

Re-affirming holistic mission

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I was a bit puzzled, I must confess. There I was at the Lausanne Forum in Pattaya last year and I noticed that 'Holistic Mission' was one of the 31 special Interest Groups. I had thought, you see, that 'holistic mission' was what Lausanne was all about, not that it was one of many subdivisions of mission interests. Somehow, our splendid definition of what we mean by 'world evangelization' -- 'The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world' -- gives that impression and 'holistic' surely implies 'the whole' of something. It turned out that the specific content of the Holistic Mission IG was really social action. And that in itself is an interesting shift in meaning. Holistic mission includes the whole of what God calls and sends us to do. Evangelism without social action is not holistic mission. But social action without evangelism likewise cannot be labelled 'holistic mission' either, and certainly not in such a way that 'holistic mission' itself then becomes a mere subdivision of 'mission as a whole'. All a bit contradictory.

Back to our roots

For originally the phrase was coined in response to the persistent idea that evangelism (understood as the verbal proclamation of the gospel) is the only 'real' mission. But at Lausanne 1974, evangelicals irrevocably re-affirmed the great 19th century heritage of evangelical social action in the context of 20th century needs, stating in paragraph 5 of the Lausanne Covenant that 'evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love of our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ.' During the 1980s a lot of work went into further clarifying the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility, and the consultation with that very title in Grand Rapids in 1982 affirmed their integral partnership. 'Evangelism and social responsibility, while distinct from one another, are integrally related in our proclamation of and obedience to the Gospel...In practice, as in the public ministry of Jesus, the two are inseparable.' The Manila Manifesto of 1989 added that 'The Gospel must become visible in the transformed lives of men and women. As we proclaim the love of God we must be involved in loving service, and as we preach the kingdom of God we must be committed to its demands of justice and peace.' Writing in the wake of Lausanne I, John Stott wrote in his commentary on Matt. 6:33, 'To seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness may be said to embrace our Christian evangelistic and social responsibilities, much as do the 'salt' and 'light' metaphors of Matthew 5. In order to seek first God's kingdom we must evangelize, since the kingdom spreads, since the kingdom spreads only as the gospel of Christ is preached, heard, believed and obeyed. In order to seek first

God's righteousness we shall still evangelize (for the inward righteousness of the heart is impossible otherwise), but we shall also engage in social action and endeavour to spread throughout the community those higher standards of righteousness which are pleasing to God.'ⁱ

Back to the Bible

The theological work that was done by the Lausanne Theology Working Group and other groups during the 1980s was hugely important because it re-established evangelical theology of mission on a solid biblical basis – and by 'biblical' I mean the whole Bible – not just a few verses from the New Testament.ⁱⁱ For indeed, just as 'the whole church' in our slogan must clearly include the churches of the global south as well as the churches of the north and west, so 'the whole gospel' must be drawn from the whole Bible.

Of course, all evangelicals would, in theory, say that they accept God's revelation in the Old Testament as well as the New. But to read some theories and strategies of mission, you would hardly think so. A common assumption seems to be that all the social, economic, and political dimensions of the Old Testament have no contribution to make to Christian mission, for only the spiritual needs of humanity are addressed in the New Testament. But this view of the New Testament, and the missiological implications that go with it, requires us to imagine that for century after century the God of the Bible was passionately concerned about social issues – political arrogance and abuse, economic exploitation, judicial corruption, the suffering of the poor and oppressed, the evils of brutality and bloodshed. So passionate, indeed, that the laws he gave and the prophets he sent address these matters more than any other issue except idolatry, while the Psalmists cry out in protest to the God they know cares deeply about such things. Somewhere, however, between Malachi and Matthew, all that changed. Such things no longer claim God's attention or spark his anger. Or if they do, it is no longer our business. The root cause of all such things is individual, internal, spiritual sin, and that is now all that God is interested in. A subtle form of Marcionism underlies this approach. The alleged God of the New Testament is almost unrecognisable as the LORD God, the Holy One of Israel. This alleged God has certainly shed all the passionate priorities of the Mosaic law, and has jettisoned all the burden for justice that he laid on his prophets at such cost to them. The implications for mission are equally dramatic. For if the pressing problems of human society are of no concern to God, they have no place in Christian mission – or at most a decidedly secondary one. God's mission is getting souls to heaven, not addressing society on earth.

I find such a view of God and of mission to be unbiblical and frankly unbelievable, if one takes the *whole Bible* as the trustworthy revelation of the identity, character and mission of the living God. I do not overlook for one moment the depths of the spiritual realities of sin and evil that the New Testament exposes, or the glories of the spiritual dimension of God's redemptive accomplishment in the cross and

resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. I simply deny that these truths of the New Testament *nullify* all that the Old Testament has already revealed about God's comprehensive commitment to every dimension of human life, about his relentless opposition to all that oppresses, spoils and diminishes human well-being, and about his ultimate mission of blessing the nations and redeeming his whole creation.

Back to the cross

Our mission flows from God's mission, and God's mission has many dimensions as we trace the theme of his saving purpose through the different strands of Scripture. But every dimension of that mission of God led inexorably to the cross of Christ. The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's mission. *So we need a mission-centred theology of the cross.* Think for a moment of some of the contours of God's redemptive purpose.

