

Mission and Peace (INT 521)

Paper 1: Toward a Theology of Mission and Peace

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Each week Christians in countless denominations around the world gather together in their local communities for prayer and worship. Collectively, members of these gatherings form the one body of Christ, the church (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12-13; Ephesians 4:4). What is the purpose of this global body? What is the mission of God's church, Jesus' one body? My thesis is that the church's mission is to obey God, bring him glory, announce his kingdom, spread his love, and proclaim the gospel of peace. In fact, these five actions are simply different ways of describing faithfulness to God's mission, the *missio Dei*.

Peace

Paul describes the good news of Jesus as the "gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15, New Revised Standard Version). To better understand what Paul had in mind when he chose this description, one must begin to grasp the depth of *shalom* in Hebrew and *eirēnē* in Greek. *Shalom* encompasses a broad range of meanings, including both political and religious dimensions.¹ Westermann notes that "the 236 instances of the use of the noun form [of *shalom*] alone range in meaning from the formulaic greeting, a sepulchral engraving, to a wish for good health and material well-being, and to God's gift of salvation now and at the end time."² Similarly, John Yeatts summarizes usage in the Hebrew Bible by stating that "*shalom* refers to safety, security,

¹ Claus Westermann, "Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament," in *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies*, ed. Perry B. Yoder and Willard M. Swartley, trans. Walter Sawatsky, 2nd ed. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 37-70.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

welfare, health, and contentment in all aspects of life.”³ Willard Swartley describes this “iridescent word” as “wholeness, completeness, well-being, peace, justice, salvation, and even prosperity.”⁴

This breadth of meaning reinforces that shalom does not merely mean the absence of violent conflict and war. Westermann speaks directly to this point, “In a society where there is no war, where everything is conducted peacefully without conflict, there is still no shalom if the people are starving or if disease reigns.”⁵ Bryant Myers, World Vision pioneer and development researcher, applies the concept of shalom to caring for others: “the kingdom vision for the better human future is summarized by the idea of shalom: just, peaceful, harmonious, and enjoyable relationships with each other, ourselves, our environment, and God. This kingdom frame is inclusive of the physical, social, mental, and spiritual manifestations of poverty.”⁶

Moving now to the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, