

However, it is a distorted and surely 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. Of course the New Testament focuses on the new thing that we now have to proclaim to the nations. Only from the New Testament can we proclaim the good news that

- God has sent his Son into the world.
- God has kept his promise to Israel.
- Jesus has died and is risen and is even now reigning as Lord and King.
- In the name of Jesus Christ we can know forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in his blood shed on the cross.
- Christ will return in glory.
- The kingdom of God will be fully established in the new creation.

All of these great affirmations, and much more, are the content of the good news that could only be made known in the New Testament, through the historical events of the Gospels and the witness of the apostles. And of course it is our mandate, duty and joy to proclaim these things to the world in the evangelistic task entrusted to us.

But where do we find any justification for imagining that by rightly undertaking what the New Testament commands us to do, we are absolved from doing what the Old Testament commands? Why should we imagine that doing evangelism in obedience to the New Testament excludes doing justice in obedience to the Old? Why have we allowed what we call the *Great Commission* to obscure the twin challenge (endorsed by Jesus himself) of the *Great Commandment*?

It is true that we must take into account the radical newness of the era of salvation history inaugurated in the New Testament. We are not Old Testament Israelites living within a theocratic covenant bound by Old Testament law. So, for example, when we take a theme such as the land of Israel we do need to recognize the typological-prophetic hermeneutic by which the New Testament sees the fulfillment of all it signified for Israel as now fulfilled for Christians by being in Christ. The land of Palestine as territory and turf is no longer theologically (or eschatologically) significant in the New Testament. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere in detail,¹⁴ the paradigmatic force of the *socioeconomic* legislation that governed Israel's life in the land still has ethical and missional

¹⁴See my *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.

relevance for Christians—in the church and in society. Just because we no longer live in ancient Israel's society does not mean we have nothing to learn (or to obey) from Israel's social legislation. The divine authority and continuing ethical relevance that Paul asserts for "all Scripture" must apply to the law as much as to any other part of the Bible (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Now there are some things commanded in the Old Testament that we no longer obey, of course, such as the sacrificial system and the clean and unclean regulations. But the reason for this change is clearly given in the New Testament. Jesus has fulfilled all that the sacrificial system pointed to, and in him we have the perfect sacrifice for sin and our perfect high priest (as Hebrews explains in detail). And the distinction between clean and unclean animals and foods was symbolic of the national distinction between Old Testament Israel and the nations, a badge of their holiness. The New Testament tells us that this old distinction is abolished in Christ, in whom there is "neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal 3:28). So we no longer need to observe Old Testament food laws, but this is not because we need not obey the Old Testament per se but because we recognize the provisional nature of those regulations as signposts to a destiny we have now reached in Christ. The rationale for our nonobservance of these matters is explicit: they were always provisional in relation to the circumstances of Israel before the coming of Christ.

But there is no hint at all that the ubiquitous message of the Old Testament about social and economic justice, about personal and political integrity, about practical compassion for the needy are in any sense provisional or dispensable. On the contrary, so central are these matters to God's revealed requirement on his people (in the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, Wisdom writings and illustrated in so many narratives) that the more ritual regulations are relativized in comparison with them, even within the Old Testament itself.

He has showed 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. (Mic 6:8)

Not only are these central demands contrasted with more ritual requirements that Micah envisions he might carry out, they are also addressed in as universal a way as possible. This is no provisional regulation until God gives his people some other priority that overrides it. This is simply "what is good." This is not just for Israel, but for "you, O man." This is what God requires, period. The same fundamental requirement on the people of God, with the same sense of nonnegotiable, nontransient urgency, can be traced through texts such as Isaiah 1:11-

that God's mandate to the state authorities (who are "servants of God") was to do justice, punish wickedness and reward goodness (Rom 13:1-7). They accepted that political authorities were there by God's appointment, but they would not have forgotten the words of the prophets, who declared that governments that perverted justice stood under God's ultimate judgment (e.g., Jer 22:1-5). And they were reminded, in true prophetic style, by James not only that faith without practical action of love and justice is dead but also that it was still part of the apostolic duty of the church (as much as the prophetic duty of old) to denounce in no uncertain terms the oppressive practices of unscrupulous employers who feed their obscene luxury on the tears of those they exploit (Jas 2:14-17; 5:1-6). No, the early Christians, with all their unbounded evangelistic energy, were not lacking in awareness of the radical implications of their faith for the political, social and economic world around them. The favorite counter allegation that they did not seek to abolish slavery seems an inadequate basis on which to rest a view that early Christianity had no political or social interest.

The Centrality of the Cross

Any theology of mission that claims to be biblical must have at its core that which is at the very core of biblical faith—the cross of Christ. So if we are to establish that a truly biblical understanding of mission is holistic, integrating all the dimensions we have been surveying hitherto, then we must ask how all of that coheres around the cross.

A mission-centered theology of the cross. I have been arguing throughout this book that the Bible presents to us God's own mission to redeem and renew his whole creation. We have more of that journey still to travel in the chapters to come. However, in the context of this discussion of the meaning of redemption and its relation to mission, a key point must be made at this stage.

