A Limited Survey of Theological Rationales Proposed for “Good Works” in Mission

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Abstract

This paper provides a limited though representative survey of some theological bases that have been proposed and/or appealed to for the necessary place of social action in mission. The four categories into which this paper organizes these theological bases, with sub-points, are: 1) The Mission of God, 2) The Kingdom of God, 3) The Commission and Commandments of God, and 4) The Exemplary Model of God. The focus is not on arguments for the integration of evangelism and social action in mission or the question of the relationship between them, but on a variety of rationales for the inclusion of social action per se in mission(s). Authors surveyed include Orlando Costas, Samuel Escobar, Rene Padilla, Richard Gibb, Andrew Kirk, Andrew Lord, Christopher J.H. Wright, Ron Sider, Tom Sine, Ajith Fernando, and Vinoth Ramachandra. The paper also considers the World Council of Church’s 1982 document, “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation” since it is commended by evangelicals on occasion and is a document rich in theological justifications for social action in mission. This paper is primarily descriptive, though the author does offer in the conclusion some preliminary thoughts for the proper development of a critical response and his own position.
Introduction and Delimitation of the Topic

This paper provides a limited though representative survey of some theological bases that have been proposed for the necessary place of “social action,” “loving deeds,” or “mercy ministries” in the church’s mission. I have tried to organize in a systematic way the rationale of several theologians, pastors, and Christian activists for the legitimate and obligatory place in mission of ministry to the material (physical) and social needs of individuals and communities as distinct from evangelistic verbal proclamation. My perusal of certain books and documents concerning mission revealed various theological assumptions as well as theological and exegetical arguments for the inclusion of “good works” in the church’s missionary task. The focus of this survey is not on arguments for the integration of evangelism and social action in mission. Nor is this a survey of various positions concerning the relationship between social action(s) and verbal gospel proclamation and the question of “priority.” I do include, though, a summary of a few proposals regarding this matter because in some instances a (singular or multifaceted) relationship between evangelism and social action is proposed as part of a larger argument for social action in mission. Finally, I have neither focused on nor critiqued the ideas that 1) social action alone can be an adequate expression of mission, 2) social action is a non-verbal gospel “witness” (i.e. a kind of evangelism), or 3) the beneficial outcomes of social action may be deemed a kind of “salvation.”

The paper aims to be primarily descriptive, though I do venture in the conclusion to offer some preliminary thoughts for the proper development of a critical response and my own position.

Authors surveyed include those from Latin America (Orlando Costas, Samuel Escobar, and Rene Padilla), the United Kingdom (Richard Gibb, Andrew Kirk, Andrew Lord, and Christopher J.H. Wright), North America (Ron Sider, Tom Sine, and John Howard Yoder, e.g.), and Sri Lanka (Ajith Fernando and Vinoth Ramachandra). I have, though not exclusively, focused on evangelical contributors to missiological dialogue and have incorporated the World Council of Church’s 1982 document, “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation.” It is a document dense with justifications for social action and is a source cited by some of the evangelicals surveyed here. The four categories into which I’ve organized these theological bases are: 1) The Mission of God, 2) The Kingdom of God, 3) The Commission and Commandments of God, and 4) The Exemplary Model of God.
I. The Mission of God (or *missio Dei*)

Contemporary missiological debate “has been dominated” by the framing of mission as *missio Dei*, God’s mission, often defined as God’s (redemptive) presence and activity in history and the world that reaches beyond the influence of the church.⁴ Explaining Christian mission as human participation in the *missio Dei* functions as an argument for social action in mission when *missio Dei* has been defined as including social agendas and implications. The mission of God, in this perspective, begins with the loving nature of a triune God who is both Sender and Sent One for the sake of loving/serving/saving/blessing others.⁵ The Bible’s record of God’s various actions in history is a revelation of the divine character and divine agenda in which Christians should share and participate with God. Christopher Wright’s 500 page theology of mission, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, is framed within a technical argument for (and exposition of) such a “missional hermeneutic.”⁶ According to Wright, because God’s identity, character, and agenda are revealed in the Old Testament, a range of responses to that revelation by Christian readers are thereby rendered appropriate and “indeed imperative.”⁷

