

Holistic Mission

Christopher Wright

Three lectures, Summary by Craig Combs, *Wycliffe Global Alliance Communications*

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1. Come in with praise; go out with hope

Sunday, 6 May 2012: The first of three presentations by Dr. Christopher J.H. Wright to look!2012.

Psalm 33: The certainty of hope

In our times some might ask, “Do we only have a ‘relativity of truth’? Is truth relative to culture only?” And many might say today, “There is a worldwide web, but there is no worldwide truth.”

With resounding opposition to such often-prevailing views, Christopher Wright responded: “No! There is such a thing as truth—truth for the whole world.”

As he began his exposition of Psalm 33, Wright highlighted the fact that God’s truth—revealed to us in God’s word—is *universal* truth, not merely something from a local deity worshiped by an ancient collection of tribes called ‘Hebrews’—applicable only to those people at that time and place. Affirming the criticality of God’s revealed word as something inherent to God’s plan (how God intends to become known by people of all nations), Wright noted as an example how Scripture was read and made clear to its hearers in the time of Nehemiah, soon after Israel’s return from exile:

“The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being said” (Neh 8:7-8 NIV).

A song of hope

Psalm 33 is a song of hope. It is a song about hope in a God who transforms, who creates, who rules all, who sees and cares for all. What makes it a song of hope indeed is its universal scope. This theme of universality is repeated several times through the psalm: “...the earth is full of his unfailing love” (v. 5); “...let all the people of the world revere him” (v. 8); “...from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth—he who forms the hearts of all...” (vs. 14-15).

Hope from the power of God’s word

God’s world-transforming word: Ps 33:4-5. God is in the business of putting the world to rights, reversing the power and effects of sin. The fourth and fifth verses remind us that God is a God of integrity, committed to justice, pouring out his love on all the earth. God is both just and loving and, as Wright put it, “on that foundation rests any concept we have of holistic mission, because if

we are engaged in his wider purpose of participating with God...it is because God himself is committed to these things.”

God's world-creating word: Ps 33:6-9. God spoke the world into existence. He spoke...and it happened. God is the God of the whole earth because he created the whole earth. Throughout human history people have believed that the heavens (v. 6), the seas (v. 7) and the earth (v. 8) all have spiritual powers of their own. But the truth is that they all owe their existence to the Lord. The heavens are merely air, vacuum and created bodies, not guiding astrological forces; the seas are merely large containers of water, not the locus of evil and chaos; the earth is merely rock and soil, not the embodiment of a fertility goddess.

God's world-governing word: Ps 33:10-11. God rules the world according to plan. Since God is the God of creation, he is also the God of history. The plans of the Lord are revealed through his prophets. All of creation and history are *from* Christ (God's creating Word) and *for* Christ (God's redeeming Word).

God's world-watching word: Ps 33:13-15. God is calling the world to account. God is the God who sees, who watches and considers “all who live on the earth.” How is this known? It is revealed through the power of Israel's stories, especially where those stories reveal God's care for individuals in need. The slave woman, Hagar, treated unjustly by her master and mistress, said of God, “He is *El Roi*, the God who sees me.” Hannah, a woman who suffered from barrenness, cried out, “You, the LORD, are a God who knows.”

Response

Given these truths about the power of God's word to transform, create, govern and see—how are we to live in light of it? The psalmist weaves appropriate responses throughout the fabric of this song of hope:

- we are called to *rejoice* (v. 12);
- we are called to *remember* where our salvation does and does not come from (vs. 16-17);
- we are called to *trust* and *hope* – with patience, joy and confidence (vs. 20-22).

“May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.”
Ps 33:22

2. What is ‘holistic mission’? Where should we start?

When we consider what ‘mission’ is, we can easily fall into a trap. Either it is, in its entirety, ‘evangelism and discipleship,’ or it is ‘social justice’ with the former taking a back seat or being ignored altogether.

Biblically, mission is inherently holistic. Biblically, the Church exists in history *for the sake of* God’s global mission. Holistic mission is mission that is concerned about the whole scope of human need. But that begs a question: What do people *really* need? God’s “global mission” for the Church incorporates the whole Church to the whole world. But that raises the question: What is legitimately included in the mission of the Church?

