

TRINITY IN MISSION

REFLECTIONS ON THE *RUNNING ON EMPTY* CONFERENCE 2006

Combined fuel : a whole people need a whole God

Rose Dowsett, OMF mission partner and Vice-Chair of the Missions Commission of the WEA, Global Missiology Task Force, gives a précis of her presentation

Ask most professing evangelicals whether they believe in the Trinity, and they would be likely to say yes. Ask them what that means to them in the ordinary business of daily life, and they are more likely to be rather puzzled and unsure of how to respond. Go one step further, and ask how the doctrine of the Trinity should shape our understanding of what mission is and how we do it, our policy setting as well as our praxis, and many would look at you completely blankly.

One of the great vulnerabilities of the British church, and indeed the global church, is that there is widespread biblical illiteracy, and a disconnect between what we (rather vaguely) claim to believe and the way we actually function in everyday life. We are running on theological empty, still busy, but in grave danger of spluttering to a halt before long. It is not only in Africa that the church is a mile wide but only an inch deep. And this has enormous implications and challenges for those of us in the mission community as well as for the church at large.

The modern mission movement was birthed largely out of the Pietist movement of the C.18th, a wonderful corrective to much of the spiritual barrenness of the time, but so focused on salvation in a rather narrow sense, and so focused on individual response to the gospel, that much of the balancing breadth of biblical revelation was ignored. The basis for mission tended to be limited to a few texts rather than from the whole sweep of Scripture, and in its upholding of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour the fullness of the Godhead was often sidelined. Eager to see people saved, and with life-expectancy brief, most missionaries had neither time nor inclination to invest in deep theological training: that became largely the preserve of non-evangelicals. That has shaped the world church ever since, and still shapes much evangelical understanding and praxis of mission today.

By contrast, the early church focused a great deal of prayerful energy on establishing the doctrine of the Trinity. Where we too often feel that this is much too difficult to begin to talk about with an unbeliever or a young believer, the New Testament and much subsequent writing plunges deep in. They knew that they must show decisively that Jesus was fully God as well as fully human, that the Spirit was fully God, both equally so with the Father, with no hierarchy or subordination. This was fundamental whether they were engaging monotheistic Jews or pluralistic pagans.

It is this Trinitarian God who in all three Persons creates, sustains, reigns, judges – and from the beginning has been a missionary God. Throughout the whole Scripture, not just little bits of the New Testament, the thread of God's missionary heart shines out. And then, the most fundamental truth about human beings is that we are made in the image of the Triune God. This means that it is in the essential DNA of Christians – all of them! – to be missionary people, reflecting the heart of God himself. Mission is not at rock bottom a task to engage in, or a task to be completed, though it clearly involves action; rather, mission is a matter of our authentic being – our true nature - as we carry the image of the missionary God. This means, for instance, that we will be more cautious about creating strategies (however useful they may be as tools), and pay more attention to what God is like, is doing and saying, and seek to align with that.

Further, God brings together in complete integration character and word and deed. He does what he says and says what he does. He does what he is. This is the way in which we find the resolution of the proclamation and social action tension: if we reflect God with faithfulness

we will ensure that word and deed and character are all involved as equally essential elements of authentic mission. If we speak without deeds and character to back it up, the unbelieving world will rightly see a lack of integrity. As James puts it, faith without works is useless. If we engage in good deeds without gospel words of explanation, pointing to God himself, unbelievers will simply see attractive humanitarianism. That is not authentic mission, either. If our words and deeds are not backed up by godly character, unbelievers will see us as hypocrites and despise the message. Much of the world mission movement is still polarised over whether mission is evangelism in the sense of proclamation only, or wholistic (which can sometimes mean everything except proclamation...). Understanding that we are to reflect the wholeness of the Godhead – creator, judge, saviour, sustainer, life-bringer – enables us to see that such polarisations are tragic, and tragically wrong.

