

THE CASE FOR PRIORITISM: PART 1

Christopher R. Little

— Editor's Note: The following article is being published in two parts due to its length. The first part is found below; the second part will appear in the Summer 2016 issue of the Great Commission Research Journal.

Abstract

The global evangelical missions movement has embraced holism or integral mission as a framework for engaging the nations. Many astute observers maintain that this development indicates that present-day evangelicals are following in the footsteps of ecumenicals and repeating the mistakes of the past. The matter of the relationship between proclamation and social action in the mission of the church must therefore be revisited for the sake of the world. The first installment of this article seeks to highlight why the debate is still necessary, clarify the fundamental differences between prioritism and holism, recount the road to evangelical holism, and address the ways in which holism has reconfigured such concepts as gospel, kingdom, and mission.

PART ONE

The temptation to drift in mission is real. Jesus faced it when he was tempted by the devil (Mt 4:1–11), Peter experienced it when Simon offered money for the power of the Spirit (Ac 8:18–24), and Paul confronted it when he refused to compromise his stance on circumcision

(Gal 5:11). It is the subject of a recent book, *Mission Drift*, by Peter Greer and Chris Horst, in which Chris Crane, CEO of Edify, is quoted as saying, “It’s the exception that an organization stays true to its mission. . . . The natural course—the unfortunate natural evolution of many originally Christ-centered missions—is to drift.”¹ As a contemporary witness to this phenomenon, Andy Crouch, executive editor of *Christianity Today*, observes, “These days I do not often meet Christians so passionate about evangelism that they question the need for doing justice. I am much more likely to meet Christians so passionate about justice that they question the need for evangelism. . . . In short, working for justice is cool. Proclaiming the gospel is not.”² The natural byproduct of this trend is that in places such as Malawi, “social justice efforts are outstripping [those of] gospel proclamation.”³

This state of affairs did not happen by accident. It is the result of very successful steps toward promoting a more holistic or integral framework for mission as expressed, among other places, in the Iguassu Affirmation (1999), the Micah Declaration (2001), and the Cape Town Commitment (2010). Those who advance evangelism as the priority in the mission of the church are now in the clear minority among self-described evangelicals.⁴ For some, the issue is settled with no need to rehash old ground.⁵ Others, like A. Scott Moreau, surmise that “the next generation of evangelical missionaries—and perhaps missiologists—will *assume* holism as the appropriate biblical picture rather than explore the text to discover whether it is,” and he is “convinced that the question of the scope of the ministry of the church among evangelicals is not fully settled.”⁶

¹ Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014), 19.

² Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 82. With reference to this quote, it is interesting to note that in his book, instead of contravening the problem, Crouch compounds it.

³ Joel James and Brian Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 25/1 (2014): 31.

⁴ As a case in point, when the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* recently asked five different leaders to articulate their views regarding the relationship between proclamation and social action, only one presented a view approximating the prioritistic position (48/3 [2012]: 265–71).

⁵ C. René Padilla, “Holistic Mission,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 162.

⁶ A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012), 318.

AN OLD DEBATE STILL NECESSARY

The debate has, in fact, been going on for a long time,⁷ so why not just agree to disagree, and move forward? It is simply because the stakes are too high to overlook, set aside, or not contest. These include, primarily, the eternal destiny of those not evangelized. Since they are the ones who have the most to lose, their concerns should be front and center. Second, generous Christians in the West, in revealing their commitments, are now giving more to humanitarian causes than to what traditionally has been known as missions. Recent statistics show that evangelicals are donating more than \$1.9 billion to relief and development but only \$1.3 billion to foreign missions.⁸ Third, the way in which such terms as gospel, kingdom, and mission are being redefined is unprecedented and calls for redress. Fourth, those who think the matter is settled are premature in their estimation. In reality, the tenets undergirding holism have yet to be proven biblically. Last, given the largely unchallenged shifts transpiring in missions today, it is essential to equip the church, both locally and globally, to reflect, communicate, and act in a more missiologically-informed manner.

It is entirely possible that non-Western Christians will dismiss this whole discussion as irrelevant since it stems from the unique history in Western quarters related to the fundamentalism/modernism controversy at the beginning of the twentieth century, developments within the World Council of Churches (WCC) subsequent to WWII, and the formation of the Lausanne Movement. That would be unfortunate. Wherever and whenever God's people have had to contend with theological liberalism—the Hocking Report, the decline and then abandonment of world evangelization in the Student Volunteer Movement, the YM/WCA, and in mainline Protestant denominations—as the Western church has had to, there are opportunities for non-Western Christians to learn how to handle the same issues if and when they arise in their own contexts.

⁷ E.g., the debates between Arthur Glasser and Tracey Jones Jr. (*Mission Trends* No. 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974], 6–11); Donald McGavran with several others (*The Conciliar–Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964–1976* [Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977]); Arthur Johnston and John Stott (*Christianity Today*, [Jan. 5, 1979]: 34–35); Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden with Harold Lindsell (*In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985], 189–214); David Hesselgrave and John Stott (*Trinity World Forum* [Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Spring 1990 and 1991]); David Hesselgrave and Bryant Myers (*Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35/3 [1999]: 279–87); several others with the author (*International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 25/2 [2008]: 65ff); and Mark Long, Raphaël Anzenberger, Christopher Heuertz, Bryant Myers, and Rose Dowsett (*Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 48/3 [2012]: 265–71).

⁸ “Spotlight: The Way We Give Now,” *Christianity Today* 57/3 (2013): 11.

CONTRASTING PRIORITISM AND HOLISM

Prioritism and holism, just like Trinity, imputation, and sacrament, are not biblical words. However, they seek to explain conceptual categories revealed in Scripture and are therefore useful in addressing critical matters facing the church.

The most classic statement on prioritism in print comes from Donald McGavran, founding Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary (1965). In his *magnum opus*, *Understanding Church Growth*, he wrote,

As in the light of Christ we look at the world—its exploding knowledge, peoples, revolutions, physical needs, desperate spiritual hunger and nakedness, and enslavement to false gods and demonic ideologies—we realize that Christian mission must certainly engage in many labors. A multitude of excellent enterprises lie around us. So great is the number and so urgent the calls, that Christians can easily lose their way among them, seeing them all equally as mission. But in doing the good, they can fail of the best. In winning the preliminaries, they can lose the main game. They can be treating a troublesome itch, while the patient dies of cholera. The question of priorities cannot be avoided. In this fast-moving, cruel, and revolutionary era, when many activities are demanded, a right proportioning of effort among them is essential to sound policy. And “rightness”—a true and sound proportion in our labors—must be decided according to biblical principles in the light of God’s revealed will.