A. God on Mission and All Creation

God is the loving and personal Creator who has made the world to be a home for persons created for relationship with him. Thus all creation, especially humans created in God’s image (*imago Dei*), should be treated with respect.⁸ Because sin and the Fall have corrupted all aspects of the created environment, all will likewise be restored via God’s mission. Therefore, humans participating in God’s mission should act to protect and rehabilitate the earth as God’s possession and an appropriate habitat for other people. Mission should include efforts to remove structures and practices that disrespect individuals or societies.

B. God on mission and the Israelites

In the election of Israel as a particular people for God, God had a beneficent *universal* agenda in mind.⁹ He would use these “offspring of Abraham” to bless all nations (even “families”) of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). Sometimes the Abrahamic covenant functions as a theological
basis for social action in mission when the universal blessing promised through Abraham is construed as including material benefit, social justice, or relief from suffering.\textsuperscript{10} God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is a paradigmatic Old Testament event. We see displayed in the Exodus that God is a God of liberation who is opposed to subjugation.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, Christian mission should include activity to liberate captives and relieve the oppressed. J. Andrew Kirk even states in his book, \textit{What is Mission?} that:

\begin{quote}
Justice is what God does, for justice is what God is. By definition he acts consistently with his attributes. So we know justice through God’s acts of deliverance, through his laws and through the kind of relationships between human beings that he requires...\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Kirk then cites Micah 6:8, Isaiah 58:6 and Psalm 72:1-4 as examples of God’s requirement of justice in human relationships. The Mosaic covenant’s attention to specific matters of justice and the “shape” of Israel’s life together\textsuperscript{13} as well as the prophets’ repeated exhortations concerning community relationships and social justice bear witness to God’s character and mission. Wright points out that “the laws God gave and the prophets God sent” addressed social issues more than any other matter besides idolatry.\textsuperscript{14} Orlando Costas sums up this perspective thusly:

\begin{quote}
We must bear in mind that Christian mission is grounded on the mission of God as revealed in the history of Israel and incarnated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament discloses a God who is opposed to any attempts to subjugate; a God who is on the side of the widow and the orphan, the poor and the stranger; a God who raises the humble and casts down the oppressor; who frees from slavery, demands justice, freedom and peace.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

\section*{C. God on Mission and the Incarnation of the Christ}

Costas succinctly correlates the ministry of Christ with this Old Testament theme of justice and liberation by calling the incarnation of Christ the “incarnation of this mission” (my emphasis). Jesus’s “identification with the poor” and proclamation of wholeness,
liberty, and restoration was the logical consequence of t/this identity, incarnation, and mission.\textsuperscript{16} The fifth point of the WCC’s “Mission and Evangelism” (1982) says:

Jesus Christ was himself the complete revelation of God’s love, manifested in justice and forgiveness through all aspects of his earthly life...In his obedience to the Father’s will, in his love for humanity, he used many ways to reveal God’s love to the world: forgiving, healing, casting out demons, teaching, proclaiming, denouncing, testifying in courts, finally surrendering his life.\textsuperscript{17}

The document at this point goes on to infer, for the church, a corresponding and consequent “mission of love (Matt 22:37) through all aspects of its life.” In a similar way, while not explicitly locating Jesus’s ministry in the missio Dei, Samuel Escobar seems to assume this motif by joining in the common practice of referring to Jesus’s “mission.” Because Jesus’s mission was “holistic,” so, too, should the church’s mission be, he reasons in, The New Global Mission.\textsuperscript{18} He, of course, is also utilizing the theological basis of divine example or model that is presented in this paper below.\textsuperscript{19} Andrew Lord asserts in his book, Spirit-Shaped Mission: A Holistic Charismatic Missiology, that since Jesus came “to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8), Christians should (and can!) engage in “holistic” ministry against evil powers as well.\textsuperscript{20}

