

# Mission as Word and Deed: Transcending the Language of Priority

by *Alan Johnson*

**O**n a recent trip to Chennai, India, I stole some time in a little food stall to order my thoughts. I found myself between two friends on opposite sides of the evangelism/social action debate. I had always been able to dodge this bullet. Now I couldn't evade a commitment to either proclamation or Christian social action. In my own ministry I had just evangelized like crazy and tried to help the poor in practical ways. If people had a problem with my social activities I would say, "Hey, I'm not a role model, I'm just trying to do what God told me to do." I even recall some years back, in my inaugural address for the Hogan Chair of World Missions at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, stating I was glad that all the debate over evangelism and social responsibility was well past us. My friends tease me about that now. Debate continues and I find it's time for me to clarify my position.

Let me back up a minute and explain myself. I'm uncomfortable, like many of us, that the church has developed bifurcating language around ministry in "word" and "deed." But I have always felt dissatisfied with attempts to do away with the tension by using catchword phrases like "no distinction between word and deed." It seems to separate things just as much as prioritizing one side or the other. If there is no distinction, if they are equal, then I can just do one or the other without having to make any connections between them. The problem is that we can't assume the world will understand our "good deeds" have any relation to the gospel. What we do is constantly filtered by people through their worldview, and our unexplained deeds could take on a meaning that is totally unconnected to the good news of what God has done in Christ.

So I would say really clever stuff like, "Do everything, at the same time, all the time!" "We need the whole package!" But then I got knocked off the fence in an email discussion between these two friends and colleagues who had locked horns in this debate. The core of their discussion focused on the nature of the Gospel and whether that term was to be understood in the narrow sense of what God has done in Christ being proclaimed verbally to the world, or in the broad

---

*Alan Johnson has served for 25 years in Thailand with Assemblies of God World Missions (USA). He still lives in Bangkok where he develops training for reaching those influenced by Buddhist worldviews. He is Secretary of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship Missions Commission which focuses on majority world mission sending, and assists their Asia Pacific leadership team in their focus on unreached people groups. He is author of the recent book, *Apostolic Function in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (reviewed in *IJFM* 26:4, p.203).*

sense of embracing all expressions that are consonant with God's reign.

So, there I was parked in a food stall in Chennai, India, trying to sketch out a solution for these two friends. I had two goals in mind. The first was to provide some concepts to help build bridges between those who find themselves more on one side of the continuum than the other. The second is to bring some analytical perspectives that can potentially help to clarify issues as people work things out in real-time on the ground in ministry. As I pressed forward to answer my two friends, I had to review multiple mission theologians and church historians, some which I mention herein. But I profited most from the recent writing of Christopher Wright, who perceptively led me beyond the language of priority to a new terminology that integrates evangelism and social action. But before hearing Wright I think we need to unpack some of our conceptual tendencies.

### *Moving Away from Ideal Type Polarities*

What I have found is that most often our discussion about the evangelism/social action nexus is carried out in abstract terms. Almost like the Weberian ideal types,<sup>1</sup> we tend to profile the positions as polar opposites. On one end you have people who only preach the Gospel and do nothing to help people along in this world, and on the other you have people who do helpful things for others and never say a word about Christ. Reality is of course more complicated because the preachers usually get involved in people's lives, and visa-versa, the helpers often talk of their faith. Very few at the end of the day would be willing to affirm *only* proclaiming the Gospel or *only* doing social action without reference to the good news of Jesus.

I see two important points here. First, for the sake of developing argument we tend to utilize abstract scenarios, but in real-time everyday life we are much more integrated. Second, many of the pressing issues are not located in that theological zone where we interpret the

biblical data about the gospel and God's concern for human welfare on the earth, but rather in the real-time practice zone of actual concrete ministry situations. So it is not so much a theoretical matter of what takes priority, as it is a contextual matter of what we are doing or should be doing in any particular place or circumstance. Underlying all this debate are actual experiences (often negative) which color the contemporary discussion on best practices. It seems to me that if folks who lean to one side or the other saw more people living out the middle ground ("do everything all the



time"), they would feel less compelled to emphasize one side of the other. They would be quite happy pragmatists who preach and serve (and many journals would go out of business because nobody would be writing long essays about the subject!). But there is enough problematic reality between both ends of the continuum to keep the ink flowing.

