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Working with the Poor as a Means for Demonstrating the Good News in a Middle East Context

Robert Hamd

Keywords: *Missiology, contextualization, Middle East, Lebanon, marginalized, evangelism, Reformed, Evangelical.*

Pity the Nation…

'Pity the nation that is full of beliefs
and empty of religion…
Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero,
and that deems the glittering conqueror bountiful…
Pity the nation that welcomes its new ruler with trumpeting,
and farewells him with hooting,
only to welcome another with trumpeting again…
Pity the nation divided into fragments,
each fragment deeming itself a nation.'[1]

In every epoch and country there are poets who capture the imagination of their people with the power of their words. The Lebanese American poet, Khahil Gibran Khahil, seized the heart of the people of Lebanon with his prophetic words about his beloved homeland. Excellent poetry is truth in words. A poet describes, with the greatest economy of words, some unvoiced reality that he and his readers face.

Gibran compressed the broader complexities and paradoxes of the Middle East into a mere 23 lines in his poem 'Pity the Nation'; and in particular, he captured the spirit of Lebanon. The country that is unwilling to honestly assess its behaviour and practices, or that does not have the courage to change, following the dictates of its consciousness of its situation, is, Gibran tells us, pitiable.

'Pity the nation whose sages are
dumb with years
and whose strong men are yet in
the cradle.'

1 Khalil Gibran wrote this poem early in the 1900s (published in 1933 in *The Garden of the Prophet*).

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With these verses ringing in our ears, we need to evaluate our past and appropriate the lessons learned for the coming generations.

It is at this juncture in our moral history that Christian theologians and missiologists enter the conversation to remind us of what was done in the past and how we can learn to apply the lessons learned for the present in the context of the fullest sense of history – history as the unfolding of God's creation. I believe that a fruitful starting point would be to evaluate one's history through the lens of God's salvific plan. This means that we do not flee the realities we face, but assess them with reference to the word of God and the entrance of God as man into the world as our rule for faith and practice.

I contend that every one of us is called in some way to merge the good and ill of our past into our present through an incarnational holistic change in our sphere of influence for the glory of God. In other words, Christians, on the model of Christ himself, must engage with the world and challenge our deeply held assumptions, confronting the status quo for the glory of God. The Gospel saying: 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first' is an excellent methodological rule for understanding history, and our place in it, not from the perspective of secular power, but from the perspective of the grassroots, the humble people themselves.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I will give a brief account of the history of the Protestants in Lebanon; second, I will focus on the role and practice of caring for the poor as a means of enacting the good news in a Middle East context.

As is evident from these themes, this paper takes its missiological cues from the past but reinterprets them from the horizon of the church's situation today, mainly in its efforts to extend diaconal care to marginalized people in Lebanon in order to transform the marginalized (to liberate their potential for love). This, I contend, is a major aspect of the church's self-understanding of the *missio Dei.*

I The Lebanon Context

Within the Arab World, spanning Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, among others, there are no less than two million Protestants for whom Arabic is their language of worship and cultural expression. The word 'evangelical' (*enjili* in Arabic) is typically used by Arabs to describe the myriad Christian denominations within the region, including the Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopal, Baptist, and other churches, which in the west are normally known as 'Protestant'.[2] In Lebanon in particular, the terms 'Protestant' and 'Evangelical' are interchangeable to describe a small minority of Christians within a larger, albeit still minority Christian population, made up of Maronite and Orthodox.

To help simplify the denominational language I am using, when I use the phrase 'Protestant church', I am referring to two major denominational traditions: Reformed and Anabaptist. They determined the Protestant church

2 Habib Badr, 'The Protestant evangelical community in the Middle East: impact on cultural and societal developments', *International Review of Mission,* 2000 no. 89 (352), 60.

landscape which we are grappling with to this day.

1. Historical Background

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was the first mission agency to send agents to the Middle East. These new missionaries, although immersed in Reformation principles, typically merged, in the manner of the 19th century, the Enlightenment's optimistic view of humanity with a postmillennialism view that motivated and informed their mission.[3] Their desire was to establish a base in Jerusalem, but Ottoman authorities barred the way.