The gospel of Luke’s presentation in chapter 4 (vss. 16-21) of Jesus’s self-identification with the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6 is a programmatic\textsuperscript{21} text for several advocates of social action in mission. Kirk calls this text “the so-called ‘Nazareth Manifesto.’” He affirms that this is Jesus’s announcement of the beginning of a Jubilee age of mercy, compassion, and generosity rather than hoarded surplus.\textsuperscript{22} Wright deems this a Jubilee age for a mission of “restoration.”\textsuperscript{23} In their book, The Message of Mission, Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra say the inauguration of this Jubilee “era of the Lord” by the messiah, Jesus, means the church must proclaim Jesus, bring release to others, love her enemies, and work for peace in the world.\textsuperscript{24}
Wright enumerates five purposes of God’s mission accomplished at/by the cross of Christ (which he calls “the unavoidable cost of God’s total mission”): the guilt of human sin dealt with (Is 53:6; 1 Pet 2:24); the powers of evil defeated (Col 2:15); death destroyed (Heb 2:14); the barrier of enmity and alienation between Jew and Gentile removed (Eph 2:14-16); God’s whole creation healed and reconciled (Col 1:15-16, 20). Such a “holistic gospel” entails holistic mission by the church. The “Micah Declaration on Integral Mission” is a brief, evangelical document that posits at least a dozen theological bases for missional social involvement. Among them it includes, “On the cross God shows us how seriously he takes justice.” Therefore, its authors call upon Christians to “do justice.” Ron Sider, in his book, *Good News and Good Works*, proposes a “messianic” model of the atonement that incorporates the three emphases of Jesus’s work as teacher, substitute and victor. The human problems of ignorance, guilt, and powerlessness have been dealt with by the death of Christ so that his followers can now battle every manifestation of evil in the world. Sometimes proponents of social action in mission appeal to Titus 2:14, “[Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

Sider posits the bodily resurrection of Christ, being proof and first-fruit of the future resurrection of Christians (1 Cor 15:35ff; cf. 2 Cor 5:1-4), as an affirmation of physicality as well as of ministry to whole persons. “If the body is so good that the Creator became flesh, rose bodily, and promises to restore the whole created order including our bodies, then any approach to human need that ignores or neglects physical needs is flatly heretical.” Besides this theological affirmation and inference, there is an appeal made by some to the resurrection as a divine turning point in the history of redemption. The eighth point of “Mission and Evangelism” asserts:

The Church proclaims Jesus, risen from the dead. Through the resurrection, God vindicates Jesus, and opens up a new period of missionary obedience until he comes again (Acts 1:11). The power of the risen and crucified Christ is now released. It is the new birth to a new life, because as he took our predicament on the cross, he also took us into a new life in his
resurrection. 'When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come’ (II Cor 5:17).

D. God on Mission via Pentecost and the Apostolic Church

"Mission and Evangelism" continues from this point to a section about conversion and Christian lifestyles. New birth by the Spirit (Jn 3:3) produces a “total transformation of our attitudes and styles of life” characterized by obedience to God’s commands. Personal growth in “restoration of the divine image” is experienced.\(^{30}\) Earlier in the document reference is made to Pentecost (Acts 2:1-39) and the Spirit’s coming to the Christian community so that through them “the world may be healed and redeemed.”\(^{31}\) The redemptive mission of God in the transformative process of salvation (i.e. sanctification) is a theological basis for the one experiencing this change of lifestyle to be at work in a godly, redemptive manner.