My suggestion here is that the polar positions are not helpful starting points for discussion and that it will be more productive to find tools that are helpful in discerning how things are played out in concrete ministry situations.

### *A Theological Perspective: Matrices and Explosion*

If we are going to resist the temptation to argue from opposite poles, how are we to proceed? What I am proposing here is a possible way toward constructive dialogue that helps build a more integrative strategy and practice. I be-

gin with three theological premises we all can generally agree on, but I want to link them to two new interpretive constructs that might help bring clarity to various ministry scenarios.

1. The term *euangelion* (good news, gospel) was used in secular Greek to describe an event that changed the world, thus it was good news. The gospel writers appropriated this term to describe what God has done in Jesus Christ; this covers the entire redemptive event from his birth through his ascension and the pouring out of the Spirit.
2. This good news is then announced, the verb *kerysso* meaning 'to proclaim as a herald'. For those who experience this good news personally, they then herald the good news of salvation and the coming of the new age.
3. Good news calls for an individual response, but results in a corporate entity, the new community of faith. These local expressions of Christ's body scattered throughout the world bear witness to the good news and announce it to the world in word and deed as they live under God's rule.

I now want to run these basic New Testament ideas through two interpretive grids. The first comes from Paul Johnson in his *History of Christianity*, where he introduces the notion of "matrices" (sing., matrix) that are inherent to the Christian faith. The term matrix is used in a number of different fields, but its original meaning had to do with the source or origin from which something takes form or develops. The idea of matrices emerges from Johnson's interpretive sweep of Christian history in which he notes how the faith simultaneously unleashes both vital spontaneous forces as well as institutionalizing tendencies. The tension between spontaneity

and the existing institutional order is endemic to Christianity, but he roots this tension not just in the innovations themselves, but in the very ‘matrices’ of our faith as the gospel encounters each new context (1976:234, 252).

Johnson uses his astute historical perspective to help us see why our faith has the potential for manifold interpretation and action. He describes the teaching of Jesus as “more a series of glimpses, or matrices, a collection of insights, rather than a code of doctrine. It invites comment, interpretation, elaboration and constructive argument, and is the starting point for rival, though compatible, lines of inquiry. It is not a *summa theologica*, or indeed *ethica*, but the basis from which an endless series of *summae* can be assembled” (1976:28). He notes how “the theological wisdom of Christ, in providing a whole series of matrices for future experiment, was demonstrated again and again as new varieties of Christian action came into existence, flourished and declined” (1976:234). What’s important for our subject at hand is to see in Johnson’s insight just how the ‘matrices’ of our gospel can lead to “rival, though compatible, lines of inquiry”, to “varieties of Christian action,” and to “future experiment.”

The second perspective comes from the work of Lesslie Newbigin in his chapter entitled “The Logic of Mission” in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Newbigin challenges the idea of the mission of the church as purely obedience to a command. He suggests that the New Testament evidence argues for a mission that begins “with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving” (1989:116).

## **T**he mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion. (Lesslie Newbigin)

What happens if we interpret these New Testament premises through the ideas of “matrices” and “explosion”?

1. One matrix that is always produced when the Gospel is accepted and a community of faith comes into being is an explosion of joy to shout the message. Just as any explosion radiates from the center out to the margins, so we see in the New Testament that centrifugal movement where the good news extends from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth among every tribe and tongue.
2. A second matrix is an explosion of caring. As God’s people, living under his rule, it brings us into a collision course with all that is not right in the world. Note in Genesis 18:19 that God’s choosing of Abraham to bless all the nations also includes “keeping the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just.” This matrix of caring will always challenge the status quo of the world system and its acceptance of the abuse of power, corruption and violence.

