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4 HOLISTIC MISSION

Harold H Rowdon

INTRODUCTION

However confusing the concept of holistic mission may be, it is much simpler than the term! The concept is in fact nothing more—nor less—than one which does full justice to every aspect of God’s mission to the world. It seeks to omit nothing, neglect nothing and include everything that is contained within it. From another point of view, holistic mission brings ministry to the whole of human need—not just one aspect singled out for special attention because of its perceived priority, but the full range. *Holistic* mission, then, is concerned with *wholes*—the *whole* of God’s mission to the *whole* world, the *whole* of the church’s God-given task, and the *whole* of human need.

WHY THE PROBLEM?

It all sounds very innocuous, obvious and straightforward, until you begin to explore the meaning and implications more carefully. What precisely are the component parts of holistic mission? Are any of them more important than others? Is there a scale of priorities? Here the difficulties begin. For instinctively, because of our history, our culture and our spiritual terminology, we begin to draw invidious distinctions between things like word and deed, evangelism and social action, preaching the gospel and healing the sick, and so on.

It is a thousand pities that the distinctions should have been made. That there is a difference between them cannot be denied. But that the *difference* warrants being treated as a *distinction* is far from obvious. In the course of his ministry, Jesus went about teaching, preaching, healing, casting out demons, with sublime indifference to any distinction between these aspects of his work. His ‘manifesto’, recorded in Luke 4:16ff, cites Isaiah 61:1–2 with its total disregard of any distinction between word and deed. We shall examine presently the biblical evidence for the concept of holistic mission. Here we must pause to ask why it is that the concept has come to be questioned.

One underlying reason may well be the Greek roots of our modern culture. Greek thought drew a sharp contrast between thought and word on the one hand, and deed and action on the other. The former was seen as superior to the latter, an activity characteristic of man, civilized man, cultured man. The latter was appropriate only for slaves—men hardly fit to be regarded as men. Behind this distinction lay the more profound—but equally perverse—one between the spiritual and the material. The world of the spirit is ‘real’, pure and noble: the world of matter is transient, degrading and ignoble.

All of this was entirely foreign to the Hebrew approach to reality which colours not only the Old Testament but also the New. The God who is spirit is perfectly prepared to soil his hands (if I may slip for a moment into the Greek way of thinking by using such a phrase) by creating a material world. More of this anon, but the point to be made now is the extra-biblical source of the distinction between word and deed.

Then there is the influence of the dreaded ‘social gospel’. This late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century phenomenon began by realistically facing up to the social and economic needs of victims of modern industrialization and urbanization in the name of Christ. Some of its exponents ended up, however, by giving the impression that the *sole* mission of the church is to relieve human need at the physical and material level. Not surprisingly—human nature being what it is—this gross overstatement was countered by another: that the relief of human needs of this kind has nothing whatever to do with the mission entrusted by God to the church. More recently, we have seen a recrudescence of the social gospel emphasis in the form of views to the effect that God is at work today simply and solely in the advance of social justice—the so-called political theology which takes a variety of forms and has been widely influential. So, if you want to discredit some social activity in the church or its ministry, all you have to do is to declare that it smacks of the social gospel!

Mention must also be made in this connection of dispensational theology as a generator of the distinction between gospel preaching and social action. The dispensationalist interpretation of scripture which was virtually originated and widely disseminated by Darby and other Brethren came into vogue as a reaction not only against social gospel theories but also the developments in biblical criticism during the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries which so seriously undermined the authority of scripture and the credibility of the gospel. Darby consciously worked from the basis not of the Greek distinction but of the (supposed) distinction between Israel as God’s *earthly* people and the church as God’s *heavenly* people. The result, however, was the same. The church’s task is to proclaim the gospel of redemption from a world that is already under sentence and is hastening to judgement. Salvation is seen in spiritual terms

only. There is a happy inconsistency in that material and physical needs are not in practice totally ignored, but they are regarded as secondary, incidental and relatively unimportant.

MATTER AND SPIRIT

When we address the question to the Bible: 'Is it proper for Christians to serve God and their fellow men at the level of ministry to physical, emotional, psychological, social and economic needs?', the answer amounts to an overwhelming 'Yes'. The evidence is to be found in the biblical doctrines of God as creator, the nature of his providential care of his creation, the fact and implications of the Incarnation, the nature of the ministry of Jesus, the wide scope of salvation and the nature of Christian mission as displayed in the 'Great Commission' and the apostolic practice of it.

Creation and providence

As creator, God made everything that was made (Gen 2:1; Psa 104:24; John 1:3; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2). He is the source of all life, all being, all things. The Bible knows nothing of a creator like the Gnostic *demiurge* (workman) who brought the material world into existence illadvisedly. The one true God brought into existence the whole earth and everything in it and pronounced his creation 'very good'.

It is true that the fall brought imperfection, defect and perversion into that perfect creation. But, though Satan may be described as 'the god of this age' (2 Cor 4:4), that does not mean that God has forsaken his world. He maintains it in being, retaining his sovereignty over it and caring for it in all its complexity. Psalm after psalm celebrates this fact, and Jesus restated it in oft-quoted words. Paul affirmed to the superstitious crowd at Lystra that the God who created all things had continued to provide for the material needs of his creatures (Acts 14:16–17) and to the more sophisticated audience that he addressed at Athens that in God we 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

The point need not be laboured. God is not just a speaking God (though he *does* speak to men). He is also a creating, sustaining, ministering God who reveals his love and care in essentially practical and material ways (as well as in other ways, too).

Incarnation

Another theological pointer of which we should take note is the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not the focal point of evangelical theology

in general and Brethren theology in particular. For us it is the Cross that is crucial. But we firmly believe in it, we stoutly defend it when it is under attack, and, whether we realize it or not, it is of fundamental importance to our faith. Without a real Incarnation, the Cross would have been of no avail. And the Incarnation points to a holistic view. If God had lost all interest in the material dimension of creation, then—as the second-century Gnostics believed—he would not have taken real humanity to himself. A phantom version would have been sufficient. But he *did* become man—for us men, and for our salvation. Whether his conception by the Holy Spirit preserved him from involvement in *fallen* humanity, or, as some would have us believe, he partook of *fallen* humanity (without at any time or in any way falling into sin himself), the point of the Incarnation is God's assumption of humanity—real, physical, material humanity—in order to redeem it.

The ministry of Jesus

Of immense importance to our theme is the nature of the earthly ministry of Jesus. We have already alluded to this, but a little more must be said about it here. That it included deeds of mercy and acts of kindness is perfectly obvious. The gospels frequently record these acts of humble service, and it may well be significant that, when Peter summarized the ministry of Jesus to Cornelius and his household, he referred *only* to the things Jesus *did*. (Acts 10:38–39) It certainly ties in perfectly with our Lord's own summary of his mission in terms of (1) service and (2) giving his life as 'a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

Just as there would have been no need of a real Incarnation if God was interested only in redeeming the *spiritual* element in man (as is almost implied when we speak about 'souls' being 'saved'), so there would have been no need of a ministry devoted to meeting the human needs of men and women (or, for that matter, of teaching and preaching). After a sinless life lived in complete seclusion from the world, the atoning death which was all that mattered could have been made. *But it didn't happen that way.*

The scope of salvation

We move on to the large and difficult matter of the scope of salvation. As always, there are pitfalls to be avoided. Scripture does not allow us to affirm, with some 'ecumenical' theologians, that salvation is little or no more than a this-worldly activity designed to usher in the experience of material and social wellbeing (*shalom* is the jargon word). Neither, I believe, does it allow us to say with voices coming from the opposite end of the spectrum that physical healing and material prosperity are included in

the salvation that comes from the Atonement (at least without careful qualification).

But neither does it permit us to say that salvation is purely *spiritual*. Scripture teaches so clearly that the believer is promised a (future) experience of salvation that will 'transform our lowly bodies'. (Phil 3:21; cf 1 Cor: 12ff, 1 John 3:2) Nor should we overlook the very broad scriptural hints about a cosmic transformation. (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20) Salvation is vastly more than the rescue of 'souls' from a material environment which is beyond redemption. The last Adam is head of a new creation—new, not in the sense of being a different kind of thing from the old, but in the sense of being rejuvenated, renewed, re-created. True, the consummation is still future, and it is vitally important that this point should be made. But the 'firstfruits' are already present (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14). The firstfruits (foretaste, down-payment) are not to be identified with the spiritual as distinct from the material aspects of salvation. Who can claim to have received all that God has to give in the first of these realms? No doubt it is the area in which they are most marked. But the effects of spiritual rebirth cannot but affect the whole of life. We must all have seen—and perhaps experienced—the effects of new birth on a person's emotional, intellectual and even physical experience. The interaction between the manifold aspects of the psychosomatic unity that is a human being can hardly fail to ensure that this happens to some extent.

This point should not be over-stated, but neither should it be omitted.

The commission given to the church

Finally, we turn to the most directly relevant of the arguments I have been marshalling in favour of a holistic view of world mission—the concept of mission given to the church in the persons of the apostles, and their practice in carrying it out. The key passages here are not only the 'Great Commission' (Matt 28:18–20) but also the parallel passage in John 20:19–23 and the commissions given to the 12 and the 70 (Matt 10:1ff; Luke 10:1ff; and parallel passages), together with passages in Acts.

In the commissions given to the 12 and the 70 it is noteworthy not only that healings and exorcisms are included, as well as preaching, but also that they loom larger. John 20:21 contains the words: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' I confess that, when preaching from this text, I *used* to relate it exclusively to the preaching of forgiveness and reconciliation which is the subject of verse 23. I trust I am wiser now, having realized that the key to the meaning of verse 21 is Mark 10:45 where Jesus sums up the terms of his commission as not only redemption but also *service*.

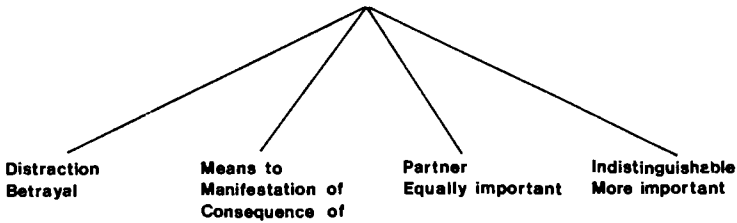
The apostles certainly understood it that way. They went out ready to act as well as to speak. Peter and John brought physical healing to a crippled man (Acts 3:6–7). The apostles as a whole healed and exorcised (Acts 5:12–16). Beyond the apostles, Philip ministered to human need as well as preaching the gospel (Acts 8:6–7). This kind of ministry was not confined to the context of preaching and evangelism. For example, Peter healed Aeneas and raised Dorcas from death. (Acts 9:32–41), Paul, as well as Peter, brought healing to a lame man (Acts 14:8–10), and exorcised a slave girl at Philippi (Acts 16:16–18). It has been alleged that the emphasis in Paul's ministry was increasingly on verbal proclamation, but there is clear evidence that this was not so. It was during his *third* missionary journey and his longest stay in one place—the crucially important city of Ephesus—that we read of unusual healings and exorcisms taking place (Acts 19:11–12).

WORD AND DEED

I could cheerfully omit the next section of this paper, for it may serve to underline the distinction which I am convinced is unreal and misleading, but for anything like a clear understanding of the concept of holistic mission it is a necessity. We must tackle the question, 'How do the two sides of the mission entrusted to the church—the spiritual and the material, word and deed, evangelism and social action—relate to each other?'

There are plenty of 'models' to choose from. A dozen or more have been distinguished, ranging from the one that places them in opposition to each other on the one hand, to the one that identifies them, and the one that sees social action as more important than evangelism on the other side! For the sake of clarity, I shall reduce them to a mere nine positions on the subject, ranging from one extreme to the other. Social action can be seen as:

- 1 A betrayal of evangelism.
- 2 A distraction from evangelism.
- 3 A means to evangelism.
- 4 A manifestation of evangelism.
- 5 A consequence of evangelism.
- 6 A partner of evangelism.
- 7 Social action and evangelism are equally important but distinct aspects of the total mission of the church.
- 8 Social action and evangelism are indistinguishable.
- 9 Social action is more important than evangelism.



The accompanying diagram groups them into four and attempts to show their 'spread'. I shall here do no more than comment on a few, and suggest a personal preference.

We are probably all familiar with the first on the list. We may have met it head-on when we suggested, years ago, introducing recreational activities for young people into our church activities, or, more recently, activities of a similar kind for adults.

The view that social action serves as a bridge across which the gospel can be taken to unconverted people is often advanced as justification for medical or educational work abroad. The fact that it is also a generous expression of Christian love for the underprivileged can be overlooked.

The same is true of the idea that it authenticates the gospel. In fact, all the views on the left side of the diagram are based on the premise that the verbal proclamation of the gospel is of paramount, if not unique, importance.

Not so the notions on the extreme right. Here the opposite is the case. It is the social side that is paramount. Since this idea is not likely to have any appeal for the audience I am addressing, I will say no more about it.

Most of us, I suspect, would want to take up a position somewhere in the middle, viewing the two alternatives as partners. Some might want to say, with the Lausanne Covenant, that the two are not equal partners, and that, in the last analysis, the *spiritual* dimension must take precedence over the *material*. Others might hesitate, and prefer to go with the exponents of what is often called 'radical discipleship' and refuse to put the two into an absolute order of preference.

