

WHAT IS MISSION? AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE.

Introduction

It seems ironic that we are today debating this topic when the Church of Jesus Christ has been engaged in Mission for nearly 2000 years. However as any student of Christian history will appreciate the way in which different sections of the Church have engaged in mission through the centuries has differed widely. Why should we engage with a question like this when the Biblical evidence has not changed?

I suggest that David Bosch provides a valuable clue to answer this question in his magisterial study, "Transforming Mission – paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission", (1991) (1) where he writes the following:-

"The Christian Church in general and the Christian mission in particular are today confronted with issues they have never even dreamt of and which are crying out for responses that are both relevant to the times and in harmony with the essence of the Christian faith". He then lists seven factors:-

1. The west has lost its dominant position in the world.
2. Unjust structures of oppression and exploitation are today challenged as never before in human history.
3. There is a profound feeling of ambiguity about Western technology and development. Progress, the god of the Enlightenment, proved to be a false god after all.
4. We live in a shrinking world with only finite resources.
5. Today we are able to both kill the earth and also wipe out humankind.
6. Theologies developed in Europe can claim no superiority over theologies emerging in other parts of the world.
7. Christians are being forced to re-evaluate their attitude toward and their understanding of other faiths.

He goes on to say, "We live in a world fundamentally different from that of the nineteenth century, let alone earlier times". He then goes on to outline six different paradigms of mission starting with primitive Christianity recorded in the New Testament and ending with what he calls the ecumenical era. He wrote this in 1991 which is 13 years ago. We are now well into the 21st. Century and on the wrong side of the 9/11 phenomenon and all that flows from those events.

Mission as God's mission

For evangelicals the starting place for Mission is found in God Himself as revealed in Holy Scripture. God is the author and prime-mover in Mission. He calls us to engage with him in his mission to planet earth. The Bible provides both the record of God's involvement in our universe as well as the supreme revelation in His Son, Our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. It also demonstrates how God has been engaged in mission from before time began and has continued throughout the history of the human race. As John Stott puts it " The primal mission is God's, for it is he who sent his prophets, his Son and his Spirit". (2) The triune God sends the Church into the world to share the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Mission as evangelism

For many evangelicals in the past mission has been largely based on the Great Commission of Jesus given in different locations on various occasions between his resurrection and

ascension. The emphasis that had been deduced from those passages at the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts chapter is largely concentrated on the proclamation of the good news of salvation and the making of disciples. Evangelism in its many forms is thus promoted so that men and women, boys and girls are encouraged to make a commitment to Christ and join a local Church. Christian discipleship is seen as a development of the faith as it touches every aspect of the life of a believer in Jesus Christ. Where there are no churches a church-planting initiative is established to ensure that believers are taught and nurtured in their faith.

Often evangelicals have also been at the forefront of translating and supplying the Scriptures that are so crucial for a true understanding of the Gospel in the different languages of the world.

How evangelism relates to mission is still under debate. Andrew Kirk has written that "there is no consensus yet among people from different Christian traditions about the relation of evangelism to mission". (3) At a recent mission consultation in the UK hosted by Global Connections and the Evangelical Alliance a debate was held on the motion – "This house believes that sending full stomachs to hell is pointless". The motion was defeated by a substantial majority but at least a significant percentage voted in favour of the motion. The issue of the relationship of humanitarian aid and social action to evangelism still has not been fully resolved among evangelicals.

Mission as more than just evangelism

David Bebbington, the historian, has helpfully identified four hallmarks of evangelicalism. The first he calls Biblicism, the second Conversionism, the third Activism and the fourth Crucicentrism. (4) All these would still be true of evangelical mission at the start of the 21st. Century. The last of these four hallmarks is of particular importance, not only in the central doctrine of the Cross of Christ as the way by which atonement for sin is accomplished but also in the pattern for mission by those who follow in the footsteps of the Saviour. Mission in Christ's way includes an acceptance of suffering for the sake of Christ. Also mission through weakness is increasingly seen as the norm rather than mission from a position of power.