Among other desires of God-in-Christ, He beyond question wills that persons be found—that is, be reconciled to Himself. Most cordially admitting that God has other purposes, we should remember that we serve a God *Who Finds Persons*. He has an overriding concern that men should be redeemed. However we understand the word, biblical witness is clear that men are “lost.” The Finding God wants them *found*—that is, brought into a redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ where, baptized in His Name, they become part of His Household.

Among other characteristics of mission, therefore, a chief and irreplaceable one must be this: that mission is a divine finding, vast and continuous.⁹

David Hesselgrave further clarifies that prioritism recognizes the importance of all or most of those ministries that address the various medical, educational, economic, and social

⁹ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth. Fully Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 24.

needs of individuals and societies. At the same time it sustains the time-honored distinction between the primary *mission* of the church and secondary supporting ministries. With reference to spiritual transformation and social transformation, it gives priority to spiritual transformation. With reference to spirit, mind, and body, it gives priority to the spirit or soul. With reference to social action and evangelism, it gives priority to evangelism. In maintaining these priorities, however, it does not admit to being reductionistic either in the sense of neglecting social ministries on the one hand or confining cross-cultural work strictly to evangelism on the other. It simply retains priority for [the Great Commission].¹⁰

In addition to these two, other well-known figures within evangelicalism who are self-described prioritists include Carl Henry,¹¹ Billy Graham,¹² Arthur Glasser,¹³ Ralph Winter,¹⁴ George Peters,¹⁵ Robertson McQuilkin,¹⁶ John Piper,¹⁷ Ajith Fernando,¹⁸ Andreas Köstenberger,¹⁹ and Eckhard Schnabel.²⁰

¹⁰ David Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 121.

¹¹ Carl Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947), 85, 88.

¹² Cf., <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/januaryweb-only/qabillygraham.html?start=2>.

¹³ Arthur Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 227.

¹⁴ “Editor’s Note on Christopher Little’s ‘My Response,’” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 25/2 (2008): 92.

¹⁵ George Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 209–10.

¹⁶ Robertson McQuilkin, “An Evangelical Assessment of Mission Theology of the Kingdom of God,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 177.

¹⁷ During his exposition of Ephesians 3 at Lausanne III in Cape Town, he said among other things, “For Christ’s sake, we Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering.” cf., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1a5V1O4M4rU>.

¹⁸ Cf., <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/november/16.40.html>.

¹⁹ Andreas Köstenberger, “Great Commandment,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 412.

²⁰ Eckhard Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 106, 563. John Stott should be mentioned here. Earlier in his career, he advocated, “priority must be given to [evangelism]” (*Christian Mission in the Modern World* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975], 58), but subsequently seems to have placed evangelism on the same level as social action by endorsing Lausanne’s Grand Rapids Report that the two are “like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird” and by describing them as “natural twins” (*The Contemporary Christian* [United Kingdom: IVP, 1992], 340, 355). It should also be noted that Stott,

There is no lack of definitions for holism. It is entirely appropriate, however, to quote the one provided by C. René Padilla, who more than anyone else should be credited with convincing evangelicalism of the need to embrace a holistic approach to mission over the past several decades,

Holistic mission is mission oriented towards the meeting of basic human needs, including the need of God, but also the need of food, love, housing, clothes, physical and mental health, and a sense of human dignity. Furthermore, this approach takes into account that people are spiritual, social and bodily beings, made to live in relationship with God, with their neighbours, and with God's creation. Consequently, it presupposes that it is not enough to take care of the spiritual well-being of an individual without any regard for his or her personal relationships and position in society and in the world. As Jesus saw it, love for God is inseparable from love for neighbor (Mt 22:40).²¹

In support of such a view, physician Jean-Paul Heldt adds,

I see mission and the whole missionary endeavor primarily as a legitimate and biblical 'problem solving' enterprise . . . whose goal is to achieve a better alternative and hope for the future. . . . After completing the creation of heaven and earth, God declared everything that he made "very good." Alas, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, succumbing in the Fall. If it had not been for the Fall, there would be no need for mission. But once the Fall occurred, it became God's business (*missio Dei*) to bring God's fallen creatures back unto God. Because of our multidimensional (physical, mental, social, spiritual) nature . . . mission cannot be anything less than an integrated and integral enterprise. . . .

Proclamation alone, apart from any social concern, may be perceived as a distortion, a truncated version of the true gospel, a parody and travesty of the good news, lacking relevance for the real problems of real people living in a real world. On the other end of the spectrum, exclusive focus on transformation and advocacy may just result in social and humanitarian activism, void of any spiritual dimensions. Both approaches are unbiblical: they deny the wholeness of human nature of human beings created in the image of God. Since we are created "whole," and since the Fall affects our total

in responding to the question, "*won't commitment to social action distract us from evangelism?*" answered, "Yes, it might. . . . Certainly we should take warning of this possibility. We should be grateful for evangelical watchdogs who bark loud and long if they see any signs in us of a diminished commitment to evangelism" (Ibid., 352).

²¹ Ibid., 158.

humanity in all its dimensions, then redemption, restoration, and mission can, by definition, only be “holistic.”²²

Likewise, in addition to these two respected figures within evangelicalism who are self-described holists include Samuel Escobar,²³ J. Andrew Kirk,²⁴ Ron Sider,²⁵ Chris Wright,²⁶ Tetsunao Yamamori,²⁷ Bryant Myers,²⁸ James Nkansah-Obrempong,²⁹ Richard Stearns,³⁰ Gary Haugen,³¹ and Dean Flemming.³²

A careful review of the literature on both sides of the debate uncovers further contrasts between the two views as depicted in the following chart.³³

²² Jean-Paul Heldt, “Revisiting the ‘Whole Gospel’: Toward a Biblical Model of Holistic Mission in the 21st Century,” *Missiology: An International Review* 32/2 (2004): 162, 166.

²³ Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everywhere* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 149–54.

²⁴ J. Andrew Kirk, *Mission Under Scrutiny: Confronting Contemporary Challenges* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2006), 49.

²⁵ Ron Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 170.