Sider, Wright, and Kirk appeal to cosmic redemption (Rom 8:18ff; Col 1:19-20; cf. 2:15) and the new creation (Rev 21:1-22:5), a redemption in response to the Spirit-enabled groaning of the subjected created order, as a basis for social or ecological ministries in mission. Though there is a future, discontinuous aspect to this redemptive action of God (i.e. it will be finally and cataclysmically accomplished at Christ’s return), they each assert, for different reasons, that its future certainty entails social action or ecological ethics in mission now.\(^{32}\) Wright says in *The Mission of God*, “Our efforts therefore have a prophetic value in pointing toward the full cosmic realizing of that truth.”\(^{33}\) Elsewhere he writes, “If the planet was created by Christ, sustained by Christ, and belongs to Christ as his inheritance, the least we can do is look after it properly.”\(^{34}\) Kirk seems to echo Wright’s assertion of the prophetic value or function of social ministry when he concludes:

[God] is still concerned to service and repair a broken down version of the world, showing what even a partial restoration to life can be like; though eventually a new model will be needed. He is fulfilling his purpose through the consecrated hands and minds of those who know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 8:9).\(^{35}\)
There is another way that the *missio Dei* motif allegedly provides a theological basis for social action in mission. Sometimes it is simply asserted that beneficiaries of God’s broadly redemptive mission should, and/or necessarily (by definition) do, become instruments of multidimensional grace. The “Micah Declaration” states, “The grace of God is the heartbeat of integral mission. As recipients of undeserved love we are to show grace, generosity, and inclusiveness.”\(^{36}\) “Mission and Evangelism” states regarding 2 Corinthians 8:9, “To believe in Jesus the King is to accept his undeserved grace and enter with him into the kingdom, taking sides with the poor struggling to overcome poverty.”\(^{37}\)

### II. The Kingdom of God

Sider noted in 1993 that use of the word “kingdom” was growing at that time, being employed by social activists, charismatic Christians, and proponents of world evangelization alike.\(^{38}\) The theological themes of *missio Dei* and the Kingdom of God are closely related and overlapping. Rene Padilla has said the mission of the church is the mission of the reign of God.\(^ {39}\) Various aspects of the kingdom and the church’s relationship to it are posited as rationale for social action in mission. The Spirit’s role/work in the kingdom is sometimes noted, as is the inspiration to action that the coming kingdom’s current (partial, anticipatory) presence provokes.

### A. Church and Kingdom

Sider proposes the kingdom motif as the framework comprehensive enough for capturing what the church in mission should be about.\(^ {40}\) What follows is a summary of four relationships between the church and kingdom that are appealed to by various authors as theological rationales for social action by the church in mission.

1. **Church as manifestation of the kingdom:** Padilla, in *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom*, deems the pre-crucifixion mission of Jesus a manifestation of the kingdom in both Jesus’s preaching and works.\(^ {41}\) It is the church that, in the post-Pentecost era, “embodies the blessings of the new [kingdom] age.”\(^ {42}\) Andrew Lord
writes, “Holistic mission flows from the blessings of the eschatological kingdom that has been already inaugurated. It is a kingdom filled with the blessings of liberation, mercy, care, justice, reconciliation and healing.”

The “Micah Declaration” says that local churches are communities that “embody the values of the kingdom,” addressing the causes and results of poverty. In a study of four “holistic” ministries (in London, Mexico City, Colombia, and the Philippines) researcher Thomas McAlpine encountered the following form of this kingdom rationale (quoting one ministry leader in reflection on Matthew 6:10):

“As someone has put it, the work of the kingdom is not so much to get people out of earth into heaven, but to get as much of heaven as possible on to the earth and into people.”

2. **Church as instrument of the kingdom:** The church that embodies the kingdom is a church through which the kingdom is coming. Another ministry leader interviewed by McAlpine alluded to Matthew 6:33 and said, “We are trying to set all our church goals in terms of the kingdom of God and recognize that the church is not an end in itself but a means to an end: the end being the establishment of the kingdom rule of God in all areas of the life of our community.”

Padilla links the Holy Spirit’s creation of a new kingdom lifestyle among Christians with the church’s continuation and extension of the kingdom. In Richard Gibb’s monograph, *Grace and Global Justice: The Socio-Political Mission of the Church in an Age of Globalization*, Gibb infers the church’s responsibility “to be engaged in multidimensional liberating activity in the contemporary world” from the universality of God’s reign in the world, a reign “that includes not only the personal and spiritual dimensions, but also the social and political realities of human existence.” The church serves as embodiment and instrument of the kingdom because the kingdom is both a present and future reality; it is “already” and “not yet.”

