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# Holistic Gospel in a Developing Society: Biblical, Theological and Historical Backgrounds

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**KEYWORDS:** *Holism, gospel, Kingdom of God, prophets, creation, redemption, economy, environment, missions, NGOs*

struggles—spiritual, material, mental and physical.

## I Key Terms

THE QUESTION OF THE gospel and its relation to the Christian's role in society has been at the centre of the perennial debate on evangelism and social responsibility. Different Christian communities have looked at the problem from diverse stand points. The thorny issue revolves around which comes first: evangelism or social responsibility? However, it seems to me that there is a consensus on the necessity to integrate the two aspects of our Christian mission without putting a wedge between the two. These two elements of our Christian mission are inseparable and must always be held together. The theological and biblical ground for this position is the very nature of the gospel. The gospel is holistic. It provides answers to human questions and

It is important for us to define the key terms in our title: 'holistic' and 'gospel' and 'developing nation/society'. The word 'holistic' carries the idea of looking at the 'whole' rather than the constituent parts. Applied to the gospel, holism means looking at the gospel in its entirety: 'undivided' or 'unimpaired,' that is, in its complete form. It means looking at the gospel in its multifaceted dimensions—physical, spiritual, political and social. This is critical because the gospel is God's answer for human sin which is the cause of all the many problems humanity is facing today—sickness, poverty, exploitation, greed, corruption and so forth. This multifaceted aspect of human problems requires a gospel that is holistic and which brings people to completeness, wholeness, and maturity.

The second key word is 'gospel'. What is the gospel? The gospel is the good news about the restoration of God's creation—comprised of human beings and the created order. It is good news for the whole person—body, soul and mind. It is good news for the present and the future and not just good news for the 'after-life'. The gospel has power to transform people to become what God intended them to be, to glorify God. It is the good news of God's salvation for humanity through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. The gospel is often related to the kingdom of God. This kingdom has certain characteristics that govern its life and activities. The Christian community is to exhibit this kingdom ethics and to spread its justice and righteousness in the world in all its many-sided dimensions. In the biblical sense, the gospel is related to salvation. Salvation in the Bible addresses the whole human person in all his existential life. Salvation is to bring God's 'shalom' into human existence that encompasses the total well-being of the person. The gospel, therefore, brings total transformation to the whole person. This view of the gospel has enormous implications for our engagement in society.

The third key term is 'developing nation'. What is a developing nation, country or society? *Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia*, gives this definition:

A developing country is a country that has not reached the Western-style standards of democratic governments, free market economies, industrialization, social programs, and human rights guarantees for their citizens. It has inconsistent varying human development index

(HDI) score, low per capita income, a relatively low standard of living, widespread poverty, and low capital formation.<sup>1</sup>

From the above definition, there are certain common characteristics found in developing countries: lack of infrastructure and technological knowledge, rampant poverty, inability to satisfy basic human needs, unemployment and human underdevelopment. This is the context within which we are called to share the gospel. Has the gospel any answers to these endemic problems facing developing nations that comprise the majority of the population of the world?<sup>2</sup> The evidence we will adduce in this paper will be affirmative only if we preach a holistic gospel.

Having looked at our key terms, what then do we mean by 'holistic gospel'? By holistic gospel, we mean a gospel that recognizes the needs of the 'whole person'. Holistic gospel recognizes that people need food, clean water, basic health care, and salvation of their souls, education, economic development, and good infrastructure to sustain them and promote the well-being of the people and communities in which they live. Such a gospel recognizes the social, political and economic aspects of the gospel and does not emphasize only the spiritual dimension of the same. In order for people to grow

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<sup>1</sup> En.wikipedia.org/wiki/developing\_country.

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Statistics Division classifies the following countries as developing countries: Africa, Americas excluding Northern America, Caribbean, Central America, South America, Asia excluding Japan and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand.

into the fullness of what God designed them to be, we need a 'holistic gospel' that develops the whole person, body, soul/spirit, and mind.

Are there any theological, biblical and historical bases to advocate such a gospel? I will argue in this article that our task for engaging in a holistic gospel that addresses the whole human person is a theological one. My thesis is that theologically, biblically and historically, God has always involved himself in a holistic mission that seeks to develop the wellbeing of the whole person, and secondly that the anthropological nature of humanity as material and spiritual requires that the gospel address the entire nature of human beings.

First, I will discuss the theological foundations for a holistic gospel in a developing nation by showing the theological ground from the Scriptures, and then demonstrate this biblically and historically through God's dealings with creation and humanity. Lastly, I will provide a concrete example, using the early Christian missions in Africa who engaged in a holistic gospel that sought to develop the whole person.

