

University of Oxford
MTh in Applied Theology

Good news for inner-cities?

A reflection on mission in an Urban Priority Area

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I. Introduction

§1 A reflection on 'mission'

§1.1 Method

Laurie Green's 'Doing Theology Spiral' begins with experience (stage one), which undergoes a 'thorough analysis' (stage two), before being reflected on (stage three). This is where 'a concerted and conscious effort [is made] to see how the Christian faith relates to the experience.'¹ But the cycle must not end here: the final stage asks what we must now do in the light of our reflection. This response should lead to a new situation or experience, where the spiral begins again.² Interestingly, in his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth employs a similar method. For him, dogmatics takes as its 'raw material' Church 'proclamation'; its goal is not itself, but the transformation and faithfulness of that proclamation.³

§1.2 Map

Here we will follow this pattern: relating, exploring, reflecting on and responding to the experiences I had on a five-week summer placement in an inner-city parish.

The reflection stage will focus on the relationship between 'evangelism' and 'social projects'. The reader will no doubt be aware that in recent times this question has received a lot of attention. However, although parts of my own evangelical tradition are moving towards a broader understanding of 'mission' which includes evangelism *and* social projects, the question is not settled. Evangelicals who value social projects are accused of preaching 'the gospel plus', those who do not of being uncaring and irrelevant.

This essay takes as its 'raw material' my summer placement and wider tradition, and has as its goal the transformation of my own praxis (and hopefully that of my tradition). Also, as a Church of England ordinand soon to be ordained into an inner-city parish, these issues have more relevance to me than simply being a reflection on a placement.

Following Green's method, we will begin with my experience.

¹ Green 1990, 27.

² For a fuller description of this method, see Green 1990, 24-32.

³ Barth 1975, §3 etc.

II. Experience

§2 Evangelism

§2.1 A definition

There are many definitions of ‘evangelism.’⁴ Following Kirk, we say that evangelism has both indicative and imperative modes: it declares the ‘good news’, and challenges people to respond.⁵

§2.2 Proclamation

The highlight of my placement happened about halfway through my time there. Three sisters arranged to see the vicar to talk about baptism, so they could be godparents for each other’s children. (They had been brought up in a Baptist church, so were ‘presented’ as babies.) When asked, they had a vague understanding of what a ‘Christian’ is, saying it is someone who believes in God, prays, helps people, does the right thing. We talked about the way God transforms us, the relationship we can have with him.

The vicar then shared a bit of his testimony, about how he had grown up going to church, but wasn’t actually a believer. Then at 21 he really became a Christian and his life was transformed. He asked me to share some of my testimony. I mentioned Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World*, which the vicar happened to have a large copy of. I talked about when I opened the door to Christ, and the difference it makes having that relationship with him. They responded so well. The vicar gave them each a copy of *Why Jesus?* and asked them to go away, read it, and come to a decision about what they wanted to do. It was absolutely thrilling being there! A couple of weeks later all three had committed their lives to Christ.

Baptism provided other opportunities for evangelism as well. While I was there, the churches’ baptism classes were running. These were for the parents of all the babies to be baptised, explaining the gospel simply. I also attended the inaugural meeting of the churches’ Evangelism Committee, at which various outreach events (only one related to baptism!) were planned, each with a specific evangelistic message.⁶

§3 Social projects

§3.1 Some definitions

Christian social work is often divided into two areas. ‘Social ministry’ refers to acts of kindness at the point of need, demonstrated (e.g.) by the Good Samaritan. ‘Social action’ seeks to transform society itself.⁷ The distinction between the two is sometimes blurred; despite different writers using the terms in different ways, we will maintain this distinction throughout.

⁴ Bosch 1991, 409. For examples see: Abraham 1994, 117; Castro 1987, 328; Kirk 1999, 56-74; Miles 1988, 274-276; Stott 2007, 49-50.

⁵ Kirk 1999, 61.

⁶ See Portfolio item D.

⁷ See e.g. Hinson 1988, 233-240 and Miles 1988, 276-277.

§3.2 *Social ministry*

Given the area's needs, I was not surprised to find various social ministries run by the church. Perhaps the most important was a free counselling service. The counsellors are professionally trained and offer their services voluntarily. They also run a variation on 'Mums and Tots', involving a large tarpaulin and 'messy' things to play with, like jelly, paint, cornflour with water, play-dough, etc.

Towards the end of my placement the fourteen local churches put on a 'Fun Day' in the local recreation area.⁸ Various local groups come with stalls, and there are games to play, karaoke machines, face-painting, a wind tunnel, races, archery, etc. It was all free, including a lunchtime barbecue. The place was packed, with an estimated three- to four-thousand visitors. If you remember last summer's weather, in July large parts of the country were flooded. Well this Saturday was the sunniest day all month, so much so that I got sunburned!

§3.3 *Social action*

I was amazed at the number of para-church charities that operate across the city. While I was there the first meeting of 'Impact' took place, the vision of which is to co-ordinate those charities to be more effective in meeting the needs of the city, and in helping the churches in mission.

One of the parish churches is an old pre-fabricated building. The vicar and PCC are considering redeveloping the site to be a community centre, GP surgery and new church building. This project has the potential to offer a central community place that is almost completely lacking at the moment.

Also while I was there a credit union was launched.⁹ These are intended to encourage people to save regularly, and enable them to borrow safely; after three months of saving, one is able to take out emergency loans, to buy (e.g.) a new washing machine. This helps people keep away from loan sharks, and stay out of or manage existing debt.

Shortly after I left the church began sending volunteers into local primary schools to read with children; as we shall see in §5.1 the level of education—literacy in particular—in the area is extremely low.

⁸ See Portfolio item E.

⁹ See Portfolio item F.

III. Exploration

§4 Inner-cities

§4.1 What is a UPA?

The designation ‘Urban Priority Area’ (UPA) is given to areas of deprivation within cities. (As can be seen in Portfolio item A, ‘deprivation’ has different aspects; it is not simply economic.) It is used by the Church of England, and refers to areas in the bottom 15% of the government’s deprivation indices.

It is perhaps a truism to say that financial hardship is common in inner-city areas.¹⁰ The Church of England’s report *Faithful Cities* says that in the twenty years since *Faith in the City* the problem has grown worse, due to spiralling levels of household debt. Urban regeneration is the watchword, but its ‘reality... does not always match the claims made for it.’¹¹ Poverty, unemployment and health (e.g.) do not necessarily improve; regeneration simply provides bigger and better apartments for the wealthy. Similarly, Atherton argues that the market economy benefits a few, leaving the rest out.¹² This inequality is most acute and most visible in cities, particularly UPAs such as my placement parish.

In terms of belief the most common form in cities—although of course there is a variety¹³—is ‘common religion’, or ‘supernatural/non-organised’,¹⁴ which includes superstition, ‘spirituality’, the paranormal.¹⁵ Atheism is not widespread, leading Ahern to suggest it is ‘middle class’.¹⁶ Specifically, God is given ‘positive’ (e.g. love, mercy) rather than ‘negative’ attributes (e.g. judgement, lordship).¹⁷ However, due to low levels of articulation, belief is often not expressed in creeds but social practice (e.g. Christmas).¹⁸

§5 The parish

§5.1 Statistics

My placement was in a minor city, within commuting distance of London. The parish of three churches has a bad reputation, and finds itself some 25,000 places below North Oxford, where I live and work.¹⁹

The percentage of people who call themselves ‘Christian’ is lower than the national average. Given what we saw in §4.1 about the general lack of declared atheism in cities, it is surprising that the number of

¹⁰ A recent report highlighted rural poverty also: BBC News, *Poverty “blights 1m rural homes”*.

¹¹ *Faithful Cities* (2006), 36, 73.

¹² Atherton 2003, 12.

¹³ Davie 1987, 51.

¹⁴ See e.g. Atherton 2003, 46-47 and Davie 1987, 32.

¹⁵ Davie 1987, 34.

¹⁶ Ahern 1987, 79.

¹⁷ Davie 1987, 47.

¹⁸ Ahern 1987, 81, 94.

¹⁹ Out of 32,482 ‘neighbourhoods’ in total. For the following statistics, please see Portfolio items A and B.

people who do not state their religion, or claim to have no religion, is 75% higher than the national average, accounting for almost one third of the total population.

Teenage pregnancy rates across the whole city are more than 40% higher than the national average. However health generally is better than average; the local hospital scores 'fair' or 'good' in all areas.²⁰

The number of people on benefits in the parish is over 75% higher than the national average (and 125% higher than the city average), although the number of people in full- or part-time work is about average.

Across the board, from Key Stage 1 to GCSE the city is lower than the national average, and where numbers are available, the parish is significantly lower still. Literacy is a particular problem.

The parish has 50% more domestic buildings, and over 100% more private gardens than the city average. This reflects the aging housing stock, built when garden space (as opposed to the number of bedrooms) was a priority. Together with the proximity to London, this means house prices are inflated.

§5.2 An inner-city parish

Education, particularly literacy, should be a key priority for all within the parish, churches, schools and council. Without the investment of time and other resources in children, there is little chance of raising the living standard of the community. Unemployment and low income are also a problem, as we would expect in a city, with a high number of people on benefits.

Within this context, the churches responded together to the social difficulties and opportunities, both locally and city-wide. Their focus, as might be expected in a UPA, was on helping their community and providing much-needed services, but they were also engaged in evangelism, especially my placement supervisor, who is a gifted evangelist.

As Part III has shown, in UPAs social problems are obvious and acute, perhaps more so than in other areas. A particular question for mission in a UPA is therefore: do social projects have a valid place within the Church's mission in the world?

²⁰ UK Government, *NHS Choices* website.

IV. Reflection

§6 ‘Therefore go’

§6.1 Redefining ‘mission’

As David Bosch says in his book *Transforming Mission*, in recent years the Church has been experiencing a ‘crisis’ with respect to the foundation, aim and nature of mission,²¹ leading to a ‘failure of nerve,’ an ‘almost complete paralysis,’ and a ‘withdrawal’ from missionary activity.²² Having given a thorough analysis of New Testament and historical ‘paradigms’ of mission, he arrives at what he calls ‘an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm.’ This new understanding of mission is ‘comprehensive’²³—as Bosch acknowledges, there is the danger of ‘viewing everything as mission’²⁴—but nevertheless it helps us to understand the Church’s work in the world. While we do not have the space to address Bosch’s work in any great depth, there are some aspects of it which are of particular relevance to our reflection.

Following Barth’s ‘magnificent and consistent missionary ecclesiology,’ Bosch sees mission as being fundamental to the Church’s nature: ‘the Church exists in being sent and in building up itself for the sake of its mission.’²⁵ As it participates in the mission of God’s love,²⁶ the Church finds itself in an ‘abiding tension’ between being ‘the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly,’ and being ‘an illustration—in word and deed—of God’s involvement with the world.’²⁷ The latter of these two ‘foci’ helps the Church stay humble, recognising it doesn’t have ‘all the answers;’ it ‘anticipates’ God’s future reign, rather than embodying it fully: the Church is an ‘*eschatological* community.’²⁸ The former—usually ‘evangelism’ or ‘proclamation’—is closer to the way many evangelical groups define mission (so, university Christian Unions have annual ‘missions’ which are basically evangelistic events).

Few Christians would disagree that they should ‘practise what they preach,’ seeking justice and mercy, helping their neighbours, etc. The question instead is one of priority. After the launch of the Credit Union, my placement supervisor and I reflected on the mission of the Church to the community. If resources and time are limited, should it get involved in issues like debt relief, or focus on evangelism? Are social projects only useful for ‘softening people up’ before the ‘real’ work of evangelism, or do they have value in and of themselves? Certainly the churches on my placement were involved, and saw value in, social projects for their own sake. But as Bosch says, ‘praxis needs the critical control of theory;’²⁹ we must reflect further on the nature of the Church’s mission: are social projects of *central* importance?

²¹ Bosch 1991, 4; Scherer 1991, 155.

²² Bosch 1991, 7.

²³ Scherer 1991, 159.

²⁴ Bosch 1991, 512.

²⁵ Bosch 1991, 372-373; Kirk 1999, 30-33, 232.

²⁶ Bosch 1991, 390.

²⁷ Bosch 1991, 381; Sugden 1996, 331.

²⁸ Bosch 1991, 387.

²⁹ Bosch 1991, 431.

§6.2 *Participating in mission*

Our starting-point is that the Church is indeed essentially missionary, and that its mission is rooted and founded in the mission of God himself; the Church is ‘sent’ by God into the world. (Benn suggests that we use ‘apostolic’ rather than ‘missionary’ to emphasise this.³⁰ His point is perhaps weakened by the fact that ‘apostolic’ comes from Greek, as opposed to ‘missionary’ which is from Latin: both mean ‘sent’!)

If the Church’s mission is essentially participation in God’s mission, then we must reflect on the nature of God’s mission to the world in order to understand our own. We will begin with the ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity can be used as a model for human society. Then we will look at the implications of the incarnation for mission, before summarising our findings by talking about baptism and the kingdom of God. As we reflect on these different aspects of mission, our section headings will follow the main points of the Matthean Great Commission, a key text for evangelical missiology.

§7 ‘In the name’

§7.1 ‘Can we copy God?’

In the renaissance of the doctrine of the Trinity in recent years, *perichoresis* has been studied widely, for its insights into theological anthropology as much as those into the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus today perhaps more than ever before, the question for theology is this: *can we copy God?* In addressing this Miroslav Volf offers examples from both extremes: Nicholas Fedorov, who argues that ‘participation in the triune life of God is not just an eschatological promise, but a present reality’;³¹ and Ted Peters, who says that we should ‘leave behind the inclusive Trinity as a model’ and focus instead on the ‘demands of the inimitable and exclusive “kingship of God”’.³² But these ‘equally unacceptable options’ offer a false alternative, says Volf. In-between them is

the widely open space of human responsibility which consists in ‘copying God in *some* respects’ ... the question is not whether the Trinity should serve as a model for human community; the question is rather in which respects and to what extent it should do so.³³

The first limit on such modelling is that (a) ontologically human beings are not divine, and therefore (b) noetically human notions can never correspond exactly to God. Trinitarian concepts can therefore be applied to human community ‘only in an analogous rather than a univocal sense.’ The second limit is that ‘the lives of human beings are inescapably marred by sin and saddled with transitoriness.’ These two limits tell us the doctrine of the Trinity can only say what human communities *ought* to look like; the doctrines of sin and creation tell us what they *can* look like, ‘now in history and then in eternity.’³⁴

³⁰ Benn 1987, 391.

³¹ Volf 1998a, 403.

³² Volf 1998a, 404.

³³ Volf 1998a, 405.

³⁴ Volf 1998a, 406; Volf 1998b, 198-200.

§7.2 Identity

First, the doctrine of the Trinity—perichoresis in particular—offers us important insights for our understanding of identity. It could be argued that perichoresis cannot offer a concept of unity comparable to its concept of plurality.³⁵ However the alternative—a system with a concept of unity far stronger than its concept of plurality—has come under ‘severe attack’ in recent decades for its ‘alleged deleterious effect’ on human identity. Volf gives an example of these attacks: Regina M. Schwartz, whose book *The Curse of Cain* (subtitled *The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*) ‘rightly’ (for Volf) claims that,

any understanding of divinity centring on the singleness of an omnipotent subject will tend to forge ‘hard’ identities and foster violence.³⁶

Following what he perceives to be the social failure of a theological focus on God’s unity, Volf reflects on the perichoretic relationship between person and community. It is here, he argues, that ‘a viable alternative to such an understanding of monotheism is available.’³⁶

Community is not simply a collection of independent and self-standing persons; inversely, persons are not merely so many discrete individual parts and functions of the community.³⁷

As before, there is space in-between. First, individuals are not just parts or functions of the community. Identity is ‘non-reducible’: there are real boundaries between persons. For this reason protection and nurture is needed for those ‘weak selves who are unable to assert themselves,’ and therefore run the risk of ‘either being manipulated or violated.’ Second, individuals are not simply a collection of independent persons. Identity is ‘not self-enclosed’: we are all in a ‘state of flux’, sharing what we have with one another.³⁸ The implication for human society is clear: it is our duty to protect and provide nurturing environments for those who are ‘weak’. It is not simply they who suffer but the whole community.

As an illustration of this, Leonardo Boff’s is a theology that models society with trinitarian insights:

our desire [is] for a society that lives together in more open communion, equality and respectful acceptance of differences.³⁹ ... The sort of society that would emerge from inspiration by the trinitarian model would be one of fellowship, equality of opportunity, generosity in the space available for personal and group expression.⁴⁰

Boff’s vision for society fits well with Volf’s argument, as does his concluding summary: ‘from the perichoresis-communion of the three divine Persons derive impulses to liberation.’⁴¹ For, as Volf goes on to say, the core concept of perichoresis tells us not only about the Triune God’s inner relations, but about the way the self-giving God relates to, transforms and *liberates* our world of sin.

³⁵ See e.g. Cooper 1991, 170 and Peters 1993, 109.

³⁶ Volf 1998a, 408.

³⁷ Volf 1998a, 409; Volf 1998b, 208-213.

³⁸ Volf 1998a, 410.

³⁹ Boff 1988, 136.

⁴⁰ Boff 1988, 151.

⁴¹ Boff 1988, 236.

§7.3 *Self-donation*

The love of God's inner trinitarian life is perfect, as Father, Son and Spirit each give and receive in 'the circular movement of the eternal divine love.'⁴² Therefore when Jesus commands his disciples to 'be perfect' in Matthew 5.48, we might expect that he means them to emulate this 'eternal divine love'. But the preceding verses tell a different story, of a love *without* the reciprocity of the divine love:

Jesus demanded not so much that we imitate the divine dance of love's freedom and trust, but the divine labor [*sic*] of love's suffering and risk. The love that dances is the internal love of the Trinity; the love that suffers is that same love turned toward a world suffused with enmity.⁴³

These 'two loves' are the same love, and yet they are different, for as we saw in §7.1, the perfection of God's inner life cannot simply be *repeated* in a world of sin and 'transitoriness'. So,

the engagement with that world entails a process of complex and difficult *translation*... In the labor [*sic*] of 'taking away the sin', the delight of love is transmuted into the agony of love.⁴⁴

As 'the spontaneously creative cycle of love' encounters evil, it takes the form of grace and forgiveness. It does not simply treat sin 'as if it were not there,' but affirms both law and justice while at the same time suspending and transcending them, defeating sin;⁴⁴ precisely because Jesus' self-giving was a weapon, this love is 'a weapon against evil.' Volf follows this rather startling statement with a further assertion:

If Trinitarian love is not practiced [*sic*] as 'weapon'... its proclamation will, in the end, amount to false 'glad tidings' that eternal life is 'not promised' but fully given.⁴⁵

This demonstrates the importance of eschatological categories in theology. As well as failing to 'translate' insights about God's inner life into an appropriate model for human society, Fedorov has an over-realised eschatology (argues Volf). Getting this balance right is key to the next stage of Volf's argument. God engages with the sinful world with a goal in mind: its transformation. That work of transformation is both present (since the cross), and yet to come, as we will see further in §9.

