

# Christian Mission is Holistic

by Mark Russell

## *Historical Overview and Present Situation*

**H**olistic mission is for some a battle cry of the true purpose for Christ's church and for others a time draining distraction from the primary task of evangelization. Some lament the lack of emphasis in personal evangelism in missions today and criticize the tendency to consider all missionary endeavors as important as evangelism. While they acknowledge the increasing need of relief and development work, they worry about a variety of activities acting as a substitute for evangelism (Floyd 2002, 5). There are many who will express this viewpoint in a variety of ways. Some point out that ministries with a development focus and a lack of emphasis in evangelism are just making people's rides to hell more comfortable (Rundle 2003, 229). Others criticize a heavy handed emphasis on evangelism as being unbiblical, ineffective and not taking into consideration the various ways that Christ worked among people (Marus 2004). Evangelicals, whose very name implies an emphasis on evangelism, have struggled to find cohesiveness on this delicate issue.

Samuel Moffett discusses the historical shifts in emphasis in the church on this issue.

There was a time when most Christians believed that evangelism was the only priority... Then the church swung too far the other way. The only Christian priority for some has been social justice through reconstruction (Moffett 1981, D-208).

For Protestant America these tensions developed around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when many became fascinated with certain philosophies imported from Europe. Numerous Christian leaders sought to reinterpret the Bible from a more modern point of view. The idea was that we had progressed beyond the belief in supernatural phenomena. As the Scriptures became 'demythologized', Christians focused on offering social services and left out all talk about heaven, hell, conversion and a greater spiritual reality. This reconstructed version of Christian mission became known as the Social Gospel.

A trans-denominational group reacting to the Social Gospel became known as the *Fundamentalists*. Their name came from their emphasis on what they

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perceived to be the fundamentals of Christianity, namely the sinfulness of all people, miracles, and well, just about anything else rejected by the Social Gospel people. The Fundamentalists did not want to be associated with this emerging liberalism and feared any connections would weaken the message of Christ. Therefore they distanced themselves from many programs of social reform.

Interestingly enough, the two positions became much more extreme and polarized after their original leaders passed away. Walter Rauschenbusch, a primary architect of the Social Gospel, actually did believe in a supernatural conversion experience and William Jennings Bryan, the most well-known and outspoken Fundamentalist, truly believed that the gospel should leave its mark on society and its economy (Siegel 1997, 3).

Of course, both of these views are still prevalent in various branches of the Church to this day. In 1974, the Lausanne Covenant expressed

penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive.... evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of Christian duty.

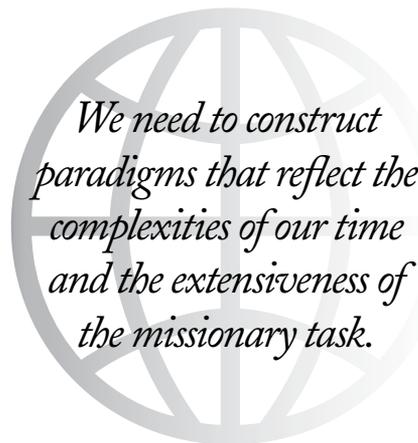
This started a movement toward cohesiveness on this issue. But it seems that we have never arrived at a high level of agreement regarding the nature of the relationship between these two aspects of Christian duty. The situation today:

Christians are learning to involve themselves in society again, but such involvement is still viewed suspiciously by many Bible believing churches. There exists in today's church, vast untapped resources which might flow like life giving veins to a dead nation if they weren't being so carefully protected (Siegel 1997, 4).

### *Expanding Our Vision for Evangelism*

What is the reason for our lack of consensus on this subject? Why are we still so divided on such a funda-

mental and practical issue? Is it that we have not completely considered the vastness of what evangelism really is? James Gustafson points this out by saying that most in the church have a "truncated concept of evangelism" (Gustafson 2004, 84). Gustafson suggests that our focus is too much on the *proclamation* of the gospel instead of the *transformation* that the verbal proclamation is supposed to bring about. He does not deny the necessity of verbal proclamation but says it is not the whole picture. The assumption that comes from a verbal proclamation-



oriented approach to evangelism is that "hearing the gospel is the equivalent to *being reached* by the gospel." Rather, a proper understanding of evangelism understands that evangelism is

about enabling the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ to be born into our lives, our cultures, our societies, our organizations, and our traditions (Gustafson 2004, 84).