3. **Church as sign of the kingdom:** The church as a visible sign for the world of the kingdom’s reality and presence is a prominent aspect of the ecclesiological project of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their book, *Resident Aliens*. The church demonstrates and explicates the meaning of the peace and justice that the kingdom brings. Padilla, integrating the concepts of the mission of God and kingdom of God, as well as the doctrines of pneumatology and ecclesiology, says:
God is at work to bring about his purpose for creation. The church in the power of the Spirit proclaims salvation in Christ and plants signs of the Kingdom, always giving itself fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that its labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).50

The Micah Declaration says the “signs of the Kingdom” provided by the church attest to the credibility of the church’s truth claims and proclamation of the gospel message.51 A church without these signs can actually “put off” persons otherwise attracted to the person of Christ.52

4. **Church as subjects in the kingdom:** Padilla provides another helpful category in his typology of the kingdom’s relationship to the church. The church is the community of the messiah; it is his church (Mat 16:18). Christians are his subjects in his kingdom. His Spirit empowers their obedience and brings about the “new society” of their life together in the kingdom.53 As the king’s subjects, Christians should obey the commands of Christ, commands to love and good works (see below). Sider appeals to Jesus’s warning in Matthew 25 of *false* faith in and/or submission to Christ in order to reinforce the necessity of ministry to the sick, poor, and those in prison.54

**B. Good Works and Good News in/of the Kingdom**

Sider prefers a kingdom framework for thinking about the church’s mission because, he claims, it so indisputably holds together in balance both “good news” and “good works.” The gospel Jesus proclaimed and delegated to his disciples was not that of individual escape from hell after death but a gospel of God’s real and current reign, with real consequences, on earth. The brevity of this paper does not allow for a survey of the proposed relationships between evangelism and social action or the question of which one, if either, has “priority” (and, if so, in what way[s]).55 However, three aspects of that debate are pertinent to this survey.

First, the idea of social action as a “bridge” to evangelism resonates with the sign concept. Escobar quotes the “Grand Rapids Report on Evangelism and Social Responsibility” to explicate what he means by the bridge idea: “[social activity] can break down prejudice
and suspicion, open closed doors and gain a hearing for the gospel.”

One aspect of this bridging dynamic is the provision by good works of credibility for the good news. Second, the church as manifestation of the kingdom is used as a theological basis by proponents of evangelistic priority as well as (ironically) advocates for social action in mission. The former argue that evangelism must be theologically and temporally prior to good works since good works (of the kingdom) are only done, and always done, by those already converted. Third, Sider bolsters his well-nuanced kingdom framework by citing a helpful caveat made by Orlando Costas: good works have an evangelistic dimension whether or not the one doing them consciously intends them to be “pre-evangelistic.”

III. The Commission and Commandments of God

Rationales for social action in mission include appeals to biblical imperatives, or mandates, and the attendant obligation of Christians to obey them.

A. Great Commission (Making Disciples)

Peskett and Ramachandra include, of course, an exposition of Matthew 28:16-20 in their theology of mission. Being (and making) disciples who obey all that Jesus has commanded (Mat 28:20a) entails living a life of “kingdom-revealing, law-fulfilling, justice-righteousness.” Costas asserts that the “missionary mandate” given by Christ to his disciples was given “in [the] perspective” of the Nazareth Manifesto of Luke 4:16-20. “Jesus commands his disciples to continue his work under guidance through the power of the Holy Spirit.” Therefore, healing and liberation are missionary activities. Kirk considers John 20:21 to be “the most all-encompassing of the New Testament’s texts on mission.” For Kirk, being sent out in mission in the same manner that Jesus was sent means doing evangelism, justice, compassion, and non-violence.
B. Greatest Commandment

In Sider’s discussion of proper resource allocation in local churches, he considers the parallel texts of Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34. Here Jesus says the “greatest commandment” is to love God and one’s neighbor. Sider concludes from this that an approximately equal amount of resources should be devoted to evangelism and social action respectively. In addition, Jesus’s commandment to love one’s enemies (Mat 5:44, e.g.) is cited by many who advocate social action in mission, especially peacemaking ministries.