The Ottomans were suspicious of the intentions of the Protestant missionaries nor did they fully understand where they fell amongst the already established Christians (which was truly disturbing to the conservative Ottoman state bureaucracy).[4] With Jerusalem off limits, the early Protestant missionaries shifted their base to Beirut, purchasing property outside the city gates.[5]

When the first missionaries disembarked, Beirut was a small town of roughly 6000 inhabitants on the Mediterranean coast. Later, European missions united with the American missionaries in Lebanon and Syria and consolidated their mission work to form a larger base. In 1830, the AMFCM moved from Istanbul to Beirut, consolidating their operations to jump-start indigenous churches, using a version of what we would now call 'contextual mission'.

By the middle of the 20th century, Reformed missions existed all across the Middle East from Turkey to Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Sudan. During this period, the Lebanese Protestant church was slowly succeeding in becoming more indigenous as the church learned how to be independent of its founding denominations.

2. Protestant Presence in the Middle East/Lebanon:

Scholarship on missions in the Middle East tends to take a critical view of the expansion of Protestant missions in the region, with some justification. To help to understand the criticism, I will give a brief outline of Protestantism in the Middle East.

Academic scholarship characteristically divides Protestantism in the Middle East into two categories: 'the colonial phenomenon' and 'the foreign (Western) transplant'. The two themes are related, as David Bosch in his book, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission,* writes: '[c]olonialism and mission, as a matter of course, were interdependent; the right to have colonies carried with it

3 David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 328.

4 Habib Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians": the policy and practice of American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and its missionaries concerning eastern churches which led to the organization of a protestant church in Beirut (1819-1848)', PhD, 1992, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ., 82.

5 The National Evangelical Church of Beirut in the heart of the capital stands on the original property purchased by the early missionaries. They have had a worshipping community since the 1860's.

the duty to Christianize the colonized.'[6] Thus, when a missionary arrived in Lebanon to spread the gospel among the Arabs, he or she was justly seen as irretrievably tied to their institutions of Europe or America. These institutions were perceived as granting the missionaries the source of their authority and connection to the West.

For this reason, many scholars emphasize the fact that 19th century missionary activity and western colonialism were inextricably bound. Indeed, one could argue the missionaries of this period were thoroughly imbrued with the dominant imperialist attitude, with both positive and negative elements emerging in their work. By the end of the 19th century, the dominant ideology within the Reformed mission essentially blended the Christian religion with western cultural values, producing an institution-wide cultural blind spot. Missiologist Wilbert Shenk points to the assumptions grouped under the slogan of 'Christianity and Civilization' with the third 'C' standing for commerce. When western nations penetrated an area to expand trade, it usually meant that missions were soon to follow.[7]

Granting, however, the imperialist connection, it can easily be taken too far in a Middle Eastern context, especially when it is claimed to provide a unilateral explanation for the rise of Arab Protestant communities. This crude–but popular reductionism tends to view western missionaries and their activities solely in an instrumental light, as though the Christian mission's sole purpose was to maintain the European and American influence in Middle Eastern populations. This interpretation transforms piety and humanitarian efforts into mere fronts, behind which we will always find the western desire for power.[8]

Historically speaking, this interpretation exaggerates a relationship that undoubtedly existed. Most serious scholars, Christian historians, and missiologists do not go this far. Sadly, some Muslim scholars and the more extreme fundamentalists believe and propagate this perspective, using it as political propaganda to cast a poor light on the motive of early missionary efforts and, by inference, on the present day church in the Middle East.

A more moderate view of the 'colonial phenomenon' theme concedes that it would be naïve not to see the close link between western imperialism and the missionary movement of the last century. Some scholars identify a 'complicity' between western missions and a western political agenda which linked the activities of the missionaries explicitly with the political consulates of their time. Surely missionaries of that era benefited from their close relationship with the ruling powers.