²⁶ Chris Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 316–18.

²⁷ Tetsunao Yamamori, *Penetrating Missions’ Final Frontier: A New Strategy for Unreached Peoples* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 131.

²⁸ Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 51–54. Even as a holistic mission theologian, Myers has recently had to come to grips with Progressive Pentecostalism which sees “evangelism [as] central” when interacting with the world, and as a consequence, is surpassing the social impact of international NGOs (“Progressive Pentecostalism, Development, and Christian Development NGOs: A Challenge and an Opportunity,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39/3 [2015]: 119).

²⁹ James Nkansah-Obrempong, “Holistic Gospel in a Developing Society: Biblical, Theological and Historical Backgrounds,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33:3 (2009): 206–7.

³⁰ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 21–22.

³¹ Gary Haugen, “Why We’re Losing the War on Poverty,” *Christianity Today* 58/1 (2014): 59.

³² Dean Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing, and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 265–69.

³³ Of course, not all prioritists and holists would affirm each point in their represented columns, yet the evidence shows that these distinctions generally hold up.

	Prioritism		Holism	
F U N D A M E N T A L I S M	Evangelism/disciple-making/ church planting are more important than other ancillary activities	O N T H E F E N C E	Evangelism/disciple-making/ church planting are equally as important as other ancillary activities	L I B E R A L I S M
	Emphasizes apostles and early church as models for mission (Representationalism)		Emphasizes Jesus as model for mission (Incarnationalism) ³⁴	
	Kingdom of God in the church through conversion		Kingdom of God in church and society through socio-economic, political action	
	Social activity as means to the end of conversion		Social activity as means to the end of improving society	
	Focuses on what Christ has done for the church		Focuses on what the church can do for society	
	Gospel is what Christ has done for the church		Gospel is what the church does for others	
	Gospel communicated only through word		Gospel communicated and demonstrated through word and deed	
	Theological hierarchy of proclamation over ancillary activities (word > deed)		Theological equality between proclamation and ancillary activities (word = deed)	
	Committed more to the lost than to the poor		Committed more to the poor than the lost or equally committed to both	
	Aims at getting people on earth to heaven		Aims at getting heaven to people on earth	
	More emphasis given to the NT than the OT		More emphasis given to the OT than the NT or equal weight given to both	
	Criticizes holism for being so earthly minded that it does no heavenly good		Criticizes prioritism for being so heavenly minded that it does no earthly good	
	Mission as specific task		Mission as everything the church does	
	Analogy: Mission is rescuing people from a burning building		Analogy: Mission is rescuing a burning building with people inside	

Several points of explanation are in order. First, this chart builds upon the one by Hesselgrave but equates holism with revisionist holism and folds restrained holism into prioritism, since to make a distinction between these

³⁴ For an explanation of these terms, see Paradigms in *Conflict*, 141ff.

views, both of which affirm the priority of proclamation, is somewhat arbitrary.³⁵ Second, it seeks to illustrate that prioritism is not fundamentalist in the sense that it rejects social action,³⁶ and holism is not universalistic in the sense it repudiates gospel proclamation. What distinguishes prioritism from holism is a qualitative difference between word and deed, evangelism and social action, and proclamation and demonstration. Prioritism believes that “the primary deed of love that one can do for a fallen world is to share the gospel with that world.”³⁷ Holism, on the other hand, engages the world “without concern for which is most important.”³⁸ Third, given the widespread assumption today that dichotomies are conceptually unhelpful, the chart opens itself to criticism. However, what is being stipulated here is not that there is a *dichotomy* between word and deed, but also that there is not equality between them either. Rather, there exists a *hierarchy* of word over deed because the announcement of what Christ has done on humanity’s behalf is infinitely more important than anything else we as humans can do for others. Moreover, it is important to note that whereas dichotomies are intrinsic to a Christian worldview (e.g., Creator/creation, invisible/visible, life/death, heaven/hell, saved/lost, light/darkness, holy/unholy, etc.), holism was originally fashioned in accordance with a “unitary and monistic conception of the universe” in which all ontological hierarchies were dismissed outright.³⁹ As such, there is a fundamental worldview clash between the theocentric categories of biblical revelation and the Neoplatonic ones of holism.⁴⁰ Last, it is entirely possible that some will refuse being drawn to one side of the debate and remain on the fence by affirming something akin to holistic prioritism or prioritistic holism. However, if the principle of non-contradiction holds true ($A \neq \text{non-}A$), such a position is untenable. One cannot logically affirm at the same time the statements, “there are priorities

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 120–22. Hesselgrave refers to William Larkin Jr.’s view as “restrained holism” (133), but Larkin preferred to label it “expansive prioritism” (cf. <http://www.ciu.edu/content/prioritism-and-holism-contribution-acts-6>).

³⁶ Henry depicts fundamentalism as “the modern priest and Levite, by-passing suffering humanity” (*Ibid.*, 2).

³⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Imminent Domain: The Story of the Kingdom of God and Its Celebration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 25–26.

³⁸ Wayne Gordon, *Real Hope in Chicago* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 108. Vinoth Ramachandra confirms this aspect of holism “as a Church we have no liberty to ‘prioritize’” (“Integral Mission: Exploring a Concept” in *Integral Mission: The Way Forward*, C. V. Mathew, ed. [Kerala, India: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2006], 54).

³⁹ J. C. Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1926), 108–9, 335–36.

⁴⁰ Cf., Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 327.

in mission” and “there are no priorities in mission” as true. One must be true and the other false; there are no other options. Hence, a choice must be made.

THE ROAD TO EVANGELICAL HOLISM

Evangelicalism has historically exhibited a genuine commitment to social action and evangelism, but it would be a mischaracterization to claim that it has been equally committed to both.⁴¹ This is because the three post-Reformation movements which provide the foundational roots for evangelicalism—German Pietism, English Puritanism, and the American Great Awakenings⁴²—stressed, based upon scriptural authority, personal conversion and the recruitment of those converted into the process of converting others.⁴³ This posture toward the world has been labeled “the evangelical impulse,”⁴⁴ and without it, evangelicalism betrays itself.⁴⁵

⁴¹ E.g., Robert Woodberry observes that although colonial missionaries “perceived societal reform as a natural extension of their faith,” they “viewed conversion as their primary goal” (“The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 106/2 [2012]: 254–55).

⁴² Gary McGee, “Evangelical Movement,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 337.

