

evangelism or social action – must we choose?

Emma Dipper & Alex Bunn explore integral mission

Social action is the alleviation of human suffering and injustice, exploitation and deprivation. It has been a feature of Christian mission from the start. The apostles James, Peter and John urged Paul when he launched his mission to the gentiles: 'All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along'.¹

19th Century missionaries undertook word ministry alongside all kinds of projects in reform and compassion. They combated the opium trade, foot-binding and exposure of girl babies in China. They waged war against widow-burning, infanticide, and temple prostitution in India. And healthcare systems in many countries today are built on missionary foundations, still providing perhaps 70% of healthcare in sub Saharan Africa.² They do much to 'adorn' the gospel,³ as Paul exhorted Titus, using the word kosmeo from which we get the word cosmetic. For instance, a survey showed that 80% of Indian Christians related their conversion to a mission hospital experience.⁴

In the 20th century the extent to which social action is necessary or 'integral' to mission has been questioned. This was partly a reaction against liberalism and the 'social gospel' and pessimism about rectifying structural evils, particularly after several devastating wars. More recently a renewed conviction, reflected in statements such as the Lausanne Covenant, has called for repentance for neglect of socio-political involvement. There has been a restatement of the 'triple focus' of mission, following God's plan to redeem the whole of creation,⁵ to individuals, society and the natural world: 'all three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God's people'.⁶

FIVE MARKS OF MISSION



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These statements recognised that social action is not to be confused with evangelism, nor political liberation with our much needed salvation. What caused this shift? Perhaps increased exposure to human anguish and exploitation from mass media. There also were important critiques of the status quo (and Western missiology) from the majority world, including left-leaning liberation theologians who challenged our political naivety:

'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.' (Bishop Hélder Câmara)

what does the Bible say?

*'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'*⁷

John Stott the influential evangelical leader argued that this version of the Great Commission demands that his followers imitate Jesus' own example.⁸ His model of mission should be ours. Proclamation and social action are linked like the two blades of a pair of scissors: both are necessary. But in accord with Lausanne, Stott stressed the primacy of evangelism, which should not be neglected at the expense of pressing human need.⁹

So what was Jesus' model? How did the Father send him? A key distinctive is that his mission was 'incarnational'. The Father didn't commission a tract, a disembodied propositional truth statement. The Word became flesh,¹⁰ full of grace and truth, in Jesus who dwelled amongst us, engaging the lost, enslaved and down trodden at great personal cost. He addressed the totality of the need for salvation, both vertical and horizontal: both reconciling us to the Father, and restoring the material and social consequences of the fall in healing and liberation.

the Nazareth Manifesto

When he embarked upon his mission, Jesus summarised it in what has been called the Nazareth Manifesto:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom
for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*¹¹

His mission both declared and demonstrated the gospel. It was an example of proclamation and teaching, hand-in-hand with the glimpses of what the kingdom of God looks like: someone is released from the prison of paralysis, and an equally important prison of guilt; another confesses abuse of power via the tax system and offers to repay victims; someone discovers grace, and becomes a model for extravagant fragrant generosity; a blind person is given physical and spiritual sight, to see the world as it really is; a person is oppressed by personal demons, recovers from self-harming and is restored to a right mind; another suffers an embarrassing disease that saps joy: Jesus' touch provides release to rejoin the community of worship, with bursts of thanksgiving, without shame or fear.

Jesus and the disciples didn't separate declaration and demonstration. It was both/and. Their model was preaching and healing, casting out demons and teaching about the kingdom of God.¹²

Today we might call this holistic, incarnational or integral mission (Read [bit.ly/2jt7BLn](#)).

Emma Dipper shares some case examples

When I began my career I had no theoretical background in how to do mission, but learnt through what I observed. As I grew in my understanding I strived to reflect biblically on the part I had to play in building God's global church. Here are four case studies spanning nearly three decades which challenged my thinking and my life.

CASE 1:

a mission hospital in Africa: urgent care can trump holistic care

Back in the early 1990s it was easy to find yourself in a senior role within a year of qualification as a nurse. At 22 I became Ward Sister in a mission hospital in rural sub-Saharan Africa. I was first-on-call for the whole hospital, only contacting one of the two resident doctors if it was really necessary. What did my 'mission' look like? It was service provision with daily prayers, and relied on the donations of generous Christians from the West.

