Gospel-centred integral mission - in Acts?

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Gospel-centred integral mission is now my own preferred phrase for what I believe to be the biblical mission mandate, in theology and practice.[1]

Mission must be gospel-centred, provided we are using that word "gospel" in its full biblical sense, as the good news of the specific historical events that God both promised and accomplished through Jesus of Nazareth, along with their implications as regards his status (as Messiah and Lord), the kingdom of God, the destiny of all creation, and our own destinies in response to who Jesus is and what he accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. It is, as Paul says quite often, "the gospel of God", i.e. primarily good news *from God and about God and about what God has done*, not just a formula or prayer for individual salvation.

To put it another way, the centrality of the gospel is not quite the same thing as the primacy of evangelism, for the simple reason that the gospel is what *God* has done (perfectly, finally and forever), whereas evangelism is what *we* do (well or poorly or not at all). It is the gospel (not evangelism) that is the power of God for salvation, says Paul. And it is the gospel of God - the sheer fact that *there is* good news because God has acted for good - that validates all that we do in mission, including evangelism, since good news must, of course, be "good-news-ed"- proclaimed in words that bear witness to what God has done.

And mission must be "integral", in the sense that the central truth of the gospel (as defined above) integrates, i.e. holds together, authorises and motivates, all that we do in word and deed, as God's people called to participate with God in his redemptive mission within history. And as the Lausanne Movement has affirmed for half a century now, integral (or holistic) mission holds together both the proclamation of the gospel in evangelism and the demonstration of the gospel in works of compassion and justice, and also, since Cape Town 2010, our creational responsibility for the earth that, according to Paul's gospel in Colossians 1:15-23, belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance. It is the truth and centrality of the whole biblical gospel of God that governs and drives every aspect of our missional thinking and acting in God's world for God's glory.

As regards the first two - evangelism and social engagement - the relationship is still portrayed by some speakers and writers as a matter of "tension", or "priorities," in spite of the immense quantity of theological reflection that the global evangelical community has done, including especially in the decade following Lausanne I (1974), demonstrating biblically that, although of course they are not the same thing, they are inseparably and integrally related within and around the centrality of the gospel itself. Any "tension" between them is not in the Bible but

[1] It is now also the title of Chapter 13 in my fully revised and updated *Mission of God* 2nd edition (IVP, 2025).

generated by ourselves, in the way churches may emphasise or engage in either while ignoring or failing in the other. But that is a fault in the church, not a reason to argue the priority of one over another or invent some kind of tension between them.

For example, it is often objected (to me when advocating an integrated and holistic understanding of mission), that churches which become active in social projects of various sorts can easily lose their passion for evangelism (if they had any) and slide into failing to preach the gospel. To which I say, that is *not* holistic mission and such churches need the rebuke and correction of the Holy Spirit and his word. It is not a reason for others to neglect the social implications, claims and demands of the biblical gospel. But there are churches also, whole denominations sometimes, well known for evangelistic zeal, but lacking any apparent concern or action in relation to issues of deprivation and injustice in their own environment or globally, sometimes with the claim of being "apolitical" (a term that would make little sense to the prophets). Let's remember that the gospel, again in Paul's terminology, is a matter of obedience, not just of belief.

Once again, it is the centrality of the biblical gospel itself that integrates all these dimensions of mission, and summons the whole church to reflective and strategic obedience to "all that I have commanded you" (as Jesus said), with multiple giftings, callings and sendings, and, yes, a variety of priorities spread across those equipped to variously address them.

But doesn't Acts show that the early church prioritized the preaching of the word over social issues, when a conflict between them surfaced in chapter 6? That is a misunderstanding of Acts 6 which I think needs to be corrected.

Luke has already shown twice that the small but growing community of believers in Jesus as Messiah, in the power of the Holy Spirit, has been characterized *both* by fearless preaching of the gospel that the crucified Jesus had been raised by God and was now exalted as the world's true king, *and* by a quality of *koinonia* that gave economic substance to their spiritual unity in generous care for the poor. And Luke emphasises that the church was growing exponentially in the wake of *both* those characteristics (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35).

Then come the threats to this early embodied gospel witness. First, we shudder at the devastating impact of intentional lying and deceit within the community, lying in fact to the Holy Spirit and to God (5:1-11). This was dramatically exposed and confronted by the Apostle Peter, with a signal instance of divine wrath. But still the church goes on growing (5:14). Then comes the threat from the religio-political authorities, including imprisonment and flogging, which totally fails to stop the apostles "teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (5:17-42). The *word* goes forth; the church grows

And then comes the threat to the *social* harmony of the community, which Luke has so carefully described twice as the life of people transformed by the gospel and the presence of Jesus through his Spirit. The very acts of compassion that were characteristic and attractive become a source of division along linguistic fault lines, with perceived favouritism and injustice doing their ugly work. This is a serious threat to the church's demonstration of the gospel's power. And what is the apostles' response this time?