⁴³ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 5–14. In addition to Bebbington’s depiction, Alister McGrath delineates the following six “fundamental convictions” regarding evangelicalism: “1. The supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living. 2. The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity. 3. The lordship of the Holy Spirit. 4. The need for personal conversion. 5. The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole. 6. The importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth” (*Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995], 55–56). Moreover, Garth Rosell notes that evangelicalism is a movement centered on “the cross” with four convictions: “(1) a shared authority (the Bible); (2) a shared experience (conversion); (3) a shared mission (worldwide evangelization); and (4) a shared vision (the spiritual renewal of church and culture)” (*The Surprising Work of God* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008], 26). Note Todd Brenneman more recently argues that since “Evangelicalism has evolved from its origins to the present; our definitions of it must evolve as well” (*Homespun Gospel: The Triumph of Sentimentality in Contemporary American Evangelicalism* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013], 160).

⁴⁴ Richard Lovelace, “A Call to Historic Roots and Conformity,” in *The Orthodox Evangelicals* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 47.

⁴⁵ Henry, while critiquing fundamentalism’s repudiation of social responsibility, still argued for the primacy of evangelism in the mission of the church as an evangelical (*Ibid.*, 88–89).

This impulse materialized very clearly in 1886 at a conference organized by Dwight L. Moody in Northfield, Massachusetts, when A. T. Pierson challenged university students with the watchword, “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”⁴⁶ This slogan was later adopted by the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910), thereby demonstrating the overall direction of the Protestant missionary force at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ As an outgrowth of the conference in Edinburgh, the International Missionary Council (IMC) was formed in 1921 “to encourage and assist churches and mission societies in their missionary task, understood as sharing with people everywhere the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” The IMC was subsequently incorporated into the WCC in 1961 and renamed the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) with the stated purpose “to further the proclamation to the whole world of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the end that all men may believe and be saved.”⁴⁸

The same year this merger took place, the WCC’s assembly in New Delhi redefined evangelism as the “commission given to the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world,” where “whole Gospel” was interpreted as “witness to all realms of life—physical, social, economic, and spiritual.” Moreover, it was understood that “Witness to the Gospel must . . . be prepared to engage in the struggle for social justice and for peace; it will have to take the form of humble service and of a practical ministry of reconciliation amidst the actual conflict of our times.”⁴⁹ Thereafter, the WCC’s Nairobi assembly (1975) “distinctly and without hesitation [brought] together evangelism and social action as integral parts of the ‘whole Gospel.’” It was expressed at this meeting, though, “that in broadening evangelism to avoid a narrowness, almost anything can be classified as evangelism.”⁵⁰ These developments had a suffocating effect on the IMC’s, and later, the CWME’s initial vision for world evangelization.

Evangelicals eventually lost confidence in the WCC and organized the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization in 1974 under the leadership of Billy Graham. The well-known Lausanne Covenant, penned by John Stott, included the phrase, “World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world,”⁵¹ showing that Lausanne did not

⁴⁶ McGee, “Evangelical Movement,” 339.

⁴⁷ Wolfgang Günther and Guillermo Cook, “World Missionary Conferences,” in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, Mission, Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 503.

⁴⁸ Paul Pierson, “International Missionary Council,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 498–99.

⁴⁹ Priscilla Pope-Levison, “Evangelism in the WCC: From New Delhi to Canberra,” in *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization 2* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 127.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 130–31.

⁵¹ Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>.

operate in a historical vacuum. This inclusion paved the theological path for Lausanne over the next several decades, as it appears both in the Manila Manifesto in conjunction with Lausanne II (1989)⁵² and in the Cape Town Commitment in relation to Lausanne III (2010).⁵³

The original Lausanne charter did declare that in “the Church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary,” but also that “socio-political involvement [is] part of our Christian duty.”⁵⁴ This dual affirmation of evangelism and social action reveals the internal tensions present within the Lausanne Movement from its inception. Those who held to a restrictive view of evangelism “accused Lausanne’s stated social vision as being the old Social Gospel in evangelical clothing,” while those who held a broader view believed that “the affirmation of socio-political involvement . . . did not go far enough” since to them “social concern still felt like an appendage to the ‘real work’ of the gospel.” This latter group felt led to form an *ad hoc* committee at the Congress of about 200 participants who drafted a document entitled, “Theology [and] Implications of Radical Discipleship.” It described the gospel as the “Good News of liberation, of restoration, or wholeness, and of salvation that is personal, social, global, and cosmic” and which “repudiated the dichotomy between evangelism and social concern, challenged the language of the primacy of evangelism, and broadened the scope of God’s salvific work in the world.”⁵⁵

In evaluating the Lausanne Movement, Arthur Johnston asserted that the Congress “made unnecessary concessions to the pressure of the incarnational theology faddism current with the nonevangelical institutionalized churches” to such an extent that “evangelism was blunted . . . and lost some of its historical ‘cutting edge’ by introducing issues related to the duties of the church.” In essence, for him and many others, the matter did not revolve around evangelism being primary in the church’s mission but that its “unique status” as related to various other responsibilities of the church was not upheld. Moreover, Johnston feared that making room for social action in the church’s mission would eventually lead “to a this-worldly or horizontal preoccupation.”⁵⁶ He was not alone in his concern as Harold Lindsell believed the same fate American mainline denominations suffered as a result of capitulating to theological liberalism awaited evangelicals who likewise opened the door to “social and economic or political action” in mission.⁵⁷

⁵² Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/manila-manifesto.html>.

⁵³ Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html>.

⁵⁴ Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>.

⁵⁵ Al Tizon, “Precursors and Tensions in Holistic Mission: An Historical Overview,” in *Holistic Mission: God’s Plan for God’s People* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 67–68.

⁵⁶ Arthur Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978), 327, 329–30.

⁵⁷ Samuel, Sugden, and Lindsell, *In Word and Deed*, 214.

