

Holistic Mission

Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 316-323.

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Practice and Priorities

For the past two chapters we have been considering the biblical case for a holistic understanding of mission. Inevitably, however, a number of questions arise of a more practical nature, which need to be acknowledged in conclusion.

Primacy or ultimacy? Even if we agree that biblical mission is intrinsically holistic and that Christians should be involved in the whole wide range of biblical imperatives—seeking justice, working for the poor and needy, preaching the gospel of Christ, teaching, healing, feeding, educating, and so forth—isn't it still the case that evangelism has primacy in all of this? Evangelism may not be the only thing we should do in mission, but isn't it the most important? Shouldn't it have priority over all else?

There is a strong current of evangelical mission thinking that has argued in this way, and it is not lightly to be challenged, let alone set aside.¹⁸ Advocates of the primacy of evangelism do not deny the holistic nature of biblical mission and the broad scope of all that we should rightly be involved in as we engage in mission for Christ's sake. They see the relationship between evangelism and social action as being totally integral and inseparable—like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird or airplane. You cannot meaningfully have one without the other, even though they are not identical to each other, nor can the one be substituted for the other. But still, even in a relationship of such integration, evangelism is seen as primary, for the reason that Christian social action (as a part of mission) requires the

¹⁸ The Lausanne Covenant of 1974 and the extraordinarily productive decade of follow-up conferences and statements on the relationship between evangelism and social action provide the mainstream of such thinking. It can be navigated in the very helpful compendium of all the Lausanne documents up to 1989: John Stott, ed. *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Carlisle, UK.: Paternoster, 1996). The thinking in all this material is broadly holistic. Further analysis of the recovery of this understanding of mission can be found in Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*, Global Christian Library (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), chap. 9; and David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), pp. 400-408.

existence of socially active Christians, and presupposes the evangelism by which they came to faith in Christ. Evangelism thus has a kind of chronological as well as theological primacy.

There is a strong logic here, and such a position is infinitely preferable to either an extreme affirmation of evangelism as the only rightful owner of the patent on Christian mission (to the exclusion of all other endeavors from any right to even use the term *mission*) or any extreme liberal and pluralist politicizing of the meaning of mission, such that evangelism is about the only things you are not allowed to do.

However, there are some uncomfortable consequences of such a view when it filters down to the thinking and practice of some individuals, agencies and churches. Consider what follows as a few gentle questions rather than severe critique, since this is a position with which I have considerable sympathy.

First, the language of “priority” implies that all else is “secondary” at best. From the world of sporting clichés, we that “second is nowhere” (at least that’s my former sport of rowing would speak of the annual Cambridge-Oxford Boat Race). And indeed, there are churches and mission agencies that have adopted the term secondary mission to describe all those who are not directly involved in evangelism and church planting. I have friends serving as medical missionaries in Africa who received a letter from their supporting church informing them that they had now been reclassified as “secondary missionaries.” The easily detected subtext of this kind of language (which is sometimes verbalized exactly thus) is that they are not *real* missionaries at all. In other words, the language of priority and primacy quickly tends to imply singularity and exclusion. Evangelism is the *only* real mission. We are back to so exalting the New Testament evangelistic mandate that we think it absolves us from all other dimensions of God’s mission that the rest of the Bible clearly requires of God’s people. However, it is one thing to say (rightly) that we *must* engage in evangelism. It is another thing altogether to say (wrongly, as I have tried to argue) that evangelism is the *only* thing that constitutes engaging in mission.

The word *priority* suggests something that has to be your starting point. A priority is whatever is most important or urgent. It is the thing that must get done first before anything else. However, a different way of thinking about mission would be to imagine a whole circle of all the needs and opportunities that God calls (or sends) us to address in the world. This is best done when thinking of a local specific context, of course, rather than attempting it globally. One can construct a spider chart in which presenting problems are traced to deeper causes, and they in turn are related to other underlying problems and factors. Eventually, a complex web of interconnected factors is discerned, constituting the whole range of brokenness and need, of sin and evil, of suffering and loss that may be found in any given human situation, personal or social. The list of contributing factors will doubtless include those that are spiritual, moral, physical, political, environmental, educational, economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, and many more.