C. Epistolary Exhortations

Besides theological constructs derived from the gospels and the commandments of Jesus in the gospels, some advocates of good works in mission appeal to exhortations in the apostolic epistles to early churches. Kirk quotes Paul’s instructions to the church in Rome that they “live peaceably with all” and feed hungry enemies (Rom 12:17-21). He takes this as a command to engage in ministries of “overcoming violence and building peace, mission in the way of Christ.” One can also find appeals to Galatians 6:10a (“Do good to all people...”) in the literature. David Hesselgrave, in his book, Paradigms in Conflict, names James 1:27 in a list of seven arguments used by (what he terms) “holists” for their conviction that social action is as vital to mission as is evangelism. While not a direct command, the hortatory import is clear.

D. Stewardship Mandate

The Christian responsibility to steward God’s created order receives much attention in Wright’s project. He grounds this responsibility fourfold in 1) God’s ownership of the good earth, 2) the earth-keeping mandate given to Adam (Gen 2:15), 3) the created realm’s redemption by Christ (Col 1:15-16, 20), and 4) “the earth as the field of God’s mission and ours.” The “Micah Declaration” says:

There is a need for integral discipleship involving the responsible and sustainable use of the resources of God’s creation and the transformation of the
moral, intellectual, economic, cultural and political dimensions of our lives. For many of us this includes recovering a biblical sense of stewardship.⁶⁷

Sider also appeals to a Christian responsibility to steward the earth, citing Genesis 1:27-30, Genesis 2:15, and Matthew 5:45 (noting the precedent of God’s care for all created things).⁶⁸ Padilla urges affluent nations and individuals to recognize “that economic life has meaning only in the context of human solidarity and stewardship and responsibility.”⁶⁹

**IV. The Exemplary Model of God**

The final theological basis or rationale in this survey is that of God as exemplary model. God the Father and God the incarnate Son are each posited as models for imitation by Christians on mission (or in missions).

**A. The Character of the Father**

As noted above, Wright’s project begins with the seminal idea that the character and identity of God, revealed via his mission in history, entails mission by the people of God. The reasons for this inference include the fact of humans in the *imago Dei* and commandments grounded in the character of God, such as “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 29:2).⁷⁰ Holiness, as explicated by Wright, includes social ethics. The “Micah Declaration” says that the cross reveals, “how seriously [God] takes justice” and implies the need to imitate this concern for justice on the part of Christians in integral mission.⁷¹

Kirk appeals to the concept of God as Father and exhorts those who claim to be God’s children to prove their asserted identity and relationship to God by imitating his care for the unrighteous and his mercy upon them, even to those who would be their enemies (and God’s enemies).⁷² Andrew Lord appeals to the fact that the restored *imago Dei* in redeemed persons is the image of a merciful God. The
godly characteristic of mercy ought to motivate ministries of healing and social work. Lord notes the compassionate heart of God is communicated to the Church by way of the Holy Spirit.

Though Sider rejects liberation theology’s prioritization of God’s alleged “preferential option” for the poor, he does remind readers of God’s real concern for the poor and the revealed fact that those who do not seek justice for them do not properly know God (citing Jer 22:13-16; Mat 25). McAlpine notes that while “holistic” mission does not happen exclusively among the poor, faithful ministries will inevitably work among and with them because of what Psalm 103:6 reveals about God: “The LORD works vindication and justice [or “righteousness”] for all who are oppressed.”

B. The Incarnation of the Son

Ajith Fernando deems Jesus to be “the message and model of mission.” Escobar unpacks a “Christological paradigm” for mission, an “incarnational pattern” for service in his chapter, “Christ: God’s Best Missionary.” It is a pattern that should be “taken seriously” and imitated by missionaries today. Sider says that because Jesus taught by word and deed, modeling the good news he proclaimed, so should Christians do both in mission. Christology teaches us to do ministry to whole persons, he says.