## II Foundations: God's Mission in the World

The Christian community's actions in proclaiming a gospel that is holistic, taking seriously the human condition—spiritual, material, social, political and economical—is grounded in God's own actions and mission in reconciling the world to himself through his Son, Jesus Christ. From the scriptures we see that God's actions in deal-

ing with humanity were always holistic; they concern the total development and wellbeing of the person. Creation, which is the first act of God, was to provide all that humanity needed to live and experience the fullness of life, 'shalom'. The reality of sin and its resultant effects, such as evil, decay, wars, ignorance, injustice, and poverty, all point to the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ must and should address these various human needs, if total restoration of humanity is to be achieved. The gospel, if it will be transformational, must address the existential life of a person in its entire entirety. This is what God has done for humanity since the creation of humans.

Our mission as a Christian community should and must be patterned after God's actions. Our model for preaching a holistic gospel or engaging in a holistic mission in a world ravaged with poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, ignorance, high infant mortality rate, disease, etc., is primarily a theological one and secondly, a practical concern. One cannot concentrate only on the spiritual aspect of human needs and not take seriously the grave despicable conditions in which these souls find themselves.

First and foremost, the ground for a holistic gospel is theological and it is embedded in the character and nature of God who works principally to transform the whole person, by providing the resources needed for such a person to live. God's own intention for humanity is to bless them in all aspects of their lives—spiritually, mentally, socially, and economically. We see him bless humanity when he created it in Genesis chapters 2 and 3. Again we see him blessing Abraham and his descen-

dants as well as the nations. God's promise that in Abraham all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12) is an indication of his intentions for humanity. God promised Abraham his blessings before Abraham made any concrete decision to worship him. Such blessings are connected with creation and all the blessings creation brings to humanity—'abundance, fruitfulness and fertility, long life, peace and rest'.<sup>3</sup> These blessings constitute the outcome of the blessings that come from the gospel, the good news of God's redemption for humanity and creation. Jesus reiterated this, when he said, 'I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly' (Jn. 10:10). Interestingly, these blessings constitute what Africans understand salvation to mean: life in all its fullness. Both God and Jesus affirm the holistic nature of the gospel and redemption.

Recently, Christopher Wright has made a seminal contribution to the question of the mission of the church in the world. Beginning with the OT understanding of who God is, what he has called his people to be and do, he argues for holistic mission as a message or gospel that sees the multifaceted nature of our task in missions or in the world. He thinks holistic mission is the proper model for all Christian missions. God's mission, he believes, is to redeem a creation (world)—that includes the created order and humanity.

In the creation mandate, Wright points out that God gave humanity a

mission. This mission involves taking care of creation—both humanity and the created order. Wright points out,

The care and keeping of creation is our human mission. The human race exists on the planet with a purpose that flows from the creative purpose of God himself. Out of this understanding of our humanity... flows our ecological responsibility, our economic activity involving work, productivity, exchange and trade, and the whole cultural mandate. To be human is to have a purposeful role in God's creation.<sup>4</sup>

Wright argues that both Israel's mission and the church's mission are grounded on the 'identity of the true and living God, YHWH' and the 'true identity of the crucified and risen Jesus'. The church's mandate to preach a holistic gospel is grounded and flows from the identity of God and Christ.<sup>5</sup> The true gospel must emphasize the uniqueness of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that God's purpose is for humanity to come to recognize the triune God in this way; that humanity will embrace them and worship and glorify them alone and no one else. And we see this holistic nature of God's act in Christ; God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself—humanity and the whole created order (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

In light of our discussion above, the old debate on evangelism and social action regarding which comes first, is an academic rather than a practical one. In commenting on the action of

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IL, IVP Academic), 221.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Mission of God*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 61-66.

God, Dyrness is right to point out that 'God's active presence (in the world) grows out of and expresses the inner reality' of his actions.<sup>6</sup> He argues the key to this integration, is God's Trinitarian character. Dyrness shows that our enlightenment heritage has limited our sense of how we relate creation to humanity. Our dualistic tendency to separate the material and the spiritual has blinded us to the need to integrate the two aspects of human life. We have lost our sense of appreciating the physical world and the body. More attention is given to the spirit than to the body. God himself engaged the physical creation and still does. Our work in creation is possible because of God's own work. Consequently, as Dyrness argues, 'The work of God in the world does not alienate our human work but rather makes it possible'<sup>7</sup> (John 14:12). Our participation in developing humanity and giving them the abilities and the resources needed to grow and live well is grounded upon God's own engagement in creation. We become co-creators with God in managing and utilizing creation for our human, economic, political and social development.