The question then is posed: What constitutes the good news of the biblical gospel in this whole circle of interlocking presenting needs and underlying causes? What is the mission of God in relation to this whole nexus? How does the power of the cross impinge on each of the evils that are at work here? That should produce a very broad answer—as broad as the scale of the problem, for the gospel addresses all that sin has touched, which is everything.

In an excellent reflection on what constitutes holistic mission (based on a lifetime of personal cross-cultural mission indifferent ministries and locations), Jean-Paul Heldt suggests that we must look at any human problem in the four basic dimensions of our human existence—*physical, mental, spiritual, and social*.¹⁹ As we do so, we uncover different underlying causes of presenting problems, and then, of course, we need to apply the power of the gospel to all such causes and their effects. He illustrates his point (and mine) from the prevalent and recurrent problem of night blindness in children, biologically the result of lack of vitamin A. But then he goes on to chart the range of factors that are involved.

Night blindness has interlocking causes. Night blindness is indeed a symptom of vitamin A deficiency (biological causation). Yet that deficiency is primarily the result of malnutrition, which occurs in a context of poverty (such as inequitable land distribution, unjust labor laws and unfair wage structures). Finally, at the root of social injustice lie greed and selfishness, which are essentially moral and spiritual values. It is then not realistic to expect to cure and prevent night blindness with vitamin A drops unless we also address and confront the issues of malnutrition, poverty, social injustice, and, ultimately, selfishness and greed.²⁰

Such a process of analysis and discernment will give us some idea of the scope of a holistic missional response to the situation we are considering. So the next question has to be, Where do we start? The language of the "priority of evangelism" implies that the only proper starting point must always be evangelistic proclamation. *Priority* means it is the most important, most urgent, thing to be done first, and everything else must take second, third or fourth place. But the difficulty with this is that (1) it is not always possible or desirable in the immediate situation, and (2) it does not even reflect the actual practice of Jesus.

Rather, almost any *starting* point can be appropriate, depending possibly on what is the most pressing or obvious need. We can enter the circle of missional response at any point on the circle of human need. But *ultimately* we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional response the wholeness of *God's* missional response to the human predicament—and that of course includes the good news of Christ, the cross and resurrection, the forgiveness of sin, the gift of eternal life that is offered to men and women through our

¹⁹ I have taught the same fourfold dimension of human life for many years, both in expounding Genesis and in teaching biblical foundations for mission. Further reflection on this is offered in chapter 13.

²⁰ Jean-Paut Heldt, "Revisiting the 'Whole Gospel': Toward a Biblical Model of Holistic Mission in the 21st Century," *Missiology* 32 (2004):157.

witness to the gospel and the hope of God's new creation. That is why I speak of ultimacy rather than primacy. Mission may not always *begin* with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately *include* declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task. It is defective mission, not holistic mission.

Our study of the exodus in chapter eight illustrates this. God broke into the circle of Israel's need at the level of their economic exploitation and genocidal affliction at the hands of the Egyptians. Having *redeemed* them through the exodus (and that is how the language is first used), God went on to provide for *physical* needs in the wilderness. Then he entered into a *covenant* relationship with them after revealing his name, his character and his law. All of this he said, was so that they would truly *know* him as the living God and *worship* him alone. Then he provided the place of his own dwelling where they could meet with him, and finally, the system of *sacrifices* by which they could maintain that relationship and deal with sin and uncleanness through the *atonement* provided. All kinds of elements are involved in this total experience and the narrative that describes it. But *ultimately* the goal was that God's people should know God and love him with wholehearted loyalty, worship and obedience. It is a rich and pregnant model for mission.