Thinking about the Trinity also helps us to find the resolution to another polarisation, the church and agency debate. As the people of God-as-Trinity, we are created to live in relationship, not just as isolated individuals. But wherever a group of believers come together, there is the people of God. We relate in many different configurations, of which local church congregation and mission agency are just two. But in both of those instances, we are still God's people, the ecclesia of called-out ones, an expression of the family of God. No single configuration is exclusive or pre-eminent. A local congregation is church precisely because it is an expression of our communal life. An agency can equally be church, when it too is an expression of communal life under the leadership of the Lord, and manifests the characteristics of committedness and shared life, complementary gifts, and above all the DNA of mission. (Some agencies, of course, are simply 'placing mechanisms', and have few of the characteristics of a family of God's people.)

There are many more ways in which Trinitarian doctrine helps us shape mission in a manner that reflects the character of God. Sadly, too much mission policy and praxis in the last fifty years has been more shaped by the behavioural sciences than by thoughtful theology. Useful as they are as tools, the behavioural sciences are thoroughly secular in their presuppositions, and are very bad masters when it comes to Christian life. Let us work together to recover policies and praxis which flow from God's Word, and from the doctrine revealed in it. Above all, let us recover theology – the study of the Triune God, father, Son and Holy Spirit – as the ground and basis of all that we are and do.

Ignite - The younger leaders' track at the *Running on Empty* Conference

Paul Hopkins, YWAM England Executive Leadership, gives his insights and in particular the plenary session on *Incarnational Leadership*

Tables, familiar faces and candles... possibly all that was missing was the Starbuck's coffee! (though the orange juice and hot drinks did fine!). The previous two sessions had set the tone, relaxed, informal, honest discussion and questions, prompted by thought provoking suggestions from the front... that was Ignite. We were in a session that had the heady title of 'Incarnational Leadership' gently begun with thought provoking guitar-led worship with Andy Flannagan including a meditative powerpoint slideshow. After this, whilst still around the small tables, each group explored the question of their experiences of good and bad examples of incarnational leadership... including their own sense of needing to grow in this area! And that marked out these Ignite sessions; honesty with where we were each at, but in a totally non-threatening environment.

I stood up to speak on the given subject. The aim was to provide a further framework for discussion on how we could be more like Christ in leadership... more incarnational in our approach. I suggested three areas: vulnerability that lead to authenticity, servant leadership and our lives as an example. If Christ was in and working through us as leaders, then His honesty, servant heart and his life would mark us out, rather than a sense of detached professionalism. I spoke of my entry school into YWAM, where the leader started by saying, 'The next six month will be an intense journey into discipleship for us all. And if I am going to lead you into that with authenticity and humility, you need to know where I struggle as a

leader.' That strength that enabled him to be that vulnerable drew me to want to follow him no matter what! Gentle yet intense discussion followed in our groups. Those thoughts and conversations were fed back on to a white board. This was a great way for us to see where we were going with our thoughts and questions as a whole group.

Into this was then added a poignant interview with Nims Obunge by Krish Kandiah. Some powerful thoughts came out of that interview with Nims; 'You can't be who God has not called you to be' and 'Just serve God, it is not about power. Leadership is about setting free the body to do what it was meant to do.'

As the session drew to a close with some reflection time led by Debbie Forster, the feeling was both of challenge yet inspiration to be far more incarnational in all we did, not just our leadership.

So what stood out about these sessions? For me... it was almost impossible to switch off , phase out, or simply fall asleep... whatever you want to call it! The interaction, the snippets of depth of thought, and the change to really engage with the material and the people bringing it made these sessions come alive. You could say they reignited our passion for not simply hearing the word, but doing it.

Excite - the track for those 40 and over, at the *Running on Empty* Conference

Julia Cameron, Head of External Relations at IFES gives her impressions of Kang San Tan's session on Incarnational Leadership

Music played us into the hall; a sail hung at the front; Andy Flannagan and his band led the praise; some sessions included very good Q and A.

Rose Dowsett's paper set the tone on the first evening. Clive Calver brought warm-hearted Bible expositions, illustrating with stories from the cutting edge of mission.

As with Ignite, we too looked at the Incarnation. How good to be taken into Scripture by someone from another culture. Kang-San Tan of OMF is Head of Mission Studies at Redcliffe College. He took us to the early hymn of Philippians 2, to read it not through British or even Jewish eyes, but through Chinese eyes.

Kang-San is from a Buddhist family; his brother was a Buddhist monk. When he became a Christian he burnt all his Buddhist books and no longer visited his father's grave. It took ten years to realise he could put flowers on his father's grave without joining in ancestor worship; he could clean the grave. From then, Christ in him was no longer seen by his family as an alien Christ.

