

## What is Christian Mission?

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Among Christians, there is a long-running debate on what counts as mission. What often happens in these debates is that one of two concepts – evangelism or social action – is taken as the dominant model of Christian mission, then the other, if acknowledged as valid, is fitted into the model in a secondary position. The perpetual tension then is this: which of evangelism or social care is to be the dominant model of mission?

This tension, though, is needless, because it falsely assumes that the controlling concept underlying mission must be one of these two options. But when we ask if there are any other options, it is apparent from scripture that neither *kerygma* (evangelism) nor *diakonia* (social care) are the controlling concept for God's model of mission. Rather, it is *agape* love. The scriptural ground for this is straightforward: "For God so *loved* the world..." (Jn.3:16). The two greatest commandments are love commands, and so surely these are the true Great Commission: "Love the Lord your God..." and "Love your neighbour as I have loved you." In other words, by scripture we are *commanded*, and by baptism we are *commissioned*, to love.

What forms does this love take? It takes several forms, including *both* social action and evangelism. Many people would have no difficulty interpreting social action as a form of love, but evangelism may be a different matter, so I will make some comments on this. The Biblical texts give a picture of God's intentions for humanity: a restored *imago dei* for all people, thereby enabling humanity to live in *shalom* with God and each other. This picture sets the context for humanity's messianic need, fulfilled by God in Jesus of Nazareth, that is, humanity's need for one who teaches, calls forth, and enables the life of forgiveness and righteousness needed to live this *shalom*.

Foundational to all this is love – "For God so loved the world." To invite people into discipleship to Jesus Christ is actually a means of loving them, by inviting them into God's forgiving and restorative love in Christ, restoring the *imago Dei* in us, that we would be more fully enabled to live in *shalom* with God and each other.

Yet our invitation is often rejected -- then what is our response? If people reject our invitation to follow Jesus, our response is to continue to love them anyway, loving them in any other possible ways, including, where necessary, by social action on their behalf.

Let me now raise a further contentious aspect of evangelism, namely 'foreign missions', as it was once called, or 'cross-cultural evangelism', to use the more common term today. Such activity has been controversial because it has been associated with cultural arrogance and 'superiority'. There certainly has been some truth in such charges, and the sins of the past must be acknowledged and corrected. Nonetheless, I suspect those who object to cross-cultural evangelism have rarely if ever met a convert to Jesus Christ. A common response of many converts to those who object to cross-cultural missions is, "Who are you to prevent me from hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ?" And as scholars such as Vinoth Ramachandra (of Sri Lanka) and Lamin Sanneh (of Senegal) have shown, cross-cultural missions have often contributed significantly to cultural preservation and justice. In effect, cross-cultural evangelism, though humbly learning corrective lessons from the past, remains an integral part of the Church's mission of love.

Let me conclude on the topic of partnering in mission. Importantly, missional humility now includes inviting mission partners from the traditional receiving Churches (generally in the

so-called Developing World) to minister in the traditional sending nations, requesting these Churches to send *us* evangelists (as well as other types of partners-in-mission) – and principally at *our* expense. This mutuality in the task of mission is an important new direction for the future of our partnerships-in-mission.

I have been talking about social care and evangelism, but partnering in missions is also done for a third purpose, namely ‘institutional support’ – assisting others where they request assistance, or them assisting us where we need assistance. For instance, during my years in Asia, my primary role was not one of social care nor evangelism (though I engaged in both as occasion arose), but rather of providing ‘institutional support’ by teaching in theological colleges. Of course, numerous other forms of such support exist – administrative, pastoral, and so on.

To conclude, let me suggest that ‘partnering in world mission’ is done to provide mutual support for three different purposes: social care (i.e., peace, justice, the integrity of creation, etc.), evangelism, and institutional support. Any mission-partnering projects would do well to attend to the all three of these elements.