Over the past thirty years there has also been a renewed emphasis among evangelicals of the social implications of mission. This is not a new emphasis as evangelicals provided leadership to the social dimension of evangelism and mission during the Evangelical Revivals of the 18th. And 19th. Centuries. However, at the end of the 19th Century there was a loss of involvement by evangelicals in social issues because of a fear that "the social gospel" was undermining evangelism. The social gospel was a view promoted by those of a liberal theological persuasion. A retreat into pietism led to a disengagement with social action as a valid part of mission by evangelicals for several decades. However there were many Evangelicals still engaged around the world with works of compassion and service as a vital part of their mission to the world. This was less obvious in the practice of evangelical churches of the UK and USA.

In 1974 the Lausanne Congress was challenged by two-thirds world theologians like Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar to include a strong commitment to social action as a vital aspect of mission. Even so the Lausanne Covenant still spoke of "the priority of evangelism". (5) Since then evangelicals have been increasingly grappling with the complexity of the world situation and are engaging with it in meaningful ways. A recent book by Andrew Kirk entitled "What is Mission: Theological Explorations" (6) is an excellent example of evangelicals engaging with a broad agenda. He includes an examination of issues such as

justice for the poor, overcoming violence and building peace as well as care for the environment in his list of aspects of mission.

Options for mission

This has led to an examination of the breadth of options for mission. The following chart provides a spectrum of positions. This was developed by Padilla and Escobar to illustrate a variety of positions on mission held by different sections of the Church. (7) They would argue for "Integral Mission" as the most Biblical position.

1 Proclamation Only	2 Traditional Evangelical	3 Pragmatic Evangelical	4 Integral Mission	5 Pragmatic Ecumenical	6 Traditional Ecumenical	7 Liberation Theology
Doing good is a distraction (therefore, a sin) from our call to preach the gospel.	Social programmes are acceptable as long as they don't take evangelism resources.	Social programmes are a good strategy for evangelism (a means to an end).	We do good because we are Christians – no distinction made between compassion & proclamation	It is ok to preach the gospel but only if you have a chance (no intentionality)	Doing good is our preaching. Don't use ministry resources to "proclaim".	Preaching the gospel is via transforming the unjust structures of society.

The closer you are to one extreme, the more difficult it is to see good in the other extreme. To some extent this can be influenced by how operational or non-operational an organisation is.

Integral Mission

Integral Mission incorporates a range of activities that are seen as addressing the whole person in community, which also has global significance. Its emphasis is upon integrating our approach to the world, its communities and its people and sharing good news and being good news that has the Gospel at its heart. The Micah Network defines it as "the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel....In integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as well 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. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God, which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task."

One word that is often used to bring these different components together is the word "Transformation". This includes the personal, family, community, national, global and cosmic dimensions. None are excluded and all are inter-related. The book edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden entitled "Mission as Transformation – a theology for the whole Gospel" expands this dimension well. (8)

The growth of evangelical relief and development agencies like Tearfund has contributed to this development to uphold integral mission as the best overview of Biblical mission. They are also increasingly taking an advocacy role as they seek to interact with a complex world. Recently the establishment of "The Micah Network" (9) with over 200 member organisations across the world is a further illustration of this. Tearfund UK were deeply involved in the establishment of that network. Their commitment is to unite "word, deed and character" and to ensure that "justice, mercy and faithful obedience to God" are kept together in line with Micah 6 v. 8. From this is developing the Micah Challenge that is a partnership between the World Evangelical Alliance and the Micah Network that is a global evangelical campaign to mobilise Christians against poverty.

Part of the reason for this development was a recovery by evangelicals of the theology of the "Kingdom of God" in Scripture. Some evangelicals had so elevated the personal need of

salvation and the planting of churches that they had overlooked the central teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God. This recovery also contributed to a recognition that mission is much broader than the individual or even their church affiliation. The whole world is to be seen as the concern of the Creator and thus of those who follow him. Others from Charismatic or Pentecostal circles have gone further and brought together “Words, works and wonders” under one banner.