One example from the first records of a Protestant service in Beirut held on November 23, 1823, at the home of the British Consul, Mr. Peter Abbott, indicates how close missionaries were to their consulates. The initial entry in the historical record book reads:

6 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 227.

7 Wilbert R.Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 51-52.

8 George Sabra, 'Protestantism in the Middle East : Colonial Phenomenon? Western Transplant? or Something Else?', *Reformed World,* 1993, no. 43 (1-2):39-51.

'[w]e administered the Lord's Supper from time to time, generally on the monthly Concert…,'[9] showing the close relation between early missionaries and their countrymen. This kind of thing has been picked up by those who would debunk the sincerity of the missionary movement in the Middle East. These critics like to cite Ussama Makdisi's work, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, which argues that the missionary movement of the 19th century was fraught with mistakes, resulting in a struggle between European and Ottoman powers for decisive influence on the basis of religious allegiance.[10]

A second line of criticism contends that Middle East Protestantism is a thoroughly foreign transplant, and regardless of its origins, Protestants are not Eastern in their origins, and therefore do not belong in the Middle Eastern world. Here, converts to evangelical Christianity are represented as though they were inhabitants of an artificial garden, transplanted on eastern soil, a sort of invasive species which never should have been brought there.[11] This view maintains that though Protestantism has been taken up by Arabs on Arab soil, it nevertheless must be considered a foreign intrusion in the landscape of the Middle East.

Scholarly discussions among Arab Protestants on this topic are on one hand critical of the missiological mistakes made by the ABCFM missionaries, but on the other hand, call for a more appreciative assessment of the changes wrought by the missionaries, and value the Reformed tradition that they have adopted as their own.[12]

These Arab scholars rightly call for a contextual revision of Protestant Reformed theology to reshape existing structures and institutions to become more relevant to the Arab community. They make the case that Reformed teaching is not defined by its origin and ties to the western world, but carries within its theological constructs universal biblical claims that are appropriate in any culture.

II Creating Missiological Capacity

There were many missiological contributions to the social good brought into the Middle East by the early Reformed missionaries. Reformed missionaries founded evangelical elementary and high schools (many are still operational today) in order to empower, through education and literacy, the very people who were influenced by the missionaries' teachings to learn and live by the word of God. An important achievement of the Reformed missionaries consisted of educating girls. This was a risky enterprise at a time when female education was not supported by

9 Robert M. Copeland, *A Sesquicentennial History of The Community Church of Beirut 1823-1973* (The National Evangelical Church Historical Records, 1974), 2.

10 Ussama Samir Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism : Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 1-14.

11 Sabra, 'Protestantism in the Middle East', 41.

12 Badr, 'The Protestant evangelical community in the Middle East'; George Sabra, 'The Struggle for a New Society in the Middle East'. *Reformed World, 1991* no. 41 (5):169-174.

societal norms.[13]

In addition to the focus on education, the Reformed missionaries sponsored print publication such as Bibles and other books written in Arabic, Armenian, Syriac, and other oriental languages. They were instrumental to this explosion of translations which certainly helped overthrow the cultural stagnation imposed by the Ottoman overlords.

The lessons one can draw from the early missiological works in Lebanon are social in nature. Care for the poor, which is one of the great lessons of the New Testament, became part of the missionary program from its beginnings in the Middle East, and was primarily manifested in the establishment of schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Care for the poor included care for *all* poor, both Muslims and Christians, which functioned as a way of enacting Reformed teachings to all within the Lebanese context. That enactment, naturally, attracted interest in the Protestant message.

The missionaries' inclusive approach touched on the importance of human rights, founded on the biblical teaching of *imago Dei* (image of God), or, in other words, the teaching that all human beings are created in God's image and have rights and value. Their work in establishing schools, hospitals, and orphanages involved confronting the ruling powers and demanding the ending of oppression and injustice, in the name of a commitment to new life in Christ.

The author of the Epistle of James says that 'religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world' (James 1:27 NIV). The early missionaries' method was in line missiologically, crossing boundaries to love all, regardless of background, belief, or societal status.

