
Faculty Breakfast, Perth Bible College, Wednesday 2 September 2009

WHY HOLISTIC MISSION CAUSES UNEASE IN SOME EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Dr Ross Langmead

Introduction

In my twenties I was deeply influenced by the radical discipleship movement. I remember reading the reports of the Lausanne Congress in 1974 and being aware that there were differences within the evangelical movement.

On the one hand there was the careful and sober statement in the Lausanne Covenant of the primacy of evangelism, for a long time one of the central planks of the evangelical platform.¹ It said, “Although reconciliation with [humankind] is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”² Put simply, this was a “both/and, with one more important than the other” position.³

Elsewhere in the volume I found inspiration in the way Samuel Escobar understood mission in a holistic way. He argued that “there is no such thing as a separate individual gospel and a separate social gospel. There is only one gospel—a redeemed [humanity] in a redeemed society”.⁴ He grounded this in the life and teaching of Jesus, who not only brought a message but bore it in his life. We are called as a community, in Paul’s words, to be living letters (1 Cor 3:1–3). We are called, said Escobar, to be a sign pointing towards the kingdom of God.⁵

But the highlight of Lausanne for me was the statement on radical discipleship at the back. Apparently it was written after a bunch of about two hundred participants at Lausanne felt that it was heading down a far too conservative path, and wanted to issue a rallying cry for a more holistic view. John Stott, who was the chair of the Covenant drafting committee, only received a draft of the radicals’ manifesto on the final evening of the conference, too late to incorporate some of its sentiments into the Covenant. But he said on stage on the last day that he agreed with it.

¹ ‘The Lausanne Covenant’, in *Let the earth hear his voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, Official reference volume*, ed. J D Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), #6, p. 3.

² ‘The Lausanne Covenant’, #5, pp.2–3.

³ John Stott, *The contemporary Christian: An urgent plea for double listening* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 339.

⁴ Samuel Escobar, ‘Evangelism and man’s search for freedom, justice and fulfillment’, in *Let the earth hear his voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J D Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 306.

⁵ Escobar, ‘Evangelism and man’s search’, 309, 312.

Its vision is that God's Good News in Jesus Christ is "of liberation, of restoration, of wholeness, and of salvation that is personal, social, global and cosmic. Jesus is Lord!"⁶ It said, "We must allow God to make visible in the new humanity the quality of life that reflects Christ and demonstrates his reign".⁷

In the thirty-five years since Lausanne, these differences have continued to be played out in evangelical theology, and I'd like to look at why some Evangelicals still uneasy about holistic mission.

Evangelicalism

First I need to say what I mean by Evangelicalism. I take it to be a broad movement marked by

- a high view of the authority of scripture,
- a belief in the need for individual conversion and therefore
- an enthusiasm for evangelism,
- an emphasis on a personal relationship with God, and
- (less universally) an assortment of doctrines considered essential, such as the substitutionary atonement, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and the historical second-coming.

David Bebbington sums these up under four headings: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. "Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism."⁸

But there are many varieties of evangelicalism.⁹ Fundamentalism affirms the verbal inspiration of scripture and its total inerrancy, and fights a battle against all biblical criticism, evolution, equality for women and so on. It tends to withdraw from the world and live in opposition to it.

There are many we could call conservative Evangelicals—or perhaps simply mainstream Evangelicals—who are more open to the role of interpretation in reading the Bible and allow some contextual readings. Many of these are open, for example, to women's leadership in the church.

Those who are sometimes called "open Evangelicals", or—if they are socially and politically active—"radical Evangelicals", on the other hand, often allow a degree of historical and critical study of the biblical text, strongly affirm social action, push for the equality of women, and are often active in ecumenical councils as an evangelical voice.¹⁰

⁶ 'Theology and implications of radical discipleship', in *Let the earth hear his voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J D Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 1294–1296.

⁷ 'Theology and implications of radical discipleship', 1295.

⁸ David W Bebbington, *Evangelicals in modern Britain: A history from 1730 to the 1980s* (London: Unwin, 2008), 3.