Because these matrices are not unchanging codes fixed by one single context, but rather provide the energy for unending creativity to generate new responses in new situations, we are not limited to only New Testament scenarios. Thus the matrix of shouting the good news meant that when distinct ethnolinguistic peoples without a gospel witness were encountered, a new burst of energy and translation was generated to address this. Although we have no record of Jesus rescuing babies who had been chained to die in the wilderness, the matrix of caring extended into new contexts and

led early Christians to rescue these babies in defiance of social norms.

### *Different Groups Do Different Things*

The more I have thought about the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility, the more I’m convinced that much of tension can be resolved when two sets of conditions, two “starting points”, are kept in view. The first is an appreciation for different kinds of groups. The second is the presence and vitality of the church in a given social setting. I will discuss them in this order.

First, let me affirm that at the level of the individual Christian in his web of personal relationships, sharing good news and caring in Jesus name are done holistically, often simultaneously, and not sequentially. Word and deed are wrapped together and hard to unpack in such close relations. Winter’s point that in family you never choose between evangelism and caring for needs is well taken (1990:99). In an ongoing relationship over time deeds are interpreted by words, and testimony to the Gospel is confirmed by our deeds.

However, when you move outside the boundaries of individuals and kinship relations the dynamics begin to change. We can expect the balance between word and deed to change when we consider local churches (modalities), mission teams (apostolic bands that function as sodalities), parachurch organizations, or faith-based NGOs. We run into problems when we try to treat all of these entities in the same way and hold them to the same balance of word and deed. The relationship between evangelism and social action is clarified if we allow that different kinds of organizational forms handle these two

matrices in different ways. They will do some things better than others. It's understandable that for groups or organizations to be successful they need to do some things to the exclusion of others. That organizations will focus only on evangelism, or only on Christian social action, is not at all strange, nor does it mean they deny the importance of the part that is not their focus; it's simply a matter of staying on course with their reason for being.

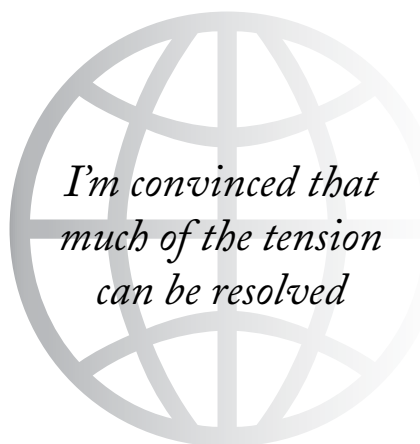
It is a bit more complex when we make a distinction between local churches and mission teams. While some people feel uncomfortable with this, I think it is more analytically powerful and strategically sound to see the mission team sodality as functioning with a much narrower agenda than local church modalities. Local churches have "family" type characteristics, work primarily within their own sociocultural sphere, have a multiplicity of giftings, and their members are embedded in relationships within the community. To evangelize and care in Jesus name should be the DNA of all local churches, and it's critical they develop structures or mechanisms to both evangelize and care as widely as possible. If for instance one of those mechanisms focuses only on social action, it still flows out of the life of the local church and its witness remains holistic in nature. In this sense, what individuals do in terms of witness and caring in their relationships is expressed on a wider canvas of a local church and its community.

When we consider the mission team sodality, I understand its function in a narrower sense, defined classically by the Pauline notion of taking Christ where he is not known. The priority is the evangelistic matrix and the goal is making disciples that form local church modalities and then bear witness and live out the values of God's rule. Whereas local churches do both things through the life and witness of their individual members and the ministry expressions of the church, the

primary purpose of the apostolic band is to make disciples and form local congregations. Mission teams may do many things that allow them to stay on the ground in a given location, but the focus is narrow.

### *Different Starting Points Need Different Kinds of Action*

Even if we own that these different kinds of groups (in this case local church modalities and mission team sodalities) have different kinds of priorities and do different things well, we also must face a second



strategic factor: the presence or absence of Christians, churches, and church movements.

Let me synthesize a sentence from the theological perspective above and then vary the scenario so that we can see how it plays out in terms of the relationship between evangelism and social action.

God desires to see humans redeemed and reconciled to him and to live out the values of heaven under his rule in a community of faith that is salt and light to the world.