From Romans 8 we saw how the global Church must enter into the groaning of a broken world. We must be willing to learn from former Muslims, Hindus, secularists. A global theology 'needs more than just a few international speakers. It demands listening, yearning, groaning.'

Kang-San urged mission leaders to relinquish the desire to control. Timothy and Epaphroditus risked their lives for the gospel of Christ; by contrast we can exercise power from positions of safety and comfort; we can find ourselves fast-tracked into leadership, and must examine ourselves. Are we truly here to serve? All this was offered in a humble spirit and with a moving tribute to the western missionaries who served so sacrificially in taking the gospel to Asia. 'We owe our life to them,' he said.

What I did I bring back? Three things.

- Friendships renewed and new friends made. Enthusiastic partnership in the gospel is critical if we are to bring healthy mission vision to our national Church.
- A reminder that we are called to be servants, as we follow a servant Christ.
- A desire to see us all take a simple task back to our agencies.

So what was that task? We looked in groups at how to put doctrine into working clothes. Each group took a different clause of the Global Connections basis of faith, asking how it informed our strategy and practice. This led to discussion which was stretching of mind, heart and soul. How stimulating for staff teams in any agency to spend a quiet day reflecting on its doctrinal basis, clause by clause, in this way.

No one will agree with everything said in a gathering like this, and we would doubtless all have done something differently. But overall it was an excellent track. My warm thanks to the planning team and to all the speakers.

Biblical Reflections

Paul Adams, Senior Pastor of Banstead Baptist Church and Chairman of BeaconLight Trust, reflects on the Biblical reflections given at the Running on Empty Conference

I always look for a key that unlocks the theme of a book or conference. For me, the focus point came when I heard Rose Dowsett said, "Theology does not fare well in the community because it does not belong there – nor in the church because it is not wanted there."

Against that background Clive Calver reflected on the Bibles' teaching about the Trinity. We were not starting from scratch in basic theology, but we all need freshening by Biblical truth. Mission flows naturally from the character of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Failure to understand the heart of the triune God is to reduce mission to procedures and processes.

When was the last time that you had more than two hours to reflect on the significance of the Trinity in relation to your work in mission? Perhaps we too easily presume our theology, rather than letting it refresh and shape our relationship with the God who modelled mission for us.

"The Father who adopts a people" was Clive's title to lead us to the covenant making God. This Father is exclusive and holy, yet extraordinarily active; but His activity towards us is never left unexplained in His Word. In the same way, Clive said, our social action without the explanation of the Gospel may be little more than sanctified humanism. Of course we knew it, but it was important for us to ponder - as we give ourselves, surrender our weapons, become blood brothers through the cutting of the covenant, take on a new name and honour the scar, agree the terms in a memorial meal and signify this by a bloodstained tree!

"The Son of God who redeems a people" was not simply the messenger, He was the message. This message was communicated with miracles, parables and deliverance until its essence was impaled on a cross in love. The servant nature of the Son provides the essential model for every missionary; even though Jesus was the ultimate example of the prophets, priests and kings.

When Clive spoke about "The Spirit who releases a people", he described the hidden Partner who does not bear witness to Himself but is sent by the Father - only to say what He hears, only to glorify Christ so that He might make men to be fruit bearers. Without Him there is no witness, no understanding, no worship, no gifts, no power, no guidance, no security, no evidence of the presence of God, no life, no future and no resurrection. Without Him we have no power to obey or to be uniquely commissioned for mission. How we need Him!

And not just us. Elijah's cloak handed to Elisha typifies the generational transfer of ministry. How many Elijahs walk off the set before the Elishas are fully ready to shoulder their responsibilities before the Lord? As the Father commissioned the Son who commissioned the apostles, and as the Spirit commissioned the church – none were left to do it alone; they stayed to be alongside.

The need for new mission leadership to experience 'parenting' without patronising, and modelling without manipulation, is as great now as ever. Perhaps it is the hardest of all spiritual tasks for elder statesmen to give. But it is so needed if we are to encourage mission to stay rooted firmly in the Trinitarian Gospel; least the kiss of novelty becomes the seduction of heresy.
