

Combined Fuel – a whole people need a whole God

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Introduction

Let me start with a couple of disclaimers. First, what I am going to say represents personal views only. Don't blame OMF for things I say that you don't agree with! Second, I make no attempt to establish a biblical case for the Trinity: that is what our Bible Readings with Clive are to do. So, in this paper I am assuming it, and exploring some of the significance for our particular sphere as mission and church leaders.

What are we trying to do?

(1) To re-connect mission praxis/practice and biblical theology rather than being shaped, however subconsciously, by secular values on the one hand or superficial biblical selectiveness on the other.

(2) To consider why and how evangelical mission has become theologically superficial, with what consequences.

(3) To look at how the doctrine of the Trinity should impact our understanding of what mission is and therefore our policy-making and strategy.

(4) As a result, to examine what we do and consider where we need to make changes – and what they should be.

The crisis of our shallowness

The title of our conference is 'Running on empty'. When the needle hits the red zone on the petrol indicator in your car, you know you have a while longer before you grind to a halt. Even so, you ignore it at your peril. You are driving on borrowed time, as it were, and if you don't fill up soon you will simply stop.

In the same way, we can make a strong case for saying that the western church, including evangelicals, and much of the global church, is running on theological empty. The mission community is caught up in that, and indeed in some cases it can be argued that our theological shallowness has directly created the same grave problems in churches around the world. We have carried an infected, and defective, gospel. The full implications of that may be masked by there still being some residual petrol in the tank, but in many places the needle is already on the red zone, as it were.

Listen to two observers on the crisis as they see it:

David Wells in 'No Place for Truth': p 190

'It is in thinking about the people of God, the church, that we encounter a perplexing reality. Theology is to be written for them but now it seems quite evident that the church is no longer the audience it once was. Indeed, it would be true to say that the level of receptivity in the church is often no higher than it is in the culture, although the reasons are quite different. Theology does not fare well in the culture because it is not believed; it does not fare well in the church because it is not wanted'.

Os Guinness (CIM MK!) in 'No God but God': p 18

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‘Contemporary evangelicals are no longer people of truth. Only rarely are they serious about theology. Both problems are a tragedy beyond belief. A solid sense of truth is foundering in America at large. Vaporised by critical theories, obscured by clouds of euphemism and jargon, outpaced by rumour and hype, overlooked for style and image, and eroded by advertising, truth in America is anything but marching on. With magnificent exceptions, evangelicals reflect this truth-decay and reinforce it for their own variety of reasons for discounting theology. Repelled by ‘seminary theology’ that is specialised, professionalised, and dry, evangelicals are attracted by movements that have replaced theology with emphases that are relational, therapeutic, charismatic, and managerial (as in church growth). Whatever their virtues, none of these emphases gives truth and theology the place they require in the life and thought of a true disciple’.

Perhaps you think this is a rather harsh analysis. Certainly you could argue that these are generalisations, and only tell part of the story. Maybe. But think for a moment about what the average Christian bookshop sells most; how much theological discussion happens round your dinner table; the most popular seminars at conferences..... We are today part of a culture that too often treats religious faith as a leisure choice, for which relaxation rather than hard work is on the agenda.

If theology is quite literally the study of the nature and wisdom of God, what could possibly be more fundamental to authentic discipleship? And what could be more crucial in the practice of mission, and in the responsibilities of mission leadership, than being aligned with the truth about God – not just in a schizophrenic way where we pay lip service to a doctrinal basis, but then operate in practice as if it wasn’t really there; but constantly measuring up what we are and do against God’s word, and constantly scouring it for the truth and the principles by which to shape what our organisations look like, how decisions are made, what we do.

