Kingdom and Church

Integral Mission and the New Mission Applicant:
Absorbing the Positive without Neglecting the Essential

by Bradford Greer

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Western mission organizations are encountering applicants who eagerly desire to engage in transformational intervention and development in order to facilitate the development of just and equitable communities. The gospel is their impetus to work with the poor, the disenfranchised, and with at-risk groups. Passages such as Luke 4:18–19 and Matthew 25:31–46 constructively shape their passion to ensure that social dimensions of the gospel are actualized in their areas of service. Yet, these applicants are increasingly inclined to overlook a vital component of the gospel: Christ's work in liberating individuals and communities from the debilitating aspects of our human fallenness through his giving of the promised Holy Spirit. Thus, an unhealthy dualism continues to pervade people's understanding of the Church's mission. Though applicants are zealous to represent Jesus, the Christ, they are less inclined to have people encounter Jesus as the Christ. This trend is only going to increase over the next ten years.

This current trend is a natural outgrowth of a fifty-year shift in cultural assumptions and values. Due to this shift in values more and more people view traditional articulations of the biblical message as dehumanizing and over-spiritualized. A number of Protestant churches have been very slow to adapt to this cultural shift and changing perception. Part of the reason for their slowness is that these churches would have to acknowledge that their articulation of core doctrines are no longer adequate and need revision. It appears that the churches' commitment to their dogmatic theologies has outweighed their commitment to Scripture and to being culturally relevant.[1] Thus, it is an irony of history that Protestant churches have aligned themselves with their traditional readings of Scripture and thereby created a need for another reformation. This reformation is already in process and the aforementioned trend among new applicants is simply one outcome of this process.

Rather than bemoan the cultural shifts within our western societies and people's consequent negative reaction to traditional dogma and creeds, I suggest

integrating the positive developments that have arisen from these cultural shifts and through a courageous return to Scripture construct contextual theologies that make sense to those seeking to serve Christ in this generation.

Out of these theologies must come an integrated, holistic paradigm of mission. This paradigm of mission must intentionally value the tangible, social impacts of the gospel as well as the absolute necessity of the involvement of Jesus, the Spirit, and the Word in creating transformed communities. Thus, this mission paradigm will view these dimensions of the gospel as integral to the Church's engagement with the world.

In this paper I will describe this cultural-theological shift that is taking place and then suggest ways that a mission organization can constructively respond to this shift among their applicants. The intention would be to develop their applicants' capacity to understand and value *integral mission* as the Church's appropriate response to its world in the first quarter of the 21st century.

Dehumanizing Dogma

Calvin's understanding of original sin[2] and the consequent statement in the Westminster Confession that "all are made opposite to all good and wholly inclined to evil"[3] have enjoyed predominance as the classical "Christian" position. This doctrine is used to neatly divide the world into two camps: Christian and non-Christian, good and bad.

However, many applicants no longer see the world this way. C. S. Lewis rejected this perception of the world back in the 1940s when he wrote:

> The world does not consist of 100 percent Christians and 100 percent non-Christians. There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name: some of them clergymen. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so.[4]

Applicants are much more cognizant of the diversity within the human race and refuse to neatly divide the world between the "good" Christians and the "bad" non-Christians. They see many people doing good and acting nobly in a variety of circumstances. They also read the Scripture and see examples of goodness that do not fit into our classical paradigm. Cornelius exemplifies one who was considered a good man and God heard his prayers because of his goodness. And this happened prior to Cornelius hearing about Jesus (Acts 10:1–4). This only reinforces their perception that the classic theological position is irrelevant, harsh, and judgmental.

Rejection of the classical position is not a new development. Theologians have disagreed over the impact of the fall since Augustine. Erasmus and Luther debated the issue. Arminius disagreed with the Calvinist position. Brunner argued about it with Barth.[5] However, many churches have been intolerant of alternatives to the classical position and reified and pejoratively labeled alternatives as *Pelagian* or *Semi-Pelagian*. This historic intolerance has crippled the church's ability to adapt to the present cultural shift.

Overspiritualized Focus

More and more applicants also react negatively to the dualistic view of humans as bodies and souls and the consequent overemphasis on focusing on people's souls while neglecting the circumstances of their lives.[6] An extreme example of the negative outworking of this dualistic view occurred in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti. Some earnest Christians went to Haiti and tried to take 30 children back to the United States. These Christians were part of a small movement that encouraged adoption so children could come to faith. Many Christians were aghast at the behavior of these missionaries and at the motivation behind this adoption movement. Adoption should be a means of expressing unconditional love and seek the well being of the entire person, not just her/his soul. However, this adoption movement was simply the natural outcome of a dualism that placed undue emphasis on people's spiritual condition.