A recent book by Peskett and Ramachandra entitled “The message of mission” (10) provides a valuable study of fifteen passages in the Old and New Testament that clearly demonstrate how Evangelicals are thinking broadly, deeply and biblically about mission. Ramachandra writes– “If ethics is the Achilles heel of late-modern secular culture, then the ethical becomes the site of gospel proclamation. To champion human rights in global and local contexts, and to argue that such respect for human dignity only makes sense within a biblical world-view is to bring political action and evangelical proclamation into powerful harmony”.

Overview of topics on mission in recent years

One way of examining how evangelicals have defined mission in the past few years is to observe the titles of the annual conferences of Global Connections (previously called The Evangelical Missionary Alliance) of the UK over the past twenty years or so. They will demonstrate the breadth of engagement by evangelicals on a wide range of topics:-

- The continuing call to mission.
- Reaching unreached peoples.
- The local church and world mission.
- Training for mission.
- The development of Emerging Missions and their challenge to western-based missions.
- Christ and the city.
- The changing role of Britain in World Mission.
- I believe....therefore I go.
- The Media and the message.
- The Holy Spirit and Mission.
- Cooperation – Creative relationships in Mission.
- Incomes and Outcomes.
- Equal Opportunities – the Bible, Gender and Mission.
- The battle belongs to the Lord.
- Mission in an exploding world – Discipling a new generation.
- Demolishing walls – Building bridges. Reconciliation and conflict resolution in a world of tension.
- The use and abuse of the Bible in mission.
- Living in the light of the future. Eschatology and mission.
- Transforming leadership.
- One world....or else! Globalisation and mission.
- Survive or thrive? Is there a future for the mission agency.
- Global Interface: engaging together with changes in the world, the church and mission.

In addition the forums of Global Connections are wrestling with issues such as Human Rights and their impact on Christian development; the challenge of ministry to those affected by the pandemic of HIV/AIDS; the care and retention of missionaries; and many other practical topics that affect the way we do mission in the first part of the 21st. Century.

This kind of list could be replicated by an examination of other national mission movements in different parts of Europe and beyond demonstrating the breadth of engagement in mission by Evangelicals at this time.

Evangelicals engaged in mission globally

Over the past fifteen years the WEA Missions Commission has been instrumental in encouraging Christians involved in the global evangelical missionary movement to become “reflective practitioners” in mission. Dr. Bill Taylor, its Director, has done much to facilitate this movement as it has grown around the world to become a truly global movement involving missionaries not only from western countries but also from the two-thirds world. Countries from Korea to Brazil; the Ukraine to Nigeria; South Africa to the South Pacific; and most recently from China with its “back to Jerusalem” movement are engaged in evangelical mission with great passion and commitment. The compendium entitled “Globalized Missiology for the 21st. century” gives an excellent overview of evangelical mission today. (11)

Two recent studies about attrition and retention in the global missionary force has revealed a growing movement that includes mission to the diaspora of many nationalities but also cross-cultural mission to many parts of the world including many western nations. “Mission from everywhere to everywhere” is becoming a reality and Evangelicals are seeking to be God’s co-workers in his mission to our needy world.

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- (1) Transforming Mission. David J.Bosch. Orbis Books. 1991.
- (2) Christian Mission in the Modern World. John R.W.Stott. Falcon. 1975
- (3) What is mission? Theological Explorations. Andrew Kirk, Darton Longman and Todd.1999
- (4) Evangelicals in Modern Britain. David Bebbington. IVP.
- (5) Let the earth hear his voice. Ed. J.D.Douglas. World Wide Publications. 1975
- (6) Andrew Kirk – see No. 3.
- (7) Padilla and Escobar paper available from Tearfund UK.
- (8) Mission as Transformation. Editors – Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden. Regnum.
- (9) www.micahnetwork.org
- (10) The Message of Mission. Howard Peskett & Vinoth Ramachandra. IVP.2003.
- (11) Globalised Missiology for the 21st century. Editor. William Taylor. William Carey Library. 1999.