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So Send I You: A Study Guide to Mission by Roger Bowen

A response to Chris Wright's response!

Melvin Tinker

So Send I You: A Study Guide to Mission Roger Bowen
London: SPCK 1996 248pp £8.99 pb ISBN 0-281-04939

'Faithful are the wounds of a friend' (Proverbs 27:6). I can only assume that it is in this spirit that Dr Chris Wright felt it necessary to respond to what he considered was an 'unfair and unjustified' review of Roger Bowen's book.

As always one is grateful to Dr Wright for his clarity of thought and expression as well as for his passionate desire to see mission as central to the task of God's people in the world, a passion I wholeheartedly share. I would also want to support Chris Wright's plea that one should not assess Roger Bowen's book solely on the basis of my review (or for that matter, Chris Wright's defence), but that one should get hold of a copy and form one's own opinion. However, I am not sure that Dr Wright himself has been all that even-handed in the presentation of Roger Bowen's views as expressed in this book. Therefore, it is in the spirit of the above proverb, as one friend to another, that I write a 'response to a response'. Hopefully, this will continue to generate creative thought and engagement on these issues of great importance.

First of all, I am heartened to hear from Dr Wright that I have not got it all wrong! I take encouragement of sorts when the President of Crosslinks writes of the General Secretary's book, 'I would disagree in a number of places, or prefer other ways of expressing a point. I would share some of Melvin Tinker's unease at times.' It might have been helpful had Dr Wright specified at what points he shared my unease and exactly where the places of disagreement were. Are they substantive (as I would suspect) or just a matter of form and expression? Dr Wright fears that the *Churchman* review will be read by some who will then decide that, 'all they need to do

is dismiss it [Bowen's book]'. The problem is that by not fully enumerating his own criticisms and stating where he *does* share my concerns (with a couple of exceptions), Chris Wright gives the impression that he hopes readers will simply dismiss my review!

Dr Wright seems to be particularly vexed that I associate the term 'liberalism' with some of the ideas expressed in Bowen's book. Two points need to be made here. First, the term is a broad one and, second, it is relative. Both factors were borne in mind when I chose my words to describe where this book might be placed along a theological spectrum. I said that we have in Bowen's book 'beliefs which even *ten years* ago would have been more *commonly associated* with theological liberalism'. I also stated that we see signs of a 'serious drift in an *unevangelical direction*'. (Are these some of the things Dr Wright feels uneasy about?) Although this book is not Bultmannian liberalism or John Robinson liberalism I would still submit that it would fit with relative ease within that 'family' of theological liberalism which some of us would associate with the SCM movement of the 1970s and beyond. In addition, protestations notwithstanding that this is a 'study guide', the fact remains that it comes from the pen of one who is the General Secretary of a conservative-evangelical organization. Relative to *this* benchmark it would strike the ordinary reader as falling on the liberal side of the fence. Of course one is not saying that *everything* in the book is to be categorized as 'liberal' (broadly defined). Indeed it would be quite surprising to find no strands which were consonant with Evangelicalism in a book written by someone who for many years has been associated with the evangelical movement. Still, this does not diminish the concern that there are significant elements in this volume which, to put it mildly, rest uncomfortably with mainline Evangelicalism.

In connection with this Dr Wright says,

This textbook method makes the book highly usable in a classroom or curriculum. It may not sit easily with the wish of some that any book by an Evangelical should simply proclaim the evangelical position and ignore or denounce all alternative positions.

Is Dr Wright implying that this is the position of the reviewer and *Churchman*? I hope not for *that* would be 'unjust and unfair'. It is tantamount to tarring those who would disagree with the methodology followed by the author with the epithet, 'fundamentalist bigots'. Surely, Chris cannot mean that. Of course there are other lines of approach which Evangelicals down the years have adopted with honour and to great effect, for example, that of Carson, Moo and Morris in their *An Introduction to the New Testament* which proceeds from a clear and well argued

evangelical base while presenting other views fairly and critically. My contention with Bowen is that his base is hardly recognizably evangelical.

Dr Wright seems to be delighted that SPCK are publishing books like this which are 'Christ-centred and biblically rich study material on mission'. However, those of a more cynical persuasion may well retort that the fact that SPCK is more than willing to publish this book immediately casts doubt on its evangelical pedigree!

Dr Wright then proceeds to provide a catena of quotations which are taken as affirming the writer's orthodoxy and rejection of religious pluralism, but this is to miss the main point. To be glad that Roger Bowen rejects pluralism is as informative as knowing that David Jenkins rejects Arianism, so we ought to be grateful (not that I am implying Bowen is to be placed in the same category as Jenkins – it is the line of argument I am concerned with). It is what Bowen actually advocates (admittedly in a somewhat confused and contradictory manner at times) that one should focus on to determine whether or not it is biblical. I still maintain that at points it is not.

Furthermore, the quotations related by Chris Wright need to be looked at very carefully in context for they are only *partial* quotations. To quote approvingly that Roger Bowen writes 'Christ is the only means of redemption [because God has dealt with our sins]... in justice in the death of his Son' (p 222) and then to write with more than a hint of sarcasm 'but no, according to the review, the book is pure liberalism!' without, noting what prefixes and follows it, is misleading. The full quote is, 'Christ is the only means of salvation. God did not pass over the sins of past believers like Abraham because He had forgotten to be just but because He would deal with them in justice in the death of His Son (Romans 3:25; 26). *The same must be true of other believers, although they are ignorant of Christ*' (italics mine). It is this latter assertion which I question in my review as being at best confused and at worst in error. I am sure we can take partial quotes from almost any theologian no matter how 'off the wall' and make them sound like John Stott, but it is not exactly the most responsible way to proceed.

Therefore, while recognizing the danger of going over old ground already dealt with in my review, I will take up some of the specific points raised by Chris Wright.

Chris takes the reviewer to task for basing my 'charge' of liberalism on the grounds that Bowen does not define the gospel in terms of Christ's sin-bearing death on the Cross. He writes, 'it is rather superficial to judge an author on the basis of what he *does not say* in any given piece of writing'. I

would entirely agree, except that,

- (a) This is a book on *mission* and for an Evangelical not even to explore the gospel in these terms is surprising to say the least, and
- (b) the main thrust of my criticism is focused on what Bowen *does* say the gospel is in defining it in terms of ‘bread’ or freedom from ‘discrimination’.

This surely is liberalism of the SCM type mentioned earlier and not biblically evangelical. Dr Wright’s attempts to salvage a modicum of evangelical credibility for Roger Bowen by quoting what Bowen says about the Eucharist is rather threadbare, for as I shall argue below, that could be affirmed by a Roman Catholic but in the same breath taken away by an unbiblical addition.

Chris Wright then makes reference to my chapter on ecclesiology from *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis* as an example of how one can draw wrong conclusions on the basis of silence, *viz* that I do not emphasize mission as central to God’s purpose. Apart from the fact, as I have already maintained, that Bowen has not been silent on what he thinks the gospel is, and this is the essence of my unease, I would say that in this instance by employing partial quotations from my essay Chris is doing to me the very thing I am accused of doing to Bowen, *viz* being ‘unjust and unfair’. So, to quote more fully the section on the purpose of the Church I write:

We must not make the mistake of thinking that church ‘gathering’ is synonymous with introversion and exclusivism. Certainly in a very profound sense the church is exclusive, but theologically it is necessary to coordinate the notion of ‘gathering’ with ‘dispersion’ – ‘calling’ with ‘sending’ so that we may, to use the language of 1 Peter 2:9, ‘declare the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’... It is the church, which by definition, is called together. While it is assembled the gospel may be presented and some unbelievers present might be converted. But, by and large, the notion of ‘sending out’ with a view to proclaiming the gospel is not the task of the church *qua* the church (ie as a gathering or institution), but the task of individuals or groups of individuals. Apostles are sent. Evangelists are sent. In one sense *all* Christians are sent (John 20:21), but the church assembly is not sent. The purpose of the sending is to gather in people by the proclamation of the gospel. The goal is the church, its upbuilding and completion. (pp102-3).

This fits perfectly with all that Chris says about the Old Testament’s

emphasis upon God's purpose for the nations; it is anything but to 'skip mission'. To then pit me against 'somebody who tries to demonstrate the centrality of mission to the Bible and the church' is false and disingenuous.

Chris Wright then proceeds disdainfully to dismiss as 'absurd' the charge that the 'rhetorical', 'If you are hungry, food *is* the Gospel', implies that Bowen 'literally equates or defines the whole biblical Gospel in terms of food aid'. I did not say that. I pointed out that Roger Bowen does understand the content of the gospel and not merely the way it is presented, in terms of existential contextualisation – ie what the gospel is will vary from circumstance to circumstance. This he writes unambiguously and furnishes examples to illustrate what he means. However, the fact that in this section on evangelism he does not remotely define the gospel in terms of Christ's work on the Cross, indicates either confused thinking or wrong thinking. If Roger Bowen did not mean this, then why did he write it? If he is so committed to what we may call 'the evangelical gospel' why did he not state it?

