HOLISTIC MISSION

Posted on November 7, 2014 by Eddie

â€œThe Churchâ€™s mission is to participate in Godâ€™s mission to restore the whole creation and all of human life. If the scope of salvation is as broad as creation, our participation must equally broad. The gospel is a gospel of the kingdom â€“ the restoration of Godâ€™s rule over the world. The church is a sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom of God in the worldâ€¦â€

Category: Observations

Evangelical and ecumenical thinkers have dominated the theory and practice of mission for the last century. There has been much debate over whether the centre of mission is verbal proclamation of the gospel or social action for justice and mercy.

OUR LEGACY: A SPLIT BETWEEN WORD AND DEED

At the end of the C19 two traditions developed in contrast to each other; the fundamentalist revival and the social gospel movement. The fundamentalists emphasized evangelism, while the social gospel stressed socio-political action. â€œWord and deed were torn asunder.â€ Through the C20, these morphed into the Evangelical and Ecumenical traditions.

The Evangelical Tradition

Between 1865 and 1935 a â€œgreat reversalâ€ took place in the Evangelical Church which reduced the missional calling to verbal proclamation. Three key factors are at work in this; premillenialism, individualism and a reaction to the social gospel.

Premillenialism. Up till mid C19, the US church was postmillennial, but a shift to premillenialism spelled doom for social concern in the church.

- Kingdom was viewed as entirely future, with the present world having little significance.
- History was viewed pessimistically; itâ€™s all going to get worse, so why try to stop it?

Individualism. Sin is seen in personal terms with little attention given to how it manifests in social or economic structures. Salvation, too, was individualised.

Reaction to Social Gospel. The social gospel movement was compromised by the Enlightenment myth of human progress and theologically compromised.

A turning point came in the middle of C20 when some evangelical scholars challenged their own community to recover the holistic dimension of the Gospel (Carl Henry).

The either/or relationship of the early C20 gave way to a both/and view.

- Social activity as a consequence of evangelism.
- Social concern as a bridge too evangelism.
- Social concern and evangelism as equal partners.

Harvie Conn says that we still havenâ€™t fully integrated the two.

If evangelism and social action are equal partners, which is primary. The Lausanne Covenant said that evangelism was primary, though in reality we would rarely have to choose.

The problem is that the split between evangelism and social action is an artificial one emerging from a false dualism. â€œThis forced a choice about which of the two has priority, and that was given to the word because (in keeping with a deeper dualism) the eternal had priority over the temporal.

Wheaton declaration (1983) said that evil exists in the human heart and social structures and must be addressed in both.

Despite the advances, there is still a dualism between sacred and secular at the heart of much evangelicalism.

The Ecumenical Tradition

Three traditions from the social-gospel movement that continue to impact the ecumenical tradition:

- Primarily this-worldly and naturalistic. Salvation equated with well-being brought by Western technological progress.
- Mission was a project of human effort, technique and programmes.
- Sin found entirely in social structures. Salvation becomes a change in society.

In the early C20 social action was charitable acts of mercy, but this morphed into address the underlying causes. The social-gospel movement opened up the eyes of the church to the deep structural dimensions of sin.

The 1928 IMC in Jerusalem gave status to the â€˜comprehensive approachâ€™ which aimed to serve the whole human being in every aspect of life. The root problem is ignorance and underdevelopment which need to be addressed through education and development.

However, the development movement was found wanting. The 1960s, 70s and 80s were designated as development decades by the UN. At the start of the 60s the worldâ€™s poorest were thirty times poorer than the richest, by the end of the 80s they were sixty times poorer!

A shift moved from development to liberation, which is an important theme today.

Recently, the ecumenical movement has started to re-emphasise the need for evangelism.

Bosch suggested that there is a convergence between the ecumenical and evangelical streams. This may be so, especially under the influence of the growing majority world church.

Toward a Solution

â€œThe Church is following Jesus when both words and deeds are recognised as essential dimensions of the mission of kingdom witness. His deeds were powerful demonstrations that the kingdom had dawned and his words announced its arrival. His words explained his deeds, and his

deeds validated his words. But both were rooted in the deeper reality of the kingdom at work in the whole life of the community â€“ a new work of the Spirit in Jesus to renew the world. The mission of the church is to *be* the witness, to *do* the witness and to *say* the witness.â€

AUTHENTIC EVANGELISM

We need to define evangelism.

- It is an essential dimension of mission.
- Cannot be replaced by deeds or presence.
- To abandon evangelism is disobedience.
- It is only one dimension of mission; it is not the whole thing.

Evangelism is a verbal witness to the gospel that invites people to believe and follow Jesus.

Evangelism is the proclamation of the kingdom of God in Jesus.

The theme of the kingdom is gaining more attention, but it still does not function centrally, especially in discussions of evangelism. This lack of a kingdom perspective has a number of effects.