The idea of the incarnation lays the ground for our critical engagement in creation and society to transform it. Christ revealed God in human form to transform human communities by establishing God's 'shalom' on earth and by promoting a just and righteous society where human beings are given opportunity to develop their potential,

so they may glorify God. 'In Christ, God becomes part of creation, God is embodied' in creation and identified with creation. God has always committed himself to creation. 'Christ's [coming and] work was to reveal the love of God for creation, by the Spirit, through Christ, to perfect creation.'<sup>8</sup>

The Exodus event is a classical example of God's own actions in holistic mission. It was the good news of salvation for his people who were oppressed, impoverished, socially and politically ostracized, and economically disadvantaged. Different Christian communities have interpreted the exodus narrative emphasizing one particular dimension of the story or another—the political or the economic or the spiritual. Very few see all three areas and hold them together. Those who spiritualize the exodus story neglect the historical context that forms the basis of the narrative, that God delivered real people who were subjected to gross injustice, oppression and violence. This reductionist approach tends to marginalize and overlook the political, economic and social nature of the exodus story. Such an approach is not holistic and it violates God's own acts of redemption. God did not ask the question, which comes first, evangelism or social action. Rather, we see God dealing first with the people's plight, before giving them any spiritual instructions. He delivered the people first from their immediate problems—oppression, economic injustice, poverty, and provided for their wellbeing—water, food, land, and safety in the desert. It was

6 William Dyrness, *The Earth is God's: A Theology of American Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), xiii.

7 Dyrness, *The Earth is God's*, 15.

8 Dyrness, *The Earth is God's*, 15.

after all these that later he gave them his laws and made certain demands on them.

Moses' song in Exodus 15 celebrates this victory over the human and divine forces of oppression and injustice and proclaims the universal reign of God over the kingdoms of the world. God's actions deal with all aspects of their lives: political oppression, economic injustice, social aggression and violence, and spiritual bankruptcy. These actions become the model for a holistic gospel that addresses the entire needs of human communities. Basing his argument of the concept of Jubilee, that restores Israel's land to its individual owners, Wright points out that Jubilee was 'an economic institution'. Its focus was on the family and the land. Jubilee addressed the social (kinship system), the economic structure (Israel's land tenure system), and religious dimensions of Israel's spiritual life. At the centre of this was the land, which was the economic vehicle for the development of the people. The land, however, belonged to God and so it was to be used for the benefit and wellbeing of the entire community.<sup>9</sup> Wright sums up the Jubilee concept in this way:

The primary purpose of the Jubilee was to preserve the socioeconomic fabric of multiple-household land tenure and the comparative equality and independent viability of the smallest family-plus-land units. In other words, the jubilee was intended for the survival and welfare of the families of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

9 Wright, *Mission of God*, 290-293.

10 Wright, *Mission of God*, 295. The emphases are his.

This economic reality of access to resources is grounded in the fact that the earth is God's and therefore humanity must be given access to it to help people develop and harness these resources to meet their basic needs. In areas where a few people own the land and the majority are landless, poverty has become the lot of many. There must be equitable distribution of and access to wealth and resources, 'especially land' in developing societies in order to 'curb the tendency of accumulation with its inevitable oppression and alienation'.<sup>11</sup> Given this theological basis for God's action, our own mission is to bring about salvation and restoration which must be holistic, one patterned after God's own actions. The gospel must transform people, socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. This in essence is what constitutes holistic development. Any development that focuses only on the material and the physical but neglects the spiritual aspect is inadequate.

In summary, God's models of redemption and restoration are holistic in nature. God's salvation of his people in the exodus narrative was holistic in nature. Wright rightly observes they scale the entire spectrum of their lives; they address the political, social and religious aspects of their existence.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, the nature of humanity as both material and spiritual requires that the gospel be holistic if it would meet these dual human needs. Since sin affected the whole person, if humanity is to be restored, the restoration must affect the whole being—

11 Wright, *Mission of God*, 297.

12 Wright, *Mission of God*, 268-288.

body, soul/spirit and mind. Since most of the issues affecting people living in developing countries concern the physical being (ie, the body), the gospel must seriously address these physical needs. It is not acceptable for anyone to spiritualize these needs or to neglect them entirely. Any gospel that will not take seriously the whole human condition and address it in its entirety is inadequate and flawed. This is not the gospel Jesus preached, and it does not follow the model God has given through his own mission practice. Of necessity, the gospel must be holistic, God's mission gives us a model to follow, and the human condition gives us no other option. Having laid down the theological and anthropological foundations for a holistic gospel in developing nations, I will seek to demonstrate this with some OT and NT examples.

### III Holistic Ministry in the Bible

Our dualistic and Greek worldviews have influenced our understanding of how we as humans ought to relate spirit and body, the spiritual and the physical. The Greek idea that matter is evil and spirit is good tends to push us to direct our Christian activities and ministry towards the human soul rather than to the body. Our Christian ministry fails to nurture the whole person, body, and soul/ spirit. As a result of these Gnostic tendencies, human development, infrastructure and economic issues facing developing nations have not been high on the agenda of the church's mission. But for real spiritual growth to take place, we need to make sure the basic things needed for life are

provided. God is concerned about these needs in human life and he is committed to provide for all our needs. God, however, uses human beings to meet our needs. The Christian community becomes the extension of God's hand to ensure that people's needs are taken care of.