This open door manifested itself at Lausanne II in Manila where holistic mission was front and center, even though evangelism was still regarded as “primary.”⁵⁸ Later, at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, the effort within Lausanne to adopt a holistic posture in mission apparently won out. At that gathering, Padilla delineated the parameters of evangelical mission in this way:

Mission is faithful to scripture . . . when it crosses frontiers (not just geographic but also cultural, racial, economic, social, political, etc.) with the intention of transforming human life in all its dimensions, according to God’s purpose and of enabling human beings to enjoy the abundant life that God wants to give to them and that Jesus Christ came to share with them. The mission of the church is multifaceted because it depends on the mission of God, which includes the whole of creation and the totality of human life.⁵⁹

This conception of mission gained further momentum when Lausanne’s Theological Working Group, prior to Lausanne III, asserted,

To proclaim and demonstrate the whole gospel . . . necessarily involves willingness to confront all that is bad news in this fallen world. The list of what constitutes that bad news would be too long to detail here. But it certainly includes the evils of poverty and injustice, political oppression and violence, brutality and war, human trafficking and slavery, ethnic and gender discrimination and violence, and the destruction of God’s creation through rampant consumerism. The gospel stands *against* these things as an integral part of its standing *for* the blessings of eternal salvation and the hope of God’s new creation.⁶⁰

That mission as holistic has now become a mainstay within the Lausanne Movement is evident in the Cape Town Commitment (2010). While setting aside prioritistic language on evangelism, it articulates, “This is true of mission in all its dimensions: evangelism, bearing witness to the truth, discipling, peace-making, social engagement, ethical transformation, caring for creation, overcoming evil powers, casting out demonic spirits, healing the sick, suffering and enduring under persecution.”⁶¹

The direct outcome of evangelicals embracing a holistic vision for mission is that, in confirming the fears of Johnston and Lindsell, the essential task of evangelism has to be defended against a wider notion of mission. As Kirk points out, “Mission, which in some circles used to be almost identified with evangelism, is now almost completely

⁵⁸ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 222.

⁵⁹ Cf., http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP33_IG4.pdf.

⁶⁰ Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/all/twg/1177-twg-three-wholes.html>.

⁶¹ Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html>.

disassociated from it. It is now aligned, more or less, with service to the community and ethical pronouncements and action in the political sphere, referred to as its prophetic ministry.”⁶² In the same vein, D. A. Carson observes, “Increasingly . . . ‘holistic ministry’ refers to deeds of mercy *without* any proclamation of the gospel.”⁶³ As a consequence, Wright has to remind evangelicals, in a historical reversal in which holism originally made space for social action in relation to evangelism, that without “declaring the Word and the name of Christ,” mission is “defective [and not] holistic.”⁶⁴ What this indicates is that “over the past thirty years, many evangelicals have moved toward positions closer to conciliar thinking than earlier evangelicals would have dreamed.”⁶⁵ Consequently, Charles Van Engen warns,

In the twenty-first century Evangelical mission agencies are becoming increasingly committed and involved in humanitarian and compassion ministries through agriculture, education, medicine, AIDS-related ministries, children-at-risk movements, and so on. Given these new emphases in Evangelical mission activism, it behooves us to consider carefully how Evangelical views of mission today may be tempted to repeat the same errors made when mission was redefined and eventually lost in the World Council of Churches.⁶⁶

Indeed, it is striking to contemplate how evangelicals in the twenty-first century have paralleled the trajectory of the WCC in the twentieth century to such an extent that “theological convergences” can now be said to have taken place.⁶⁷

WHY NOT HOLISM?

There is no question that holists are some of the most respected, intelligent, self-sacrificing, and Christ-honoring people involved in God’s mission among the nations today. However, holism, as presently conceived, cannot bear the weight of expectations placed upon it as a viable paradigm for mission. This is demonstrable in the following ways:

1. Hermeneutical Issues. More than any other, Stott can be credited with advancing the Johannine version of the Great Commission, “as [καθώς] the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (Jo 20:21; cf. 17:18).

⁶² Ibid., 47.

⁶³ D.A. Carson, “The Hole in the Gospel,” *Themelios* 38/3 (2013): 353.

⁶⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 319.

⁶⁵ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 319.

⁶⁶ Charles Van Engen, “Mission Defined and Described,” in *MissionShift: Global Missions Issues in the Third Millennium* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2010), 20.

⁶⁷ Samuel Escobar, “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38/4 (2013): 193.

In his estimation, it is the “crucial form” of the Great Commission, the “*model*” upon which the church’s mission must be based, and entails “selfless service for others, [since the Son’s] service took a wide variety of forms according to men’s needs.”⁶⁸ Besides the fact that, as Köstenberger notes, it is a mistake “to push the relationship established by *καθώς* . . . too far” in view of “the ontological gap” which exists between Jesus and his disciples, there is an underlying assumption related to Stott’s proposal which generally goes undetected.⁶⁹ In reality, “A focus on human service and on human need, though often characteristic of contemporary mission practice, is not presented in the Fourth Gospel” and “Jesus never attempted to attack or change the social and economic structures of Galilean or Judean society.”⁷⁰ Hence, the mandate to establish a more just society through direct social engagement as exemplified in Jesus goes beyond the evidence.

In addition to John 20:21, there are four other passages to which holism appeals in order to justify its *modus operandi*: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16); “The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even* the least of them, you did it to Me’” (Mt 25:40); “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor” (Lk 4:18); and “through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col 1:20). As shown elsewhere,⁷¹ by adhering to the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture (i.e., *analogia scriptura*), it is better to interpret “good works” as referring to keeping one’s “behavior [or conduct] excellent among the Gentiles” (1 Pe 2:12), “these brothers of Mine” as connoting Christ’s disciples (cf. Mt 10:40–42), and “the poor” as denoting the “poor in spirit,” that is, God’s people (Mt 5:3).

With reference to the Colossians passage, Wright, in constructing his theology of mission along the biblical storyline of “Creation, Fall, Redemption in History, and New Creation,” believes that a holistic posture for mission encompasses not only “human beings,” but “the rest of creation for whose reconciliation Christ shed his blood (Col 1:20).”

⁶⁸ Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 23–24.

⁶⁹ Andreas Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 186, 188.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 215; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church, Volume Two* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 1577.

⁷¹ Christopher R. Little, “Breaking Bad Missiological Habits,” in *Discovering the Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 492ff.

