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# The Mission of the Church and Holistic Redemption

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## I. Introduction and Key Terms

The question of the mission of the Church 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 standpoints. However, evangelicals seem to be reaching a consensus that both evangelism and social responsibility are inseparable elements of the Christian mission and must be integrated.

The theological and biblical ground for this position is the holistic nature of the gospel, which provides answers to all types of human questions and struggles—spiritual, material, mental and physical.

We must clearly define the key terms in our title. First, *mission* connotes vocation and calling. When used in Christianity, it refers to sharing and spreading the Christian faith in the world.

*Church* means a gathering of believers called together by the proclamation of the gospel and by the Holy Spirit from different communities and people groups (Rev 5:9), and bound to each other through Christ. The church is people standing in covenant

with God and with one another (1 Cor. 6:16). This gathering of God's people is meant to be a witness to the world, encouraging all humanity to fellowship with God.

The third word, *holistic*, carries the idea of looking at the whole rather than the constituent parts. Applied to the church's mission, holism means looking at the gospel of redemption in its entirety or complete form and in its multifaceted dimensions: physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, political and social. This is critical because the gospel is God's answer for human sin, which has resulted in all the problems humanity is facing today—sickness, poverty, exploitation, greed, corruption and so forth. These problems require a holistic gospel of redemption to bring people to completeness, wholeness and maturity.

By *gospel*, I mean the good news of the redemption and restoration of God's creation, which comprises human beings and the created order. It is good news for the whole person—body, soul and mind—and not just for the soul. It is good news for the present and future, not just for the afterlife. The gospel redeems and transforms people, rescuing them from sin and all its effects so that they may become

what God intended them to be and glorify God.

The gospel provides salvation or *redemption*, which addresses all parts of human life holistically. Salvation brings the shalom of God into human existence and encompasses people's total well-being. The gospel, therefore, brings total transformation to the whole person.

This fact requires us to address the gospel's implications for the social, political and economic aspects of human life. The church and Christians are called to exhibit God's kingdom and spread its justice and righteousness in the world. This calling has enormous implications for the Church's mission in the world.

## II. Mission as Holistic

The church's mission must necessarily be holistic, or what the Micah Declaration of 2001<sup>1</sup> calls 'integral mission'. It must entail the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, backed by deeds. The Micah Declaration states that integral mission does not mean 'simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.'

This statement tries to avoid claiming that either evangelism or social

responsibility is primary. Rather, it affirms the importance of both and holds the two together. The Bible holds this position as well.

### 1. Theological Foundations: God's Mission in the World

The Christian community's acts in proclaiming a holistic gospel that takes seriously the spiritual, material, social, political and economic aspects of life are grounded in God's own acts and mission in reconciling the world to himself through Jesus Christ.

God's acts in dealing with and redeeming humanity were always holistic; they concerned people's total development and well-being. Creation, God's first act, was intended to provide all that humanity needed to live and experience the fullness of life, or shalom. The reality of sin and its resulting effects imply that the gospel and the redemption that it brings us, if it going to be truly transformational and achieve the total restoration of humanity, must address these various human needs.

Our mission as a Christian community should be patterned after God's acts. Our calling to engage in holistic mission in a world ravaged by poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, ignorance, high infant mortality, disease and many other woes is both theological and practical. One cannot concentrate only on the spiritual aspect of human needs and not take seriously the grave, despicable conditions in which people find themselves.

The primary grounding for the holistic gospel is theological and embedded in the character and nature of God, who works to transform the whole person. God's intention is to bless humans

<sup>1</sup> 'The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission', in *Justice, Mercy and Humility*, ed. Tim Chester (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 17–23.

in all aspects of their lives. We see him blessing humans when he created them in Genesis 2 and 3. Again, God blesses Abraham and his descendants as well as the nations. His 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 blessings to Abraham even before Abraham made any concrete decision to worship him. Such blessings are connected with creation and all the blessings that creation brings to humanity: 'abundance, fruitfulness and fertility, long life, peace and rest'.<sup>2</sup> These blessings are also the outcome of the gospel, the good news of God's redemption for humanity and creation. Jesus reiterated this point 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.