The pragmatics of caring for the poor, and making the poor the privileged target of their teaching, was not elevated into a theory by these early missionaries. The late missiologist Orlando Costas believes that Protestant churches, by and large, have an underdeveloped theology of the Incarnation, which informs their missiological practice towards a whole gospel that includes justice and proclamation because theological training has not paid sufficient attention to prepare future leaders to handle new challenges. He writes, '…if it is true that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed and therefore that God's people must also be on the side of the little ones…'[14]

Costas's insight provides us with an imperative for missions today, urging them to work with older churches to revive cultures and contexts with the Word, without requiring God's elect to embrace the missionaries' culture. Rather, missiologists should be satisfied with simply focusing on following Jesus wholeheartedly in generating culturally-appropriate expressions of worship and community life.

In the incarnation, Jesus' mission was holistic and engaged the world.

13 Christine Beth Lindner, *Negotiating the Field : American Protestant Missionaries in Ottoman Syria, 1823 to 1860* (Ph.D., 2009, University of Edinburgh), 196.

14 Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 169.

When Christ announced the kingdom of God, he linked together Word and Deed, healing the sick, raising the dead, giving sight to the blind, and instructing the people to tell what they had seen, for 'the poor have good news brought to them' (Matthew 11:4-5 NRSV). Therefore, it is the assumption of this paper that caring for the poor and marginalized is part of the announcement of the Kingdom of God, which is at the heart of our missional practice. In other words, in a Middle East context, how we treat the poor, migrants, refugees, and marginalized is primary evidence of our love and devotion for Christ.

What we need in the Middle East is a Reformed theology that is both incarnational, in the above sense, and contextual—that is to say, sensitive and respectful to local culture. We must be willing to cross boundaries to become servant-orientated in our methodology. The result would hopefully be thoroughly Reformed, thoroughly Arab, and thoroughly grounded in *praxis* for the poor.

When I say thoroughly Reformed, I am taking my missiological impulse from the teachings of John Calvin. Calvin taught that the believer should take his or her responsibility in the world seriously. I have found Bonnie Pattison's book, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin,* to be a helpful guide to Calvin's social teachings. Her thesis is that 'in Calvin's theology, poverty, and affliction—not splendor and glory—mark and manifest the kingdom of God on earth'.[15] Her framing is helpful to illuminate the privileged place that poverty and our treatment of it holds in manifesting the self-revelation of Christ as king, serving as an essential mark of the kingdom of God.

She notes historical and economic changes in the mentality of people throughout Europe in Calvin's time. Calvin's Geneva was a city inundated with migrants and refugees, to which Calvin's response was both pastoral and practical. Though Pattison's work is valuable, she develops Calvin's theological framing of poverty more than his practice in confronting poverty. Still, we can draw important parallels that our response needs to be pastoral and practical.

Today, many Lebanese Christians and Muslims regard the poor with similar attitudes to those in Calvin's day—that is, the poor are in their condition as a divine judgment, or as recipients of donations from the wealthy for their spiritual benefit.[16] I contend that these Lebanese wear cultural blinders that prevent them from sympathizing with the plight of the poor, as a result of which they tend to tolerate the poverty in their midst.

In other words, a certain fatalism pervades the Lebanese attitude to the poor. The Lebanese maintain a rigid system of social stratification, and even if the poor are pitied, there is little belief that one can challenge the social order to systematically improve the plight of the poor.

The question I have for the Protestant Church in Lebanon is: how can it

15 Bonnie Lynn Goding Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin*. Vol. 69, *Princeton Theological Monograph Series* (Eugene: Pickwick Publ., 2006), 4.

16 Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin,* 147.

reconcile the prophetic dimension that prompts believers to get involved in society with this state of things? Or is it right for the church to remain on the side lines, discussing systematic theology, in lieu of putting into practice the command to love one's neighbour as oneself?

