

# Calling the Church of Christ Back to Humility, Integrity and Simplicity<sup>1</sup>

Chris Wright

## The mission of God

About 4,000 years ago, God launched his global mission, with the first Great Commission, to Abraham, telling him to “Go ... be a blessing ... and through you all nations on the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3). That is God’s great mission. That, says Paul, is the gospel that the Scriptures announced in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3:8-9) – God will bless the nations!

How would that happen? God’s plan was that it should happen by God first creating a people, his own people, a people chosen in Abraham, redeemed through Christ, **and** (as God reminded himself in conversation with Abraham after lunch one day in Genesis 18), a people called to “walk in the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice”, so that God could keep his promise to Abraham and bless all nations through him (Gen. 18:19). That’s why I chose Abraham, God says. The whole purpose of our election is ethical and missional (as Paul observed, when he calls us to live out the fruit of our predestination by living to the praise of God’s glory (Eph. 1:4, 6, 11-12).

And God has been keeping that promise to bless the nations. Some foreigners came to faith in the living God and experienced his blessing in the Old Testament, e.g. Rahab, Ruth, Naaman. Many more in the New Testament, such as the woman of Syro-Phoenicia, the Roman centurion, the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius – and multitudes, of course, through the missionary work of Paul and his team. And of course, at the Cape Town Congress we celebrated, visibly and tangibly, that the people of God are now to be found among many nations, tribes and peoples all over the earth. That’s God’s great mission.

## Obstacles to God’s mission

But there were, and still are, many obstacles; many things that keep frustrating and hindering that great loving, saving, mission of God. The Cape Town Congress considered many of them. Which might we consider to be the greatest of those obstacles to God’s desire for the evangelization of the world?

I would suggest that it is **not**: other religions, persecution, postmodernity, or resistant cultures. The overwhelming witness of the Bible is that the greatest problem for God in his redemptive mission for the world is ... *his own people*. What hurts God most, it seems, is not just the sin of the world, but the failure, disobedience and rebellion of those whom God has redeemed and called to be his people, his holy people, his distinctive people.

In the Old Testament, the vast bulk of the words of the prophets were addressed to God’s own people - Israel, and only a few chapters to ‘oracles against the nations’. By contrast, we tend to spend all our time attacking and complaining about the world and ignoring our own failures. God’s calling on Old Testament Israel was very clear, as it is for us:

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the slightly edited text of the address given on Day 5 of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, Cape Town, October 2010. It is published in Julia Cameron (ed.), *Christ Our Reconciler: Gospel / Church / World* (Hendrickson, 2012), pp. 149-158.

- God called them to be 'a light to the nations'. But according to Ezekiel (5:6; 16:44-52), Israel sank even lower than the nations, including Sodom and Gomorrah. They were hardly a shining light in that condition!
- God called them to know him, to love and worship him alone, as the one true living God. But they constantly went after other gods, falling into repeated idolatry. This was a tragic squandering of the greatest privilege and blessing they had -- the fact that they were his redeemed, covenant people, chosen for the sake of bringing God's blessing to the rest of the nations.

## **Idolatry**

I believe that idolatry is the biggest single obstacle to world mission. For if God's mission is to bring people into the blessing of knowing and worshipping him alone as Creator and redeemer, then the greatest threat to that is the worship of other gods, false gods, no gods. But the problem, as we see in the Old Testament very clearly, is **not** just the idolatry of the foreign nations and their false gods, but the idolatry that is rampant among God's own people.

There are many false gods and idols, of course, that entice us away from the living God alone, but three in particular seem especially seductive, just as much for evangelical Christians today as for Israel of old:

- the idol of power and pride;
- the idol of popularity and success;
- the idol of wealth and greed.

The wise writer of Proverbs 11:2-4 puts all three together in three successive verses

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,  
but with humility comes wisdom.  
3 The integrity of the upright guides them,  
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.  
4 Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,  
but righteousness delivers from death.

Those verses are wise warnings, but the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles all challenge us with powerful, prophetic condemnation of these three destructive idols that pollute and pervert the mission of God's people.