Dr Wright then goes on to say 'Of course if the above quotation [which is only a partial quotation again – I give the full quote in my review] is what makes him a liberal, then James must again face the charge'. This is almost unbelievable! I take it that James is not writing a treatise on mission – but Roger Bowen is. Also what James says about 'religion' (not the gospel by the way) being defined in terms of caring for orphans and widows coheres with what I said in my review, that there are *entailments* of the gospel which have to be worked out, but the entailments are not to be allowed to collapse into what the gospel is, for it then becomes 'another gospel'. This I maintain Bowen has allowed to happen.

And so to Dr Wright's defence of Roger Bowen's position on the Eucharist.

I would agree with Dr Wright that the liturgies referred to which speak of social and political injustice are not confused with the central act of Christ's redeeming work on the Cross, but they certainly distort the whole eucharistic act in a way that takes us away from the emphasis of Christ's original institution. *Yes*, God is concerned with injustice – who is denying that? But it is debatable whether incorporating such elements into eucharistic liturgy enhance its central message or, as I would argue, detract from it.

Dr Wright agrees with me that Roger Bowen's presentation of the Eucharist as the Church being involved in Christ's self-offering to God 'does not fit with the New Testament's way of linking us to Christ's death'.

I would have thought this is worthy of more serious concern than Chris seems to give it. Furthermore, is it really the case, as Chris Wright maintains, that 'it is much clearer than Tinker admits that Bowen himself favours the first view as preserving the proper biblical emphasis on the priority of God's saving grace... it is clearly an unfair distortion to speak of an "embracing of the Catholic notion"'? I would contend that it is far from clear and that what is written by Bowen *does* embrace the Catholic notion. The Roman Catholic church would be quite happy to affirm the first view (that 'in the Eucharist Christians receive the benefits of Christ's death which set them right with God. This is a movement of grace from God to human beings, and we are passive receivers' p 50), but the addition of the second view (taking part in Christ's self-offering) from which, by Chris Wright's own admission, Bowen does not clearly distance himself, undermines it. So we can find this written in a modern presentation of the Roman Catholic faith in its discussion of the Eucharist:

'Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life...'
When we proclaim those words at Mass we proclaim the centrepoint of our Christian faith. Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, became one of us in order to, live with us, die for us, and raise us up to live with God. Through his death upon the Cross he cleansed our human nature from the deadly contagion of sin and conquered evil which separates us from God. (Pasco and Redford *Faith Alive* (Hodder) p 157)

It sounds very evangelical. But then it is undermined by what it goes on to say about the Church's self-offering with Christ's offering in the Eucharist. Not unlike what Roger Bowen has written.

So what of the discussion of 'inclusivism' and the view that it is possible that those who have never heard of Christ can be saved by Christ, with analogies being drawn between men like Abraham and those who are 'informationally BC'?

Chris Wright's distinctions regarding 'inclusivism', 'non-restrictivists' etc are correct and helpful. Such distinctions assist in precision, although within the brief space afforded by a review one does not always have the luxury of the extended discussion necessary to tease them out.

I can assure Chris that I am also very much aware of what Roger Bowen is saying in comparing Abraham's faith with that of people who turn to 'God' but have not heard of Christ. My criticism of this position concurs with what Chris Wright himself wrote in 1984 when he criticized the syncretistic approach to religion (I acknowledge that Bowen is not advocating this, but the principles still apply to what he is proposing);

The fact that the living God addressed Abraham and entered into a covenant with him in terms of divine names Abraham would have already known, in no way implies that all Abraham's contemporaries who worshipped El in his various manifestations, and with the seamier side of his mythology, thereby knew and worshipped the living God. It does not even imply that Abraham's own religious belief and practice constituted worship of the living God or was acceptable to him before the point where God addressed him and he responded to him in obedient faith... the purpose of God's self-revelation was not to validate the religion of El and his pantheon, but to lead Abraham and his descendants beyond it into a personal relationship with God *in preparation* for the full experience of redemption and thereby the full knowledge of his true name and character.

So the patriarchal experience certainly does allow us to believe that God does address and relate to men in terms of their existing concepts of deity (as, eg in the case of Cornelius). But we must presume such an initiative is preparatory to bringing them to a knowledge of his historic and redemptive acts (which, in our era, means knowledge of Christ). It does not allow us to assert that the worship of other gods is in fact unconscious worship of the true God, nor to escape from the task of bringing knowledge of the saving name of God in Jesus Christ to men of other faiths. (*Themelios* January 1981 Vol 9 No 2 p 7)

Later when discussing Joshua 24 he points out that the

text shows something of the strains in practice arising from Israel's polytheistic environment and pre-history. But the answer was not a tolerant syncretism but a radical rejection of all but the God known through his acts of revelation up to that point in history. *How much more is this the case for us who stand 'this side' of the completion of both revelation and redemption in Christ?* (Italics mine.)

