfhood the signature of the messianic artisan.” (Christus Faber, p. 266)

The City on a Hill/Israel

What about the coming city on a hill? What about eschatological Israel? Did Jesus believe he was building a new Zion? Did he believe Jerusalem would be replaced as God’s eschatological city? Did he believe that eschatological Israel would be other than natural Israel?

If the restoration of Israel and the establishment of the city on a hill were such important signs of the presence of the
Kingdom, it would certainly be surprising if it were not the intent of Jesus to bring them into existence. His message was that the Kingdom of God is present. Did this mean that all the signs of the Kingdom were present except the small detail of eschatological Israel and Jerusalem – Zion?

In a real sense, this question has already been answered. If the church is the eschatological temple, and if the church is the remnant people, then it is Israel and it is the new Jerusalem. What else, other than land, can be called Jerusalem and Israel? The people and the temple constituted the city and the nation. Without them there was no city or nation. So when we discussed the remnant and the temple we were talking about the elements that make up a city and nation, but let’s look a bit further.

It is quite clear in the New Testament that the replacement of Jerusalem by an eschatological city is the goal of history. History began in a garden but it will end in a city:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:2-4)

But already, in our relationships with God’s people, we have come to Mount Zion - the city where God dwells. In our earthly gathering as the people of God, it is much more than it appears. When we come together, the power and reality of the Kingdom are present. When we come together we come to Zion:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, (Hebrews 12:22)

Jesus certainly saw his disciples as the eschatological city, a “city set on a hill.” This was a promise given to the eschatological Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s future was to be a city on a hill - a city to which all the nations would be drawn. (Isaiah 2:2-5; 60:1-3) But Jesus, speaking to his disciples, transfers this function to them:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Lohfink’s remarks are helpful:

“Though formulated as a general principle of everyday experience, this saying is scarcely conceivable without the theology of Zion which is present in the Old Testament and in early Judaism. The presence of the motif of the pilgrimage of the nations in Jesus preaching confirms this point. If this motif does stand in the background, the saying about the city on a hill must be interpreted in light of Jesus’ preaching of the reign of God. As far as Jesus is concerned, the rule of God certainly no longer lies in an absolute future; it is already breaking into the present. In the same way, it is impossible for the eschatological city of God to be an absolutely future reality. It shows itself already in the group of disciples who follow Jesus. Together with Jesus, the disciples are already the city on the hill.” (Jesus and Community, p. 67)

Could it be that this is the significance of an upper room in Jerusalem? Was the new eschatological Zion being raised up on the Day of Pentecost? Was the “city on a hill” in an upper room when the shekinah of God came and brought the light of his glory? Were the nations in Jerusalem that day the nations that were being drawn to the city of God?

The apostle Paul certainly understood that it was the aim of Jesus to make his followers into the eschatological Israel/ Jerusalem. In one of his earliest books he explicitly calls the church the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). The most basic thrust of what is sometimes called the “Christological epistles” (Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians -
in my judgment they should be called the “ecclesiological epistles”) is that the church is the eschatological temple, remnant, and Zion through which God will be glorified. (Ephesians 3:21; cf. I Thessalonians 1:10) Further, this is his entire argument in Romans 9-11. I encourage you to read chapter thirteen of N. T. Wright’s, *The Climax of the Covenant* for a full exegesis of Paul’s argument.

Build the temple of God, bring together the eschatological people of God, build a city on a hill - these were the aims of Jesus. These aims were all fulfilled in the church - not in completeness but in earnest. Only when the Kingdom comes in its consummation will we fully know who we are and what we were made to be. But already we are that people. All that is said of the temple, all that is said of the remnant, all that is said of Israel/Zion/Jerusalem applies to us.

**Application**

So what? What difference does this make to you and me? Is this simply an exercise in academic theology with little relevance for you and your church or the people you serve in the Vineyard? I am convinced that it is terribly important to anyone involved in the Lord’s work.

It is important to understand these things lest we misunderstand our mission and the purpose of the Kingdom of God. Our purpose is not just to get people saved so they will go to heaven. Our purpose is not just to build large or small churches. Our purpose is not to survive until Jesus comes. Our purpose is not to be a church in which the gifts of the Spirit are functioning. Our mission, and the purpose of the Kingdom of God, is to build a city on a hill, a holy nation, a temple where God is present. Our purpose is to build a community of churches that are communities of worship, light, and hope in a despairing world. That is what we are here for.

The primary sign is developed through the secondary signs. They are the instruments through which community is built.

> Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel (the Vineyard) saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6)

Therefore, we must continue to be renewed in the things of the Spirit; but, in so doing, we must never allow them to keep us from our purpose - building the community of God.

John Wimber shared a vision with us back in the Toronto days. The vision was of a large waterfall like Niagara. Millions of tons of water was gushing over the falls and running out into the desert and dissipating. John felt that this was a picture of what was happening in the Vineyard. He felt our focus on blessing was causing us to squander the work of the Holy Spirit at that time - that we had lost our way. He said that God told him in the vision that the Vineyard was to focus on building a place for the water to flow. We were to go out into the desert and begin plowing furrows and planting vines. We were to give ourselves to building up the body of Christ. Then, when the waters of the Spirit came, we would harness its power in accordance with the purpose of the Kingdom.

This is what Paul says in I Corinthians: “if you have not love you are zero,” even if all the gifts are operating in you or your church. (I Corinthians 13:1-3) The evidence of love is community. He reiterates this priority in chapter 14 when he sets as the standard for charismatic behavior in the church:

> So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church. (I Corinthians 14:12)

> What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (I Corinthians 14:26)

> But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner. (I Corinthians 14:40)
It is important to understand this purpose so we keep in mind how wonderful the church is. I like to apply the language of Zion to the church because I believe we are eschatological Zion - not fully, but essentially. How long has it been since you said concerning the church:

His foundation is in the holy mountains. The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah. “I shall mention Rahab and Babylon among those who know Me; behold, Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia: ‘This one was born there.’” But of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her;” and the Most High Himself will establish her. The LORD will count when he registers the peoples, “This one was born there.” Selah. Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes shall say, “All my springs of joy are in you.” (Psalms 87:1-7)

My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. (Psalms 84:2)

Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King. (Psalms 48:2)

Does this seem too high for the church? Well what about Paul’s praise of the church in Ephesians 3:

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory. (Ephesians 3:8-13)

It is important to understand these things so we know the importance of what we are doing. I know it takes a lot of energy to build our churches and to extend ourselves to the movement. I want to walk away from my responsibilities some time and go back to a much simpler life. I am sure that you have the same thoughts. But we can’t quit. The job is far too important. Everything else that is happening in the world is but backdrop for what we are doing in building God’s community.

It is important to understand these things so that we continue to value our relationships with one another. The church is all about community. It is about building relationships of caring and sharing, of love, acceptance and forgiveness. It is about laying down our lives for one another. It is about sharing common vision and goals. If community is our goal, relationship is the way to that goal. For the sake of the church of Jesus Christ, let’s make it our highest priority to develop relationships of unity and cooperation between us that will cause the Father’s name to be hallowed.

I challenge you to join me in building a community of communities - a community empowered by the Spirit - an eschatological community that will provide ever-increasing hope to a despairing world.