The true starting point: the mission of God starts with God

What is the great plan and purpose of God? Paul expressed it succinctly in his letter to the Ephesians: “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:10_b). God’s aim, as Dr. Wright put it, is “to redeem the whole of creation, broken by sin and evil, into the new creation, populated by the redeemed from every culture, through the cross and resurrection of Christ.” The whole counsel of God—the Scriptures from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21—reveal the arc of human history in light of God’s plan and purpose:

Creation – Fall – Redemption – New Creation

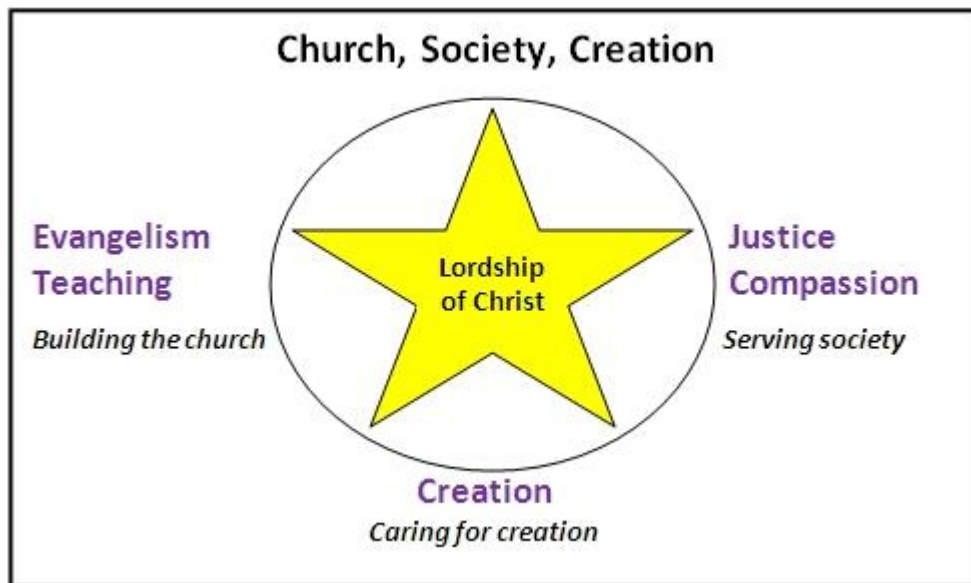
Five marks of mission

Many attempts have been made to define what God’s mission is. In 1984, the Anglican Communion published a declaration on “five marks of mission”: Evangelism, Teaching, Compassion, Justice and Creation care—all held together under the lordship of Christ. This conception has deep roots in the whole of the Bible, including the Great Commission. It might be diagrammed like this:



These five marks are interconnected, like points around the rim of a wheel. The wheel is united by its hub, the lordship of Christ over all aspects of life and mission.

Another way in which this model can be pictured is to arrange the five points under three broader categories of Christ’s mandate to His people—Building the church, Serving society and Caring for creation:



Does the Great Commission begin with a command, “Go and evangelize”? No, it begins with a statement: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He is Lord—over his church, over human society and over his own creation. So the concept of Biblical holism, in which we are called to participate, addresses our interface with individual persons, with society and with creation. All three of these are broken by sin, with resulting suffering, death and destruction—but all three are also included in the redeeming love and mission of God.

Building the church

Jesus now moves on to the matter of building his Church: “Therefore” (now that the issue of authority has been settled) “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Dr. Wright noted that, in Scripture, the word ‘Christian’ occurs only three times. But the word ‘disciple’ occurs around 237 times.

Evangelism

Evangelism, the first step in the disciple-making process, can be interpreted as “gospeling” or “good-newsing” to the world what God has promised and accomplished through Christ. But what is the place of this “gospeling” activity in the picture of holistic mission? Wright said there are two common traps into which we might fall. The first is to see holistic mission as including everything else *except* evangelism (a one-sided social gospel, if you will). The second trap is to view it as incorporating everything (including evangelism), but without integration. Wright called this the “bag of marbles” approach. It’s multiple-choice, a take-what-you-want-and-leave-the-rest philosophy.

Getting back to the wheel metaphor, we can see that the Lordship of Christ is central. It holds the wheel together and provides the power for it to meet the ground and move along it. This is a good picture of integral mission (another way of saying holistic mission). All parts are interconnected,

each part has its function, and all working together move the Church forward. So, what does the fullness of evangelism look like as we speak of ‘integral mission’? It is both *proclamation* and *demonstration* of the good news.

Teaching/Discipling

When Jesus walked the earth and chose 12 men to follow him, he spent the best part of three years doing one thing: teaching. And in doing so he was following an age-old biblical/rabbinical tradition. Dr. Wright noted Andrew Walls’ observation that the Old Testament narrative of God’s dealings with Israel was the “oldest and longest program of Theological Education.”

The Apostle Paul demonstrated all the important aspects of teaching (disciple making) in the course of his long ministry. Of course, as he traveled on his several missionary journeys, he preached the good news of Jesus Christ wherever he went. But that was not all.