Consequently, for Wright, mission involves “not only the salvation of human beings, but also the redemption of the whole creation.”⁷² However, Wright’s schema is problematic on several fronts. First, mission occurred before creation and will continue after the new creation in glorifying the triune God. Hence, to begin and end mission with creation circumscribes it too narrowly.⁷³ Second, asserting that all elements of creation can be reconciled to God by default leads to universalism. Instead of adopting this line of argumentation, it is more sensible, as F. F. Bruce points out, to interpret the phrase “reconcile all things to Himself” as indicating God’s forcible subjugation of rebellious angels and humans through judgment.⁷⁴ Third, although Wright acknowledges that “we must read the Old Testament in light of the New,” he later states that it is a “false hermeneutic to argue that whatever the New Testament tells us about the mission of the followers of Christ *cancel*s out what we already know about the mission . . . from the Old Testament.”⁷⁵ Yet cancelling the Old cannot be equated with the New surpassing the Old in terms of progressive revelation (cf. Mt 5:21–48; 2 Co 3:7–11; Gal 3:24–25; Eph 3:1–10; Col 1:25–27; Heb 1:1–2; 8:1–13). Revelation as progressive “in no way implies that the Old Testament is less inspired. It states simply that the fullness of revelation is in the New Testament. . . . [T]he heart of Christian theology is found in the New Testament which contains the clearer revelation of God. Christian theology and ethics [as well as mission] must take their primary rootage in the New Testament revelation.”⁷⁶ Hence, “it will not do to give equal force, in defining the mission of the Church, to an Old Testament prophet and a New Testament Apostle if their focus differs.”⁷⁷ This is what Wright will not permit, though, even to the point of objecting to the preeminence of the Great Commission in the New Testament.⁷⁸ In doing so, he has forged an expansive definition of mission, which includes creation care, even though there are occasions when Israel, Jesus, and Paul, failed to live up to this program (cf. Dt 20:20; Mt 21:18–19; Lk 8:32–33; Ac 14:8–18). Last, it is easy

⁷² Chris Wright, *The Mission of God’s People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 39, 269.

⁷³ Cf. Little, “In Response to ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission,’” in *MissionShift*, 210–12.

⁷⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 209–10.

⁷⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 303–4.

⁷⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970), 104.

⁷⁷ McQuilken, “An Evangelical Assessment,” 175–76.

⁷⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 61, 304.

for Wright to say, “*Mission is not ours; mission is God’s*,”⁷⁹ but more difficult to delineate exactly what the mission of the church is. Clearly, not everything God does is conferred upon the church to pursue or realize in this age. That is, the *missio Dei* is not subsumed into the *missio hominum*. Since the redemption of creation involves the reversal of the curse—something that falls only within the divine prerogative (Ge 3:14–19; Ro 8:19–21; Eph 1:10; 2 Pe 3:10–13; Rev 21:1) and in the Colossians passage is performed by Christ himself—the church is not called, as Wright contends, “to reconcile” the earth to God via caring for creation. This is not to discount, however, that there remains a stewardship role on the part of all humanity in this regard.

2. Kerygmatic Issues. The gospel from a holistic perspective is now being characterized as something the church is,⁸⁰ lives,⁸¹ embodies,⁸² and demonstrates,⁸³ and evangelism as “all actions,”⁸⁴ which the church performs in inviting people “through word, deed, and example . . . to follow Christ.”⁸⁵ Apparently, the terms “gospel” and “evangelism” have no limits, and if they do, they have no meaning. In such a world, mission quickly becomes doing what is right in one’s own eyes. However, the “gospel is not infinitely malleable, and cannot without fatal loss be reduced to whatever constitutes good news in a given culture”⁸⁶ and “evangelism needs to be defined carefully so that its special task is not lost within the wider demands of mission.”⁸⁷ Toward this end, Scot McKnight suggests the contemporary church must return to “the earliest days of the church” and consider the “*apostolic gospel tradition*” as revealed in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, “*that Christ died, that Christ was buried, that Christ was raised, and that Christ appeared.*” This framework points to “something at the grassroots level: the word *gospel* was used in the world of Jews at the time of the apostles to *announce* something, to *declare* something as good news—the word *euangelion* always

⁷⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁰ Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, 3.

⁸¹ Cf., <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/all/twg/1177-twg-three-wholes.html>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Cf., http://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/page/mn_integral_mission_declaration_en.pdf.

⁸⁴ Stephen Burris and Kendi Douglas, “Introduction,” in *River of God: An Introduction to World Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 3.

⁸⁵ Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God*, 18.

⁸⁶ K. Ferdinando, “Gospel,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 140–41.

⁸⁷ R. Peace, “Evangelism,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 115.

means good news. ‘To gospel’ is to herald, to proclaim, and to declare something about something.” Thus, McKnight rightly deduces, “the gospel is to announce good news about key events in the life of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁸ To this, Schnabel adds, “The good news that the church proclaims is always the good news of Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah and Savior, who died and rose from the dead so that sinners can have forgiveness of sins, find salvation, receive God’s Spirit, and be granted eternal life.”⁸⁹ What this means is that “the gospel itself is always an external word that comes to me announcing that someone else in history has accomplished my salvation for me,”⁹⁰ which thereby implies, “[w]e are not the Good News, but its recipients and heralds; not the newsmakers, just the reporters.”⁹¹ As such, “the biblical gospel is inherently a *verbal* thing [which] cannot be preached by our deeds,”⁹² “[s]ocial action and caring for the poor is not . . . the gospel [but] implications”⁹³ or “entailments”⁹⁴ of it, and “evangelism is the act of giving verbal witness to the good news, confident that its power does not fluctuate with the strengths or weaknesses of the messenger.”⁹⁵ If, in relation to the mission of the church, “we want to be New Testament Christians,” then “this gospel must once again become our gospel.”⁹⁶

⁸⁸ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 46, 49–50.

⁸⁹ Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*, 712.

⁹⁰ Michael Horton, “Christ at the Center,” *Christianity Today* 53/11 (2009): 48.

⁹¹ Michael Horton, *The Gospel Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 127.

⁹² Duane Litfin, *Word Versus Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 36, 45. Flemming takes Litfin to task over this assertion and argues for a nonverbal form of evangelism by appealing to 1 Peter 3:1–2, “you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of *them* are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior” (260–61). The question must be asked, how can husbands be won to the faith apart from the gospel being verbally explained to them? If not from their wives, then someone else has to do it. Hence, Peter is simply saying that the deeds of wives via their “chaste and respectful behavior” must compliment rather than contradict the verbal proclamation of the gospel in relation to unbelievers, not that the gospel can be shared without words.

⁹³ Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 53.

⁹⁴ Carson, “The Hole in the Gospel,” 355–56.

⁹⁵ Litfin, *Word Versus Deed*, 55.