The gospel has always been holistic right from the beginning of human existence. Before God created humans, he had already created the physical world and endowed it with all kinds of resources to meet the material needs of humanity. God was concerned with human needs, and he provided for them (Gen. 1-3). The gospel must address all the needs of humanity, physical, mental and spiritual.

The Old Testament provides us with many examples. We mentioned the creation and the exodus narratives earlier as acts of a holistic mission. In those accounts God was concerned with human wellbeing. He met those needs through his providence and through his mighty acts of delivering Israel from oppression. God did not make a dichotomy between the physical needs of the people of Israel and their spiritual needs. He ministered to them holistically. He did not prioritize the needs by putting the spiritual before the physical. When he needed to feed them because they were hungry, he fed them. When they needed to be protected and delivered from oppression and injustice, he delivered them.

Wright has given a balanced position on this. In his discussion on the church's practice and priorities, he asks whether we should talk about the primacy or the ultimacy of the gospel in mission. Citing from Exodus Chapter 8, he makes this point:

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...God went on to provide for their *physical* needs in the wilderness. Then he entered into a *covenant* relationship with them after revealing his name, his character and his law....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* God 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.<sup>13</sup>

God is a God of compassion and of justice. He calls humans to emulate his character and nature. The prophet Micah stressed this point in Micah 6:8: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

Issues of justice, mercy and faithfulness are central to the heart of God. Issues of justice, mercy and faithfulness deal with the material as well as the spiritual. God is concerned about

this and he expects Christian to demonstrate this kind of life in society.

The prophets' ministry in the OT was holistic. All the prophets of the OT were concerned about three things: social justice, good governance expressed by political integrity, and their spiritual wellbeing. They called the people to spiritual renewal, to faith in God, and to faithful obedience to his laws and commandments. They challenged the oppressors and the powerful who took advantage of the less powerful and less fortunate in the community. They defended the weak and the poor, the orphans and the widows who were mistreated and marginalized. They protected the land of the weak from the powerful, who through their power grabbed the land and reduced them to abject poverty.

The prophets did not only preach the good news about God's salvation and deliverance for the souls of the people. They were concerned about three things: social justice; good governance and political integrity; and the spiritual wellbeing of the community. Both areas of the ministry were kept in balance. All these aspects of the prophetic ministry are patterned after God's own actions.

There is no prioritization of these in God's way of dealing with humanity in redeeming and restoring it to himself. So the question that is often asked about which comes first, evangelism or social action, is an academic one. Human needs can be categorized in four ways—spiritual, mental, physical and social. All are important to God. All must be attended to by the church. What we do first in my judgment will depend on the situation we are confronted with. We must learn from God's own example.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 319. The emphases are his.

Humanity is faced with 'a complex web of interconnected factors' that are associated with human problems and the gospel must speak to these interconnected issues and be able to address all aspects of human needs. Given the fundamental needs of humanity, any starting point in terms of ministry can be appropriate, depending on what is the most pressing or obvious need. But ultimately, we must not see our work complete until 'we have included within our own missionary response the wholeness of God's 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....'<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in the NT, we see that Jesus' own ministry was holistic. The gospel he preached called people to repentance and faith in God. Luke 4:18-19 sums up the focus of Jesus' ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me  
Because he has anointed me  
To preach the gospel to the poor.  
He has sent me to heal the broken  
hearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are  
oppressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of  
the Lord.

This sets out the scope of Jesus' ministry. The elements that make up his ministry address both the spiritual and the physical well being of humanity. We see this in practice in Jesus'

ministry. Jesus gave equal weight to his teaching and healing ministry because he was concerned about the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the people (Mt. 8; 17:14-21; Mk. 1:21-24, 40-45). He healed the sick. He fed the hungry crowd twice in his ministry when there was need for it (Mt. 14:13-21; 15:22-29; Mk. 6:30-44). Jesus pointed out that God cares about what we eat and put on, so he would provide food and clothing for his people (Mt. 6:19-34). Scripture tells us Jesus was moved by compassion for all these people he ministered to.

Jesus encouraged us to have compassion on those who are in need around us and help them in whatever ways we can. The story of the Good Samaritan was to this effect. Sometimes religious people become so spiritual that they fail to see the needs and hurt of people around them and ignore and do nothing about them. Jesus taught that we should do what the Samaritan did; to show compassion and love to the needy and to help them.

When we are moved by compassion for the needy, we will not ask the question which comes first? Rather, we will move fast to meet their needs. Jesus makes reference to the use of resources that God has given us. These resources are to be invested so that they yield some profits. God expects us to use the resources he has given us to build up society to promote the wellbeing of the people (Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 16:1-9).

The early Christians in the book of Acts engaged in holistic ministry. In addition to their spiritual nurture, they provided for the needs and the welfare of the people who were disadvantaged so that no person among them was

needy (Acts 6:1-7).