Evangelism and social involvement: Chicken or egg? Another way the issue is sometimes framed is this: Surely the best way to achieve social change all the good objectives we have for society on the basis of what we know God wants (justice, integrity, compassion, care for his creation, etc.) is by vigorous evangelism. The more Christians there are, the better it will be for society. So if you want to change society, do evangelism. Then those who become Christians will do the social action part. I have often heard this as an argument for prioritizing evangelism over social action, and it sounds very plausible, but it has some serious flaws. Again, let me emphasize that what follows is in no way intended to deny that evangelism is utterly vital but rather to deny that it can carry the weight of obedience to the rest of the Bible's commands regarding our social responsibilities in the world.

First (and I think I owe this point to John Stott), there is flawed logic in the assertion that says, If you are a Christian, you should not spend time doing social action. Instead give all your time to evangelism because the best way to change society is to multiply the number of Christians. The logic is flawed because (1) all those new Christians will, following the same advice, give time to evangelism, so who is going to be engaging in the social engagement side mission? And (2) you ought to be engaging in social action since you are the product of someone else's evangelism. So by your own logic you should be the one to get involved in the social activity you are so readily to the fruit of your own evangelistic efforts. In other words, the argument becomes an infinite regress in which real social engagement as part of Christian mission in the world is conveniently postponed from one generation of converts to the next, with each one feeling a spurious justification for passing the buck.

Second, this view overlooks the importance of example. We all tend to imitate those who have most influenced us. If someone comes to faith through the effort of a Christian or a church that endorses only the evangelistic mandate and has a negative and nonengaged attitude to all things social, cultural, economic or political, then the likelihood is that the new convert will imbibe, consciously or otherwise, the same dichotomized attitude. We teach as we were taught. We reflect the kind of mission that moved us into faith. Evangelism that offers a safe long-term personal exit strategy from the world rather than a missional engagement with the world is likely to produce Christians and churches that have little cutting edge in the surrounding culture and little incentive as to how or why they ought to have anyway. Evangelism that multiplies Christians who are only interested in more evangelism but who are not wrestling with the challenge of being salt and light in the working world around them may boost church growth statistics. But we should not pretend that it is an adequate way, let alone the best way, to fulfill the rest of our biblical obligations in society.

Third, and tragically, this view is simply not borne out in the history of Christian mission. Now of course there is such a thing as conversion uplift. That is, the fact that when people become Christians from very poor and deprived backgrounds, they tend to shed some harmful habits (e.g., squandering resources on gambling, alcohol, etc.) and acquire some positive ones (such as a new sense of personal worth and the dignity of work, caring for others, providing for their family, honesty, etc.). The effect can contribute to an upward social drift and can certainly benefit a community if enough people are affected in this way.

However, there are other instances where rapid conversion of whole communities to a pietistic gospel that sings the songs of Zion to come but demands no radical concern for the social, political, ethnic and cultural implications of the whole biblical faith here and now has led to massive and embarrassing dissonance between statistics and reality. Some of the states in northeast India, such as Nagaland, are held up as outstanding examples of the success of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century evangelism. Whole tribes were converted. The state is recorded to be around 90 percent Christian. Yet it has now become one of the most corrupt states in the Indian Union and is riddled with problems of gambling and drugs among the younger generation. Naga students of the Union Biblical Seminary, where I taught in the 1980s, would tell me this as proof of the fact that merely successful evangelism does not always result in lasting social transformation. Others will point with desperate and baffled sadness at the tragic irony of Rwanda—one of the most Christianized nations on earth and the birthplace of the East African Revival. And yet whatever form of Christian piety was taken to be the fruit of evangelism there could not stand against the tide of intertribal hatred and violence that engulfed the region in 1994. The blood of tribalism, it was said, was thicker than the water of baptism. Again, successful evangelism, flourishing revivalist spirituality and a majority Christian population did not result in a society where God's biblical values of equality, justice, love and nonviolence had taken root and flourished likewise.