### **1. Power and Pride.**

Listen to the word of the Lord, through Isaiah:

The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled). ... The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, ... and the idols will totally disappear. (Isa. 1:12-18)

Listen to the God's great requirement, through Micah:

What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:8)

Listen to the Lord Jesus Christ himself:

Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; .... 26 But you are **not** to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and

the one who rules like the one who serves. ... I am among you as one who serves.  
Lk. 22:24-27

Listen to the apostle Paul. When he talks about the life that is worthy of our calling in the gospel, the very first thing he says is this:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Eph. 4:2)

Sisters and brothers, to be obsessed with power and status in Christian work is sheer disobedience to Christ and the Bible. It destroys the very thing we are trying to accomplish.

We are called back in repentance to **Humility**.

## **2. Popularity and success**

Obsession with these idols leads us into manipulation, dishonesty, distortion, duplicity . We can end up like the false prophets, who claimed to speak the word of God but were really acting in their own self-interest. They claimed to be 'men of God', but they were really only giving the people whatever they most wanted to hear or see at the time. They were popular and successful - but they were false prophets in the grip of a false god.

Listen to the word of God through Micah:

As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him. ... Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us." (Mic. 3:5-11)

Or listen to the word of God through Jeremiah:

From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. (Jer. 6:13-15).

You don't need to feel ashamed, or blush, when you're popular and successful, when you've got thousands of followers, mega-everything, and a lifestyle to match. But you can still be a false prophet, with all of that.

And even in the early church, Paul warned against those who 'peddle the word of God for profit', those who "use deception and distortion" (2 Cor. 2:17, 4:2). The church in Corinth was dazzled by these 'super apostles' as he called them. They loved to boast about their credentials, their impressive speaking, their great popularity. **They** were the kind of leaders the church at Corinth wanted, because when a church has leaders like that it makes them proud of their own image. 'Look at us, we have [BIG NAME] as *our* pastor!'

But listen to Paul:

Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. (2 Cor. 11:13-15.)

Sisters and brothers, we cannot build the kingdom of the God of truth on foundations of dishonesty. Telling lies about our success, or accepting what we know to be very questionable statistics, in order to get, or to grant, funding for our projects, is nothing short of bowing down to the idols of manipulated success. The pressures are sometimes very great. We can justify all kinds of questionable practices on the grounds of 'doing God's work'. But God's work cannot be done by using the tools of Satan (lies) to boost the statistics of our own success.

We are called back in repentance to ***Integrity***.

## **2. Wealth and Greed**

The idolatry of greed infected the religious leaders of Israel too.

Listen again to the word of the Lord through Micah:

Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us." (Micah 3:11)

Isaiah saw in his day, as ours, a whole culture of greed, accumulation, and covetousness – which Paul reminds us *is* idolatry.

Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. (Isa. 5:8)

Of course, we know that God provides abundantly for his people. But Moses, who rejoiced in that expectation, also warned against the danger:

When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Deut. 8:10-18)

Jesus gave the same stern warning: 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.' (Luke 12:15). And neither, he could have added, does a person's ministry. And yet it seems that some Christians actually rate great leaders and mega-pastors by how wealthy they are.

We are called back in repentance to ***Simplicity***.

### **The temptations of Jesus**

It is interesting to notice that Jesus himself, in fact, faced the same three fundamental temptations (Satan has no originality).

- The devil offered him *power and status* over all nations, from a high mountain. Jesus refused it, choosing to worship God alone. Jesus chose the path of *humility*.
- The devil suggested he *manipulate* the crowds by a spectacular death-defying miracle. Jesus recognized the way Satan was twisting Scripture to get him to achieve success. He chose the path of *integrity* in his trust in God.
- The devil dangled before him the *lucrative prospect* of abundant food for himself and the hungry masses – turn stones into bread! Why, you could make a fortune for

yourself with such a miracle! Jesus resisted with the scriptural truth that God could supply bread, but human beings need greater food for life than that. He chose the path of *simplicity* in dependence on the promises of God.