From our discussion so far, we can ascertain that mission or the gospel may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include evangelism which calls the sinner to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ is not complete. Such mission is not holistic. It is clear from our arguments above that the gospel has wide implication for the spiritual, socio-political and economic wellbeing of the people and societies in which we minister.

In the last two sections we have demonstrated the theological and biblical foundations for holistic gospel, arguing that this is the norm for God's own acts, Jesus did it and the early church practised it. Now I will show concretely how this holistic gospel was preached in Africa by the early Christian missionaries who worked in Africa. Their holistic approach to missions had a great impact on the communities they served

#### IV Early Christian Missions in Africa

Historically, conservative evangelicals have seen the physical, social, political, economic and educational needs of people in three different ways—'secondary,' 'supporting' or 'related' to Christian mission.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the early 1960s was dedicated to winning people to Christ. The church's work then, focused mainly on 'evangelizing the world' and 'disciplining the nations'.

<sup>15</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 118.

However, since Vatican II,<sup>16</sup> Evangelicals, ecumenical Protestants, and Catholics have shown great concern for the poor, the oppressed and the powerless in our world today. These Christian communities sought ways in which to help reduce the sufferings of people. In line with the developments of Vatican II, the Lausanne Congress in 1974<sup>17</sup> tended to move the poor to the top of its agenda. Here a holistic gospel was proposed. 'Holism' came to be understood by some as ministry through 'word', 'deed', and 'sign'. Others saw holism as ministry to the whole person—spirit, mind and body, while some emphasized transformation of entire cultures and societies. There are yet others who see holism as partnership with socio-political action and evangelism.<sup>18</sup>

Hesselgrave has outlined three basic theological approaches to holistic ministry in relation to the 'poor' as understood by both conservative evangelicals and Catholic Christians. These approaches he classifies as 'liberation theology', 'holism theology' and 'prioritism theology'. The liberationist takes a radical stance, drawing on the Exodus motif showing God's own action in dealing with oppression and evil in human society. Using this as

<sup>16</sup> Austen Plannery, O. P. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Revised Ed. Grand Rapids (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988). See especially Section 64, Part II, Chapter 3, 'Economic and Social Life,' and Chapter IV 'The Political Community,' 968-985.

<sup>17</sup> *Lausanne Covenant*, [www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-1974.html](http://www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-1974.html)

<sup>18</sup> Hesselgrave, *Paradigms*, 120.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 319.

their theological basis, the liberationists' mission 'is to promote justice in society and establish Shalom on earth'.

Holism theology, he points out, has two strands to it; namely, revisionist and restrained. The revisionists' mission is 'to minister to society and individuals without dichotomizing between the physical and the spiritual or the body and soul/spirit'. The restrained, on the other hand, sees its mission as ministering 'to society and individuals socially and spiritually while giving certain priority to evangelism'.<sup>19</sup>

Prioritism theology holds the traditional stance that sees the mission of the church as 'primarily to make disciples of all nations. Other Christian ministries are good but secondary and supportive.' Hesselgrave seems to have problems with the first two approaches. He tends to support the third approach. Holism, he concludes, is inadequate and he argues for the priority of the gospel over all else.<sup>20</sup>

The evidence we have shown so far seems to militate against Hesselgrave's conclusion. God's mission to his creation is holistic, the gospel by its nature is holistic, and it addresses every dimension of human existence. Contrary to his assertion that Jesus was primarily concerned with 'spiritual needs not with meeting the physi-

cal, material or social needs' of the people,<sup>21</sup> the evidence we have given does affirm that Jesus did give equal weight to both the spiritual and material needs of the people he ministered to. If God's act is the pattern or model for our own mission work, then how should we present the gospel? This whole idea of which one comes first, evangelism or social responsibility, can be seen once again as an academic question not a practical one.

The historical context of Africa as a continent that has experienced great humiliation, through the slave trade, the colonization of the continent by western powers, the exploitation of the west for the resources of African nations, gross poverty, diseases, injustice, witchcraft and demonic oppression, and ignorance have made the theme of liberation very popular in African Christianity. This theme was championed by the early African leaders who fought for the liberation of African countries from colonial oppression. Any gospel that does not address these socio-political aspects of human life and needs will be inadequate. It is important that the whole of human life is addressed by the gospel.

A holistic gospel is critical for developing societies and especially in Africa where the African worldview does not allow a person to divide the world into sacred and secular, into physical and spiritual, body and soul/spirit. Life is seen as a whole. The gospel must address the whole of the African person and his needs. Salvation must not address only sin and the soul, but the body and the world in which s/he lives.

<sup>21</sup> Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 136.