For Fernando, the incarnation of the Christ means that Christ followers must live lives committed to others to such a degree that Christians share in their sufferings. Like Jesus (and Paul), Christians should choose deprivation for the sake of holistic mission (citing, among other verses, Philippians 2:7-8). Gibb concludes in his study of globalization that Christians should imitate Christ as servant, identifying with the marginalized in a global society for the sake of bringing them tangible benefits. Costas, likewise, sees in the messianic life of Jesus an example of identification with the deprived and marginalized for and with whom the contemporary missionary labors. Peskett and Ramachandra, in exposition of Luke 4:16-30, poignantly state:

Given Jesus’s orientation of his ministry towards the ‘nobodies’ and the ‘outsiders’ (i.e. ‘the poor’) of his society, our own relation to ‘the poor’ of our
contemporary societies, and indeed our global world, becomes not merely a question of ‘social ethics’ but lies at the heart of our response to the gospel itself. Repentance must include a turning away from complicity in unjust structures of exclusion and repression, and a turning in compassion towards the dispossessed, the rejected and the oppressed.\(^{84}\)

The “Micah Declaration” says near its conclusion, “We want to see those living in poverty through the eyes of Jesus who, as he looked on the crowds, had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.”\(^{85}\)

**Concluding Remarks and Prolegomena to a Proposal**

This has been a mere limited sample of arguments and assumptions made by pastors, theologians, and activists in building their respective arguments for the inclusion of social action or “good deeds” in mission(s).\(^{86}\) Not all of them, in my opinion, are the product of sound exegetical and/or appropriate hermeneutical practice. That said, it should be self-evident that any scholarly attempt to define the “mission of the church” and/or the task of Christian “missions” must be aware of and interact with these several overlapping (even interlocking) theological rationales that I have categorized here as having to do with either “The Mission of God,” “The Kingdom of God,” “The Commission and Commandments of God,” and/or “The Exemplary Model of God.”

The late missions historian Stephen Neill famously quipped that, “When everything is mission, nothing is mission.” Recent books by conservative Reformed evangelicals address their authors’ concern that “mission creep” is wrongly marginalizing evangelistic ministry and unduly burdening believers with more obligations than can realistically be met (or than is biblical, anyway).\(^{87}\) The concern that churches and individual Christians abandon neither verbal articulation of the *evangel* nor attention to making Christian disciples from among *every nation* is a legitimate concern; it is also shared by several (if not all) of those whose views I have surveyed here. Question begging can cloud the debate about the definition of “missions” if the
discussion does not pertain as well to the matter of ecclesiology. The resolution to this apparent impasse, I propose, is to always consider Scripture’s robust ontology of the church (versus mere marks of the “true” church) while maintaining some kind of terminology that clearly distinguishes pioneer church planting work among all ethno-linguistic people groups on earth from everything else the church is, does, and should be doing (while promoting all of it).

Finally, in a similar way that the kingdom framework holds in balance the place of good news and good works, so does a “discipleship among the nations” motif or framework because it encompasses “all that [the resurrected King Jesus] commanded,” whether some particular activity is agreed upon as “mission(s)” or not. The local church is the divinely intended milieu and means for Christian discipleship, including evangelistic activity, cross-cultural mission, and the spiritual formation of converts. Church planting is the work of initiating and being a new expression of all that a congregation is supposed to be - as a company of Spirit-empowered (as well as Spirit-acted upon and Spirit-utilized) disciples in covenant relationship - albeit in a new and different place or among a new and different people. It would seem, then, that acts of love, mercy, and even justice amongst themselves (i.e. toward “one another”), toward other Christians, and toward unbelieving neighbors should be part of their experience from the beginning of the new congregation’s life together. Love, mercy, and justice should also be experienced as a manifestation and extension of the corporate life and ministries of the sending, birthing, and “mothering” congregation or congregations that temporarily nurture a nascent body.