It seems to me that Gustafson's perspective is supported when one carefully reads the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). I have heard many sermons, attended many seminars, and have had many discussions regarding these three verses. The most common exposition is that Christ called us to go out and evangelize. The aspect of evangelism is drawn from Christ's commission to "make disciples". It is ironic to me that the term evangelism is used for the phrase "make disciples" and then is defined as a 'verbal proclamation' of salvation

in Christ. If to "make disciples" refers to evangelism, then surely we need to expand our understanding of evangelism from being simply a verbal proclamation of the gospel. To be a disciple is to be transformed. It does not mean to turn over a *part* of one's life to Christ, rather one's *entire* life. This misunderstanding and corresponding misapplication of this simple phrase in contemporary evangelical mission circles is an explanation for our lack of consensus regarding holistic mission. The goal of a verbal proclamation is to give knowledge of salvation. The goal of evangelism is transformation. Gustafson puts it this way,

Evangelism is transformation, transformation is development, and development is evangelism in a very real sense (Gustafson 2004, 84-85).

There is a need to expand our understanding of evangelism to something beyond, yet including, the verbal proclamation of the gospel.

### *Expanding Our Vision for Mission*

Today we face a tremendous challenge. We need to construct paradigms that reflect the complexities of our time and the extensiveness of the missionary task. René Padilla says we need to "create models that have Jesus Christ as the Lord of all life and show the interdependence of all human beings" (Padilla 1986, 135). German missiologist Horst Bürkle has written, "Mission is the full responsibility of the church to the world" (Bürkle 1979, 14). Chuck Colson has said,

True Christianity goes far beyond John 3:16—beyond private faith and personal salvation. It is nothing less than a framework for understanding all of reality. It is a worldview (Colson 1999, ix).

If we want to promote true Christianity in our mission activities, we also need to have this paradigm.

When we properly understand that the Great Commission is making disciples through personal transformation and when we can correctly balance it with the cultural commission (Gen. 1:28) to

live and work on this earth to God's glory, then we have a basis for holistic mission. We do not see mission as a part of the church, defined primarily as evangelism. Rather one starts to see mission as the central focus of all the church does and recognizes a missionary dimension to all of theology (Bürkle 1979, 13). When we have this perspective, we can produce ministries that reflect this. These ministries would reflect the ministry of Christ. For "Christ went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (Matt. 9:35). Jesus used his divine nature to cure people while simultaneously teaching the gospel. Should we not also seek to impact people holistically?

### *The Basis for the Vision: The Primacy of Love*

The basis for this expanded vision is a focus on what Christ said was primary, namely to love God and humanity (Matt. 22:37–39). Paul also said that love was the greatest attribute (1 Cor. 13:13). There has been a tendency in some circles to inadvertently de-emphasize love out of the concern that it results in an anthropocentric focus. But we must reclaim the importance of love. John wrote,

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God... If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (1 John 4:7, 20).

To love God means to love our neighbor. If we truly love our neighbor, it is because we also love God.

Bryant Myers has pointed out that these are in essence one commandment. He points out that the interconnection of loving God and loving neighbor is found throughout the Scriptures. Focusing on the book of Isaiah, he writes,

**S**tark argues persuasively that Christianity rose to prominence in the first centuries because Christians ministered to people in times of plagues and sufferings.

The God who speaks through Isaiah doesn't seem to make a distinction between loving God and loving neighbor (Myers 1999, 2).

Jesus did say there was a "first and greatest commandment" and said loving our neighbor was the second commandment (Matt. 22:37–39). However, the rest of Scripture makes it clear you cannot fulfill one without doing the other. A proper understanding would be to realize that our ability to love our neighbor comes from first having a reconciled love relationship with God. We then demonstrate our love to God *by* loving our neighbor. One may come before the other, but they cannot be done independently. As Jesus said,

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matt. 25:40).

We are created to glorify God. The glory of God is God manifesting his majesty (Harrison 1984, 443–444). God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Therefore, to glorify God means to love him and others as He does. This is why Jesus gave primacy to these commandments. The glory of God and the love of God are inseparable attributes. This is the basis of holistic mission.