⁹ See the brief summary in Arthur Glasser, 'Evangelical missions', in *Toward the 21st century in Christian mission*, eds. James M Phillips and Robert T Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 11–12.

¹⁰ See the good summary in Paul Merritt Bassett, 'Evangelicals', in *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 393–395.

It is in this broad grouping that we find holism most often. Many holistic evangelical voices are to be found in the Two-Thirds World, perhaps predictably, because there the physical, social and political needs of most people are huge and overwhelming, and a gospel that doesn't speak to survival alongside eternal life is hardly Good News at all.

Amongst fundamentalists, it is my experience that mission is seen reduced to evangelism. That is, social action and ecological mission are just not in the picture.

It is amongst conservative or mainstream Evangelicals where I find the interesting debate going on. Many are open to holistic mission and yet there many who are uneasy about it, perhaps unable to dismiss the social, political and environmental dimensions of the gospel, but not sure how to fit it into a framework where our individual relationship with God has such primacy.

Holistic mission

It's time I defined what I mean by holistic mission, though Escobar put it pretty well in my earlier quotation: "There is only one gospel—a redeemed [humanity] in a redeemed society".¹¹

To me holistic mission affirms that although there are many tasks and dimensions of Christian mission there is only one overarching goal, and that is to co-operate with God's mission to reconcile the world to Godself in all of its relationships—between ourselves and God, between each other, between groups and societies and between humankind and God's creation. Jesus' term for this was "the kingdom of God". I variously paraphrase it as "the kingly reign of God", "life in the ways of God", "the gracious presence of God", or—in a post-monarchist context—"the commonwealth of God".

Holism of course, affirms that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It draws attention repeatedly to how things are interrelated and interdependent. It takes an ecological view of reality, aware of systems, relationships and symbiosis.

Another term which means that same as holistic mission, and which is used more in the Two-Thirds World, is "integral mission". The Micah Network defines it this way: "Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel."¹²

Why the unease

In the short time I have, I'd like to focus on the criticisms of one leading evangelical missiologist, David Hesselgrave, now retired, but the co-founder of the Evangelical Mission society and former Professor of Missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

¹¹ Escobar, 'Evangelism and man's search', 306.

¹² Micah Network, 'Micah declaration on integral mission', in *Justice, mercy and humility: Integral mission and the poor*, ed. Tim Chester (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), available at <<http://micahchallenge.org/article.aspx?menuid=546>>, 17-23.

In the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* in 1999 Hesselgrave wrote an article entitled “Redefining holism”.¹³ And in 2005 he published a book called *Paradigms in conflict: 10 key questions in mission today* with a chapter on holism and prioritism.¹⁴

He advocates **prioritism**, which is the traditional view that “mission is primarily to make disciples of all nations. Other Christian ministries are good but secondary and supportive.”¹⁵ We can’t feed the whole world but we can evangelise it, and that, he says, is the primary command of Jesus himself.¹⁶ In Australia this position is most clearly advocated by the Sydney Anglican Diocese, which recently required its social welfare arm, Anglicare, to justify its role in the mission of the church.¹⁷

Hesselgrave has some sympathy towards the second position, which he calls “**restrained holism**”. On this view, “mission is to minister to society and individuals socially and spiritually while giving a certain priority to evangelism”.¹⁸ This is clearly the Lausanne position. But he objects to John Stott selectively bringing to centre-stage passages such as John 20:21 (“As the Father has sent me, so I send you”) and pairing it with Luke 4:16–20, which announces the mission of Jesus as bringing good news to the poor.¹⁹

Even more radical in Hesselgrave’s eyes is the stronger version of holism to be found amongst Evangelicals, what he calls “**revisionist holism**”. It says that mission is “to minister to society and individuals without dichotomizing between the physical and spiritual or the body and soul/spirit”.²⁰ This type of holism sees evangelism and social action as different but “full and equal partners” in mission.