He then writes:

Many other individuals come into a relationship with God from 'outside' – through the acknowledgement of the living God of God's people (eg Melchizedek, Balaam, Jethro), through experience of his saving healing power (eg Naaman), or through prayer and response to God's word (eg Cornelius). But our awareness of such divine presence and activity in the world beyond the boundaries of the church ought to be an incentive to evangelism – ie taking the saving *knowledge* of the name of Jesus to those he is already preparing to receive it. (p 11)

I could not agree more. In fact this is the position from which I would be coming in my analysis of the Bowen volume. The problem is that Bowen, in his argument that people can be saved through Christ while being ignorant of Christ, can only make the analogy work (and it is *only* an analogy, not a scriptural argument) between those who are 'informationally BC' today and men like Abraham by ignoring this crucial fact, that the patriarchs responded to special revelation and stand within the flow of salvation-history defined by the divinely provided covenantal framework of which Christ is the fulfilment. It also overlooks the fact that because of the coming of Christ the situation is now significantly different, which is really what Chris Wright argues in the *Themelios* article.

What is it that these 'believers ignorant of Christ' believe in which places them within the same orbit of saving grace as Abraham? Chris Wright in his response speaks of those 'who turn in some way to God in belief and repentance'. But what does this mean? It certainly is difficult to square with what Chris Wright wrote in 1984 which seemed much more definite and clear.

It would seem that Dr Wright has significantly changed his position so that he is much closer to that of Roger Bowen on this issue, being what can be termed a 'soft-inclusivist'. This is evidenced by his editorial, 'P for Pentateuch, patriarchs and pagans' (*Themelios* January 1993 Vol 18 No 2) and the joint paper with Goldingay mentioned in the response, entitled, 'Yahweh our God Yahwah One', in which the Melchizedek passage in Genesis 14 is analysed. Here Melchizedek blesses Abraham in the name of El Elyon, Creator of heaven and earth (14:19). Abraham properly responds by taking an oath in the name of Yahweh El Elyon. So Goldingay and Wright state: 'The implication seems to be that Abram and Genesis itself recognize that Malkisedeq (and presumably other people in Canaan who worship El under one manifestation or another) does serve the true God but does not know all there is to know about that God'. Later the comment is made that, 'it is still the God worshipped within these other religions who is more fully known here, and it is apparently assumed that Israel can still learn from these other religions'. They then go on to say, having noted parallels between Israelite and Canaanite religions, 'this is not to say that these institutions, ideas or texts are unchanged when they feature within Yahwism, but that it was able to reach its own mature expression with their aid'.

Professor D A Carson's comment on the Wright/Goldingay chapter is most apposite: 'Almost all of this is right, and almost all of it is wrong, or at least questionable' (*The Gagging of God* p 250). He rightly points out that the most natural reading of the text is, that far from some emerging of monotheism from polytheism, there were still other monotheists around,

people who still preserved God's gracious self-disclosure to Noah. So Carson writes: 'To use this account to justify the proposition that "apparently" Israel could "still learn from these other religions" is indefensible.' This seems to be a significant departure from the position held by Chris Wright in 1984. Of course we can and do move on in our ideas and beliefs, but one would want to ask gently if this is a move in a more biblically grounded direction? (For a more extensive critique of the 'soft-inclusivist' position as held by scholars such as Pinnock, Wright and Bowen the reader is referred to Carson's *The Gagging of God* pp 291-314).

Finally, Dr Wright acknowledges that he shares my unease with what I termed 'an incipient universalism' and would 'want a more careful discussion'. However, Chris Wright goes on to contend that Bowen's discussion does not constitute a 'flagrant disregard' or 'mischievous extension of Scripture'. He points out that Bowen 'avoids the universalist interpretation of the classic old universalist proof texts'. He certainly does that, but instead he introduces *new* ones! If the following is not a flagrant disregard of Scripture in that no attention is paid to the contexts of the texts, and if what is said does not point in a universalist direction, then I am at a loss to know what does: 'Mercy is God's chief characteristic, and if he has shown mercy to some, both Jew and Gentile, the visible first fruits, *must he not intend to eventually show mercy to all?*' (Rom 11:28-32, James 1:18) (italics mine). The fact that he later goes on to say that mercy is not shown because people are religious, does not detract from the theological import of what Bowen does say. Either he did not mean this, in which case he is careless and possibly irresponsible as a writer of such an important book, which as Chris acknowledges, will be used by students, or he does mean it and so the cumulative evidence points to the conclusion that in spite of Dr Wright's protests to the contrary, the term 'liberalism' is not an entirely inappropriate one to apply to this book.

Postscript: Is there any significance in the fact that my review of Roger Bowen's book appeared immediately after Dr Mark Thompson's article, 'Being Clearly and Positively Evangelical'?

MELVIN TINKER is vicar of St John's, Hull.