12 Kirk, 104.

13 Yoder, 183.

14 Christopher J.H. Wright, “Whole Gospel, Whole Church, Whole World: We must believe, live, and communicate all that makes the Christian message staggeringly comprehensive good news,” in Christianity Today vol 53 no 10 (Oct 2009), 32.


16 Costas, 44.

17 WCC, 66.


19 See pages 13-15.

Andrew Lord call this text “programmatic” in reference to Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’s identity and/or Jesus’s understanding of his own mission, 63-64.

Kirk, 106-107.


Peskett and Ramachandra, 165-171.


Padilla and Sine, “Micah Declaration,” 1.


Sider, 142.

WCC, 67.

Ibid., 66. Cf. Yoder, 183, who appeals to the new lifestyle that was “spread...across the Mediterranean world,” by the “apostolic missionary community” (emphasis mine).

Sider actually draws the conclusion directly without any mediating reason given. Sider, 95.


Kirk, 55.

Padilla and Sine, 1.
37 WCC, 66. Cf. C. Rene Padilla’s call for Christians to “take seriously” (i.e. imitate) Christ’s “evangelical poverty” in his Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 137.

38 Sider, 49. It seems that interest in the kingdom motif is unabated, if perhaps surpassed now by attention to trinitarian and pneumatological models.


41 Padilla, Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom, 189.

42 Ibid., 68f.

43 Lord, 51.

44 Padilla and Sine, 2.

45 McAlpine, By Word, Work and Wonder: Cases in Holistic Mission, 111.

46 Ibid., 112.

47 Padilla, Mission Between the Times, 191-192.


50 Padilla, Mission Between the Times, 196-197.

51 Padilla and Sine, 2; Sider, 179f.
This is reminiscent of Lesslie Newbigin's designation of the Christian community as “plausibility structure” for the gospel message or claims of Christ.

Padilla, Mission Between the Times, 190-191.

Sider, 144.

For an introduction to this debate, see David J. Hesselgrave, Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), chapter 4. Hesselgrave argues for the “primacy” of evangelism. For a more nuanced presentation of the prioritist position, see J. Robertson McQuilken, “An Evangelical Assessment of Mission Theology of the Kingdom of God,” in The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium, eds. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 172-178. See also Sider, chapter 10, for a nuanced proposal.


McQuilken, “An Evangelical Assessment of Mission Theology of the Kingdom of God,” 177.


Peskett and Ramachandra, 187.

Costas, 44.

Kirk, 38-55.

Sider, 168-171.

E.g. Kirk, 145.

Kirk, 146.
Hesselgrave, Paradigms in Conflict, 124. Hesselgrave does not cite specific examples, but is an older missiologist who must be familiar with much of the relevant material. Hesselgrave also lists as bases for holism: God’s love and compassion for the poor, the exodus deliverance as paradigmatic, the character of the kingdom of God, the Great Commandment (to love), the Great Commission (to make disciples who obey all that Jesus commanded), and the example of the early church.

See especially The Mission of God, chapter 12.

Padilla and Sine, 2.

Sider, 141.

Padilla, Mission Between the Times, 140.


Padilla and Sine, 1.


Lord, 18.


McAlpine, 131.


Escobar, 106-111.

Sider, 71.

Ibid., 143-145.

Fernando, “Grounding our reflections in Scripture: biblical trinitarianism and mission,” 211.
81 Ibid., 220.

82 Gibb, Grace and Global Justice, 207-208.

83 Costas, 44.

84 Peskett and Ramachandra, 166.

85 Padilla and Sine, 2.


87 E.g. Michael Horton, The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011; also, Kevin 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). These authors posit a theological and practical distinction between the institutional and the organic church. They argue that a Word- and ordinance-centered great commission to make disciples belongs to the former while the great commandment and stewardship mandate belong to the latter in a way that affords great freedom to individual Christians as to how they apply them.
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