Let me illustrate, in headline form only, some of the consequences of ignoring theology and de-centring or side-lining God – that is, the Triune God as revealed in Scripture, made known to us by revelation not by reason:

Ecclesiology with God de-centred becomes sociology
Pluralism with God de-centred becomes idolatry
Contextualisation with God de-centred becomes anthropology
Hermeneutics with God de-centred becomes sectionalism/vested interests (e.g. radical feminism), or philosophy
History with God de-centred becomes Marxism or existentialism
Strategy with God de-centred becomes behaviourism
Postmodernism with God de-centred becomes anarchy

It is not that things like sociology and anthropology and philosophy have no value at all. Far from it. But the profoundest realities about the church are not found in sociological analysis or description. Anthropology does not take into account the fundamental truth about human beings, that we are made by a personal Creator, in his image, and for community relationships designed by the living God. And so on.

The argument, of course, is that these things are objective, and therefore trustworthy. But this is a false understanding of what objectivity truly is. True objectivity is living within and operating from a biblical framework, not from a secular framework. In this sense, objectivity is paradoxically committed. Whatever they say, and contrary to their admission,

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so is the so-called objectivity of the secularists and humanists. But the importance of biblical objectivity is that it relates to true truth in a way that secular frameworks do not and cannot. It highlights the priority of revelation over reason. Please note, I am emphatically not calling for anti-intellectualism. Absolutely to the contrary. But I do want to emphasise that as we pursue our calling with full intellectual vigour – and rigour – it must be within a sustained and disciplined habit of constantly scrutinising our assumptions, our decisions, our policy and praxis, in the searchlight of Scripture.

The alternative is that we accommodate, consciously or unconsciously, to secularism. But accommodation to secularism makes the gospel itself, and thus the very *raison d'être* of mission, both implausible and lacking in credibility. On the contrary, we need most urgently to recapture with bold humility and without apology the glorious truths which are to shape us, including how we lead our agencies and do whatever it is our agency does.

God himself must be at the heart of every part of our worldview – our beliefs, our values, our goals, our methods. Without that, there is no deep worldview change. And without deep worldview change, within a generation or two there is no transmission of the gospel.

In 1980, at the opening of the Billy Graham Centre at Wheaton, a Lebanese diplomat, scholar and Eastern Orthodox believer, Charles Malik, said:
'The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds. If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world. Indeed it may turn out that you have actually lost the world'.

And it is arguable that much of the world church is, as the saying goes, a mile wide and an inch deep. Geographical expansion has not always been accompanied by matching depth and stability. And a shallow church, as we have seen so painfully in Europe, is a vulnerable church. The same pattern is alarmingly apparent on every continent.

Latourette famously dubbed the C.19th 'The Great Century' as a century of unprecedented spread of the Christian faith and of the church. In those terms, the C.20th could be called 'The Even Greater Century'. But it may be more accurate to call it 'The Ambiguous Century'. To be sure, there were great territorial gains – but there were also losses. On the one hand, there was power, including imperial power (and its abuse) sometimes sheltering the church – but there was also great weakness and suffering; and there was new life – but often shallowness.

Some reflections on the history of the modern mission movement

The modern missionary movement, of which we are still a part, was birthed largely out of the Pietist movement of the C.18th. In rather simplistic terms, this movement rightly emphasised personal devotion and piety, and the importance of personal salvation, but was less attentive to a breadth of belief, a full spectrum of theology, continuity with the church down through the centuries, and the communal and wholistic nature of the gospel. Before you protest, yes, there have always been glorious exceptions, and much C.19th mission (including that of my own mission, then the China Inland Mission) was in fact wonderfully wholistic! But there was a strong reaction against the rationalism, deism and humanism that increasingly infected Europe and North America, and against growing liberalism in the church, and as often happens in such a time of reaction there were some important babies thrown out with the proverbial bathwater over successive decades.

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The upshot was that emerging evangelicalism, and for our topic especially emerging evangelical mission, most commonly displayed great devotion and energy, conspicuous activism, but rather few thinkers and missionary theologians (again with some glorious exceptions!), and the basis for mission tended to be limited to a small number of biblical texts. Also, partly as a reaction to Unitarianism, it tended to be strongly Christological, but rarely fully Trinitarian.