III A Call to Action

Why is the church in Lebanon slow to respond to the contextual needs right outside its doors? As Lebanese theologian, George Sabra asked, is the Protestant Reformation essentially and fundamentally a Northern European phenomenon *or* is it universal, and therefore universalizable in other contexts? In other words, does the message of the Reformation address and touch *only* the men and women of Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva, or does it address and touch, just as much, the men and women of Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo?

The lessons we should draw from the early Reformed missionaries serving in Lebanon is to integrate robustly, if imperfectly, the message of the gospel with the practice of holistic care. This approach, as we pointed out above, had its origins in an incarnational understanding of *imago Dei* (image of God), in that all people, being created in the image of God, deserved care and basic human rights.

The message here is similar to that of Thomas Cahill in his book, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages*: 'Christianity's claim that all were equal before God and all equally precious to him' challenged Greco-Roman society and introduced scores of people to the message of the gospel through its holistic approach.[17] Christianity, according to Cahill, was a 'harbor to women, who had always been kept in the shadows', and to slaves, who had never before been granted 'social dignity or political importance'.[18] Even aristocrats joined the Jesus movement, and they were sincere and bold 'seekers after truth who had gone quite out of their way to find it'.[19]

In the 4th century, Christianity had become so popular within the Greco-Roman region that the emperor Constantine adopted it as the state religion (Edict of Milan 313 AD), and it quickly became the prevailing religion of the Roman Empire. According to Cahill, it was the holistic efforts of the leaders of the church that led people to lift their eyes to Jesus, instead of to the Greek and Roman gods, thereby transforming the western world.

IV Philemon Project

In 2002, my local church in Lebanon, in line with this tradition, was called into action and began a ministry to poor migrants and refugees which we called the Philemon Project, after the Christian whose ownership of a Christian slave prompted one of Paul's letters. The National Evangelical Church of Beirut chose to serve the poor holistically by crossing over the lines of class in our culture to demonstrate that the gospel breaks down barriers.

Our call to action was motivated in part by recognizing that all people are created in the *imago Dei* (image of

17 Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 44.
18 Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages,* 44.
19 Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages,* 44.

God), which means we are called as a church to put ourselves among those who are placed at the margins of society in a pastoral and diaconal expression. The Philemon Project aims to be a project of humble service, just as St. Paul humbly allowed the slave Onesimus into his home (see the Epistle to Philemon) and served him, which we believe is an appropriate missiological approach in a Middle Eastern context.

Our worship services are at the heart of the Philemon Project, providing a forum where people can return to God through Christ, and remember God's call to serve one another through the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the most important aspects of the services is the witness to our diversity: people from many nationalities, social backgrounds, educational levels, and former religious affiliations are gathered to worship the one true God. We emphasize, therefore, that we come together as the family of God, a family in which everybody is included and received without prejudice in the name of Christ.

The vision of the Philemon Project is to clearly combine church life with service to the poorest among the poor as a contextual missiological way of practising our mission. We believe the church can be a healing presence among the marginalized, and a place of refuge. Our intention is to create a church made up of people from all continents and all walks of life, so that together we may discover 'the breadth and length and height and depth' of the Kingdom of God (Ephesians 3: 18). In that moment the discriminating social categories are abolished, and the first and last come together as one. That is why the congregation and the diaconal work are two sides of the same coin.

Specifically the Philemon Project demonstrates our missiological thrust in a number of areas, including but not limited to:

Counselling: When people come to the church seeking assistance, they are welcomed into our community. We believe that the first thing we ought to do for people is to listen to them. Their stories are offered as valuable and unique, and they want them to be heard. Listening proves to be so helpful that people leave our community relieved that someone has heard their cry. In counselling, we point people to God's love and care, and we pray with people and share God's love through Christ respectfully.

Financial aid: Illegal refugees tend to fall outside most categories that make them eligible for aid, which is where the Project can come in. We sometimes provide people with small grants that can help them pay for surgery, medication, the rent of a room, education fees, papers required for legal residence, etc. Financial aid is concentrated on the most vulnerable group in Lebanon: single women with children. Particularly when caring for young children, single women are unable to work and fully provide for themselves and their families.