- Having spent years in Ephesus teaching and training the believers, he was later able to declare to them, “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27).
- He spent time working intensively with other members of his mission team – Timothy, Titus and Apollos – including writing letters to them to remind them of all he had taught them and to encourage them in faithfulness.
- When the church at Corinth fell into factionalism, splitting over which leader they would follow, Paul powerfully admonished them concerning the importance of unity under Christ: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Cor. 1:10).
- Paul was the author of a major portion of the New Testament. His writings reflect a strong concern that the people of God would grow—not in numbers—but in depth of knowledge, love, faith and obedience. In other words, Paul was concerned about our *maturity* in Christ.

“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.” Col. 1:28

3. The Church and Global Mission

Now, in his third and final message, Dr. Wright turns to the areas of compassion and justice as the expressions of our service to society; and to a fuller biblical understanding of the place of creation care in the full scope of holistic mission.

Serving society: expressed through compassion and justice

When Jesus was about to depart this earth and gave his final instructions to his disciples, he told them (after first reminding them of the authority vested in him by the Father) that they were to go into all the world, make disciples of all nations and, in that endeavor, “teach them to obey all I have commanded you.”

Wright called this expression within Jesus' Great Commission "pure Deuteronomy." There was always a powerful emphasis on obedience to God's commands in the books of Moses, particularly in Deuteronomy. It was not just the following of a set of rules; it was imitating the very nature of God as a God of both justice and compassion. A key passage on this theme is Deuteronomy 10:12-19, which includes a foreshadowing of Jesus' final instructions: "And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, *to walk in all his ways*, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and *to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving to you today* for your own good?" (vs. 12-13, emphasis added).

And what are "his ways"? They clearly include justice and compassion: "For the Lord your God...shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing" (vs. 17-18). The passage goes on to say in verse 19 that God's people should do the same things God does. Wright cites other passages (from among many throughout Scripture) that echo God's heart in this matter:

- Matt 5:6; 6:33 – "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled;" and "...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (or justice)..." (Wright noted here that the Hebrew and Aramaic words for 'righteousness' and 'justice' come from the same root.)
- Matt 23:23 – Jesus speaking to the teachers of the law and Pharisees: "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness."
- Micah 6:8 – "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Dr. Wright developed this theme further in his more recent book, *The Mission of God's People*, which he calls the "So what?" of his earlier work, *The Mission of God*. The central theme of the book is captured in the posing of two questions: Who are we (who are we to be)? -and- What are we here for (what are we to do or proclaim)?

There are many examples from Old Testament Scripture that reveal God's expectations on both aspects—*being* and *doing/proclaiming*. Wright cited these passages as examples:

- Genesis 18:19 – Abraham was "to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just."
- Exodus 19:6 – God's people were to be holy (set apart; different) and be a "kingdom of priests" in the midst of the nations.
- Leviticus 18:1-5 – God's people are to be holy as He is holy and to live in such a way as to be distinctive from the nations.
- Deuteronomy 4:6-8 – God's people are to be visible to the nations in such a way that they will see and ponder who God is and what God is doing in their midst.

Thus, Israel had a mission to *be* something for the sake of the knowledge of God among the nations. It should be clear, from the above passages and others, that our 'being' – who and what we reflect – is an extension of God in us, revealing His own character and values through us to a broken world.

Highlighting a passage from Isaiah 58, Wright said that light shines from people who are committed to compassion and justice. What characterizes this shining light according to Isaiah? If God's people "loose the chains of injustice...set the oppressed free...share food with the hungry...provide the poor wanderer with shelter...clothe the naked"—"Then your light will break forth like the dawn" (Isaiah 58:6-8). Wright concludes on this passage: "Light was ethical as well as theological."

These things are echoed and reinforced in the New Testament. Jesus says to his disciples, "You are the light of the world ... Let your light shine before men, that *they may see* your good deeds *and glorify* your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14, 16 – emphasis added).

The apostles and the early church were as committed to living in obedience to Jesus' teachings on serving society, as to preaching about salvation through Jesus:

- Acts 4:32-35 – "...they shared everything they had...there were no needy persons among them...money...was distributed to anyone as he had need."
- Galatians 2:10 – Paul, reflecting on the apostles' instructions to him: "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."
- Paul's letter to Titus – Paul, giving instructions on the basis of the grace of salvation received: "And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good" (3:8). Paul repeats the admonition about "doing what is good" numerous times in this letter. In Roman times, one who "did good" was a social benefactor, not just someone who did nice things.
- James 2:14-17 – Using an example of failing to have compassion toward those who are without the basics of life—clothing and food—James says, "...what good is it? ... Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."
- 1 John 3:17-18 – "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

Citing the work of Wycliffe and SIL in their work of providing Scripture as an example of the out-working of these things, Wright said, "You know perfectly well that, when you give people the gift of a preserved language, a language now written down...and give them status and literacy, you are engaged in a process that has social, political and economic impact and results ... because you are affirming the dignity of every language and culture and ethnē. You are saying, 'everybody matters, everybody counts.' You are building on the biblical truth ... that God created ethnic diversity, and loves it, and wants to affirm the dignity of every language and tribe, people and nation."