So Jesus resisted these temptations to give in to the false gods. But tragically, it seems that so many Christian leaders (including mission leaders) blatantly *fail* these tests at precisely the points that Jesus overcame them. They cannot resist the temptations of elevated status, manipulated success and selfish greed. And then the whole church pays the cost of their failure, in the loss of integrity and credibility. So whenever we point a finger of criticism at the sin of the world, we are told, bluntly and rightly - 'Clean up your own back yard'. We are, in short, a scandal, a stumbling-block, to the mission of God.

### **The need for reformation**

In the pre-Reformation medieval church in Europe, we see these same three idols masquerading in the corrupt ecclesiastical system. There were powerful bishops, wielding enormous wealth and power. There were highly popular and successful cults of saints and shrines, making all kinds of false claims about their relics and miracles. There were people making their fortune from selling indulgences – exploiting the poor with promises of good things in the life to come.

Meanwhile, the ordinary people lived in ignorance of the Bible, which was neither available in their language nor preached from the pulpits. Reformation was the desperate need of the hour.

Surely the same desperate need is with us now. And, I dare to propose, it needs to begin in the worldwide evangelical community. For there are parts of the so-called evangelical church today where the same three idols are rampant.

- There are self-appointed super 'apostles' and other mighty and elevated leaders, unaccountable to anybody, popular with thousands of followers, exploiting the flock of Christ, unconcerned for the weak and poor, showing none of the marks of an apostle as described by Paul, and with no resemblance to the crucified Christ. That is nothing less than the idolatry of pride and power
- There is a craze for 'success', for 'results', to win the largest number in the shortest time. There is obsession with statistics and outcomes, leading to wild claims, unsubstantiated numbers, untrue reports – blatant manipulation and collusion in falsehood, all for the sake of funding, and ministry success and growth. That is the idolatry of success.
- There is the so-called Prosperity Gospel. Now we should certainly affirm what the Bible says about God's blessing, about the power of God's Spirit and the victory of God over all that crushes and curses human life. But many promoters of this teaching distort the Bible (if they use it at all). They appeal to human greed or exploit human need. They have no place for the Bible's teaching on suffering and taking up the cross. They succeed only in enriching themselves to a lifestyle utterly contrary to the teaching and example of Christ. This is surely the idolatry of greed.

And meanwhile, just as in the pre-Reformation church so today, the ordinary people of God in many churches around the world live in ignorance of the Bible. They have pastors who neither know the Bible themselves nor have the willingness or ability to preach and teach it clearly and faithfully. So we have the matching scandals of material obesity and biblical starvation - even in churches that claim the name evangelical.

Reformation, a twenty-first century reformation, is once again the desperate need. And it needs to start with us.

### What then must we do?

We need a radical return to the Lord . We need to take heed to the prophetic word, from the prophets and apostles of God, and from the Lord Jesus Christ himself: ‘Repent, and believe the gospel....’ Remember, Jesus preached that message, made that command, *not* to pagan unbelievers, gentile outsiders, people of other faiths, but to those who already claimed to be God’s covenant people. The command to repent comes first to the people of God – in the Old and New Testament. So,

- Before we go out to the world, we must come back to the Lord
- If we want to change the world, we must first change our own hearts and our ways (Jer. 7:3-8)
- As we take the words of the gospel to the world, we must also take with us words of confession to God (Hos. 14:1-2)
- Before we get off our seats to seek the lost, we must get on our knees to seek the Lord.

At the Cape Town Congress, this message was followed by a short time of confession, repentance and prayer for God’s forgiveness, calling upon ourselves in the following terms:

- Where we have revelled in our status or squabbled over honours, or abused power, let us walk humbly with our God, for the Lord gives grace to the humble but puts down the proud.
- Where we have manipulated and distorted, exaggerated and boasted, let us walk in the light and truth of God, for the Lord looks on the heart and is pleased with integrity.
- Where we have sought to enrich ourselves, or have been envious of those who do so, let us walk in the simplicity of Jesus, for we cannot serve God and mammon.

**H**UMILITY,  
**I**NTEGRITY,  
**S**IMPLICITY.

H.I.S.

HIS People. Let us be what we are, for God’s sake, for our mission’s sake, for the world’s sake.