It was the purpose or mission of God:

- *to deal with the guilt of human sin*, which had to be punished for God's own justice to be vindicated. And at the cross God accomplished this. God took that guilt and punishment upon himself in self-substitution through the person of his own Son. For 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6), and 'Christ himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24).
- *to defeat the powers of evil*, and all the forces (angelic, spiritual, 'seen or unseen'), that oppress, crush, invade, spoil and destroy human life, whether directly or by human agency. And at the cross God accomplished this, 'having disarmed the powers and authorities, ...triumphing over them by the cross' (Col. 2:15).
- *to destroy death*, the great invader and enemy of human life in God's world. And at the cross God did so, when 'by Christ's death he destroyed the one who holds the power of death - the devil' (Heb. 2:14).
- *to remove the barrier of enmity and alienation between Jew and Gentile*, and by implication ultimately all forms of enmity and alienation. And at the cross God did so, 'for he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier...to create one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility' (Eph. 2:14-16).
- *to heal and reconcile his whole creation*, the cosmic mission of God. - And at the cross God made this ultimately possible. For it is God's final will 'through Christ to reconcile all things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross' (Col. 1:20 - the 'all things' here must clearly mean the whole created cosmos, since that is what

Paul says has been created by Christ and for Christ (vs. 15–16), and has now been reconciled by Christ (v. 20).

So then, all these huge dimensions of God's redemptive mission are set before us in the Bible. God's mission was that:

- sin should be punished and sinners forgiven
- evil should be defeated and humanity liberated
- death should be destroyed and life and immortality brought to light
- enemies should be reconciled, to one another and to God
- creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its creator

All of these together constitute the mission of God. *And all of these led to the cross of Christ.* The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's holistic mission – as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: 'not my will, but yours, be done'.

A full biblical understanding of the atonement (of which the above points are the merest sketch), goes far beyond the matter of personal guilt and individual forgiveness. That Jesus died in my place, bearing the guilt of my sin, as my voluntary substitute, is of course the most gloriously liberating truth, to which we cling in glad and grateful worship with tears of wonder. That I should long for others to know this truth and be saved and forgiven by casting their sins on the crucified Saviour in repentance and faith, is a most energising motive for evangelism. All of this must be maintained with total commitment and personal conviction. *But there is more in the biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to biblical mission than evangelism.* The Gospel is good news for the whole creation (to whom, according to the longer ending of Mark, it is to be preached, Mk. 16:15, cf. Eph. 3:10). To point out these wider dimensions of God's redemptive mission (and therefore of our committed holistic participation in God's mission), is *not* 'watering down' the gospel of personal salvation, (as is sometimes alleged). Rather, we set that precious good news for the individual firmly and affirmatively within its full biblical context of all that God has achieved, and will finally complete, through the cross of Christ for the whole of creation.

But it is equally true, and biblical, to say that the cross is the unavoidable centre of our mission. All Christian mission flows from the cross – as its source, its power, and as that which defines its scope. *We also need a cross-centred theology of holistic mission.*

It is vital that we see the cross as central to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission – that is, of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a mistake, in my view, to think that, while our evangelism must be centred on the cross (as of course it has to be), our social engagement has some other theological foundation or justification. Why is the cross just as important across the whole field of mission? Because in all forms of Christian mission in the name of Christ we are confronting

the powers of evil and the kingdom of Satan – with all their dismal effects on human life and the wider creation. If we are to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of the reign of God in Christ – that is, if we are to proclaim that Jesus is king, in a world which likes still to chant ‘we have no king but Caesar’ and his many successors, including mammon – then we will be in direct conflict with the usurped reign of the evil one, in all its legion manifestations. This – the battle against the powers of evil – is the unanimous testimony of those who struggle for justice, for the needs of the poor and oppressed, the sick and the ignorant, and even those who seek to care for and protect God’s creation against exploiters and polluters, just as much as it is the experience of those (frequently the same people) who struggle evangelistically to bring people to faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord and plant churches. In all such work, social or evangelistic, we confront the reality of sin and Satan. In all such work we are challenging the darkness of the world with the light and good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through him.

By what authority can we do so? With what power are we competent to engage the powers of evil? On what basis dare we challenge the chains of Satan, in word and deed, in people’s spiritual, moral, physical and social lives? Only the cross. Only in the cross is there forgiveness, justification and cleansing for guilty sinners. Only in the cross stands the defeat of evil powers and all oppression and injustice. Only in the cross is there release from the fear of death and its ultimate destruction altogether. Only in the cross are even the most intractable of enemies reconciled. Only in the cross will we finally witness the healing of all creation.

The fact is that sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the cross of Christ is good news for every area of life on earth that has been touched by sin – which means every area of life. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess. And by God’s incredible grace we have a gospel big enough to redeem all that sin and evil has touched. And every dimension of that good news is good news utterly and only because of the blood of Christ on the cross.

*Ultimately all that will be there in the new, redeemed creation will be there because of the cross. And conversely, all that will **not** be there (suffering, tears, sin, Satan, sickness, oppression, injustice, corruption, decay and death), will not be there because they will have been defeated and destroyed by the cross..*

So it is my passionate conviction that holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the cross. That includes the conviction that the cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power, no other resource, no other name, through which we can offer the whole Gospel to the whole person and the whole world, than Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

ⁱ John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (IVP, 1978), p. 172.

ⁱⁱ The seminal work of the 1970s and 80s on the holistic nature of mission (which sadly seems in constant danger of being forgotten) can be traced in many books, including:
John Stott (ed.), *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Paternoster, 1996);
Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Eerdmans, 1985).
Vinay Samuel and Albrecht Hauser (ed.) *Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way: Studies in Integral Evangelism* (Regnum, 1989);
Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice: A Contemporary Perspective on Mission* (Eerdmans, 1980);
S C Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford University Press, 1982);
Timothy Chester, *Awakening to a World of Need: The Recovery of Evangelical Social Concern* (IVP, 1993)
Dewi Hughes, *God of the Poor* (OM, Paternoster, 1998);
Bruce Nichols and Beulah Wood (ed.), *Sharing Good News with the Poor* (WEF, Baker and Paternoster, 1996).