- It truncates the gospel, reducing it to an otherworldly future and individual salvation, profoundly impacting discipleship and the witness of the church.
- We lose the prophetic edge of the kingdom. A reduced gospel allows us to live comfortably with injustice.

The ecumenical tradition has recognised these issues, but they suffer from a different problem in which the kingdom becomes detached from the person of Jesus and is reduced to a social program.

Evangelism must be contextual

There are aspects of accommodation and confrontation. The Gospel must be relevant and it must challenge. To often contextualisation refers simply to the relevance side and ignores the challenge.

The challenge of applying the gospel to a culture without capitulating to the values of the culture is a difficult one and will be addressed in the next chapter.

John uses the familiar Greek concept of *logos* to make his gospel relevant, but the challenge comes when he says that the incarnate Jesus is the origin and source of order in the world.

Evangelism requires that we be present in the lives of people in an attractive way.

We must spend time with people, if we are to share the gospel. Evangelism is not shouting from a distance.

The more that evangelism is relational, the more important it is to adorn it with an attractive approach. Dialogue rather than dogmatic proclamation is important in our context.

The communication of the gospel should be organically connected to everyday life.

It is not about presenting a canned method or a slick sales pitch. The church needs to see the whole scope of the gospel in response to the whole scope of human need and to present it well.

Our evangelistic words must from a community whose life demonstrates the truth of the gospel

Words can be cheap. If we are to say that there is a new power at work in the world through the Spirit, we have to also demonstrate the reality of this in our lives. We have to live in a way which confronts the idolatries of our times.

MERCY AND JUSTICE

Distressing statistics and the churchâ€™s calling

In chapter one we looked at some of the issues regarding social and economic need, but statistics hardly tell the full story of global suffering and injustice

â€œThe Churchâ€™s mission is to participate in Godâ€™s mission to restore the whole creation and all of human life. If the scope of salvation is as broad as creation, our participation must equally broad. The gospel is a gospel of the kingdom â€“ the restoration of Godâ€™s rule over the world. The church is a sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom of God in the worldâ€¦â€

Justice, mercy and the calling of the church.

The relationship between the church and the kingdom can be articulated in three statements:

- The church is the place where the eschatological kingship of God in Jesus Christ becomes

visible.
- The church has to serve the kingdom by proclaiming the message that Jesus is Lord
- The church is engaged in the struggle of Christâ€™s kingdom in this world against the destructive powers of darknessâ€¦

The first priority of the church is to be a model of the justice and mercy of the kingdom in its own life. This is demonstrated in Acts 4.

The church is not on the place of the kingdom, but it is the instrument too. In the early church, Christian and pagan authors alike saw the church as teaching and embodying care for others.

Is todayâ€™s church ready to take on this?

The nature of social action

Two theological pitfalls subvert the true nature of social action.

- Identify the kingdom with history and to see it fully present in the historical process. This leads to uncritical triumphalism.
- Separate the kingdom from history and see it as entirely future. This leads to disengagement.

What can we do to avoid these, knowing that our best actions are a drop in a bucket?

- Our deeds bear the character of witness to the presence and power of the kingdom of God.
- They are an expression of our love for a world caught in the clutches of sin.
    - We offer merciful relief
    - We seek justice
    - We hope for conversion
- We hope that our actions produce more justice in the world: that we bring about transformation.

Social action and the local congregation

If the church is to be the sort of community talked about here, then courageous leadership is called for. Congregations need to be constantly challenged. It is not enough to be seen to be doing good, it must be clear that good deeds flow out of the gospel.

CALLING OF BELIEVERS IN SOCIETY

The importance of the laity in society

All of our callings in life must bear witness to the lordship of Jesus. People need to be trained to live for the kingdom in their daily lives.

Congregations need to find ways to equip and support the laity in their callings.

The problem of dualism

Churches have often left the public square to secular forces. We need to eradicate the secular/sacred dichotomy.

The church is not a passive observer of Godâ€™s work in the world, but is a participant in it. This must involve the lives of all Christians.

There is not distinction between areas of life that interest God and those that donâ€™t. He is interested in all of it.

The importance of the local congregation

The universal church is important, but this does not detract from the local, gathered congregation.

- Local church must be a fellowship which nourishes the life of Christ through word and sacrament.
- Each local fellowship needs a leadership which is equipped to support the laity in their callings.
- The congregation must be a community which supports members in their callings.
- There needs to be structures which will support members in their various callings.

Suffering and spirituality

Faithfulness to Christ will involve suffering and requires a deep spirituality.

Living faithfully to the gospel will involve challenging the orthodoxies of our age and our professions. This can be costly.

This is part of my continuing series making notes onÂ Â Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and IssuesÂ by Mike Goheen.Â If you are finding these notes helpful, a small contribution to the running costs of Kouyanet would not go amiss â€“ or you could get us a book from the list on the right.Â