Christopher Wright has made a seminal contribution to the question of the church's mission in the world. Beginning with the Old Testament understanding of God and what he has called his people to be and do, Wright argues that all Christian missions should be holistic.

In the creation mandate, Wright points out, God gave humanity a mission that comprised caring for all creation—both fellow humans and the created order. Wright says:

The care and keeping of creation is our human mission. The human race exists 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>3</sup>

Wright argues that both Israel's mission and the church's mission are grounded in 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 flows from the identity of God and Christ.<sup>4</sup> The true gospel must emphasize the uniqueness of the triune God, and that God's purpose is for humanity to come to recognize the triune God, to embrace, worship and glorify him alone and no one else. In addition, we see the holistic nature of God's act in Christ, reconciling the *world* to himself—humanity and the whole created order (2 Cor 5:17–21).

In light of this discussion, the old debate over which comes first—evangelism and social action—becomes academic rather than practical. Dyrness rightly points out that 'God's active presence [in the world] grows out of and expresses the inner reality' of his acts.<sup>5</sup> He argues that the key to this integration is God's Trinitarian character.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 221.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 61–66.

<sup>5</sup> William Dyrness, *The Earth Is God's: A Theology of American Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), xiii.

Dyrness shows that our Enlightenment heritage has limited our sense of how we relate creation to humanity. Our dualistic tendency to separate the material from the spiritual has blinded us to the need to integrate the two aspects of human life. We have lost our appreciation for the physical world and the body, and we give more attention to the spirit than to the body. In contrast, God himself engaged with his physical creation and he still does. As Dyrness argues, 'The work of God in the world does not alienate our human work but rather makes it possible (John 14:12).'<sup>6</sup>

Our participation in helping humans to develop the abilities and 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 incarnation lays the groundwork for our critical, transforming engagement in creation and society. 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 have the opportunity to develop their potential so that they may glorify God. 'In Christ, God becomes part of creation ... and [is] identified with creation.' God has always committed himself to creation. 'Christ's work was to reveal the love of God for creation, by the Spirit, through Christ, to perfect creation.'<sup>7</sup>

The exodus event is a classic example of God's own acts in holistic mis-

sion. It brought the good news of salvation to people who were oppressed, impoverished, socially and politically ostracized, and economically disadvantaged. Different Christian communities have interpreted the exodus narrative so as to emphasize one particular dimension of the story: the political, 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, in which God delivered real people who had been subject to gross injustice, oppression and violence. This reductionist approach to Exodus tends to marginalize and overlook the political, economic and social features of the story. This non-holistic interpretation violates God's own understanding of redemption.

God did not ask whether to do evangelism or social action first. He dealt with the people's immediate plight and saved most of the spiritual instructions for later. He delivered the people from their immediate oppression and then provided water, food, land and safety in the desert. Only after all this did he subsequently give the Israelites his laws and make certain demands of 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 political oppression, economic injustice, social aggression and violence, and spiritual bankruptcy. These acts become the model for a holistic gospel that addresses the entire needs of human communities.

Basing his argument on the concept

6 Dyrness, *The Earth Is God's*, 15.

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

of Jubilee, the time when land in Israel was restored to its original owners, Wright points out that Jubilee was 'an economic institution', focused on families and land. Jubilee addressed the social (kinship system), economic (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 people's development. The land belonged to God, however, and so it was to be used for the benefit and well-being of the entire community.<sup>8</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>9</sup>

This economic reality of access to resources is grounded in the fact that the earth is God's and therefore humans must be given access to it so that they can develop and harness the available resources to meet their basic needs. In areas where few people own the land and most are landless, poverty has become the lot of many. Equitable distribution of and access to wealth and resources, 'especially land', in developing societies is necessary to 'curb the tendency of accumulation with its inevitable oppression and alienation'.<sup>10</sup>

Given this theological basis for God's action, our mission is to bring

salvation and restoration, which must be holistic, patterned after God's own actions. Any development that focuses only on the material and the physical but neglects the spiritual aspect is also inadequate. The nature of humanity as both material and spiritual requires a holistic gospel to address these dual human needs. Since sin affected the whole person, if humanity is to be restored, that restoration must affect the whole being.