⁹⁶ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 133.

3. Basileia Issues. The kingdom of God at the beginning of the twenty-first century was heralded by evangelicals as the means to “break the impasse between evangelism and social action.”⁹⁷ Unfortunately, instead of clarifying the mission of God, this effort confounded it. For example, “*Kingdom Missiology*” is now being advanced to encourage the church to perform “faithfully the whole work of the kingdom of God to the whole world,”⁹⁸ which evidently involves “more than simply winning men and women to Christ.”⁹⁹ Rather, kingdom work strives “for the redemption of people, their social systems, and the environment that sustains their life,”¹⁰⁰ using “the current trends toward capitalism and economic development to [raise] the standard of living . . . for all,”¹⁰¹ and surprisingly results in “something permanent, something that will not be displaced in the world to come. . . . When a well is dug, a school is built or an orphanage opens its gates, the dream of God [i.e., the kingdom] becomes actualized in our time.”¹⁰²

To speak in such terms is, of course, nothing new, as even Sider did, but upon further reflection modified his view: “It is important to note that *absolutely none* of the scores of New Testament texts on the kingdom of God speak of the presence of the kingdom apart from the conscious confession of Christ. . . . There seems to be no warrant in the New Testament for talking about the coming of the Kingdom of God via societal change apart from confession of Christ.”¹⁰³ On the meaning of the kingdom, George Ladd states, “[t]he church cannot build the Kingdom or become the Kingdom, but the church witnesses to God’s Kingdom—to God’s redeeming acts in Christ both past and future.”¹⁰⁴ Glasser observes, “[t]o preach [the kingdom] is to issue a call to conversion” for “apart from the new birth one cannot see, much less enter, the Kingdom of God.”¹⁰⁵ I. Howard Marshall notes, “[t]he

⁹⁷ Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 12.

⁹⁸ Burris and Douglas, *River of God*, 1.

⁹⁹ Eric Swanson and Sam Williams, *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 81.

¹⁰⁰ Myers, *Walking With the Poor*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Ken Eldred, *God Is at Work: Transforming People and Nations Through Business* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2005), 48, 71.

¹⁰² R. York Moore, *Making All Things New: God’s Dream for Social Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 152.

¹⁰³ Litfin, *In Word and Deed*, 104; cf. “Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice,” *International Review of Mission* 64/255 (1975): 258, 262ff.

¹⁰⁴ George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future. Revised and Updated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 265–66.

¹⁰⁵ Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 358, 246.

kingdom consists of those who respond to the message in repentance and faith and thereby enter into the sphere of God's salvation and life."¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, Christians should "be wary of making over-ambitious claims for particular manifestations of the [kingdom's] presence,"¹⁰⁷ "not call social change the coming of the kingdom,"¹⁰⁸ recognize that "efforts to make the world a better place do not inherently qualify as kingdom work" since non-Christians can "work to make the world a better place, but they are not, in doing so, building *Christ's* kingdom,"¹⁰⁹ and realize that "kingdom mission is church mission . . . because . . . kingdom mission is first and foremost about a redemptive reality of living under King Jesus."¹¹⁰ Ultimately, however, the kingdom "cannot be subsumed in earthly forms [given its] eschatological character,"¹¹¹ and according to Hendrik Kraemer, is really

a transcendental, supra-historical order of life. Identification of a so-called Christian social order, Christian State or Christian culture with the Kingdom of God signifies making what is by its nature relative (social order, state, culture) absolute, and making the absolute (the Kingdom of God) relative. This is so because the tension inherent between the sphere of relative human history and that of the transcendent realm of God, the ethic of the Kingdom of God, of the complete fulfillment of the will of God, can never be annihilated in this dispensation. Therefore the Kingdom of God can never be realized in any social, economic, political or cultural order. If it were it would amount to saying that the absolute and perfect can be adequately expressed in the relative and imperfect. To "Christianize" the social or other spheres of life can only legitimately mean their being influenced and tamed by Christian influences and standards. Whoever expects more confuses the relative realities of life.¹¹²

Thus, "[t]he phrase 'kingdom work' is confusing and nonbiblical and . . . should be jettisoned"¹¹³ in favor of describing the church's socio-

¹⁰⁶I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 80.

¹⁰⁷Kirk, *Mission Under Scrutiny*, 94.

¹⁰⁸Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 90.

¹⁰⁹Litfin, *Word Versus Deed*, 121.

¹¹⁰McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 157.

¹¹¹Georg Vicedom, *The Mission of God* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1965), 22.

¹¹²Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1963), 93.

¹¹³Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 112.

economic engagement with the world as “good works . . . in the public sector for the common good.”¹¹⁴

4. Missiological Issues. Without question, the most disturbing trend within evangelical missiology today, one which confirms that the greatest challenges facing this academic field are not “methodological [but] theological,”¹¹⁵ is the wholesale attempt to renegotiate the boundary on which mission occurs. Mission, among self-declared evangelicals, now includes, “caring for the environment,”¹¹⁶ “creating jobs and wealth,”¹¹⁷ “giving to fellow believers in need,”¹¹⁸ “political action, in fighting social injustice,”¹¹⁹ and “anti-trafficking work, care for AIDS and malaria patients, food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, release for the prisoners.”¹²⁰ This expansive definition of mission justifies Carl Braaten’s concern that “holistic mission has contributed to such a great inflation in the meaning of mission, including everything the church is doing, that there is the danger that evangelism, which is the heart of mission, will become buried in an avalanche of church activism.”¹²¹

In the middle of the last century, Stephen Neill faced the same situation with the WCC when it began to label every praiseworthy work of the church as mission. As a corrective, he set forth his now famous dictum, “If mission is everything, mission is nothing. If everything that the Church does is to be classed as ‘mission,’ we shall have to find another term for the Church’s particular responsibility for ‘the heathen,’ those who have never yet heard the Name of Christ.”¹²² He later expounded upon this statement by defining mission as “*the*

¹¹⁴McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 118.

¹¹⁵David Hesselgrave, “Evangelical Mission in 2001 and Beyond—Who Will Set the Agenda?” *Trinity World Forum* 26/2 (2001): 3.

¹¹⁶Lowell Bliss, *Environmental Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 17.

¹¹⁷C. Neal Johnson, *Business as Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 42.

¹¹⁸Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God*, 192.