### *Functional Inseparability*

Some have pointed to evangelism and social ministry as "functionally separate."<sup>1</sup> However, they are more integrated than that formulation would imply. They are actually interdependent parts of a greater whole. They are both means to a variety of common ends. Evangelism is a means to the end of loving God as is social ministry. They are both a means to the end of loving others. Finally, they are both a means to the end of increasing the effectiveness of the other.

Many have criticized the increasing move toward holistic mission in a

variety of forms. The primary concern is that it distracts time and resources from evangelism (Little 2006, 80; Floyd 2002, 4). However, we should welcome this integration as good news because this shift will actually enhance the effectiveness of evangelism. Some of the criticism has been focused on the emerging role of business in missions (Little 2006, 80).

However, it should be noted that the Apostle Paul used business in missions. His reasons were not to make money; rather he had a strategic purpose. He argued passionately that he was entitled to financial remuneration (1 Cor. 9:1–5). His purpose was to become "all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:22). This phrase is often used to teach missionaries to identify with their host culture. However, it should be noted that in the context it is Paul's culminating statement defending his practice of refusing financial donations. Rather than being forced into work out of some hardship, Paul had a three-fold purpose: 1) gain credibility, 2) model integrity, a strong work ethic, lay evangelism and 3) have access to people he otherwise would not have been able to reach. Paul did not view his tentmaking enterprise as a time-draining distraction, but rather as an enhancement to his goal of seeing lives transformed, churches planted and the gospel spread around the world.

Ministering to people holistically can provide a context for effective evangelism. Rodney Stark argues persuasively that Christianity rose to prominence in the first centuries because Christians ministered to people in times of plagues and sufferings (Stark 1996). He says that the obscure Jewish sect became a dominant religious force because of its social benefits. Christians loved people in times of crises. The early years of Christianity were trying and difficult times for all people in

many ways. There were a wide variety of epidemics. Out of fear, the pagans fled. Christians stayed behind to help and provide care for those in need. As a result of their compassion, many pagans, who had been essentially abandoned by their previous social networks, converted to Christianity. The Christian faith suddenly made sense to people and Christian community was something for which they longed. Genuine love for people distinguished Christians and created an atmosphere conducive to widespread conversions.

Christianity grew because it was attractive to many people. This sums up Stark's argument. The love of Christians drew in those who suffered. To receive the love of a Christian community prompted them to want to be a part of that community. Early Christianity developed environments for people to share and love one another and collectively to look forward to the rewards of the next life.

Christian love is our greatest attribute and most powerful apologetic. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, US governmental agencies were heavily criticized for their slow and inadequate response. But the church responded effectively. They mobilized quickly and started to help people without waiting for money or permission. This did not go unnoticed. The Red Cross director for Mississippi said, "If the church had not taken the initiative many more would have died" (Ward 2005, 5). Renowned British atheist Roy Hattersley looked at the prevalence of Christians and the absence of atheists and announced,

The correlation is so clear that it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand...[Christian faith makes believers] morally superior to atheists like me.

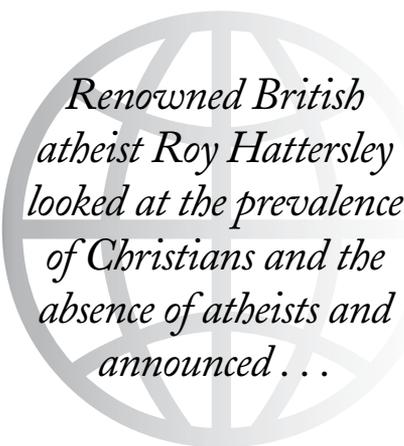
He added,

The truth [atheism] may make us free. But it has not made us as admirable as the average captain in the Salvation Army (Hattersley 2005, 3).

The impact of love on the effectiveness of evangelism is not just advocated by relief and development practitioners. Evangelical apologist Ravi Zacharias has said,

If the church of Jesus Christ rises to the challenge of HIV/AIDS, it will be the greatest apologetic the world has ever seen (Correll 2003, 266).

Recent discoveries in neuroscience have shown that development, diet, nutrition and other factors have an effect on a person's emotions and cognition (Rynkiewicz 2004, 133). If a person is not well fed then their decision-making



abilities will not be as sharp. If they are not well rested then their emotions will be more volatile. In short, a full stomach and good night's sleep puts somebody in a better position to hear and understand the gospel message. Social ministry is not an obstacle to evangelism, rather an integral part of and a significant enhancement to it.