And since most of the pressing issues affecting people in developing countries concern the physical 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 does not take the whole human condition seriously 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.

Having articulated the theological and anthropological foundations for a holistic gospel in developing nations, I will next provide some biblical examples.

## 2. Holistic Ministry in the Bible

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 pushes us to direct our Christian activities and ministry towards the soul rather than the body. Our Christian ministry fails to nurture the whole person—body, mind and soul/spirit.

8 Wright, *Mission of God*, 290–93.

9 Wright, *Mission of God*, 295.

10 Wright, *Mission of God*, 297.

As a result of these Gnostic tendencies, human development, infrastructure and economic issues facing developing nations have not been high on the church's mission agenda. But for real spiritual growth to take place, the basic things needed for life must be provided. God is concerned about these needs and he has committed to providing for them—but he uses other human beings to do so. The Christian community becomes the extension of God's hand to ensure that people's needs are met.

The gospel has been holistic 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 humanity's material needs. Accordingly, the gospel addresses physical and mental as well as spiritual matters.

#### a) Holistic Missions: The Prophets

The Old Testament provides many illustrative examples. We have already mentioned creation and the exodus as acts of holistic mission. In those accounts, God was concerned with humans' socio-political, economic and physical well-being. He met their needs through his providence and through mighty acts of delivering Israel from oppression. God did not make a dichotomy between the Israelites' physical and spiritual needs, nor did he prioritize the spiritual before the physical; he ministered to them holistically. When they were hungry, he fed them. When they faced oppression and injustice, he protected them.

Wright, in a discussion of the church's practice and priorities, asks whether we should talk about the pri-

macy or the ultimacy of the gospel in mission. He cites Exodus 8 in his response:

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>11</sup>

God is a God of compassion and of justice. He calls humans to emulate his character and nature. Micah 6:8 stresses this point: 'He has shown 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, and they deal with the material as well

<sup>11</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 319. The emphasis is his.

as the spiritual. God expects Christians to demonstrate this kind of life in society.

The Old Testament prophets' ministry was holistic. They all expressed concern about three things: social justice, good governance expressed by political integrity, and spiritual well-being. They called the people to spiritual renewal, faith in God, and 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, 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 their victims to abject poverty.

The prophets did not simply preach God's salvation and his deliverance of people's souls; they also sought deliverance for the disadvantaged and oppressed. Both aspects of ministry were kept in balance, just like God's own actions.

There is no fixed prioritization of these considerations in God's dealings with humanity. What we do first—what human need we address first—will depend on the situation facing us. We must learn from God's own example.

Human problems are related to 'a complex web of interconnected factors' and a holistic gospel must be capable of responding to the full range of human needs. Any starting point might be appropriate for a particular situation, as determined largely by what is the most pressing or obvious need. But we must not consider our work complete until 'we have included within our own

missional 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>12</sup>

### b) Holistic Mission: Jesus' Style

Jesus' ministry was similarly holistic. The gospel that 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 op-  
pressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of  
the Lord.

The elements that make up Jesus' understanding of his ministry address both the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of humanity. In actual practice, Jesus gave equal weight to his teaching and healing ministry because he was concerned about both people's spiritual and physical needs (Mt 8; Mt 17:14–21; Mk 1:21–24, 40–45).

On the physical side, Jesus healed the sick; he fed the hungry crowd twice in his ministry (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 that Jesus was

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<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 319.



moved by compassion for all the people he ministered to. When we are moved by compassion for the needy, we will not ask whether word or deed should come first; rather, we will move quickly to respond to felt needs. Jesus discussed using wisely the resources that God has given us, investing them so that they yield profit. God expects us to use these resources to build up society and promote the people's well-being (Mt 25:14–30; Lk 16:1–9).