Caring for creation

As a preamble to his Great Commission to his Church, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven *and on earth* has been given to me" (Matt 28:18 – emphasis added). In saying this, Jesus is once again hearkening back to ancient truth as expressed in Deuteronomy: "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below. There is no other" (Deut 4:39).

But what are the implications of this – that he has *all* authority "on earth"? After all, he is about to depart this earth!

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, gives us a powerful and clear statement about the role of Christ in creation (1:15-20). He tells us that "...all things were created by him and for him...and in him all things hold together" (vs. 16-17). Further, "...God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven..." (vs. 19-20). The entire universe was created, is sustained, and will be redeemed by Christ. In short, since Jesus is Lord of all creation, including the earth, we are to care for and about it.

Wright asked: Why is it, that there is so much neglect of this truth among evangelicals? It's because of a defective theology of creation itself. It's almost as if our Bibles began with Genesis 3 and ended with Revelation 20. But the Bible begins with Genesis 1 and 2, and ends with Revelation 21 and 22; it begins with creation and ends with the new creation. So a whole theology of redemption must include creation. What does God say about his creation?

The goodness of creation

First, creation is good in relation to God:

- It belongs to God (Deut 10:14; Ps 24:1)
- It reveals God (Ps 19; Ps 50:6; Acts 14:17; Rom 1:20)
- It has intrinsic value; it is valued by God (Gen 1:31)

Second, creation is good in relation to us:

- Humans are made in God's image to rule in God's way (Gen 1:26-28; Ps 145)
- Humans were placed in the garden to serve and to keep it (Gen 2:15)

The glory of creation

Creation exists to give glory to God and for mutual enjoyment – God in his creation and creation praising God:

- God's glory through the praise of creation (Psalms 145, 148, 150; Rev 5:13)
- God's glory in the fullness of creation (Ps 104:31; Isaiah 6:3). It needs to be noted here, that we are not talking about pantheism, since Scripture tells us, "You have set your glory *above* the heavens." God is both outside of and ruler over his own creation.
- Therefore, given these truths about the relationship between God and his creation, whatever destroys creation diminishes the praise and glory of God.

The goal of creation

All creation is included in God's plan of redemption (because creation *needs* redemption):

- There will be a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17-25)
- All of creation will rejoice when the Lord reigns (Ps 96:10-13)
- Creation will be liberated from the bondage of decay (Rom 8:18-21)

- Creation will be reconciled to God through the cross (Col 1:20)
- Creation will be purged, not obliterated (2 Peter 3:10-13)

All of this, Wright observed, reveals that the prophets “included ecology in their eschatology.”

Finally, humanity itself has a final destination when all these things have been accomplished:

- Our destination is not just ‘heaven,’ but life in a new creation; there is a new heaven *and* a new earth; God will come down – He will come here and dwell among us in this new creation (Rev 21:1-4).
- The glory of all human languages and cultures will be purged and purified, and then brought into the City of God (Rev 7:9; 21:24-26).

So what?

What are the implications of all this, for the Church and its mission? Should everyone be trying to do everything? What happens when things become difficult, when results are not as expected? Dr. Wright concludes his presentation on Holistic Mission and The Church and Global Mission with some key reminders:

1. God’s whole mission is for God’s whole Church. No one is exempt. Dr. Wright said it in a memorable way: “To say ‘missional church’ is like saying ‘female woman.’ If it isn’t female, it isn’t a woman; if it isn’t missional, it isn’t the church.”
2. The whole church’s mission includes every individual member and the whole of everyday life. Specialization is okay. But it isn’t compartmentalized into false dichotomies of ‘sacred/secular’ or ‘mission/non-mission.’
3. The activities of mission can have unpredictable, ambiguous results because we live in a fallen world. Fields of wheat invariably grow weeds as well. That’s okay. Our job is to remain faithful while remaining secure in the knowledge that God is sovereign.

- See more at: <http://www.wycliffe.net/missiology?id=2729#sthash.WMdAYPtk.dpuf>