Note that you cannot separate the different aspects of this statement since it's a cycle, where those who experience reconciliation are announcing the good news, then birthing new people into the community of faith, and who in turn are salt and light. But how do the different aspects play out in different contexts?

What happens if you are standing in the middle of 80 million people who don't know Christ, or who may have a minuscule number of Christians, and no viable church movements? In this scenario our theological statement takes on a more sequential feel because you have to announce the good news in order to build the community of faith that will in turn live out the message. That proclamation may indeed be wrapped in loving Christian social action, but in such a circumstance, explanation of the gospel is needed in order to make sense of that action, and the overall priority will be on evangelism and making disciples into faith communities.

Let's change the scenario again. What if you are in a place with many forms of Christianity, much of it nominal, with large viable church movements amidst crying physical needs and all kinds? And these churches have nicely dressed folk sitting in little buildings on Sunday and going to heaven while they ignore the marginalized outside their doors? Here we have the critical function of waking up these local church modalities to the fullness of what the good news means.

I need to make a few qualifying statements so I'm not misunderstood. First, to say that the work of the mission sodality has the goal of planting the church does not mean that the social concern it may be involved in is a "carrot on the stick" activity designed primarily to warm people up to hear about Jesus. It has to be genuine love in Jesus' name and because Jesus loves people, with no strings attached. Neither can this social concern be disconnected from who we are, because the "who we are" in Christ is what is driving our actions and that needs to be made clear.

Second, when local churches express God's compassion for the hurting in their local setting, it does not mean that they abandon evangelizing those who are non-Christians around them as well. Christian social concern in a place with visible and vibrant forms of

Christian faith can enhance understanding of the gospel.

Thirdly, we have to be careful not to export local church modality practices automatically into the sodality setting. It's an uncritical and naïve use of method. It has been my observation that many times local churches in the West that are not very socially active at all in their own setting, want to "do mission" by some kind of social action in a cross-cultural setting. This becomes problematic at several levels. If they are going to a place that has churches and Christians, their efforts are often completely outside of existing church structures. They can damage the effort and morale of these existing churches, or in other cases, they set a disempowering example of what social ministry is by implying it can only be done with funding from the West. If they are going to a place with few or no Christians, their assumption that people will "see Jesus" in their actions is unfounded. It's an assumption based on their experience in their home setting where there is more visible Christian faith and a common culture and worldview. It can have disastrous consequences (like the accusation of "buying" people to become Christians) rather than helping people understand more about the gospel.

### ***Back to Theology: Chris Wright's Notion of Ultimacy***

Having dodged the bullet for so many years, and having remained highly involved both in evangelism and social ministries, I personally have had no problem with using prioritizing language (i.e., first evangelism, then social concern). Years ago during a discussion about the relationship between word and deed a friend said that logically, at the very least, there has to be a priority on evangelism since you can't have Christian social action without there being Christians.<sup>2</sup>

There are some, however, who find prioritizing language very problematic.<sup>3</sup> Chris Wright offers an alternative sug-

## **T**he objection is usually couched in terms of the observation that . . . Paul did not campaign for the end of slavery

gestion that is the best biblical and theological basis I have ever seen for avoiding bifurcating terminology. The material that follows is drawn from Wright's *The Mission of God* chapters eight and nine on the Exodus and Jubilee.

Wright argues that God's model of redemption is the exodus event. The Hebrew verb *ga'al* at Ex. 6:6 and 15:13 are the first occasions (with the exception of Gen. 48:16) of the language of redemption. When a person is the subject of the verb the term is *go'el* (redeemer) (2006:266). The English word *redeem* from its Latin roots suggest a financial transaction where you 'buy something back.' But in ancient Israel the *go'el* had wider social dimensions associated with the demands of kinship. The 'kinsman protector' or 'family champion' was involved in avenging shed blood, redeeming land or slaves, and providing an heir (2006:266–67). 'The *go'el* then, was a near kinsman who acted as protector, defender, avenger or rescuer for other members of the family, especially in situations of threat, loss, poverty or injustice' (2006:267).