Within two weeks I knew that although I felt 'called to mission', it wasn't what I hoped for. Firstly, I noticed that children were being admitted with measles. I wondered why this was, when there was a vaccine to prevent it. Yet there was little in the way of primary health care. Secondly, I decided to join a TEE (Theological Education by Extension) group made up of local pastors. I saw their hunger to understand God's word and yet in the hospital I saw dedicated and wonderful medical personnel sent from churches all around the world so consumed by the physical needs that the spiritual seemed to be neglected to me, inexperienced as I was.

I committed myself to two things as a result. I would train as a midwife in order to bring greater professional expertise. And I would go to Bible College so I could care for the spiritual birth and growth as well as the physical. I knew that my medical profession was like a key unlocking a door to the nations, but equally I knew I should not neglect the whole person. Don't let this fast moving society deny us a few years' decent training and reflection. No time in training is a waste. It literally saves lives.

CASE 2:

a refugee camp: discipleship involves more than handouts

My next experience did little to grow my understanding of mission or being church. Now a midwife, I offered to join a team serving in the refugee camps in the Congo, following the Rwandan genocide of 1994. We were working alongside all manner of NGOs trying to keep a Christian distinctive. It was a circus of aid distribution, chaos, insecurity and saving lives. As the medical coordinator I observed a medical team giving out medicines in paper medication cones. Each one was printed with scripture and the message 'Jesus loves you'.

Were any of these integral missions? The team were deeply sincere in their service and yet little of it seemed to be integrated with what I thought might be effective transformation of lives through Christ.

'The Bible tells us that the Lord is loving toward all he has made, upholds the cause of the oppressed, loves the foreigner, feeds the hungry, sustains the fatherless and widow.'¹³

There is no doubt these Christians were fulfilling part of this mandate. But how can one really bring the gospel to those who suffer without being accused of taking advantage of their vulnerability?

'Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.'¹⁴

I can see what the medical relief team was trying to do. In the pressure of saving lives they wanted to communicate a reason for their love. Tragically, the community they were serving was described as 95% Christian. Yet they had just brought the greatest destruction to one another's lives in ignoring the biblical truths of unity and loving one's enemies by upholding tribalism as higher. Had deeper discipleship with a greater understanding of social transformation been a part of the early Rwandan church, would this assault on humanity have occurred?

CASE 3:

creative access countries: earning our right to speak

In later life I lived in what is now described as a creative access country. If one was caught proclaiming the gospel one could be expelled or even killed. Was this an excuse for the gospel to be only presented through social action without words? No. By good cultural training, language study and the discernment of the Holy Spirit, an integrated approach could be lived out as a Christian.

We were development workers and yet, we easily found ways to love those we served through our lives and share our faith over staff tea. There were times when I was asked, 'Why are you here?' I could tell them why which led to other opportunities. Had we approached with a proclamation-only strategy we would have fallen at the first hurdle. It is essential in every culture that you earn the right to speak by living the life of authentic Christian witness first.

Nowadays I work with the church living under persecution for their identity in Jesus. What kind of mission do I observe? Of course, it varies but in the Middle East I witness discernable wisdom and a willingness to proclaim Jesus despite the cost. I hear of care in North Korea being given to people's physical needs as they live through famine and heartache. I hear of the whispers of the gospel being shared in forests, through a scrap of paper filled with scripture, and through the witness of unconditional love in a prison cell.

CASE 4:

loving your enemy: healthcare in the Middle East

Recently I met with the leadership of the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East. They live under hostility with some direct abuse and attacks as an oppressed minority. Yet they have a clear strategy to bring quality health care to several regions in their nation, to serve the whole community whatever their religion in order to be salt and light and to love their enemies.

integral mission at home

How can integral mission help us connect with and bring Christ to millennials? They want to see an authentic Christian life before hearing the truth of the gospel. We need to share in each other's burdens and suffering. That is a bridge for the gospel when the world watches Christians wrestle through pain and sees how relevant and powerful God is. We can start with one thing we can really change right now, with God's help. Ourselves. What sort of friend am I to those who are not yet Christians? How might they see how I live my life as a follower of Jesus? What opportunities have I had to speak about the gospel but missed it?

So how can I prepare for my ministry in the workplace in the UK or in a cross-cultural setting? Start reading biographies. Read of their joys and challenges, their methods and their messages. And start seriously praying for God's world. Only 3% of those in cross-cultural ministry go to the Muslim world. The door is open for medical professionals. Why you would not go to that part of the world? And think about training. Why would you spend ten years on your professional development and only take a short course in Bible studies or cross cultural ministry? Why not contact www.allnations.ac.uk for more information about training opportunities? ■

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