Financial aid is always coupled with extensive listening, considering, and counselling. We seek to avoid making people dependent on the church, but rather our work should give them a sense of dignity and care, knowing there is someone who stands with them.

Food parcels: The church regularly distributes food parcels to those in great need. The advantage of handing

out food parcels over direct financial aid is that food parcels offer practical help and avoid the problems entailed by the abuse of funds. Food from the Project helps its recipients make it through the month with better nutrition. Food parcels for women with children also often include milk and diapers.

The diaconal work of the Philemon Project is thoroughly *missional*. Many of those who benefit are nominal Christians or Muslims, and through the Project's assistance, we seek to convey the inviting love of Christ. Our intention is to enact that love, rather than to use assistance as a lure. As a result, some of the refugees and migrant workers show clear interest in the message of the gospel and the fellowship of the church. We recognize that 'rice Christianity' is a great pitfall, and a humiliation to both the donor and the recipient.

However, we are bound to proclaim that it is the love of Christ that drives our missional care for others, and that we are at all times called to testify to God's love for us in our context. Furthermore, those who have received are called upon to give to the less fortunate when their own circumstances change, transmitting God's love through the community.

Among the 100 family units that were assisted during the year 2011, 65 were families in which one or more persons are Muslim. (Often female Christian refugees are married to Muslim men, and they turn to the church when the need of the family is great.) The nationalities of assisted people included Sudanese, Ethiopian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Nigerian, Eritrean, Iraqi, Egyptian, Congolese, Somalian, and (very rarely, for this is not the scope of the project) some Lebanese.

V What about Evangelism?

Of course, one criticism among some Protestant Evangelicals is how all this fits into evangelism. Our critics are quick to point out that by emphasizing diaconal work we may be watering down the preaching of the gospel and neglecting our mandate to evangelize. We don't see it that way. Remember, we are talking about a dominant Muslim context, although Lebanon has a Christian population. Nevertheless, evangelism must be carried out wisely and be culturally-appropriate, and the community that can most appropriately carry this out is the local church.

I contend that our dominant Muslim context requires the church to engage with our wider context wisely. Thus, evangelism must remain culturally wise but ever active in the knowledge that we are merely following Jesus' mission, which was holistic and engaged with the world. It is our experience that when the church engages in justice issues within our Arab context, we have the opportunity to preach the gospel in acts, not words. The acts invite people to encounter the ultimate author of the acts—Jesus—and from that point to encounter others both in word and in deed.

It is important to note, when we confront social issues in our context we believe there is a softening of the ground for the proclamation of the gospel. We found David Bosch's *Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today* (1987), to be very helpful in the conversation. David Bosch asserts eight principles that help to

ground our justice ministry with a thorough proclamation of the gospel:

a) Evangelism the heart of mission

It is essential for the church to announce salvation in Christ alone to nonbelievers; this mission is not diverted by caring for the poor and marginalized. We retain the message of the forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in Christ. But we enact, as well, the love of God, proclaiming the gospel practically among Muslims.

Here, the concept of honour becomes important. Muslims identify acts of service as honourable; thus when we care for the poor we are earning the honourable right to share the gospel. Additionally, our research has found that Muslims perceive the church as an extension of its founder—Jesus—and our care for the poor whether they be Muslim or Christian is perceived as bold obedience to continuing the work of Jesus.

b) Evangelism brings people into community

Many non-Arab workers who engage in missiological activity in the Middle East among Muslims tend to distance themselves from the local visible church for a variety of reasons. Countering this trend, we encourage workers to develop a robust working relationship with the visible church. As Reformed missionary practitioners, we believe in having a healthy connectional ecclesiology that encourages foreign workers to value the indigenous church, which is rooted in society. When workers begin interacting with the indigenous church, both the church and the missionary will benefit from the cross-pollination of theological, cultural, and missiological perspectives.