God's mission has many dimensions as we trace the theme of his saving purpose through the different strands of Scripture. But every dimension of that mission of God led inexorably to the cross of Christ. *The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's mission.*

Think for a moment of some of the great contours of God's redemptive purpose. The following items (at least) would probably have been included by Paul in what he called "the whole will [or purpose] of God" (Acts 20:27). I list them as minimally as possible. Every point deserves a theological discourse of its own (and has generated many).

It was the purpose or mission of God

- to deal with the guilt of human sin, which had to be punished for God's own

justice to be vindicated. And at the cross God accomplished this. God took that guilt and punishment upon himself in loving and willing self-substitution through the person of his own Son. For "the LORD has laid on him / the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:6), and Christ "himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24). The cross is the place of personal pardon, forgiveness and justification for guilty sinners.

- to defeat the powers of evil and all the forces (angelic, spiritual, "seen or unseen") that oppress, crush, invade, spoil, and destroy human life, whether directly or by human agency. And at the cross God accomplished this, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, . . . triumphing over them by the cross" (Col 2:15). The cross is the place of defeat for all cosmic evil and seals its ultimate destruction.
- to destroy death, the great invader and enemy of human life in God's world. And at the cross God did so, when "by [Christ's] death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14). The cross, paradoxically the most terrible symbol of death in the ancient world, is the fount of life.
- to remove the barrier of enmity and alienation between Jew and Gentile, and by implication ultimately all forms of enmity and alienation. And at the cross God did so, "for he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Eph 2:14-16). The cross is the place of reconciliation, to God and one another.
- to heal and reconcile his whole creation, the cosmic mission of God. And at the cross God made this ultimately possible. For it is God's final will "through [Christ] to reconcile all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:20; the "all things" here must clearly mean the whole created cosmos, since that is what Paul says has been created by Christ and for Christ (Col 1:15-16), and has now been reconciled by Christ (Col 1:20). The cross is the guarantee of a healed creation to come.

So then, all these huge dimensions of God's redemptive mission are set before us in the Bible. God's mission was that

- sin should be punished and sinners forgiven.
- evil should be defeated and humanity liberated.
- death should be destroyed and life and immortality brought to light.

- enemies should be reconciled to one another and to God.
- creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its Creator.

All of these together constitute the mission of God. And all of these led to the cross of Christ. *The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's total mission*—as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: “not my will, but yours, be done.”

A full biblical understanding of the atoning work of Christ on the cross goes far beyond (though of course it includes) the matter of personal guilt and individual forgiveness. That Jesus died in my place, bearing the guilt of my sin as my voluntary substitute, is the most gloriously liberating truth to which we cling in glad and grateful worship with tears of wonder. That I should long for others to know this truth and be saved and forgiven by casting their sins on the crucified Savior in repentance and faith is the most energizing motive for evangelism. All of this must be maintained with total commitment and personal conviction.

But there is more in the biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to biblical mission than evangelism. The gospel is good news for the whole creation (to whom, according to the longer ending of Mark, it is to be preached [Mk 16:15; cf. Eph 3:10]). To point out these wider dimensions of God's redemptive mission (and therefore of our committed participation in God's mission) is *not* watering down the gospel of personal salvation (as is sometimes alleged). Rather, we set that most precious personal good news for the individual firmly and affirmatively within its full biblical context of *all* that God has achieved and will finally complete through the cross of Christ.

A cross-centered theology of mission. So the cross was the unavoidable cost of *God's* mission. But it is equally true and biblical to say that *the cross is the unavoidable center of our mission*. All Christian mission flows from the cross—as its source, its power, and as that which defines its scope.

It is vital that we see the cross as central and integral to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission, that is, of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a mistake, in my view, to think that while our evangelism must be centered on the cross (as of course it has to be), our social engagement and other forms of practical mission work have some other theological foundation or justification.

Why is the cross just as important across the whole field of mission? Because in all forms of Christian mission in the name of Christ we are confronting the powers of evil and the kingdom of Satan—with all their dismal effects on human life and the wider creation. If we are to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of the reign of God in Christ—that is, if we are to proclaim that Jesus is king, in a world that still likes to chant “we have no king but Caesar” and his many suc-

cessors, including mammon—then we will be in direct conflict with the usurped reign of the evil one, in all its legion manifestations. The deadly reality of this battle against the powers of evil is the unanimous testimony of those who struggle for justice, for the needs of the poor and oppressed, the sick and the ignorant, and even those who seek to care for and protect God's creation against exploiters and polluters, just as much as it is the experience of those (frequently the same people) who struggle evangelistically to bring people to faith in Christ as Savior and Lord and plant churches. In all such work we confront the reality of sin and Satan. In all such work we are challenging the darkness of the world with the light and good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through him.

By what authority can we do so? With what power are we competent to engage the powers of evil? On what basis dare we challenge the chains of Satan, in word and deed, in people's spiritual, moral, physical and social lives? Only through the cross.