I would like to develop the idea that the question of the relative importance of the two things we are discussing is one that ought not to be asked in an absolute generalized, way. If, as I firmly believe, mission includes everything which God has sent the church into the world to do in his name, then everything—yes, *everything*—is important, *equally* important since it is included in our marching orders. If the whole church were involved in *either* verbal proclamation *or* social action to the total exclusion of the other, then alarm bells should be ringing. The same applies to a local church, if it is to achieve a balanced witness. For the individual, it is

slightly different. If the biblical concept of the body, with its multiplicity of members, each with its distinctive—and partial—function to perform for the effective operation of the whole, means anything at all, then the individual may well have to decide between one and the other and know which is more important *for him or her*. In some cases, of course, it may be both. But the missionary doctor, for example, does not need to justify his medical work by drawing attention to the spiritual work he is able to do 'on the side'. You may well ask if there is any direct biblical evidence for such an assertion. To answer this very proper question, we must address ourselves to the crucial issue: is there any biblical warrant for Christian involvement in activities which are not narrowly evangelistic, proclamatory or 'spiritual'. To ask the question in these terms is almost to answer it, since many of those who are reading these lines spend most of their waking hours in such activities! (ie they earn their living this way!) So, presumably, the question should be narrowed to apply to those who are engaged in such activities under the guise of full-time Christian service. But this raises the spectre of a distinction between Christians which has never been congenial to those known as Christian Brethren!

CONCLUSION

The time has come to draw the threads together. Care of the sick, the afflicted, the hungry and the oppressed is more than an accompaniment to the preaching of the gospel as the *real* task of mission. It is more than a bridge, leading people to open their eyes to the message. It is more than authentication of the message (though it is all of these). It is *part of the message*. The distinction between word and deed is artificial. How do you know that someone really loves you? Not merely because they say so *verbally*, but also because their *actions* say so. 'God so loved that he gave.' Medical care, educational attention, the provision of food for the hungry and the imparting of technological skills—not to mention 'supernatural' acts—speak loud and clear, provided they are done clearly and unequivocally in the name of Jesus. In any case, they are inherently good things. I am aware that giving can be ill-advised and even done in such a way as to create more harm than good, but I am talking about actions done with due regard to the dignity and sensitivities of fellow human beings.

In short, there is no need to apologise for being medics, educationalists, or relief workers as if we were second-class servants of Christ whose role is merely to pave the way for the bearers of the good news or to authenticate what they have already said. (Actually, there are no such beings as 'second-class' servants of Christ if we are fulfilling the role that we have been given us by Christ.)

This is the real crunch. Are we in our appointed place?

Something would be radically wrong if *all* Christians were involved in various forms of social service, just as it would almost certainly be wrong if they were *all* occupied with the business of verbal communication. But how are we to know our role? A number of criteria may be suggested:

1 Our perceived gift (or gifts) and training. This is not as simple a matter as might appear at first sight. I think of the medical doctor who realized that he also possessed linguistic gifts and that these were of more strategic value *in the situation in which he found himself* than his medical gifts and training.

2 The strategic needs of a situation should therefore be taken into account. This does not mean, for example that someone without any ability as a teacher should be misled by the crying need for basic education into trying his hand at something for which he was manifestly unfitted. But it does mean, for instance, that the need for a balance in Christian ministry should be taken into account whenever possible. This applies just as much in a local church situation in the 'home country' as in a situation overseas. For that matter, it applies regionally or nationally.

3 Some reference should also be made to the *overall* strategic situation. Supposing the majority of evangelical Christians in a country, or worse still worldwide, were to be involved in *one* aspect of mission, it would be high time for someone to draw attention to the imbalance. This sort of situation was a reality not too many years ago when it was comparatively rare for evangelicals to be involved in any but the verbal aspects of world mission. The imbalance may one day be seen on the other side, but this does not seem to be the case today—particularly in the circles we move in!

Holistic mission. Let us not worry too much about the ugly term. Let us make sure it is being practised. And the last word must be given to a British missionary who is engaged in social work in Peru. She writes:

Sometimes my time is spent visiting hospitals, schools, lawyers and different organizations in an attempt to get help; sometimes I might sit with an anxious mother in a hospital waiting room and help her fill in forms; sometimes I might sit a child on my knee, wipe away his tears and give him a cuddle. Whatever I might do, concrete 'results' are rarely seen. I've not seen anyone converted, and my attempts to sort out people's problems are often thwarted. I do not feel that this is necessarily the most important factor. These children and their families need to know that someone is willing to take their part, that someone cares. After all, how else will they ever know that God cares?

For further reading on this subject, see B J Nicholls, *In Word and Deed* (Paternoster Press); John R W Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Falcon Press, London).