This dualistic view of humanity has created a somewhat irreconcilable dichotomy in mission. Mission workers either focus on proclamation and church planting or on working to improve the conditions of people's lives through intervention or development. In addition, missionaries tend to disparage the work of those on the other end of the spectrum.

Due to the present cultural shift, an increasing number of applicants are aligning themselves on the intervention and development side of the spectrum. The outcome of this is that they place diminishing significance on verbally explaining the gospel. One young man's reply to a question about sharing his faith exemplifies this: "I would rather give a cup of cold water to the one who is thirsty."

This seeming irreconcilable dichotomy between proclamation and social action and the rejection of traditional, fundamental doctrines has created a quandary for mission work. First, the confidence of many of the new applicants in traditional theological formulations has eroded. Second, since Scripture provides the basis for these traditional theological doctrines, its authority and relevance is questioned. Third, the corrective move against seeing human beings as souls and neglecting of the social dimensions of the gospel has influenced new workers to place diminishing significance on gospel proclamation. Finally, this change is reinforced by the way applicants view humanity. People are not as evil as the Church's doctrines have portrayed them. Thus, it is increasingly felt that there is less of a

compelling need in mission for people to encounter Jesus as the Messiah than there is to help people experience fruits of the gospel: liberation from oppression and corruption, equal access to education, equal rights, and equal opportunity.

The objective of a mission organization might be to *co-labour with Christian development programs that address strategic needs and match action with clear gospel presentation.* This objective is increasingly going to be difficult to achieve in the present context. Is there a way forward in this changing environment? I suggest that one way forward is to absorb the positive within this cultural shift without neglecting the essential.

Identifying Our Problem: Fallenness in Narrative Perspective

First, what must we as Christians believe? Is it essential that we believe the doctrine of original sin as it has been historically articulated?

The doctrine of original sin arose out of the desire to answer the question: Why is everyone remarkably prone to doing what is wrong?[7] In one sense, embedded within the question was an admirable admission. Theologians humbly and honestly agreed that Paul described themselves when he said: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 2:23 ESV). These were not people who were pointing the finger at others. They overtly acknowledged that they also did wrong like everyone else.

It would have been nice if the Bible had definitively answered this question. If it had, then there would have been no room for disagreement over the answer. However, the Scripture does clearly affirm the human predicament: wrongdoing (sinning) is the universal human experience.

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engages in mission? Is it enough that Christian workers seek to represent Christ and engage in interaction and development so that people are empowered in new ways to create just and equitable communities?

There are those who would assert that a Christian presence is unnecessary and may even hinder people's attempts in creating meaningful community. The Swedish film, *As it is in Heaven*, asserts this very proposition. (By the end of 2008, this movie possibly became the longest running film in Australian history.) The local Lutheran priest in the film is unable to produce authentic community, and he even hinders its development. In contrast, those who increasingly detach themselves from the priest and the church are the ones who are able to create a meaningful community through the sharing of a common purpose, extended interaction, growing transparency, and gradual acceptance of one another.

The film constructively criticizes that which certainly needs criticism: a religious Christianity that fails to produce authentic Christian ethics in people's lives. The film, however, intimates that creating an authentic, just community is possible apart from Christ. Is this truly possible? Rather than looking for answers in propositional statements, let us turn to the narrative of Scripture.

God had extended his loving grace to the people of Israel by freeing them from their slavery in Egypt. He brought them out of Egypt and took them to Mount Sinai. At Sinai God gave Israel the Torah so that they would know how to build fulfilling, meaningful communities in the land he was to give them.[8]

The Israelites entered the land with the promised presence of God and

the Torah. However, the disturbing narrative of the history of Israel is that even with the presence of God among them the Israelites consistently failed to follow the Torah. Over time the constructive purpose of the Torah was lost and eventually replaced by its effect.[9] Rather than being the guidance on how to build authentic communities, the Torah became the standard that showed people how "sinful" they were (Romans 3:19–20). The narrative teaches us that even with proper instruction and even with the presence of God, constructing just and equitable communities is virtually impossible for human beings.

The repeated failure of the people of Israel in building just communities should indicate to each and every Christian worker just how serious a problem our human fallenness is. Though it may be demeaning to view our fellow human beings as "totally depraved," the Scripture appeals to us to humbly acknowledge that we as humans have a serious problem and that we ostensively obstruct the tide of human, social, and economic development and the creation of just and equitable communities.[10]

Valuing God's Solution: The New Covenant

Second, just as we must humbly acknowledge the debilitating impact of our human fallenness on achieving transformational development and the creation of just communities, we must also intentionally value God's solution to our human predicament.

God saw how his people had repeatedly failed to develop authentic, God-honoring communities and he responded by giving a new covenant. In this covenant he provided a way for humans to be transformed and empowered to create authentic

communities. Ezekiel lucidly articulates this new covenant:

> I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my rules (Ezek. 36:25–27 ESV).