Therefore, we think it is imperative to introduce those to the visible church who by God's grace have come to have faith in Christ. This practice should be part and parcel of our evangelistic norm as laid out in the New Testament. It ultimately is a cultural more than a theological issue. When workers exclude themselves from the local community and those their ministry touched, they are practising a form of Evangelical missiological imperialism as though they who are not from the community context can best determine one's community association.

c) Evangelism witnesses to God in action

When we engage in caring for the poor, we draw people's attention to the character of God as a God of missions and justice. Caring for the poor is a vital and important part of *missio Dei* by demonstrating that God cares for the poor and marginalized. Our evangelism, therefore, becomes a witness. Our work is not meant to draw attention to our virtues, but rather points curious onlookers to the source of our mission, service of the Triune God under whose commands we labour.

Thus, caring for the poor enables us to confront injustices in tangible ways that give glory to God. Additionally, caring for the poor counteracts an often-misunderstood notion among some Arab Middle Easterners that Evangelicals are politically aligned with a particular group of people whose beliefs

are based on pre-millennia theology.

d) Evangelism is an invitation, and (e) irradiates with its lifestyle

One problem among some missionaries is that they believe that caring for the poor is a distraction from the more important task of bringing about conversion. These practitioners tend to separate proclamation from the social component. From this point of view, serving the poor is subordinate to proclamation.

Yet this notion is, in practical living, completely disproved. In the Philemon Project, we have first hand experience that our work produces fruit by God's grace. For example, during 2010, a Muslim family was invited to come to the church community mainly to request help with enrolling their daughter into a school. The family essentially lacked the means to pay for regular tuition. Over time the Muslim family was drawn to our community.

We later learned from the family that they had been pleasantly surprised by what they had witnessed in the church community. They discovered first hand the rich diversity of our community, where white and black, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, all equal in God's sight, encouraged one another, praying, worshipping, and receiving the Word and sacrament. The family was witness to the fact that it was not by words alone that we witnessed to Jesus, but by all the innumerable visible acts of worship and love.

Indeed, the Philemon Project did assist the family to place their daughter into one of our Evangelical schools. But that is not the whole story or the reason why this family remains in the church. It was the invitation of a marginalized poor woman sharing with the family that the church was a place to find help—and discover who Jesus is. That introduction opened them to the power of the gospel. Over time, the family professed faith in Christ. They continued in fellowship, regularly growing in their faith. We learned later that the church's demonstration of a grace-based community of acceptance, love, and care was precisely what drew them back to attend the church faithfully.

f) Evangelism is risk taking

Suffice to say when we engage in caring for the poor we are taking a risk. There are no assurances that our help or care for the physical person will do anything spiritually for the person. This, however, was a risk that Christ himself took time and time again in the Gospels. We recognize that we cannot simply dismiss the suffering of the marginalized and remain Christian. We are compelled to extend Christ-like care to the least in our society.

When we proclaim the gospel in word and deed, we do not possess any control over the gospel, nor know where the message will go. What we do affirm is that we are proclaiming the twofold gospel, in word and in deed. Our message announces that the good news consists in restoring our relationships with God and humanity.

David Bosch succinctly puts it another way. He writes that the gospel is 'Announcing that God, Creator and Lord of the universe, has personally intervened in human history and has done so supremely through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth

who is Lord of history, Saviour and Liberator'.[20]

We realize that our witness to the gospel coupled with confronting social injustices means our work will attract friends and foes. Nevertheless, we are called to take risks in securing justice for the poor since another word for justice is liberation and in the words of missiologist J. Andrew Kirk liberation is 'the removal of barriers which prevent human beings from participating fully in the benefits and responsibilities of the community'.[21]

It is always risky to work in such a way that one's ministry challenges the status quo of the dominant few over against the majority poor in a prophetic manner. Our work is a reminder to the cynical and indifferent that suffering and exclusion are not the final words.

g) Fruits of evangelism

In our work we are cautious not to make false promises, which encourage a dependent relationship. We want to avoid the trap of using our help making a convert into a rice-Christian, outwardly affirming Christ in order to reap some material benefit. This is a degrading relationship both for the giver and the receiver.