Wright asks the question, "When God decided to act in the world and in human history in a way that could be pictured as a *go'el* in action, what did he do?" (2006: 268). He points out that the exodus shows political, economic, social, and spiritual dimensions. "In the exodus God responded to *all* the dimensions of Israel's need .[the exodus] effected real change in the people's real historical situation and at the same time called them into a real new relationship with the living God" (2006:271). He concludes that Exodus-shaped redemption demands Exodus-shaped mission (2006:275). He warns that there are two interpretive options that fall short of this holistic missional

hermeneutic: to concentrate on the spiritual significance and marginalize the political, economic, and social dimensions; or to concentrate on the latter so that the spiritual dimension is lost (2006:276).

Wright begins the chapter on jubilee by noting that the exodus was a single historical event. God was concerned that its basic principles be worked out in Israel's everyday life. "There needed to be an ongoing commitment to economic and social justice, freedom from oppression, and due acknowledgement of God through covenant loyalty and worship" (2006:289). Wright says that if the exodus was God's idea of redemption, then the jubilee found in Leviticus 25 was God's idea of restoration (2006:290). After working through the details of the institution he then looks at its evangelistic, ethical, and eschatological implications, concluding that "the wholeness of the jubilee model embraces the wholeness of the church's evangelistic mission, its personal and social ethics and its future hope" (2006:300).

The next twenty pages in this chapter in Wright are critical, but I cannot produce the argument in detail here. What Wright does masterfully is to respond to the objection that New Testament mission is only evangelistic and not holistic. He not only responds to this objection, he also sets out a perspective that embraces both evangelism and holism.

The objection is usually couched in terms of the observation that Jesus did not get involved in politics, and Paul did not campaign for the end of slavery, so therefore is not New Testament mission to focus on evangelism? (2006:303). Wright answers these objections on hermeneutical, historical and theological grounds. I want to draw

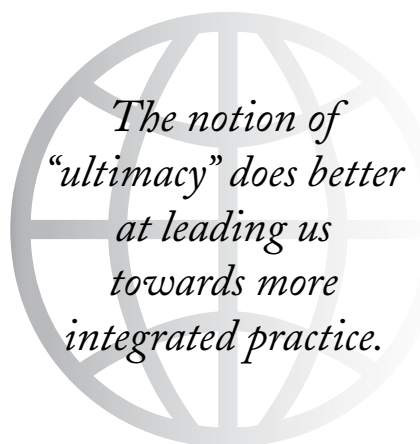
on just two of his points. First, he says that it is a false hermeneutic “to argue that whatever the New Testament tells us about the mission of the followers of Christ *cancels out* what we already know about the mission of God’s people from the Old Testament” (304).<sup>4</sup> Second, he looks at the centrality of the cross, then unpacks all of God’s purpose through the cross, and then shows how the cross must be the center of our mission: “The fact is that sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the cross of Christ is good news for every area of life on earth that has been touched by sin, which means every area of life. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess” (2006:315).

He then turns to examine the issue of primacy/priority between evangelism and holistic mission. Based on his theological work with the exodus, jubilee, and the cross, he suggests that the notion of “ultimacy” does better at leading us towards more integrated practice. Here is a brief summary of what this ‘ultimacy’ looks like (2006:317–319):

- Think of mission as a whole circle of all the needs and opportunities that God sends us to address in the world.
- If you analyze a particular local context, it will reveal a complex web of interconnected factors constituting the whole range of brokenness, sin, and evil across the entire human dimension.
- The key question then is, “What constitutes the good news of the biblical gospel in this whole circle of interlocking presenting needs and underlying causes?” (318).
- Virtually any *starting point* can be appropriate, depending on what is most pressing, so you enter the circle anywhere.
- But “*ultimately*” we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional

response the wholeness of God’s missional 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 that is offered to men and women through our witness to the gospel and the hope of God’s new creation” (319).

When I first worked through this material it just jumped off the page to me. It was the first time I had found a way of expressing things that did not



let anyone off the hook. To focus on only one side or the other is to have a defective and truncated mission. Because ultimacy keeps us focused on the Cross and how it addresses the full range of human brokenness, the need for priority language disappears.