To propose a social knowledge based on the doctrine of the Trinity is above all to re-narrate the history of the cross, the cross understood not as a simple repetition of heavenly love in the world, but as the Triune God's engagement with the world in order to transform the unjust, deceitful, and violent kingdoms of this world into the just, truthful, and peaceful 'kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah' (Revelation 11:16).⁴⁵

If we are to obey Christ's command to 'be perfect', we must love the world with suffering love, in order to transform it. Although we are given a foretaste of the Trinity's heavenly love in various ways, 'we are called to imitate the earthly love of that same Trinity that led to the passion of the Cross.'⁴⁵ For human communities this means a 'divine welcome in Christ', which Volf argues is 'almost universally portrayed

⁴² Volf 1998a, 412.

⁴³ Volf 1998a, 413.

⁴⁴ Volf 1998a, 414.

⁴⁵ Volf 1998a, 415.

[in the New Testament] as the model for Christians to emulate.⁴⁶ As we have seen, this love does not treat sin as if it is not there; we must speak the truth and ensure justice is done before an embrace may take place. This is the model of Christ's own life and death:⁴⁷ the 'downward movement' of God coming 'out of the circularity of divine love' so that he might 'take godless humanity into the divine embrace.'⁴⁸ Thus love is not reduced to eternal suffering; there will be joy after the pain, as God transforms the world by his suffering love.⁴⁹ His work is ongoing, but one day will be complete.

As we have reflected on the doctrine of the Trinity, we have discovered that transformation is central to God's mission in the world; it is both the motive and the goal of God's 'suffering love.' God wants to transform creation, to make society 'just, truthful, and peaceful.' In the same way that this love and goal is central to God's mission, so it should be to ours. God is not simply our model; we *participate* in his life and mission to the world,⁵⁰ recognising that he has begun now what will only be complete when Jesus returns. As the charities on my placement worked to transform their communities (§3.3), they were participating in the 'downward movement' of God's love to the world, seeking to transform and overcome evil and suffering. They were fostering community, protecting and nurturing the 'weak'.

§8 'Make disciples'

§8.1 *Incarnation*

We have looked at the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity models an engagement with the world that seeks the transformation of its unjust and violent structures. Such work is not an 'extra' to God's mission in the world, but a central part of it. We would therefore be right to expect similar results when we reflect on the incarnation. As we said earlier, few Christians would doubt that we should engage in this kind of activity, needing little more justification for it than Jesus' response to the question in Luke 10.29, or his teaching at the end of Matthew 25. The question for us however, is whether or not such ministry is *central* to the Church's identity, to its participation in God's mission.

We begin with William J. Abraham, for whom the gospel is not about a moral code but events in history:

The claim of the church is that God has come to us uniquely to establish his rule in and through Jesus Christ; what began there by the work of the Holy Spirit continues in the world today through the work of that same Spirit; in God's own time, that work will be brought to a fitting consummation. This is the heart of the gospel.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Volf 1998a, 415.

⁴⁷ Volf 1998a, 416. As an example, Wright tells of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and South Africa's 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission', where crimes had to be named and identified before there could be reconciliation: Wright 2007, 191.

⁴⁸ Volf 1998a, 417.

⁴⁹ Volf 1998a, 418.

⁵⁰ On the complementarity of imitation and participation, see Fiddes 2000, 28-29 etc.

⁵¹ Abraham 1994, 121.

The important point here is that ‘what began’ in history, continues by ‘that same Spirit’. God established his rule *in history*, through one man; he continues to do so through the same Spirit, but many women and men. We cannot emphasise enough the importance of Jesus’ identity as the *Incarnate One*. These things happened in history, in time and space, they happened to Jesus and his disciples, to Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas. By acting within history (rather than imposing his will from outside it) God affirmed material reality; incarnation, or ‘embodiment’ as Hendricks puts it, teaches us that docetism and asceticism are both wrong for denying materiality.⁵² Not only is God the creator of all, but he did not leave it to decay:⁵³ neither should we. The incarnation is thus not an ‘abstract theological concept’ but ‘the concrete vision of a way of living offered to us as a guide and model to be followed.’⁵⁴

It is perhaps my own evangelical tradition which needs to hear this most clearly. Its laudable commitment to the gospel of grace focuses on individual repentance and faith: the concern is primarily for people’s ‘spiritual’ health, for ‘saving’ their ‘souls’. But this ‘misunderstanding,’ claims Gladwin, involves a ‘mild dose of gnosticism.’⁵⁵ He goes on:

[making] material and worldly concerns... quite secondary to the real business of saving souls... tears salvation apart from creation, the kingdom of God apart from history, and the cross and the resurrection apart from the incarnation.⁵⁶

The gospel’s ‘spiritual character’ is not to be contrasted with the ‘material life of creation,’ but with *worldliness*, ‘independence from God,’ ‘self-sufficiency.’⁵⁷ God’s affirmation of materiality is not simply in the *fact* of Jesus’ incarnation, but in Jesus’ actions themselves: ‘Jesus not only forgave sins; he also healed the physical and mental diseases of those who believed.’⁵⁸ (Here the selectivity of Jesus’ healings is worthy of note; Jesus did not heal everyone, and so the Church should not expect to transform or heal the world completely this side of Jesus’ return. As we saw in §7.3 we must get the balance right between the present anticipation of the kingdom and its future consummation.)

In his treatment of the definition of ‘salvation’ Sider argues that although the term refers primarily to entering the kingdom, repentance and forgiveness, we must not ignore the *consequences* of that salvation for discipleship. God’s kingdom ‘is not just a future but also a present reality,’⁵⁹ as God creates a community with ‘a visible social reality sharply distinguished from the world both by its belief and its lifestyle.’⁶⁰ If Jesus’ ‘good news’ was about the coming of God’s kingdom, then the ‘radical discipleship’ demanded by the King is part of the gospel itself;⁶¹ salvation has material consequences.

⁵² Hendricks 1988, 230.

⁵³ Hendricks 1988, 221.

⁵⁴ Castro 1987, 329. While the incarnation is unique and cannot be repeated, what it reveals can be a model, as with the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁵⁵ Gladwin 1980, 195. To that we might add a ‘mild dose’ of Marcionism, for the Old Testament is clear on the importance of social concern.

⁵⁶ Gladwin 1980, 196.

⁵⁷ Gladwin 1980, 196.

⁵⁸ Sider 1975, 257.

⁵⁹ Sider 1975, 258.

⁶⁰ Sider 1975, 257.

⁶¹ Sider 1975, 256.

§8.2 *Justice-righteousness*

Perhaps at this point we need to look a little deeper at an important word in the New Testament: *dikaiosune*. In the Great Commission, Jesus tells his followers to ‘make disciples of all nations’, ‘baptising them’ and ‘teaching them to obey’ all he had commanded them.⁶² Bosch asks: what were Jesus’ commandments, that we must obey them? ‘They are something very concrete that can be summed up in two words: *justice* and *love*... or, rather, as justice-love.’⁶³

Jesus has commanded the fulfilling of the Law which is the practice of justice-love. To love the other person means to have compassion for him or her and to see that justice is done. Love of neighbour and enemy manifests itself in justice.⁶⁴

It is easy to miss this because in most Bible translations *dikaiosune* is translated ‘righteousness’ rather than ‘justice’.⁶⁴ Bosch highlights Matthew 5, for example:

Those who hunger and thirst to see that justice is done have become those who piously hunger and thirst after spiritual righteousness (5:6).⁶⁵

Instead Bosch proposes the translation ‘justice-righteousness’ which covers its constitutive (‘God justifying us, making us righteous and holy in his sight’) and normative (‘God raising up people who become ministers to others of the same justice they have experienced’) dimensions.⁶⁶ If we accept this then we remove a major block for evangelicals who may insist that salvation is about ‘righteousness’. They are correct, but only in part. In both creation *and* redemption God is concerned about *both* ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’. As we hinted at the end of §8.1, the former corresponds to our salvation, our entry into the kingdom, the latter to our ongoing life of ‘radical discipleship’ within that kingdom.

§8.3 *Baptismal identity*

Much of what we have argued in §8 may be summarised briefly using the language of baptism. In the act of baptism we subscribe to ‘a narrative identity situated in the large narrative of God.’ That identity demands that ‘we live out a life of justice in terms of concrete neighborly [*sic*] concern.’⁶⁷ Brueggemann gives as an example Christians who hid Jewish children during World War II. Asked why, they responded, ‘We did it because it did not occur to us that we should not.’ Such ‘radical’ social ministry is simply the natural consequence of salvation, ‘the public articulation of baptismal identity.’⁶⁸ Our identity is within God’s; what is central to God’s mission is central to ours. Since we have seen that materiality is central to God’s mission in the world (in creation, redemption *and* new creation—see §9), the ‘public articulation’ of the Church’s ‘baptismal identity’ must be ‘material’ as well as ‘spiritual’.

⁶² Matthew 28.18-20.

⁶³ Bosch 1984, 26.

⁶⁴ Bosch 1984, 27.

⁶⁵ Bosch 1984, 28. See also Morris 1992, 99.

⁶⁶ Bosch 1991, 71-72.

⁶⁷ Brueggemann 1999, 156.