It was Ezekiel's articulation of this covenant to which Jesus referred when he told Nicodemus: "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5 NRSV).[11]

God's solution to the human predicament was to provide a means by which we could be transformed. The solution included the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, his resurrection, and his ascension into heaven so that Jesus could pour out on us the Spirit. The Spirit would empower us to live according to the ethical standards that were enshrined in the Torah.[12]

By means of this covenant and the work of Christ we enter and actualize the kingdom of God in our midst. Without the empowering Spirit human beings are simply unable to create just and meaningful communities.

The tragedy of Christian history is that we have deemphasized the Spirit's role in actualizing in us the ethical standards to which the Word calls us. Instead, we have overemphasized the role of cognition, belief and justification. Our desire to be free from guilt has caused us to neglect the ethical standards to which the Scriptures call us. Our apparent neglect of biblical ethics and our lack of dependence on the Spirit in creating transformed, authentic Christ-like lives is what has fueled the contemporary antipathy to Christianity, an antipathy exemplified by *As it is in Heaven*.

This clarifies the reason why proclamation is essential to the church's mission. It is an integral part of how God enables communities to be just and meaningful. Proclamation acknowledges that we humans do not have the power to overcome our self-destructive inclinations. Proclamation affirms that God has created the means for our release from the debilitating effects of our fallenness.

Affirming God's Purpose: Salvation to the Ends of the Earth

Finally, God's solution enables communities to be transformed from the inside out and actualize the ethical standards enshrined in the Torah/Scripture. The actualization of these ethical standards is included in the word *salvation*.

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The Scripture indicates that salvation is not to be solely thought of in spiritual terms (forgiveness, justification, etc.) or individual terms (personal salvation). The scope of salvation embraces individuals (John 3:16), communities (Acts 8:5–8), the environment (Lev. 25; Rom. 8:19–20), and ultimately the cosmos (Eph. 1:9).[13] In addition, God's purpose is that this salvation, this message of hope, of empowerment, of ethical standards, and of its transformational impact, be taken to the ends of the earth (Acts 13:47).

Contemporary objectives of sustainable development (Harris 2000) reflect the biblical, ethical standards in significant ways. These objectives are:

1. to develop a just and equitable society within a cultural milieu,
2. to enable the development of goods and services on a continuing basis, and
3. to live in ways that respect and preserve their environment.

These objectives align well with the church's mission. However, as Christians we do not expect these objectives to be obtainable apart from the direct involvement of Jesus, the Word, and the Spirit. Although we do not disparage the efforts of development work over the past fifty years or so, we are compelled to acknowledge that the results have been disappointing, and understandably so.[14]

Since salvation embraces the totality of individuals and communities, the Church's mission cannot be broken down and dichotomized into two opposing categories: proclamation vs. intervention and development. Integral to the Church's mission is the proclamation and the demonstration of the gospel. The Church's mission is to engage in *integral mission*:

> Integral mission…is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not 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. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task (The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission)

Conclusion

A cultural shift has taken place over the past fifty years that has positive benefits. While it may have caused

people to reject traditional theological explanations of the world, it has enabled people to embrace diversity and change, to think reflectively, as well as expect authenticity in faith. These positive impacts of this cultural shift should be lauded. However, this shift has undermined people's confidence in traditional church structures and in the Scriptures, and caused them to question the value of gospel proclamation.

I suggest that mission organizations recognize this shift in the thought world of its applicants and adapt to it. If possible, I suggest they contextualize their theology so that it can highlight the essentials of the faith in ways that are not perceived as demeaning and that fully value all that God has done through Christ for his creation. In this way these organizations may help their applicants align themselves more completely with God's purpose and engage in integral mission, helping individuals and communities actualize the salvation that God offers. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

[1] See N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 39-53; also Graham H. Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke's View of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p.2.

[2] See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. J. Allen. (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), Vol. 1. II.i.8.

[3] See Calvin, *Institutes*, 6.4.

[4] See C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1952), p. 176.

[5] For more contemporary digressions from the classical position, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 1981). See also Ben Witherington, III, and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (*Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p.144-153.

[6] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 252-253.

[7] See Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), xv.

[8] Bradford Greer, "The *Sharia* of God: A Contextual Bridge for Islamic Contexts", *The Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 44/3 (2008). Also, Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 25.

[9] Ben Witherington, III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians*. Edinburgh, UK: T. and T. Clark Ltd, 1998), p. 256.

[10] Christopher Wright, "'According to the Scriptures': The Whole Gospel in Biblical Revelation", *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 33/1 (2009), p. 13.

[11] Andreas Köstenberger, 'Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective', in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Encountering Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), p. 84.

[12] See Greer, 2008.

[13] See also R.E.O. White, "Salvation", in W.A.Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984).

[14] See Tomi Ovaska, "The Failure of Development Aid", *Cato Journal*, 23/2 (2003), p.175-188.