- Only in the cross is there forgiveness, justification and cleansing for guilty sinners.
- Only in the cross stands the defeat of evil powers.
- Only in the cross is there release from the fear of death and its ultimate destruction altogether.
- Only in the cross are even the most intractable of enemies reconciled.
- Only in the cross will we finally witness the healing of all creation.

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. And by God's incredible grace we have a gospel big enough to redeem all that sin and evil has touched. And every dimension of that good news is good news utterly and only because of the blood of Christ on the cross.

Ultimately all that will be there in the new, redeemed creation will be there because of the cross. And conversely, all that will not be there (suffering, tears, sin, Satan, sickness, oppression, corruption, decay and death) will not be there because they will have been defeated and destroyed by the cross. That is the length, breadth, height and depth of God's idea of redemption. It is exceedingly good news. It is the font of all our mission.

So it is my passionate conviction that holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the cross. That includes the conviction that the cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power,

no other resource, no other name through which we can offer the whole Gospel to the whole person and the whole world than Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Practice and Priorities

For the past two chapters we have been considering the biblical case for a holistic understanding of mission. Inevitably, however, a number of questions arise of a more practical nature, which need to be acknowledged in conclusion.

Primacy or ultimacy? Even if we agree that biblical mission is intrinsically holistic and that Christians should be involved in the whole wide range of biblical imperatives—seeking justice, working for the poor and needy, preaching the gospel of Christ, teaching, healing, feeding, educating, and so forth—isn't it still the case that evangelism has primacy in all of this? Evangelism may not be the only thing we should do in mission, but isn't it the most important? Shouldn't it have priority over all else?

There is a strong current of evangelical mission thinking that has argued in this way, and it is not lightly to be challenged, let alone set aside.¹⁸ Advocates of the primacy of evangelism do not deny the holistic nature of biblical mission and the broad scope of all that we should rightly be involved in as we engage in mission for Christ's sake. They see the relationship between evangelism and social action as being totally integral and inseparable—like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird or airplane. You cannot meaningfully have one without the other, even though they are not identical to each other, nor can the one be substituted for the other. But still, even in a relationship of such integration, evangelism is seen as primary, for the reason that *Christian* social action (as part of mission) requires the existence of socially active *Christians*, and that presupposes the evangelism by which they came to faith in Christ. Evangelism thus has a kind of chronological as well as theological primacy.

There is a strong logic here, and such a position is infinitely preferable to either an extreme affirmation of evangelism as the only rightful owner of the

¹⁸The Lausanne Covenant of 1974 and the extraordinarily productive decade of follow-up conferences and statements on the relationship between evangelism and social action provide the mainstream of such thinking. It can be navigated in the very helpful compendium of all the Lausanne documents up to 1989: John Stott, ed. *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996). The thinking in all this material is broadly holistic. Further analysis of the recovery of this understanding of mission can be found in Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*, Global Christian Library (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), chap. 9; and David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), pp. 400-408.

patent on Christian mission (to the exclusion of all other endeavors from any right to even use the term *mission*) or an extreme liberal and pluralist politicizing of the meaning of mission, such that evangelism is about the only thing you are *not* allowed to do.

However, there are some uncomfortable consequences of such a view when it filters down to the thinking and practice of some individuals, agencies and churches. Consider what follows as a few gentle questions rather than severe critique, since this is a position with which I have considerable sympathy.

First, the language of "priority" implies that all else is "secondary" at best. From the world of sporting clichés, we know that "second is nowhere" (at least that's how my own former sport of rowing would speak of the annual Cambridge-Oxford Boat Race). And indeed, there are churches and mission agencies that have adopted the term *secondary mission* to describe all those who are not directly involved in evangelism and church planting. I have friends serving as medical missionaries in Africa who received a letter from their supporting church informing them that they had now been reclassified as "secondary missionaries." The easily detectable subtext of this kind of language (which is sometimes verbalized exactly thus) is that they are not *real* missionaries at all. In other words, the language of priority and primacy quickly tends to imply singularity and exclusion. Evangelism is the *only* real mission. We are back to so exalting the New Testament evangelistic mandate that we think it absolves us from all other dimensions of God's mission that the rest of the Bible clearly requires of God's people. However, it is one thing to say (rightly) that we *must* engage in evangelism. It is another thing altogether to say (wrongly, as I have tried to argue) that evangelism is the *only* thing that constitutes engaging in mission.

The word *priority* suggests something that has to be your starting point. A *priority* is whatever is most important or urgent. It is the thing that must get done first before anything else. However, a different way of thinking about mission would be to imagine a whole circle of all the needs and opportunities that God calls (or sends) us to address in the world. This is best done when thinking of a local specific context, of course, rather than attempting it globally. One can construct a spider chart in which presenting problems are traced to deeper causes, and they in turn are related to other underlying problems and factors. Eventually, a complex web of interconnected factors is discerned, constituting the whole range of brokenness and need, of sin and evil, of suffering and loss that may be found in any given human situation, personal or social. The list of contributing factors will doubtless include those that are spiritual, moral, physical, familial, political, environmental, educational, economic, ethnic, cultural, religious and many more.