⁶⁸ Brueggemann 1999, 157.

It is no accident that we have ended this section on the subject of baptism. In §2.2 I related how an evangelistic event occurred as a result of three ladies wanting to be baptised. Two of the other key evangelistic events were directly connected with baptism. It seems that—on my placement at least—baptism offers an important opportunity for evangelism, as the event that (for adults) signals that some evangelistic activity has borne fruit.

In §8.3 we have used the language of baptism to summarise our arguments for the centrality of social projects. The sacrament—as such a symbol of God’s affirmation of materiality—demonstrates for us the equal and central importance of evangelism and social projects. This is Sider’s conclusion: he describes them as ‘distinct yet equal.’⁶⁹ And let us not forget Bosch’s ‘abiding tension’ between the two ‘foci’ (§6.1). It seems he was right all along: both are needed, for as Brueggemann rather bluntly puts it, evangelism by itself is ‘self-indulgent narcissism,’ and social action by itself is ‘hard-nosed ideology.’⁷⁰

§9 ‘To the end of the age’

§9.1 *The kingdom of God*

Throughout this essay we have focused primarily on social projects; the importance of evangelism has been assumed. Returning to it now, we find the ‘twin modes’ of Kirk’s definition of evangelism—indicative and imperative—in Tom Wright’s recent book, *Surprised by Hope*:

The power of the gospel lies... in the powerful announcement that God is God, that Jesus is Lord, that the powers of evil have been defeated, that God’s new world has begun... Of course, once the gospel announcement is made, in whatever way, it means instantly that all people everywhere are gladly invited to come in, to join the party, to discover forgiveness for the past, an astonishing destiny in God’s future, and a vocation in the present.⁷¹

In fact, what evangelism offers people is a message of *hope*. This is, unsurprisingly, the main theme of *Surprised by Hope*. Wright argues that heaven is much misunderstood in Western Christianity. It is seen as the ‘spiritual’ place we go when we die.⁷² To counter this he offers what he sees as an authentically Christian and biblical understanding of ‘heaven’, based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus. As he does so, he redefines the kingdom of God: it is and will be fully embodied; it is not a future state of spiritual bliss, but ‘the sovereign rule of God;’⁷³ it is therefore both here *now*, yet also *still to come*.

In Part IV we have argued against the spiritualising tendencies of evangelicalism. We have explored the ways in which materiality is central to God’s own mission—and therefore our own mission—in the world, in creation, incarnation and redemption. This is also one of Wright’s concerns; his book adds the

⁶⁹ Sider 1975, 264-267.

⁷⁰ Brueggemann 1999, 157.

⁷¹ Wright 2007, 238-239.

⁷² Wright 2007, 20-38.

⁷³ Wright 2007, 213.

final way in which God affirms his creation: in the same way that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, so God will not destroy his creation, but transform it, *resurrect* it. This is the hope God offers his people:

God's people are promised a new type of bodily existence, the fulfilment and redemption of our present bodily life...⁷⁴ a proper grasp of the (surprising) *future* hope which is held out to us in Jesus Christ leads directly... to a vision of the *present* hope which is the basis of all Christian mission.⁷⁵

The future kingdom will embrace not only human bodily life, but the life and beauty of all creation. *This* is what evangelism must proclaim: real hope for the future. When we pray 'your kingdom come', we are asking God to transform the whole of creation; this implies an holistic understanding of mission:

God's rule is thus to be put into practice in the world, resulting in salvation in both the present and the future, a salvation which is both *for* humans and, *though* saved humans, for the wider world.⁷⁶

We 'put into practice' God's rule through the proclamation of Jesus as Lord,⁷⁷ and through living the life of the kingdom as disciples. However we must recognise that, first, 'God builds God's kingdom.'⁷⁸ The fact that he does so often through his creatures should not divert us from this important point. Second, as we have said before, we must 'distinguish between the final kingdom and the present anticipations of it.' (We see here echoes of Volf's two limits from §7.1.) Therefore Wright calls mission 'building *for* the kingdom.'⁷⁹ We are participating in God's work, which is not yet complete.

And so we ask: how may the Church build *for* God's kingdom? We must now relate our reflections back to my experience, suggesting that my placement could be a model to evangelical churches more widely, a model I can work towards myself, once I am ordained.

⁷⁴ Wright 2007, 159.

⁷⁵ Wright 2007, 204.

⁷⁶ Wright 2007, 217.

⁷⁷ Durwell 1980, 123.

⁷⁸ Wright 2007, 218.

⁷⁹ Wright 2007, 219.

V. Response

§10 Transforming praxis

§10.1 Community

We said in §6.1 that ‘praxis needs the critical control of theory.’⁸⁰ In the light of Part IV we will therefore evaluate my placement and offer suggestions for transforming Church praxis. As we do so we will use insights from two of the Church of England’s recent reports: *Faith in the City* and *Faithful Cities*.