Further, much C.19th and then C.20th mission came to be modelled on revivalism, without due attention to the vastly different context in which the preaching of the gospel was being done. That is, revivalism arose in the context of Christendom, where a great deal of Christian belief and practice was at least vaguely known and where the majority of the population had some contact with the church if only at birth, marriage and death. But revivalism transferred to the world beyond Christendom meant little engagement with worldview, and a disastrous scrambling of gospel with western culture. It focused on individuals rather than communities or even families. While there was a commendable emphasis upon the need to respond to the person of Christ, and clarity about the facts of the Cross and Resurrection, and the reality of sin, there was rather little attention to the wholeness of the Trinity.

I do not wish to be hyper-critical, because I salute and admire the dedication with which many of our missionary forebears lived out their love for the Lord Jesus. Further, I recognise that when life expectancy was often extremely limited, there was understandable urgency to focus on getting people to make professions of faith, however little the converts may have understood, and however little the missionary may have grasped about their context beyond the superficial.

Nonetheless, revivalism had little concern for communality, little appreciation of tradition and Christian history, little emphasis on 'a long obedience in the same direction', and led step by step to an almost total focus on individual, immediate conversion and profession of faith, and some impatience with intellectual stretching. As a result, serious theology became mostly the preserve of non-evangelicals (which left it wide open to becoming theoretical and detached from Christian discipleship, and indeed in turn detached from Scripture), and mission became depleted and truncated. One of the great ironies – and tragedies – of the landmark 1910 Edinburgh missionary conference was that one of the ground-rules was that there should be no discussion of theology: it was considered that theology could only be divisive (which sadly has an element of truth in it), and that the cause of world mission could be addressed without it (which is mind-blowing in what it reveals). Whatever their real feelings about that, evangelicals were complicit in it, which should make us pause as we think about our present context.

The ecumenical movement that later flowed from that 1910 conference, in the form of the International Missionary Council and then the World Council of Churches, over the decades has chosen to address mission through a series of grids. If I were a little uncharitable, I might call them changing fashions. So we have had Christology as the centre of mission theology, then John Hick famously maintained that mission must be theocentric (thus neatly divorcing mission from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ensuring that 'god' could mean almost anything, and thus ensuring that all religions are of equal validity). Later, at Canberra came the move to being pneumatocentric – Spirit centred – or maybe that should be spirit-centred with a small 's', since the conference began with Aboriginal Australians calling up their spirits. At different points, mission has

been perceived as ecclesiocentric – church-centred; Kingdom centred (sometimes entirely detached from the King); reconciliation centred.....and so on.

Before we quietly congratulate ourselves that of course we evangelicals would not get so far adrift, we need a little sobering self-examination. Rather few of our churches, and perhaps rather less of our mission praxis than we might be comfortable owning up to, demonstrate balanced fully Trinitarian reality. Many evangelical churches live with one person of the Trinity dominant, and the other two in the background. In my view, this has significantly contributed to the failure of large swathes of British evangelicalism being authentically missional. Also, the spectrum of those who call themselves evangelical in the UK has now become so wide and the constituent elements so diverse, that it is hard to know exactly what the term now means. It is decidedly fuzzy.

Further from around the mid C.20th onwards, two major influences have complicated the scene. First, in many evangelical mission circles the behavioural sciences increasingly took over, with a strong emphasis on anthropology, methods and strategies, and a focus on measurable results. Useful though some of these things are as tools, they are very dubious masters, especially when they rather than biblical missiology determine what we do and how we do it. They also produce an endless stream of fashions – Unreached People Groups, 10/40 Window, AD 2000, Homogeneous Unit Principle, and many more. The most recent fad I am urged by a North American colleague that I cannot possibly function without buying into is 'power distance'. Well, well, well..... Secondly, the charismatic movement, which brought with it some great blessings, nonetheless produced amongst many evangelicals a functional dualism, where subjective experience may have little to do with objective truth. In today's increasingly postmodern culture, here in Britain at least, this has critical consequences for church and mission. There is a widespread interest in spirituality, but even among professing Christians that may be divorced in fact if not in intention from the-God-who-is-there. It may have more to do with contemporary post-Enlightenment preoccupation with self and self-fulfilment than with the objective reality of the Triune God.