Jesus identified two fundamental elements of the church's mission: the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:37–40 (love God and neighbour with our whole being) and the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20, which encompasses outreach, evangelism and discipleship—or preaching, baptizing and teaching. The Great Commandment outlines our task as involving devotion to God and social responsibility to our fellow human beings. Our love for God and neighbour cannot be separated. Likewise, the Great Commission emphasizes preaching the word so as to lead people to conversion, and then discipling believers to observe the commands of God and our social responsibility to society. This is achieved through both word and deed.

These two activities of the church are to bring about both spiritual renewal and social transformation in the communities the church serves. The church's mission is threefold: proclamation, edification and service. We must hold all three aspects together.

Jesus' ministry involved preaching, teaching and healing; he gave the same mandate to his disciples. He sent them out in Matthew 10:1 to do what he had been doing himself: preach, teach and heal. This ministry includes sacrificing

oneself for people in need. Proclamation must be seen in the context of service. Jesus' cared about the problems of the needy and those suffering; the church's mission must also be holistic (Lk 10:25–27; Mt 25:31–46; cf. Deut 10:17–19). The apostle James's definition of true religion was tied to doing acts of mercy and kindness (Jas 1:27; cf. 1 Jn 3:17–18).

The church's mission requires it to engage with society, addressing social injustices and moral decadence. The church is society's moral conscience. It should seek social justice and teach its members to be responsible citizens. It must affirm human dignity, as well as the sanctity of life, and uphold the moral order if it is being violated. This will often require challenging the status quo. At times the church must address the social, economic and political concerns affecting Christians and give them guidance on how to respond. This is all part of a holistic ministry that touches every facet of life. The Old Testament prophets and their New Testament counterparts give us direction as to what our engagement with civil society should look like.

The early Christians in the book of Acts engaged in holistic ministry. In addition to their spiritual nurture, they provided for the needs and welfare of the disadvantaged so that no person among them was needy (Acts 6:1–7).

Jesus encouraged us to have compassion on those in need around us and help them in whatever way we can. The story of the Good Samaritan drove home this message. Sometimes religious people become so spiritual that they overlook or ignore the needs and pain of the people around them. Jesus taught us to do as the Samaritan did.

Our discussion so far demonstrates that mission may not always begin with evangelism. However, mission is not complete if it does not ultimately call the sinner to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel has wide implications for the spiritual, socio-political and economic well-being of the people and societies around us.

We have laid the theological and biblical foundations for holistic mission; next I will show concretely how the early Christian missionaries to Africa preached a holistic gospel, with great impact on the communities they served.

### III. Early Christian Missions in Africa

Historically, conservative evangelicals have seen the physical, social, political, economic and educational needs of people in three different ways: as either secondary to, supporting or related to Christian mission.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in the early 1960s, evangelical mission was dedicated to winning people to Christ. The church's work at that time focused mainly on evangelizing the world and discipling the nations.

However, since Vatican II,<sup>14</sup> evangelicals, ecumenical Protestants, and Catholics have shown great concern for the poor, the oppressed and the power-

less. In line with the developments of Vatican II, the Lausanne Congress in 1974<sup>15</sup> moved the poor towards the top of its agenda and proposed a holistic gospel. '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. Yet others saw holism as entailing a partnership between socio-political action and evangelism.<sup>16</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 in church history. He classifies the three as liberation theology, holism theology and prioritarianism theology.

The liberationist takes a radical stance, drawing on the exodus motif as depicting God's own action in dealing with oppression and evil in human society. On this basis, liberationists embrace a mission 'to promote justice in society and establish Shalom on earth'.

Holism theology has two strands, 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 version of holism, on the other hand, sees its mission as ministering 'to society and individuals socially and spiritually while giving certain priority to evangelism'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 118.

<sup>14</sup> Austen Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). See especially Section 64, Part II, Chapter 3, 'Economic and Social Life', and Chapter 4, 'The Political Community', on pages 968–85.

<sup>15</sup> See the *Lausanne Covenant*, available at [www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-1974.html](http://www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-1974.html).