John Stott has moved from the Lausanne position to this outlook in his book *The Contemporary Christian: A Plea for Double Listening*.²¹ He argues strongly for mission as both evangelism and social engagement, seen as natural twins or as two sides of the same coin.²² The language used at the Lausanne-sponsored Consultation on the Relationship Between Evangelism and Social Responsibility in Grand Rapids in 1982 was similar. The two are like the wings of a bird or the blades of a pair of scissors—clearly both are equal partners.²³

¹³ David J Hesselgrave, ‘Redefining holism’, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35.3 (July 1999), 278–284.

¹⁴ David J Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in conflict: Ten key questions in Christian missions today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 117–139.

¹⁵ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in conflict*, 122.

¹⁶ Hesselgrave, ‘Redefining holism’, 284.

¹⁷ Doug Edmonds, *An incarnational agency in an evangelical world: A theological consideration of Anglicare’s role in mission* (Hobart: Anglicare Tasmania, n.d. (c. 2006)), available at <http://www.anglicare.asn.au/documents/TheRevdCanonDougEdmonds_AtheologicalconsidofAngrleinmission.pdf>

¹⁸ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in conflict*, 122.

¹⁹ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in conflict*, 121.

²⁰ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in conflict*, 122.

²¹ Stott, *The contemporary Christian*.

²² Stott, *The contemporary Christian*, 354–35..

²³ *Evangelism and social responsibility: An evangelical commitment*, Grand Rapids Report No.21, Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR) (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1982).

Ronald Sider also holds to this position, saying that that evangelism and social action deserve equal energy and are inseparable, closely intertwined partners.²⁴

I have great respect for this position, but go further than Stott or Sider. I actually think that Hesselgrave has lumped together those who see evangelism and social concern as two equal partners—which is not strictly holistic but still dichotomous, in my opinion—and those who are genuinely holistic, who see mission as essentially one task, that of living into the kingly reign of God in every way.

Stott talks of two bird wings, or two blades of a pair of scissors, or two sides of a coin. I prefer to talk in terms of the gospel being like a diamond, with an inner light shining out through the many different facets.

To talk of two things, for a start, is to leave out others things, such as our relationship to God's creation. Often we're not careful in our definition of seeking justice, too, and peacemaking falls off the table. And there are so many varieties of loving our neighbour, from offering a cup of cold water (mercy) to offering welfare services on a regular basis, to engaging in social policy reform, to calling for non-violent ways to resolve conflict, to advocating large scale political and social change. I've been involved in all of these as part of my call to mission.

But genuine holism, in my mind, overcomes dichotomy and tries to see the whole more than the parts. Bryant Myers, of World Vision International, write a response to Hesselgrave in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* in 1999, and put it much better than I can:

Holistic mission is a frame for mission that refuses the dichotomy between material and spiritual, between evangelism and social action, between loving God and loving neighbor. Holistic mission is the life of Christians passionately pursuing their relationship with God by seeking to be more like Christ, and who, because of their life in Christ, are passionately sharing the good news that through Christ anyone can be restored a loving relationship with God and can learn to love, not only their neighbor, but their enemy. This is what is meant by holistic mission as life, word, deed, and sign.²⁵

The key for most missiologists who are committed to holistic mission is the kingdom of God. This is the broader context. This, as Lesslie Newbigin once put it, is "the new reality which the work of Christ has brought into being".²⁶ This is the vision of reconciled and renewed relationships in all dimensions, even perhaps to the cosmic level. The role of Jesus Christ as God's Good News is central to this vision, but it spills out into a whole host of implications, which we only partly grasp and yet which we are privileged to explore.

²⁴ Ronald J Sider, *Evangelism and social concern* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 172, 175.

²⁵ Bryant Myers, 'In response: Another look at holism', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35.3 (July 1999), 286–287.

²⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The gospel in a pluralist society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 136.

I can understand why some Evangelicals are uneasy about holistic mission. I was brought up in a fundamentalist home and know the emphases inside-out. But my gospel has grown bigger as I've journeyed, without in any way diminishing the uniqueness and centrality of Jesus as the key to the gracious presence of God among us. Part of that big gospel is the breadth of God's purposes for the world. And for me, that calls for a holistic approach to God's mission.

Ross Langmead, 26-8-09