For example, salvation, which means 'life', in Africa is seen in multifaceted dimensions. Larbi observes this 'life' is not in abstraction but rather 'life in its concrete and fullest manifestations. It means the enjoyment of long life, vitality, vigor, and health; it means life of happiness and felicity.'<sup>22</sup> Life includes possessions, prosperity—wealth, children; peace and tranquillity; and freedom from all the forces that threaten the well-being of the person—safety and security.<sup>23</sup> This holistic view of reality requires that the gospel message must of necessity be holistic. The message of the gospel and its implications for our spiritual, mental, emotional, social, political, and economic life must be emphasized and practised in our quest to develop our communities.

Africans have a legacy and model from the early missionaries who worked in Africa. They did not only preach the gospel to save souls but developed the whole person by establishing hospitals and schools and so forth. The preaching of the gospel in Africa and any developing nation should follow this legacy. The gospel must develop the whole person. This means that the material, mental, spiritual and physical, socio-political and the economic wellbeing of the people must be taken seriously. This holistic view of life is expressed by the African proverb that says: 'An empty sack cannot stand; or a hungry stomach has no

ears.'<sup>24</sup> This shows the importance Africans put on the material and physical wellbeing of a person. In other words, Africans believe, first things must be done first. The safety and wellbeing of a person come first before anything else. Any gospel that fails to address the stunning needs of developing nations will not reflect the character and nature of God—as one, who loves, cares and provides for the needs of his creation.

### 1. Early Missionaries and Development in Africa

The missionary movement of the 19th century preached a holistic gospel. Following the great model of our faith, God and the Lord Jesus Christ, they ministered to the whole person. They engaged in health services, education, social services, and vocational skills, preached the gospel and planted churches. In many cases, they met the physical needs of many of the communities in which they served before any person gave their lives to Christ. They became the hands, feet, and eyes of God to the community. They demonstrated the heart of God to provide for the needs of his people. In this respect, they built schools to develop the intellectual abilities of the people to whom they ministered. By teaching the people to write and read, many in the communities were able to read the word of God themselves. This led many to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of the leaders of the African independence movements in the early 50s and

<sup>22</sup> Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Center for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 2001), 8-13.

<sup>23</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> Tokunbo Adeyemo, *Africa's Contribution to Christendom* (Nairobi: AEA, nd).

<sup>19</sup> He points out this kind of holism is espoused by the Lausanne Covenant, 1974. The architects of the covenant struggled with the issue of social responsibility but preserved the priority that in the ministry of the church evangelism is primary.

<sup>20</sup> Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 120-125.

60s were Christians and products of the missionary schools.

The mission agencies also built hospitals to cure the diseases that afflicted the people. They taught new agricultural techniques, and dug bore holes to provide good drinking water for the people. They built other infrastructure such as roads to provide easy travel and places for the community to meet to have recreation. They understood the social aspects of the gospel. They built high schools and established vocational schools that trained men and women in different skills; this led to the creation of jobs and employment which helped them to develop economically so that they could live a decent life and be in a position to provide for their families. We cannot deny the holistic nature of the gospel preached by the missionaries. They were seriously concerned about the development of the whole person. The gospel gave them the basis for their involvement in the material wellbeing of the people.

Unlike our protestant evangelical ancestors, the more recent evangelicals in Africa did not take the social and economic development of the gospel very seriously. That generation of Christians was more concerned with the salvation of souls and bringing people to the kingdom; so they paid far less attention to the material, psychological and emotional needs of the people. This attitude to life made some African governments criticize the evangelical church as being anti-social and anti-development in its outlook. These governments scolded the church for not taking serious interest in the suffering and plight of people.

We must overcome this dualistic attitude. The dichotomy between soul

and body, material and spiritual, must be rejected. It is rooted in Greek philosophical thinking that sees the material as evil and the spiritual as good. This dichotomy is unacceptable to the non-western minds. But more importantly, it is foreign to biblical teaching and theologically bankrupt. The body is not evil. God did not create an evil body but a good body. The body is God's design and intention for humanity. We will have bodies in this life and in the life to come. Therefore, we need to take good care of our physical bodies as we do take care of our spirits. The spirit needs the body to be a person, and the body needs the spirit to be a person. Both are indispensable. We all need bodies to be real persons. This is why God will give all humanity resurrected bodies in his 'New Creation'. Although a different kind of body, it is still a body!

This trend has changed in recent years. Protestant denominations and newer evangelical churches, especially the Pentecostals, have adopted a holistic approach to the gospel. The Pentecostal movements have played a critical role in ministering to the whole person. The so-called 'prosperity gospel' preached by the Pentecostals is an attempt to deal with these deficiencies of the past. Thus, the church has become more aware of the needs of their people. In their efforts to address human needs holistically, the churches have engaged in community development projects, established vocational training centres to provide basic trade skills for many young unemployed youths, opened homes for orphans, helped the poor and needy amongst them by providing them with basic food supplies, and given bursaries/scholarships to help needy parents to educate their children. In addition

tion to these, we have seen great interest by the church in developing the intellectual abilities of people. Many of the denominations have established institutions of higher learning at the tertiary level. Most of these institutions have taken seriously the social, economic and political implications of the gospel for human life and development. Christian institutions are not only concerned about theological education but are also offering courses in other disciplines to help develop the human and economic resources of their nations.