In §7 we looked at using the doctrine of the Trinity to model human society. In particular it offered us two insights: (1) we must understand our identity as individual and communal; (2) we should love the world with God’s suffering love, working for its transformation. I saw both of these on my placement. For example, I was impressed with the way different denominations in the city worked together, a community in more than name; such fruitful co-operation is rare. There was a weekly prayer meeting for all the church leaders, to which the leaders of local Christian charities were invited. These meetings helped the Christians in the city work towards a balance between evangelism and social projects, caring for ‘the poor and needy, whether in spirit or in body,’⁸¹ transforming their communities. It is in that balance, that ‘abiding tension’, that the real ‘good news for inner-cities’ is to be found.

While the integration between church and para-church charity was good, there are some difficulties in the model. Separating ‘church’ and ‘charity’ (as I have done for convenience) could damage an holistic understanding of mission; it could lead churches to see their only task in the community as evangelism. Where clergy visibility positively correlates with local acceptance of Christians,⁸² this will have negative consequences in the community. The only way through this lies in long-term ‘suffering love’. Local churches have ‘significantly greater longevity’ than other local community groups;⁸³ as they and the charities are seen working together in their community, their unity will be shown and recognised.

As Boff says, it is important that the Church thinks of itself not simply as the Church *for* the poor, but the Church *of* the poor.⁸⁴ The Church has struggled historically to make an impact in cities,⁸⁵ perhaps because it was neglecting Boff’s latter concern; churches should instead encourage local leadership,⁸⁶ and lay participation. John Stott says that churches are *communities*, so should encourage and use the different gifts God has given.⁸⁷ My placement churches provided opportunities for lay involvement, from leading baptism classes to volunteering in charity shops, to visiting local primary schools.

⁸⁰ Bosch 1991, 431.

⁸¹ *Faith in the City* (1985), 359.

⁸² Ahern 1987, 103.

⁸³ *Faithful Cities* (2006), 80.

⁸⁴ Boff 1988, 236.

⁸⁵ See e.g. *Faith in the City* (1985), 27-28 etc.

⁸⁶ *Faith in the City* (1985), 112.

⁸⁷ Stott 2007, 75-78. See also Gladwin 1980, 194.

§10.2 *Embodiment*

My placement churches reached out to the community's social needs in many ways. Lay volunteers made possible the work in primary schools and with toddlers, the counselling project, the 'Fun Day', the Credit Union. One of their hallmarks was 'hospitality', which *Faithful Cities* suggests is a better term for our 'proper response' to strangers than 'tolerance', because it is active rather than passive.⁸⁸ This fits well with our reflections not only on the 'welcome' of §7.3, but also (in §8) the positive affirmation of materiality and the translation in of *diakosune* as 'justice-righteousness', a positive action rather than simply a passive quality. The 'good news' for UPAs is in both positive proclamation and positive action.

It seemed on my placement that it was easier to get people involved in social projects than in evangelism. Whereas the social aspects of the churches' mission were well organised and integrated with other churches and the charities, the evangelism was not. There was an imbalance between the two. We must remember that building for the kingdom requires *both* evangelism and social action. As we said,

[there is] an abiding tension between... [perceiving the Church] to be the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly... [and viewing it] as an illustration—in word and deed—of God's involvement with the world.⁸⁹

Difficult though it is, churches should aim to keep these two understandings of mission in 'creative tension,' where the two foci 'stand in each other's service.'⁹⁰ We have here been reminding evangelical churches of one of the foci; perhaps some other branches of the Church need reminding of the other.

§10.3 *The parish audit*

Perhaps the best and most comprehensive way that local parishes can attempt to hold all the different threads of mission together is the parish audit. They are widely recommended,⁹¹ and allow churches to study themselves and their community in depth. A survey into the latter asks questions such as 'What sort of people live in our area?' It uses National Statistics to determine demographics, and levels of income, health, crime, etc. As for the former, churches should ask how they organise themselves, how welcoming they are to newcomers. They need to look at strategies for evangelism and social projects.⁹² Exploring these questions is a way of helping a church find appropriate ways of reaching out to the local community. It helps to identify social and spiritual needs, and areas where the church's mission is weak.

In UPAs especially, where there is great need, churches (and I!) must step up and hold out genuine hope to the world. As we do so, as we practise God's justice-love, offering hope to the world, loving it with God's suffering love, as God transforms the world, perhaps we will start to understand social projects not as a way of 'softening people up' for evangelism, but as the work of God, building his kingdom, into which people are invited through our proclamation.

⁸⁸ *Faithful Cities* (2006), 23.

⁸⁹ Bosch 1991, 381.

⁹⁰ Bosch 1991, 385.

⁹¹ By writers as different as (e.g.) Ahern and Stott.

⁹² See e.g. Stott 2007, 59-65.

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