### *The Contemporary Trajectory: Problems in Trends and Applications*

As I noted above, much of the debate on the relationship between evangelism and social action relates not to theological issues but to how that relationship is played out in practice. From the fieldworker side, when you are in a place with few Christians and trying to preach the gospel and plant the church, it is frustrating and even frightening to see people from local churches in the West who want to come and/or

finance “social ministry” so they can do mission. What you often find is that they are not motivated theologically, but rather by an issue, a technique or a trend that is currently popular and can raise interest and funds. There’s a loss of intentionality and commitment to the longevity of perspective required to announce why they are doing what they are doing. This kind of work retains the “form” but loses all the heart and ends up becoming “mission as stuff that makes us feel good.” It voids the outworking of God’s mission priorities in a given place.

Many cross-cultural workers in unreached people groups are seeing more and more visitors (and even new recruits to the mission) who are enamored by a particular social, economic or political issue rather than a vision of Jesus and his glory among the nations. In the part of the world where I live we now have people contacting our team who want to come and free sex slaves in a one week mission trip. When you are standing in the middle of millions of lost people your heart cries out to such well-intentioned folks “Please, preach the unsearchable riches of Christ!” Jesus is the pearl of great price and only as people come to know him can lasting change come to their social systems. We dare not demean the mission of God by doing stuff that makes us feel good. We can’t have our little forays out into the real world and then escape to our air-conditioned technology filled bedrooms, throw candy at people in Jesus’ name, or video document naïve interventions that have failed before the plane lifts off to return home. In some cases, full-time cross-cultural workers can become experts in playing the home base heart strings in order to keep a steady stream of teams and funds flowing. The missionary role devolves into managing visitors who want to “do missions” in the space of a ten day trip. That is mission on our terms, not God’s costly mission.

Of course, one can also reverse this scenario and see how field personnel deeply involved in caring for physical

needs would feel when people come and just want to “get them saved” and ready for heaven. What can be theologically clear from one side or the other gets very tangled as it is played out on the ground. It’s why I often quip to my missionary colleagues that missions education is lifetime employment. There is so much confusion about notions of mission. Even after you explain something in a crystal clear fashion people will go and do the opposite because that is what mission is to them, regardless of what the Bible says.

So what do we do in the real world where people lean instinctively towards either side of this evangelism/social concern issue? I believe we must promote a more integrated picture of mission. We need to talk in terms of ultimacy, not just priority. It allows us to deal with people on the basis of what has fired their heart first. Whether it is evangelism or caring for the poor, in whatever relational interface we find ourselves with them, we can start to build a more integrated picture of

God’s mission and their participation in it. The language of ultimacy keeps everything in view, helping our words make better sense, helping us to move towards better practice in our mission contexts, and giving this generation a more integral understanding of mission as word and deed. **IJFM**

## References

- Johnson, Paul  
1976 *A History of Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Newbiggin, Lesslie  
1989 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans.
- Weber, Max  
1947 *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Edited with an Introduction by Talcott Parsons ed. New York: Free Press.
- Winter, Ralph  
1990 “Mission in the 1990’s: I. Ralph D. Winter.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 98–102.
- Wright, Christopher J. H.  
2004 *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

2006 *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Ideal types are generalized abstract concepts that describe not an individual course of action, but an idealized or ‘typified’ one (1947:12-13). Weber said that seldom if ever can real phenomena be found that corresponds to an ideally constructed pure type (1947:110); it is used for purposes of analysis.

<sup>2</sup>Later on I discovered Chris Wright makes the same point (2006:316).

<sup>3</sup>Wright enumerates some of the problems in using primacy/priority language. It implies all else is secondary; it suggests something has to be your starting point when in reality a serial approach is not always possible or desirable and does not fit the practice of Jesus; and to insist that social change will come as believers influence society reflects a flawed logic—people will copy what they know and if all they see is evangelism that is all they will produce (2006:319).

<sup>4</sup>Wright argues that “the paradigmatic force of the socioeconomic legislation that governed Israel’s life in the land still has ethical and missional relevance for Christians” (2006:304). This point is developed in detail in his book *Old Testament Ethic for the People of God*.