Unfortunately the NIV does not really help us here. This is how they translate the apostles' words in Acts 6:2. "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry

of the word in order to wait on tables." Now that immediately sounds like a pejorative comparison. Obviously, being a preacher is more important than being a waiter! (obvious to some, perhaps, but not a good biblical theology of work and vocation; but that's another issue). What the translation obscures is the fact that the Greek uses the same root three times:

- in v. 1, *diakonia* (translated "distribution of food", but simply means "ministry", or "ministration" [KJV]);
- in v. 2, *diakonein* "to minister/serve at tables" (NIV inserts "ministry" before "of the word". It is not in the Greek there.
- in v. 4, *diakonia* (ministry of the word).

In other words - the whole passage is about *ministry*, in two distinct forms: one the *ministry* of caring for widows, the other the *ministry* of preaching and teaching the word. John Stott puts it like this:

> It is essential to note that both distributing food and teaching the word were referred to as ministry (*diakonia*). Indeed both were Christian ministry, could be full-time Christian ministry, and required Spirit-filled people to perform them. The only difference between them was that one was pastoral ministry, and the other social. It was not that one was 'ministry' and the other not; nor that one was spiritual and the other secular; nor that one was superior and the other inferior. It was simply that Christ had called the Twelve to the ministry of the word and the Seven to the ministry of tables.[2]

And that further points to a more careful understanding of the apostles' point. They were concerned for their own Christ-given priority, not referring to the whole church. "It would not be right for *us*…" they say. The emphasis is clear at the start of v. 4, where the "and we…" of the NIV overlooks the particle *de,* which contrasts their task with the task they assign to the Seven. It would be better rendered: "We will turn this responsibility over to *them*. But as for *us*, we will stick firmly to prayer and the ministry of the word." It would not be inappropriate to use the word "mission" here. The apostles certainly had their mission already, direct from the risen Christ. But the Seven also now had *their* mission, as part of the overall mission of the church as a whole who chose them and accepted their apostolically authorised task.

The apostles know the priority that Christ had given to *them* as authorised apostles, specifically called and sent to bear witness in words and signs to the crucified, risen, ascended and reigning Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ. They are not telling the church as a whole that caring for the widows in practical and impartial provision was of secondary or lesser importance for the whole church, or even worse (as is sometimes alleged) a "distraction" from the real work of mission. On the contrary, in view of the *importance* of that specific *diakonia* in the visible, gospel-embodied witness of the new community, it must be done and done well - and for that reason it must become *the priority for those who would be appointed to see to it.* And it is noteworthy that when the Seven were chosen, they were essentially "ordained" to the task, with prayer and laying on of hands - exactly the same

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[2] John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (IVP, 1992), p. 141.

significant actions that launched Paul and Barnabas on their second missionary journey (Acts 13:3).[3]

So it seems to me that when Luke concludes this episode (and a major section of his book) with another reference to the word of God spreading and the disciples increasing in number rapidly (6:7), he is not implying that this growth of the church was because the ministry of the word was prioritized over social care, but rather that *both key ministries* were effectively maintained by wise and godly decisions that ensured *both* were prioritized respectively by those called, appointed and Spirit-filled for each, so that the witness of *the whole church,* in word and deed, in proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, in obedience to the Messiah and empowered by the Spirit, continued to bear abundant fruit.

Of course, this careful prioritization of each dimension of the church's mission for those appointed to respective ministries did not mean any kind of watertight separation between them. It was perfectly possible for Stephen to be a Spirit-empowered preacher and teacher, as it was for Philip to be a Spirit-transported evangelist, as it was for Paul to follow up his early famine-relief trip with a constant remembering the needs of the poor "all along" in the midst of his church-planting work (Gal. 2:10).

In the church today, then, gospel-centred integral / holistic mission should mean that any local church community ought to be thinking strategically and comprehensively about the variety of ways in which the gospel can be proclaimed and embodied, in their own neighbourhood, in their nation, and in their commitment to God's mission to the ends of the earth. They should ask, are we ensuring that *the gospel of God is central* both to our verbal witness in the preaching and evangelism of the church, and also to our outreach in acts of love, compassion, service and justice in the community?

And while every member has their specific calling and place of *diakonia*, let those who know God has called and gifted them to particular forms of *diakonia* - whether word-based or other forms of ministry - concentrate on that as *their own priority*, without insisting that it be the only priority for the church as a whole, in a way that relegates other ministries as secondary or "not real mission." That kind of dichotomizing and taxonomizing is where the so-called tension arises, and it is so unhelpful.

After all, the Great Commission is very clear. Jesus did not say, "make disciples….teaching them to obey *what you decide has priority* among all that I commanded you…" No, he simply said, "to obey *all* that I commanded you," which, as the gospels themselves show, is a very comprehensive range of obedience indeed.

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[3] Their first mission trip (when the church in Antioch, alerted by the Spirit, sent off Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus together) is in Acts 11:27-30, and it was for famine-relief. That "mission" (12:25, NIV), is actually also called their *diakonia.* Their subsequent church-planting work in Asia Minor is twice referred to simply as their "work" - *ergon* (13:2; 14:26).