Our mandate is to proclaim a gospel that calls people to faith in Christ while working to transform our local community. Thus, we would never promise people in our ministry on-going assistance as a quid pro quo for the confession of faith. Assistance is given irrespective of the person's background or belief. But we make no secret of the fact that our work for the poor and the oppressed is all part of the covenantal promises of salvation in Christ alone; that Jesus will never leave them nor forsake them.

This does not ensure a life free of trouble – far from it. It is a life of taking up the cross, and this must be recognized. But what it does is announce that the kingdom has arrived and informs the conversation that the work we do not only confronts injustices but also restores people, marred by the effects of sin, through Christ alone.

h) Evangelism calls people to be followers of Jesus

Indeed, our experience demonstrates that, in the Muslim context, it is suitable and culturally appropriate to integrate the proclamation of the gospel with a holistic approach to social problems as a model for what it means to follow Christ. It is teaching by doing, in a sense. Caring for the poor gives us access to our work by countering indifference to our message by demonstrating its worth. We acknowledge that when we confront injustices it gives us respect and honour among a broad base of Lebanese communities.

We believe the work we are advocating is best executed within a church-based ministry. Because many Evangelicals in Lebanon are not well off, the Protestant church, does not stand in a place of superiority, nor stand over against the poor in society, but rather stands in solidarity with those on the margins. It is our argument that the church has a vital role to play within our context, even if the church does not

20 Bosch Transforming Mission, 412.

21 J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 106.

by itself possess the power to change harmful structural practices.

We nevertheless must present the whole gospel to the whole world using the whole church. We are called to prophetically challenge the status quo. That is why the church is called to model Christ's ministry in dependence on the Holy Spirit, which is a means to ultimately transform our context.

I would suggest that the church's mission is a medium for God's mission in the world. The church is called to challenge the counter-kingdom principles in the world.[22] This comes from proclaiming the gospel in word and deed—announcing the saving message of Jesus Christ and denouncing systems of idols or powers that are opposed to God in the name of Christ.

This is best demonstrated within a church community, which is, after all, founded on love of Christ. The community lives by extending the love and grace it has received through Christ to others through ministering in the fullest sense of the word. Furthermore, the mission of the church is to cross all frontiers and social barriers, confronting injustices and evil as a sign that the kingdom of God has arrived.[23] Therefore, God wills the church to participate in his active mission as a sign to the world that the kingdom of God comes in weakness and not in power.

VI Conclusion

This paper is based on a lecture given in November 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey. It was intended to give a very brief historical sketch of the birth of the Protestant church in Lebanon, pointing out that the early Reformed missionaries were thoroughly engaged in a variety of justice ministries which cared for the poor and marginalized as a means of proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. This paper also argued that the present missiological model is applicable to and culturally-appropriate for a Middle East context.

For further study on the work of the early missionaries' church planting activity I recommend the work of Rev. Dr. Habib Badr, *Mission to 'Nominal Christians'* and Dr. Christine Lindner's *Negotiating the Field*. I hope this article will spark future interest among scholars, missiologists, and church practitioners to examine the connection between social justice work in the Reformed tradition and the planting of the church in the Middle East. This paper attempts to show the link between actively confronting injustices and proclaiming the gospel in the Middle East.

I used as an exemplary contemporary instance of the synthesis of social justice and evangelism the ongoing work of the Philemon Project, with which I am involved. This is a church-sponsored ministry of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut, which finds its justification in continuing the work handed down to us from our Reformed forbears. Furthermore, it is our belief that our missiological practice strengthens local congregations where they are found, and seeks to organize local churches where none exist.

Lastly, we believe our missiological practices are grounded in a holistic sense of what proclaiming the whole

22 David J. Bosch, 'Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research,* 1987, no. 11 (3), 100.

23 Bosch, 'Evangelism', 101, 102.

gospel means. That sense understands the message of hope and salvation in Christ as part of the whole work of Christ in the world, seeking to affect transformational social change. May we all have the courage to trust God and be inspired to action.