Some lessons from the early Church

One of the reasons we shy away from Trinitarian truth is that we find it so difficult to get our minds round what is a unique category without any parallels. I know people use analogies such as water, steam and ice, but at the end of the day we simply have to face up to the fact that a very great deal about the Trinity is beyond our limited comprehension. Further, it is often argued that getting into discussions about the Trinity only confuses people and puts them off; or, in the case of Muslims in particular, is so offensive that it's better not to raise it.

It is then very instructive to see what the early church did. Far from running away from such a huge issue, much of the New Testament revolves precisely around establishing the divine identity of the Son and Spirit alongside the Father. If the Son is not fully God eternally as well as fully human in his earthly incarnation, then there can be no atonement, the cross is simply another regrettable but common death among many, and the resurrection is empty nonsense. If the Spirit is not fully God, then there is no possibility of new life being created out of old life, no 'God with us' in the here and now.

The early church outraged the Jews precisely because of the claims relating to Jesus and to the Spirit, and challenged the pagan, pluralist gentile world on the same Trinitarian grounds – even if the 'way in' to building bridges for the sharing of the gospel was

sometimes variable and contextualised. It was for this reason also that the early councils of the church revolved around clarifying the doctrine of the Trinity: it was not an embarrassing complication, to be owned up to only when necessary; it was the bedrock of the gospel. Without establishing the identity of Jesus and of the Spirit as fully divine, and without insisting then that the Godhead comprised three equal persons in unity, however mysterious and difficult to grasp that might be – without establishing that, there was nothing significant to say about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, in a world full of competing claims about deities and spirits.

For example, I think it is highly significant that one of the densest, most complex Christological passages in the New Testament is in Colossians 1. Here is a little church drawn from monotheistic former Jews, and pluralist pagans, either of whom would have considerable difficulty in wrapping their heads around Trinitarian truth, and Paul wades in quite unapologetically with the profoundest of statements about the eternal, divine nature and work of Jesus Christ, and interweaves Father, Son and Spirit, each as God.

As it was for the early church, so it is for us. As we confront an astonishing array of religions, beliefs and philosophies, the truth of the Trinity is not something to graduate to but something central to the gospel. Whether we live and work among Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus, or pagans and secularists or anyone else, we must be able to hold out Christ as one person within the eternal and triune God. The early church and the Fathers poured out a great deal of energy resisting theories of hierarchy and subordination, with Christ as a lesser Being, and the Spirit lower down still. This was not silly nit-picking. They knew absolutely that to concede would be a total betrayal of the gospel, and quickly reduce the church to yet another variant of pagan religion. It was as crucial as that.

With the collapse of Christendom, and with the captivity of so much of the world to untruth, we need most urgently to grasp once again this foundation of all Christian revelation. If we were bolder in this, our witness would be more faithful and more incisive.

The Triune God as the missionary God

A proper grasp of God as Trinity is a wonderfully liberating and illuminating way to see that God has always been, and always will be till the end of time, a missionary God. From the very beginning of Genesis, where God creates a universe and a world for his delight and for communion with himself, God reveals his plurality of personhood. As he creates human beings, even more fundamental than distinctions of gender, male and female, is the fact that alone of all creation people are made in his image. We will come back to that in a moment, because it is of the greatest importance that we grasp that we are made in the image of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are created to reflect, as in a mirror, the character, the being, the doing, the speaking of the triune God. It is for this that we are placed in the world, and our mission – our sent-ness – must capture this.