<sup>16</sup> Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> The Lausanne Covenant espouses this

Finally, prioritism theology holds the traditional stance that the church's mission is '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 and espouses prioritism, concluding that holism is inadequate and arguing for the priority of the gospel over all else.<sup>18</sup>

The evidence we have seen above seems to militate against Hesselgrave's conclusion, because it portrays God's mission and the gospel as holistic, addressing every dimension of human existence. Contrary to Hesselgrave's assertion that Jesus was primarily concerned with 'spiritual needs, not with meeting the physical, material or social needs' of the people,<sup>19</sup> the available evidence affirms that Jesus placed equal weight on both the spiritual and material needs of the people he ministered to.

The historical context of Africa as a continent that has experienced great humiliation through the slave trade, colonization by Western powers, exploitation of resources, gross poverty, disease, injustice, witchcraft, and demonic oppression and ignorance has made the theme of liberation very popular in African Christianity. This theme was championed by the native 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 in some way is simply inadequate.

A holistic gospel is critical for developing societies, especially in Africa since the African worldview does not allow the world to be divided into sacred and secular, physical and spiritual, body and soul/spirit. Life is seen as a whole. Accordingly, the gospel must address the whole of the African person and his needs. Salvation must address not only sin and the soul, but the body and the world in which people live.

For example, salvation, which means *life* in Africa, is seen in multifaceted dimensions. Larbi observes that this concept of life is not an abstraction but 'life in its concrete and fullest manifestations. It means the enjoyment of long life, vitality, vigour, and health; it means life of happiness and felicity.'<sup>20</sup> Life includes possessions, prosperity, wealth, children, peace and tranquillity, and freedom from all the forces that threaten one's safety and security.<sup>21</sup> This holistic view of reality requires that the gospel message must be holistic. The implications of the gospel message for our spiritual, mental, emotional, social, political and economic life must be emphasized and practised in our quest to develop communities.

In this regard, Africans have an excellent legacy and model from the early Christian missionaries who came to the continent. They not only preached

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kind of holism. 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>18</sup> Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 120–25.

<sup>19</sup> Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 136.

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<sup>20</sup> Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Edies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Center for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 2001), 8–13.

<sup>21</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 8–9.

the gospel to save souls but developed the whole person by establishing hospitals, schools and other endeavours. The preaching of the gospel in Africa and any developing nation should follow this legacy of developing the whole person. This holistic view of life is expressed by an African proverb: 'An empty sack cannot stand; a hungry stomach has no ears.'<sup>22</sup>

Africans believe that first things must be done first. Ensuring a person's safety and well-being comes before anything else. Any gospel that fails to address the stunning needs of developing nations will not reflect the character and nature of God who loves, cares and provides for the needs of his creation.

### 1. Early Missionaries and Development in Africa

The nineteenth-century missionary movement truly preached a holistic gospel. Its representatives engaged in health services, education, social services and vocational skill training, all while preaching the gospel and planting churches. In many cases, they were meeting the physical needs of the communities in which they served before any community members gave their lives to Christ. They became the hands, feet and eyes of God to the community. They demonstrated God's desire to provide for the needs of his people.

The missionaries built schools to develop the intellectual abilities of the people to whom they ministered. By teaching the people to read and write, they enabled Africans to read the word of God themselves, and many came to

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many leaders of the African independence movements in the early 1950s and 1960s were Christians and products of these missionary schools.

The mission agencies also built hospitals to cure diseases. They taught new agricultural techniques and dug boreholes to provide good drinking water for the people. They built other infrastructure like roads and community recreation centres. They opened high schools and vocational schools that trained men and women in employable skills so that they could improve their economic status, live a decent life and be in a position to provide for their families.

These early missionaries were seriously concerned about the development of the whole person. The gospel was their motivation for becoming involved in ensuring people's material well-being.

Unlike our Protestant evangelical ancestors, the more recent generations of evangelicals in Africa did not take the social and economic implications of the gospel very seriously. These generations of Christians were more concerned with saving souls and bringing people into the kingdom and paid less attention to material, psychological and emotional needs. This attitude caused some African governments to criticize the evangelical church as anti-social and anti-development in its outlook, and for not showing serious concern for natives' suffering.