I write as a son of Northern Ireland. That has to be one of the most "evangelized" small patches on the globe. As I grew up, almost anybody I met could have told me the gospel and "how to get saved." Street corner evangelism was a common feature of the urban scene. I took part in it myself on occasions. Yet in my Protestant evangelical culture, the zeal for evangelism was equal only to the suspicion of any form of Christian social concern or conscience about issues of justice. That was the domain of liberals and ecumenicals, and a betrayal of the "pure" gospel. The result was that the de facto politics of Protestantism was actually subsumed under the gospel in such a way that all the political prejudice, partisan patriotism and tribal hatred was sanctified rather than prophetically challenged (except by a very brave few who often paid a heavy price). So the proportionally high number of the evangelizers and the evangelized (in comparison with any other part of the United Kingdom) certainly did not produce a society transformed by the values of the kingdom of God. On the contrary, it was (and sadly still is) possible to hear all the language of evangelistic zeal and all language of hatred, bigotry, and violence coming from the same mouths. As James would say, "this should not be" (Jas 3:10). But it is. And it is one reason why I beg to dissent from the notion that evangelism by itself will result in social change, unless Christians are also taught the radical demands of discipleship to the Prince of peace, are seeking first the kingdom of God and his justice, and understand the wholeness of what the Bible so emphatically shows to be God's mission for his people.

Holistic mission needs the whole church. A final question that is often raised in the context of teaching holistic mission arises from unavoidable personal limitations. "You are saying that Christian mission involves all these dimensions of God's concern for total human need," someone will say. "But I am finite, with finite time, finite abilities and finite opportunities. Should I not then stick to what seems most important—evangelism—and not try to dissipate myself over such a broad range of otherwise desirable objectives. I can't do everything!"

No, of course you can't. The same thought doubtless occurred to God, which is why he called the church into existence. Here is another reason why ecclesiology must be rooted in missiology. The mission of God in the world is vast. So he has called and commissioned a people—originally the descendants of Abraham, now a multinational global community in Christ. And it is through the *whole* of that people that God is working his mission purposes out, in all their diversity.

Of course every individual cannot do everything. There are different callings, different giftings, different forms of ministry (remembering that magistrates and other government officials of the state are called "ministers of God" in Rom 13, just as much as apostles and those who organized food aid). Individuals must seek personal guidance from God regarding the particular niche in which they will engage in whatever sphere of mission God has called them to. Some are indeed called to be evangelists. All are certainly called to be witnesses, whatever their context of work. The apostles in Acts recognized their own personal priority had to be the ministry of the Word and prayer. But they did not see that as the only priority

for the church as a whole. Caring for the needs of the poor was another essential priority of the community and its evangelistic attractiveness. So they appointed people who would have as *their* priority the practical administration of food distribution to the needy. That did not limit their ministry to such work (as Philip's evangelistic encounter with the Ethiopian shows), but it does show that the overall work of the church requires different people to have different gifts and priorities.

The question is, Is the church *as a whole* reflecting the wholeness of God's redemption? Is the church (thinking here of the local church as the organism effectively and strategically placed for God's mission in any given community) aware of all that God's mission summons them to participate in? Is the church, through the combined engagement of *all* its members, applying the redemptive power of the cross of Christ to *all* the effects of sin and evil in the surrounding lives, society and environment?

The ringing slogan of the Lausanne movement is: "The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world." Holistic mission cannot be the responsibility of any one individual. But it is certainly the responsibility of the whole church.

In conclusion, I can do no better than endorse the fine conclusion of Jean-Paul Heldt's article:

There is no longer a need to qualify mission as "holistic," nor to distinguish between "mission" and "holistic mission," Mission is, by definition, "holistic," and therefore "holistic mission" is, de facto, mission. Proclamation alone, apart from any social concern, may be perceived as a distortion, a truncated version of the true gospel, a parody and travesty of the good news, lacking relevance for the real problems of real people living in the real world. On the other end of the spectrum, exclusive focus on transformation and advocacy may just result in social and humanitarian activism, void of any spiritual dimension. Both approaches are unbiblical; they deny the wholeness of human nature of human beings created in the image of God. Since we are created "whole," and since the Fall affects our total humanity in all its dimensions, then redemption, restoration, and mission can, by definition be "holistic."²¹

²¹ Ibid., p. 166.