As the world becomes increasingly integrated and values of pluralism and tolerance rise, a love-based evangelism is what is needed. This is what will distinguish scriptural evangelism from sectarian proselytism. René Padilla has noted that authentic evangelism takes place as

an expression of true concern for individuals and communities who are not seen as 'souls' to be saved but as persons who have physical, material, psychological, and spiritual needs and who are the object of God's love in Jesus Christ (Padilla 2003, 303).

Holistic mission is needed to "save" evangelism. To save it from being proselytism and save it from being ineffective. If we evangelize without loving the whole person then we are guilty of taking the most spectacular and beautiful story the world has ever known and announcing it with resounding gongs and clanging cymbals (1 Cor. 13:1).

Holistic mission is a paradigm for seeing the actual integration of apparently distinct activities of the church. As Myers wrote,

Holistic mission is a frame for mission that refuses the dichotomy between material and spiritual, between evangelism and social action, between loving God and loving neighbor (Myers 1999, 2).

Approached correctly, these aspects are not held in tension, but rather produce a harmonious worldview. They work together like fingers on a hand, not competing against each other but aiding and supporting the other.

### *Appropriate Distinctions*

Effective evangelism entails much more than verbal proclamation. As David Befus said,

The communication [of the gospel] requires an integration of words and deed; verbal concepts articulated in acts of service (Befus 2001, 131).

However, there is a need for some appropriate distinctions. The Lausanne Covenant has tried to bring this out by saying that evangelism is not social action yet a necessary part of Christian duty. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel always, and if necessary, use words." And this is exactly the point; it is necessary to use words. Holistic mission is not code for "do whatever you want" nor synonymous with secular humanitarianism. It affirms the necessity of the verbal proclamation of the Kingdom of God. As Paul pointed out,

How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them (Rom. 10:14)?

Therefore, an appropriate distinction is between verbal proclamation (word) and social service (deed).<sup>2</sup> Yet there is no inherent superiority or inferiority to either perspective. They seamlessly integrate together to equal effective ministry. Good deeds prompt questions. This is why Peter instructed his readers to do good and then followed by saying,

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15).

If we do good deeds then we need to be ready to say why we do them. The questions will come. And if not, we have to

wonder if we are at fault when no one asks questions to which the gospel is the answer (Myers 1997, 131).

### *Tremendous Challenges*

The world is becoming increasingly integrated and we are becoming more aware and knowledgeable of various illnesses, injustices, problems and suffering around the world. The population in developing countries is growing exponentially (Population Research Bureau 2006). Sadly, suffering instead of success is accompanying this increase. Every day, almost 2,000 babies are infected with HIV, either during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding (Bourke 2004, 43). A sixth of the world's countries receive two-thirds of the world's income. For every \$1 created through exports, \$0.03 goes to low-income countries (Ryman and Keen 2002, 4). 2.8 billion people live on less than \$2 a day and 1.2 billion on \$1 (Tan 2003, 1).

The people of the world need to know that they have intrinsic value. They were created in the image of God and He loves them. Gloria Züniga wrote it well,

Everyone has value. This is distinct from their personal ethic, morality or contribution to the world (Züniga 2003, 190–191).

They are deserving of our compassion. Animal researchers have noted that compassion is an entirely human trait.

**T**he questions will come. And if not, we have to “wonder if we are at fault when no one asks questions to which the gospel is the answer.”

In his reflection on this observation, Jordan Ballor said,

What is it about human beings that causes us to act with compassion when animals do not? Simply this: we were built for a purpose to love God by loving our neighbor (Ballor 2005, 1).

Holistic mission is the living out of our purpose. *Soli Deo Gloria.* **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> This formulation has been recently published (Allen 2005, 11). It probably originated with Tetsunao Yamamori. He proposed to define evangelism and social action “as functionally separate, relationally inseparable and essential to the total ministry of the Church” (Yamamori 1977, 267). It is well worth noting that Yamamori has moved from this original formulation nearly thirty years ago and now advocates a “more integrated” view of the functionality of evangelism and social ministry (Yamamori 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The traditional distinction has been between evangelism and social ministry. They have been defined as word and deed respectively. However, due to the tendencies to reduce evangelism to the verbal presentation of a few points of the Gospel, I think it is necessary to rephrase the distinctions in this way.

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