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 saw the material world as evil and spiritual things as

<sup>22</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa's Contribution to Christendom* (Nairobi: AEA, n.d.).

good. This dichotomy is unacceptable to non-Western minds, but more importantly, it is foreign to biblical teaching and theologically bankrupt. The body is not evil, it is part of God's design. 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 of our spirits. The body and the spirit are inextricably linked and 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. Though a different kind of body, it will still be a body!

This dualistic trend has changed in recent years. Protestant denominations and newer evangelical churches, especially the Pentecostals, have adopted a holistic approach to the gospel. The so-called prosperity gospel embodies an attempt to deal with these deficiencies of the past. Thus, the church has become more aware of the needs of the people they minister to.

In their effort to address human needs holistically, 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 among them by providing basic food supplies, and given stipends and scholarships to help needy parents educate their children.

In addition to all these actions, the church makes great efforts to develop people's intellectual abilities. Many denominations have established more institutions of higher learning. 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 delivering theological education but also offering courses in other disciplines to develop the human and economic resources of their nations.

Others are engaged in providing primary health care for the poor. Churches run medical centres where they provide basic health services to those who cannot afford them. The more Christians understand the holistic nature of the gospel, the more they realize that they cannot preach the good news and remain indifferent to the needs and concerns of the people among whom they minister. How can one close his or her eyes to the immensity of the poverty, disease and sufferings in our world today and not do anything about them?

God never closes his eyes to human need and suffering. True love will always respond to human need. God sent Jesus Christ not only to address human sinfulness and bring salvation from sin, but also to heal our bodies and to give us abundant life, God's shalom.

## 2. Current African Realities

Africa is endowed with great natural and human resources, yet many of its countries are among the poorest in the world. It is ravaged by political tensions, democratic struggles, wars, poverty, hunger, disease, ignorance, high infant mortality, injustice, massive unemployment, unprecedented urbanization with inadequate infrastructure support, an influx of refugees as a result of political instability, bad governance, moral degradation and high indebtedness to the international community.

With the current limited resources available, African governments are stretched to the limit and cannot meet

all their obligations to their citizens. Governments are calling on Christian communities to assist with development activities that will alleviate the people's suffering. This call is an important one. It shows that governments expect Christian communities to do more than just take care of souls. Believers must respond by seeking to serve the plethora of human needs that confront many developing nations in the world today.

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

### 3. The Daunting Task of the Church

Advocating for the holistic gospel places an enormous burden on the church. The humanitarian needs on the African continent are gigantic and daunting, requiring a huge amount of resources. One could easily get discouraged and give up. The church will need great human, material and financial resources to do this noble and great work, which it does not have.

What can we do, then, to preach and deliver a holistic gospel to Africa? The immensity of this work requires us to harness our resources—material, human and spiritual. This calls for partnerships, in which we recognize each

person's gifts and use them for the benefit of humanity and to advance God's mission on earth.

It is very important for the church to enter into partnerships with other institutions involved in development work. Our suggestion for entering into partnerships with other stakeholders, such as governments, non-governmental organizations and civil rights activists, in collaborative ventures has a biblical basis in 1 Corinthians 3:1–15.

The principle of partnerships was modelled by the apostles in Acts 6. Applying it will help to prevent duplication of our efforts and will avoid unnecessary competition within the Christian community.

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

We must affirm the work that other organizations do in delivering basic human services to communities. We must show our solidarity with them by encouraging, visiting and praying for them, and by assisting them in any way possible. We can also learn and benefit from their expertise in areas where we are not competent. Following are some specific examples.

- Christian professionals' expertise can be harnessed to train people and communities in a wide variety of skills and fields, so that they can use the resources available to them to improve their lives. The goal is to help people create wealth. We may need partners who are experts in entrepreneurship, micro-financing and economic development to participate in such training as resource persons. Addressing poverty will require skill development in the

areas of micro-enterprises and entrepreneurship. Communities must be helped to develop the economic environment in which people can create wealth for themselves.