By Genesis 3, with that first cataclysmic sin of Adam and Eve, we see the missionary heart of God at work as he comes looking for them. From there till Revelation, the whole Scripture reveals the living God whose consistent longing is for men and women to be drawn back into fellowship with himself, and for our image-ness to be restored. I think we are beginning to recover the truth that mission is not an add-on, it doesn't start with the New Testament, it doesn't depend on a few verses here and there, it is the testimony of the whole of Scripture. Moreover, the most basic reason of all for our engagement in mission lies precisely in our being made in the image of God. It is not fundamentally a

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task to be completed – or even a task to be undertaken – so much as intrinsic to our DNA as image bearers of the God who is missionary in all three persons of his being.

It is important to grasp the significance of this. Because if we think of mission as primarily a task to be undertaken, then of course we will focus on strategies and timetables. And yes, there is a task – but it is the outworking of something prior, something more fundamental – our very identity as human beings made in God's image. It is what and who we are, not just what we do. Our eyes are on God-as-Trinity, engaged in mission from the beginning of time to its consummation, reaching and sending in order to reconcile the world to himself. When we understand it this way, we are more cautious about our strategies and planning, because we need to align with the essence of God, not simply reason out how we think we will reach the world in the shortest possible time.

Further, it is this that is the key to that hoary old chestnut – is evangelism or social action (or today we might add environmental concerns) the most important issue in mission? For, if we are made in the image of God, who is creator, sustainer, judge, life-bringer, as well as Saviour, then that is the wholeness of God that we are to reflect. God brings together in perfect harmony and integration his character (what he is like), his deeds (what he does, his activity), and his words (what he says). In God, we do not have character divorced from action and word/explanation; we do not have action divorced from character and word; we do not have word divorced from character and action. The whole of Scripture bears witness to these three coming together, each illuminating the others. So it seems to me a pointless, indeed a God dishonouring, discussion to argue about the primacy of evangelism and proclamation on the one hand, or social action and concerns about addressing poverty or injustice or whatever on the other. The fact is that thoroughly biblical wholistic mission is not an option but a necessity; and moreover it is only wholistic when it brings together character, word and deed. So, if we are to reflect the creator, we will include in our wholism both a concern for the creation, and also be creative. If we are to reflect the Saviour, we will live and speak and act in such a way as to point to the Cross, Resurrection and ascension of Jesus but also embody sacrifice for others, a relinquishing of violence and earthly power. You can follow that through for all the other attributes and qualities of God. We will ask ourselves whether what we are and do and say, individually and communally, is a visual aid of the missionary God.

And yes, it will be both individually and communally. For though there is differentiation between the persons of the Trinity, there is also inseparable community. And that's part of our image-ness, too. There is no place for the totally independent lone-ranger here. As members of the Body of Christ, we are bound up with one another. I will return to that in a moment.

But first I want to make a further comment on wholism. When you look at the different agencies represented here, we have many different emphases and preoccupations. We could easily get into arguments about whether those focusing on evangelism and church planting and reaching unreached people groups are somehow more truly mission agents; or whether those involved in relief and development are the ones really doing the business today; or whether you are a Lausanne person, or an Ethne person, or a WEA Mission Commission person, or a whatever it is that AD2000 has become person. And make no mistake, the things that keep these groups apart revolve precisely around disagreements about what is most truly mission.

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So I want to appeal to you all, wherever you stand on this, we all need to take a long hard look at whether what we do, what we stand for, the way we do what we do, truly reflects the wholeness of God. If you are into evangelism and church planting, then let me challenge you: do you bring authenticity and biblical faithfulness by also rolling up your sleeves in getting involved in the whole bundle of life, caring about poverty and injustice and environment - and let it be said, wealth and work and privilege as well? If you don't you are betraying the Trinity. If you reckon you are into wholistic mission, then let me challenge you: are you as deeply committed to communicating in words – explaining clearly – the motivation for your medical care, your education, your forestry, your business as mission, or whatever, as you are to exercising compassion? Because if you aren't, the people you serve will not deduce the gospel, only some kind of western humanism, probably with some kind of ulterior motive..... and you will have betrayed the Trinity. And by the way, this kind of wholistic engagement with a community requires the investment of long-term service as the norm: how else can you even begin to understand people different from yourself, their language, their worldview, their culture, their heart-concerns? We have been seduced by our impatient culture to want to do everything in a short time, to take short cuts, to do something short-term before moving on to the next thing. That inevitably breeds superficiality, and that in turn does great damage in the long term whatever the advantages may seem to be in the short term.