Others are engaged in giving primary health care for the poor. Churches engage in medical camps where they provide basic health services to those who cannot afford such services. The more Christians have come to understand the holistic nature of the gospel, the more they have come to realize that they cannot preach the good news and at the same time be indifferent to the needs and concerns of the people among whom they minister. How can we close our eyes to the immensity of the poverty, diseases, and sufferings we see in our world today? God never closes his eyes to human needs and suffering. True love will always respond to human needs and suffering. God responded to human sinfulness by sending Jesus Christ not only to bring salvation from sin, but also to heal our bodies and to give us abundant life, God's 'shalom'.

## 2. Current African Realities

The continent of Africa is endowed with many natural and human resources. Yet the continent is rated one of the poorest in the world. It is a continent ravaged by political ten-

sions, democratic struggles, wars, poverty, hunger, diseases, ignorance, high infant mortality rate, injustice, massive unemployment, unprecedented urbanization with inadequate infrastructural support, influx of refugees as a result of political instability and bad governance, moral degradation and high indebtedness to the international community.

With the current limited resources available, African Governments are stretched to the limits and cannot meet all their obligations to their citizens. Governments are calling on Christian communities to assist them and to engage in development activities that will alleviate the sufferings of their people. This call is an important one. It shows governments expect Christian communities to do more than just take care of souls. The gospel must address these challenges and plethora of human needs that confront many developing nations in the world today. A person who has the character and the compassion of the triune God or a church that seeks to follow the mission of the triune God cannot overlook the misery of people they minister to. The Scriptures calls us to take care of the needy among us. The lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ must be experienced in all areas of our lives so we can experience God's 'shalom' in our lives.

## 3. The Daunting Task of the Church

Advocating an holistic gospel places an enormous burden on the church. The humanitarian needs on the African continent are gigantic and can be daunting. They require a huge amount of resources to meet them. One can



easily get discouraged and easily give up. How then can this be done so that the church fulfils its mandate to preach a holistic gospel? The immensity of this work requires us to harness all our resources. This calls for partnerships. Partnerships imply that we recognize each person's gifting and utilize such gifts for the benefit of humanity and in promotion of God's mission on earth.

It is very important that the church enter into partnerships with other institutions who are doing development work. Our suggestion for entering into partnership with other stakeholders—governments, non-governmental organizations, civil rights activists, etc, to engage in collaborative ventures has its biblical basis in 1 Corinthians 3:1-15. This will help us to harness and use our resources, gifts and strengths in a more effective and productive way. This principle is also used in the early church by the apostles in Acts 6. This will help to prevent duplication of our efforts and avoid unnecessary competition within the Christian community.

In this regard, it is prudent for the church to take the lead in these efforts, as it fulfils its mandate in accomplishing God's mission to bring about 'shalom' for humanity. In being true to our Christian heritage the church in Africa must engage in the social, economic, political and human development of its people. However, all of our lives and activities must be placed under the Lordship of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15-20).

#### a) Partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations

We must affirm the work these organi-

zations do in bringing basic human services to communities. We must show our solidarity with them by encouraging them, visiting, praying and assisting them in any way possible. Such partnership will help meet the spiritual and material needs of the people in a balanced way. We can learn and benefit from their expertise in areas in which we are not competent.

- Christian professionals' expertise can be harnessed to help train people in all kinds of skills and fields in order to help people and communities to develop themselves and utilize the resources readily available to them for the betterment of their lives. The goal is to help people create wealth. We may need people who are experts in entrepreneurship, micro-financing and economic development to help in this training to serve as resource persons. Addressing poverty will require that we train and develop communities in the areas of micro-enterprises and entrepreneurship. Communities must be helped to develop the resources they have to create an economic environment for people to create wealth for themselves.
- Help needy communities to harness all the resources they have for the development of their communities. We must see this as part of our spirituality by engaging the world and being partners with God to make this world a better place for humanity to seek God's love and provision for their needs.
- Maintain our prophetic voice and remain the voice of the voiceless. We must remain the moral eyes of the nation and communities and

speak against the evils and injustices done against the marginalized, the vulnerable in our societies. In addition, we must set up advocacy units or collaborate with civil societies and organizations who share the same vision as us to bring to light the evils committed against the innocent and seek to appeal to and challenge governments and influence policy makers to make policies that give basic human dignity for all to live well.

- Advocate for the provision of basic infrastructure—health facilities, good drinking water, good sanitation—that promotes the wellbeing of people. These basic amenities are critical. The church must team up with health personnel to engage and teach people in basic health care issues to help people who are vulnerable to protect themselves from some of the preventable diseases that easily kill them. All these activities must be taken as part of our spirituality. The apostle James says that, true religion is this: to show mercy, compassion, to those who are weak and vulnerable in our societies (James 1:27).