- Helping needy communities to maximize effective use of resources should be part of our spirituality as we engage the world as God's emissaries, seeking to make this world a better place for humanity to perceive God's love and his provision for their needs.
- We must maintain our prophetic voice and remain the voice of the voiceless. We must be the moral eyes of the nation and its communities, speaking against the evils and injustices perpetrated against the marginalized and vulnerable in our societies. In addition, we must set up an advocacy unit or collaborate with civil society organizations and others who share our vision so as to shine the light on the evils committed against the innocent. Finally, we must appeal to and challenge governments and influence policy makers to adopt policies that guarantee basic human dignity so that all can live well.
- We must advocate for basic infrastructure—health facilities, good drinking water, good sanitation—that promotes people's well-being. These basic amenities are critical. The church must team with health personnel to engage local residents and teach them basic health care issues, including how to protect themselves from preventable diseases that could easily kill them.

All these activities must be viewed as part of our spirituality. The apostle

James wrote that true religion involves showing mercy and compassion to those who are weak and vulnerable in our societies (Jas 1:27).

### b) Educational and Social Amenities

To address the problem of ignorance that still affects most African communities, education is critical. Christian communities should collaborate with national universities that have adult literacy programs to teach the community to read and write. Many Africans would enjoy more fruitful Christian lives if they could read and study the Bible themselves. Education will give others the opportunity to explore their gifts so that they can become a greater blessing to the communities in which they live and serve.

### c) The Relief Model

Relief work as a temporary measure to help needed communities could be encouraged. This model was practised in the early church when the church in Antioch sent relief to the Jerusalem church. Although many Christian organizations and non-governmental groups have used this model, it must be seen as temporary. We must also implement more permanent ways of helping people meet their own needs with the resources available to them.

More Christian organizations are looking to construct long-term development agendas that will equip communities to provide for themselves. This will prevent what has often happened with relief work: the dependency syndrome, in which recipient communities become dependent on others.

#### d) Advocacy

The church must lead in advocating for 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, economy and so forth to provide for the people's basic needs.

#### e) Policy Formulation

The church must advocate to and work with governments and civil society organizations to formulate economic policies that foster development in all areas of the nation and create a conducive environment for such activities to take place.

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 enhance the church's acceptance in society. We should not present ourselves as anti-development or against progress. Rather, the church should be concerned about human dignity. For humanity to live a dignified life, we must take the development of the whole person seriously.

A holistic gospel will enable the church to make the love of God and his concern for the well-being 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 encounters them, such as for Elijah, David, and the Israelites in the wilderness.

### IV. Conclusion

The true gospel must address the

whole person—body, mind and spirit. If we are going to preach the whole gospel, we must not just talk about the salvation of souls. If we stop there, our preaching is not holistic. We are also to love our neighbours as ourselves. Salvation is something that only God can grant, but once salvation is received, the whole gospel calls us into relationship with others and creation.

Too many preachers address the spirit and soul but say nothing about the body. When the church preaches a gospel that only saves the soul but doesn't feed the hungry, take in the stranger or clothe the naked, the Church is not preaching a holistic gospel (Mt 25:31–40).

A holistic ministry addresses all of creation, including issues like deforestation, air pollution, contamination of our rivers, and the extinction of animal species. God's message to the Israelites was comprehensive, addressing every facet of their lives and not just their spiritual relationship with him. The prophets and Jesus accused those who claimed to make spiritual things a priority and neglected the people's material and physical needs, declaring that such people were not following God's ways.

To me, the whole debate over whether to prioritize evangelism or social action is based on Western dualistic presuppositions. It is rooted in Western thinking that draws a dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, a distinction that has its root in the Enlightenment tradition and has no place in African or biblical thought.

The gospel of Jesus Christ must transform the whole person—mental, emotional and psychological. Salvation is expressed by the biblical idea



of shalom, which encompasses a person's total well-being. Therefore, those who seek to communicate its message cannot separate it into two unrelated poles. The gospel must affect both the physical and spiritual life of the person who experiences its transforming power. The African view of life is holistic, with the material and spiritual realms interrelated. Any ministry that does

not deal with the entire African world-view will not be effective or transformational.

Jesus' ministry was holistic; he healed physical sickness, forgave sins, fed the hungry and commanded us to do the same. His ministry dealt with the whole person. Any holistic mission must follow the pattern given us by God and Jesus.