Many of you have the opportunity to speak in churches; some of you may be regular preachers or church leaders. Do you reinforce the long-held heresy that mission is only to be found in a few verses here and there, and so – thank goodness! – it's an optional extra for those with an extra bump on their heads? Or do you show from all over the Scripture that God is a missionary God, and that we who are made in his image must be missionary people, too, even though the where and the how may differ from person to person? Don't fall into the trap, or let your people on deputation and home leave fall into the trap, of repeating over and over a few well-worn so-called missionary addresses. Embrace gladly the discipline of teaching almost anywhere from the word of God and unveiling the missionary heart of God.

And let's think again about the community of the Trinity: difference, but loving unity, interdependent relationship, one eternal goal. Should this not give us pause when we get into arguments about the relationship between churches and agencies? Over the years, I have listened to many debates about modalities and sodalities, and conclude that most of it is a load of nonsense. It is a mistake to identify the church exclusively with a local congregation. That is one, and only one, configuration of the church. The church, the ecclesia, is the called-out people of God, the Body of Christ. Pentecost marks the birth of the church, with continuity but also distinctness from the Old Testament people of God. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in the birth of the church. Immediately, there are the households and the crowds, the residents and the visitors, those who had been with Jesus for several years and the newcomers, some of whom may never have so much as set eyes upon him. You shake a kaleidoscope, and the pieces fall into different patterns, but the constituent parts are the same. Whether the believers met in twos or threes, or in a vast crowd, whether they were in a home or at the Temple, whether the Apostles happened to be along or not, they were still church. They were part of the Body of Christ, brought alive by the Spirit. The emphasis is on organism, not institution. It was only later that the church became institutionalised, and the organisation, hierarchy and structure, became more important than the essential life of the organism.

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The Reformers did not disentangle themselves from the long-held assumptions of Christendom, in which a particular structure and line of command tracking back to people in control at the top of the hierarchy was the accepted way of organising people, including in the church. This reflected the way society as a whole was organised. But the inescapable logic of the priesthood of all believers, and of the ultimate authority of the Word not a Pope or Pope substitute, is a much flatter structure from which hierarchy is excluded and complementarity is the model. Such indeed is the pattern of the Trinity, in whose image we are.

Structure and organisation are important for their role in keeping multiple human beings in step with each other, but they are not in and of themselves the purpose and goal, simply a means to facilitate a purpose. In the same way, our bodies need skeletons, but the point at which the skeleton becomes the main focus of attention is probably when we are dead. Our skeletons are part of our bodies, but they are not any more our bodies than our flesh, our organs, our blood.

In the same way, local congregations may be the most common and familiar configuration of church that we experience, and clearly the Lord intends us to be part of committed local communities. But a mission agency can equally be a manifestation of church, equally a community of people committed to reflecting together the dynamic life of God-who-is-Trinity, in so far as its members are bound together in meaningful life and service, with God at the heart, and mutually enriching one another through complementary giftings.

Rather than arguing about whether church, meaning local congregation, or mission agency, is the rightful instrument through which mission happens, it is surely more profitable to accept that Christians link together in a variety of ways in different situations, and that wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, there is the church. Moreover, whether in local congregation or in agency, the essential mark of authentic Christian life is imaging God, including his missionary heart. So, let's celebrate unity in diversity and seek to work in harmony and partnership in common purpose and for mutual good. We are designed for interwoven community within the one Body. Let's live it.