¹¹⁹Brian Woolnough, “Good News for the Poor—Setting the Scene,” in *Holistic Mission*, 6.

¹²⁰Moore, *Making All Things New*, 159. Compare these statements with the one by George Peters just a generation ago, “I do not find anywhere in the Bible that the first [cultural] mandate comes under the biblical category of missions. It is man’s assignment as man and is to be fulfilled on the human level. It is not implied in the Great Commission of our Lord to His disciples, nor do any of the spiritual gifts (charismata) as presented in the Scriptures relate to it. It is therefore unscriptural to confuse these two mandates and speak of them on equal terms as missions and church ministries. Only the second [evangelistic] mandate is considered missions in the strict biblical sense” (170).

¹²¹Carl Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 11.

¹²²Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959), 81.

*intentional crossing of barriers from Church to non-church in word and deed for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel.*¹²³ McGavran affirmed this viewpoint when he wrote, “Christian mission must not be defined as doing everything God wants done. Mission is not everything the Church does outside its four walls. Christian mission is enrolling in Christ’s school as learners [among all people groups] in every nation-state. This huge task is mission.”¹²⁴ However, David Bosch interjected a contravening viewpoint when he stated, “Whoever we are, we are tempted to incarcerate the *missio Dei* in the narrow confines of our own predilections, thereby of necessity reverting to one-sidedness and reductionism. We should beware of any attempt at delineating mission too sharply.”¹²⁵ In similar fashion, Wright, working within the framework of a biblical theology of redemption for the entire cosmos, believes in contradiction to Neill’s statement that “It would seem more biblical to say, ‘If everything is mission . . . everything is mission.’ . . . [E]verything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God’s world.”¹²⁶ As such, the evangelical church is now faced with a situation where, according to Timothy Tennent, “the word [mission] has been [so] broadened . . . to mean ‘everything the church should be doing,’” that it has lost “any distinctive emphasis or character.”¹²⁷

In light of this predicament, missiology needs to reconsider the question, what is and what is not mission? In other words, is the church responsible for both world evangelization and world reparation? Robertson McQuilkin points in the right direction when he deems “the question of final destiny [to be] *the* theological issue for missions.”¹²⁸ Consequently, if the church has to choose among competing agendas, if it has to accept its limitations, if it has to grope for the narrow way, then it should chart its course in mission with reference to those who have the most to lose (and gain) in the debate—the not-yet evangelized. Hence, Neill’s viewpoint should trump Bosch’s

¹²³Quoted by Charles Van Engen, *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 28.

¹²⁴Donald McGavran, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 29–30.

¹²⁵David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigms Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 512.

¹²⁶Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 26.

¹²⁷Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 54.

¹²⁸Robertson McQuilkin, “Lost Missions: Whatever Happened to the Idea of Rescuing People from Hell?” *Christianity Today* 50/7 (2006): 42.

and Wright's, and the church should embrace "lostness" as the only non-negotiable boundary for mission and "final destiny" as the leading theological impetus for all its interactions with the world.¹²⁹ Accordingly, "[n]othing can be called mission in the biblical sense which is not . . . directed toward conversion."¹³⁰ "There is but one acid test that should be applied to all activities that claim to represent obedience in mission. Do they . . . produce disciples of Jesus Christ?"¹³¹ "Mission" is not simply . . . 'everything that the church does,' but the deliberate activity of a community of faith that . . . [seeks] to win other people for the content of faith and the way of life espoused by that community."¹³² Finally, "the only valid motive and purpose of missions is . . . to call men and peoples to confront themselves with God's acts of revelation and salvation for man. . . . If [other things] usurp the place of the apostolic motive, which is the alone valid and tenable one, they transform the Christian Church into a goodwill agency for the diffusion of refined and cultured idealism" and lose "all intrinsic relation with the central apostolic consciousness that we are to be witnesses to God and His revelational dealing with man and the world."¹³³ As such, the *sine qua non* of mission is nothing other than making disciples of all nations.

¹²⁹Ibid., 42. Mike Constantz, pastor of global mobilization and initiatives at Saddleback Church, while promoting Rick Warren's PEACE Plan, adopts a contrasting view, "Jesus calls his people to sacrificially serve the widows, orphans, aliens, poor, starving, homeless, persecuted, oppressed, repressed, terrorized, tyrannized, crushed, enslaved, exploited, helpless, hopeless, voiceless, marginalized, victimized, beaten up, beaten down, down & out, shut in, shut out, shut up, burned out, outcast, brain damaged, mentally ill, incurably ill, disabled, pregnant at the wrong time, unemployed, underemployed, unemployable, swindled, shoved aside, left aside, replaced, emotionally starved, emotionally scarred, emotionally dead, and the otherwise forgotten" ("Every Member on Mission Through Churches Everywhere," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 50/4 [2014]: 497). In this impressive list of descriptors, however, one is noticeably missing—"lost," indicating the need to continuously emphasize this biblical concept to avert mission drift in the church.

¹³⁰Walter Freytag, quoted by Peter Beyerhaus, *Missions: Which Way?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 101.

¹³¹Glasser, *Mission Trends No. 1*, 8.

¹³²Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*, 563.

¹³³Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 292–93. Contrast these views with that of the World Council of Churches' recent articulation of mission, "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes" (2010), which states among other things, "We affirm that the purpose of God's mission is fullness of life (John 10:10) and that this is the criterion for discernment in mission. Therefore, we are called to discern the Spirit of God wherever there is life in its fullness, particularly in terms of

About the Author

Christopher R. Little has over eighteen years of cross-cultural experience in which he has sought to advance God's mission in Kenya, Europe, the Asian sub-continent, Mozambique, and Jordan. He holds a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary and presently is a Professor of Intercultural Studies at Columbia International University where he equips others for Christian mission (clittle@ciu.edu). He is the author of *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized* (William Carey Library, 2000), *Mission in the Way of Paul* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), and *Polemic Missiology for the 21st Century* (Amazon Kindle, 2013), as well as numerous articles on mission in various journals.

the liberation of the oppressed peoples, the healing and reconciliation of broken communities, and the restoration of the whole creation. We are challenged to appreciate the life-affirming spirits present in different cultures and to be in solidarity with all those who are involved in the mission of affirming and preserving life. We also discern and confront evil spirits wherever forces of death and negation of life are experienced” (cf. <http://www.raadvankerken.nl/fman/4194.pdf>).