#### b. Educational/Social Amenities

- To address the problem of ignorance in most developing nations, education is very critical. It would be good for Christian communities to partner with national universities where there are programs for adult literacy training to teach the community to read and write. Many people would enjoy more fruitful Christian lives if they could read and study the bible themselves.

Education will give others the opportunity to explore their gifting so they can become a blessing to the larger communities in which they live and serve.

#### c. The Relief Model

- Relief work as a temporary measure to help needy communities might be encouraged. This model was used by the early church. The Church in Antioch sent relief to the Jerusalem Church. While this model has been used by many Christian organizations and non-governmental groups, it must be seen as temporary. Many are thinking more of permanent ways of helping people meet their own needs from the resources available to them. More of these organizations are looking to lasting development agendas that will benefit and help communities to provide for themselves. This will prevent what has often happened with relief work—the dependency syndrome. If this goes on for a long time, it causes communities to become dependent on others.

#### d. Advocacy

- The church must lead in advocacy for impelling governments to develop good governance systems and accountability structures so that they can raise enough resources to develop their nation's infrastructure, schools, health facilities, economic development, and so forth in order to provide for the basic needs of their people.

### e. Policy Formulation

- The church must advocate and work with governments and civil societies to formulate economic development policies to foster development in all areas of the nation—economic, educational, infrastructural, agricultural, housing, health, and create a favourable environment for such activities to take place.

### V Conclusion

If the church does not want to become irrelevant to society, a holistic gospel is the answer. A holistic gospel will give credibility to the message and acceptance of the church in society. The church should not be viewed as anti-development or anti-progress. Rather, the church should be concerned about human dignity. For humanity to live a dignified life, development of the whole person must be taken seriously.

A holistic gospel will also provide the way for the church to make the love of God and his concern for the wellbeing of humanity more obvious to the world. Compassion and mercy are essential attributes of God. Throughout the Bible, we see God providing for human needs whenever and wherever he meets them. He provided for individuals like Elijah, David, and groups like the Israelites in the wilderness.

Furthermore, the gospel has certain implications for our lives in society. We are called to partner with God in bringing everyone under the Lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ and God's 'shalom' to humanity. It means the message of the gospel must be holistic to address

both the spiritual and the physical needs of humanity. Both are critical for humanity to experience God's 'shalom'. We must also hold the two together.

When the church preaches a gospel that only saves the soul but does not feed the hungry, take in the stranger, or clothe the naked, it is not preaching a holistic gospel (Matt. 25:31-40). A holistic ministry also addresses creation—the issues of deforestation, pollution of the atmosphere, contamination of our rivers, and the extinction of animal species. The message of God to the Israelites was comprehensive; it addressed every facet of their lives. The prophets and Jesus accused those who made the spiritual a priority and neglected the material and physical needs of the people as not following the ways of God.

The whole debate around 'holistic' mission is a critical one. The church has followed different traditions over the years, but the issue is not 'either-or' but 'both -and'. The attempt to prioritize evangelism or social action is, I suggest, based on a western dualistic presupposition that has its root in the enlightenment tradition and has no place in non-western and biblical thoughts.

The gospel of Jesus Christ must transform the whole person. Therefore, the gospel must not be polarized by those who communicate its message. African view of life is holistic and any ministry that does not deal with its entire world view would not be effective and transformational. Jesus' ministry was holistic and he expects his followers to engage in holistic ministry. Therefore our mission must follow the pattern of Jesus.

# Holistic Gospel in a Developing Society: Some Biblical, Historical and Ethical Considerations

Justin Thacker

**KEYWORDS:** *Lausanne Covenant, Grand Rapids, missio Dei, Micah Declaration, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, Integral Mission*

### Introduction

#### Lausanne 1974 and afterwards

Some controversial issues seem never to depart from evangelical shores, and the precise relationship between evangelism and social action remains one of them. On the one hand, there are those who argue that all that matters is our eternal destiny, and therefore our primary responsibility is to verbally proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ so that the unsaved might trust in him for their salvation. On the other hand, there are those who argue that in response to the biblical mandate to seek justice we need to work at improving the material conditions of the lives

of the poor, that issues of eternal destiny are beyond our control, and our only responsibility is to demonstrate the love of Christ by our actions towards people.

According to the first of these views, Christian social action is a distraction from what should be our main activity, the verbal proclamation of the gospel. According to the second, to ignore the material conditions of people's lives is to embrace a neo-platonic Christianity that is a travesty of the actual gospel preached and practised by Jesus Christ.

Despite this polarisation, the vast majority of evangelicals now agree that both evangelism and social action are needed if we are to pursue salvation in the biblical sense. Enough academic work has taken place to demonstrate that the concept of salvation in the New Testament is not restricted to our eternal destiny, but embraces a far wider canvas. Michael Green writes,

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