The providence of God

One of the ways in which a properly Trinitarian theology transforms our thinking is that it brings to the forefront the providence and sovereignty of God – in individual lives, for the church universal and local, and for the world beyond the people of God. I am not talking about fatalism, or absence of free-will, both of which are caricatures of divine providence. I am talking about the fact that God sustains the whole cosmos, and loves it; that he gives rain alike to the just and the unjust; that the life-bringing Spirit is at work in people long before we encounter them, preparing them for further revelation about the Son, and even on occasion through dreams and visions bringing conviction about Christ's true identity without any apparent involvement of any Christian at all; that even when it seems that history is spiralling out of control, God is still the King, and it will be he, not humankind, that will determine when time is wound up; that the love of God is not incompatible with present human suffering, nor are Christians immune from the groans of a fallen world, but we have a sure hope of a new heavens and a new earth and the restoration of the Kingdom in all its fullness. I may not be able to understand all that God is doing, either in my own life or in the lives of my loved ones, I may weep with those who weep and mourn, I may feel heartache and puzzlement about world affairs, I may feel helpless in the face of war and injustice and all the destructive consequences of fallenness and sin. But this I know: the Father has not abdicated, the Son has not ceased interceding, the Spirit has not withdrawn

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from our world – and one day we shall know all that we need to know, and see face to face the glory and love of God.

We do not bring in the Kingdom, nor do we build it – God alone does that; but we bear witness to it – the now and the not yet of the Kingdom – and seek by word and deed and character to image the King and to give a little glimpse through our communal relationships and faltering words as to what will one day be inescapably visible to all creation, the glorious reign of God. We do not build the Kingdom, but we do pray ‘Your Kingdom come!’ in longing and in faith. And it is the understanding of the providence of God, of the sovereignty of God, and of the total engagement of Father, Son and Spirit in the whole of creation, that gives us the confidence, the right and the duty, to speak into the world of public affairs, the public square. Our God, the Triune living God, is not God only of the Christians. He is the one and only, with sovereign rights over all humankind, whether or not they choose to acknowledge it.

Against such a background, we are delivered from inflated ideas about what we can do, and what we can achieve, and do not have to paralyse ourselves in knots of guilt about all that is beyond us. We will look with eager anticipation and faith-filled expectation to see the finger prints of God at work long before us, and follow where he leads. We will accept that the same activity of God will simultaneously lead some to seek the light, and others to prefer darkness and the rejection of the light. We will pray, not as empty ritual, but out of a profound sense of wanting to align ourselves with the will and heart of God, and in trusting faith that he is well able to direct our lives for his glory and our good. We will live as those for whom the Triune God is truly the living God, enmeshed with the reality of life on earth here and now, not some abstraction, nor God-at-a-distance. We will search for the way in which, in every dimension of our lives, the Three-in-One is the integration point and ground of our being. We will testify boldly to the fact that history, time and space, have a sure destination. We will not claim to know the timetable, because we do not, but in the meantime we will press on to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ took hold of us, as Paul puts it in Philippians 3:12.

Friends, our mission agencies and churches are not to be indistinguishable from secular businesses apart from a little veneer of Christian political correctness. No, we need to be saturated in all that we do and say and decide and plan with the mind-renewing, life-transforming truth and grace of the living God. Good management skills may be invaluable in our leaders, and we suffer when they do not have them. But even more crucial is spiritual calibre, the wisdom that is grounded in God’s truth, and the capacity to think theologically and biblically so that policy and decisions are aligned with the mind of God. This will shape who we recruit or partner with, and what they will do. As we take stock of the world of 2006 in the light of all that the Triune God is and does, we need to ask ourselves whether we are recruiting or enabling the right people to do the right things in the right way, whether our mission statements are truly biblical in a full-orbed way, whether cherished ways of working are as pleasing to the Lord as they may be to us. It will shape how we work with brothers and sisters in Christ all over the globe. It will shape how we preach and disciple in our churches and Christian communities. It will shape our priorities and vision. It will re-fill our empty tanks.

Most of all, it will help us afresh to rejoice in the living God, Father, Son and Spirit, and to bring honour and delight to him.

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May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)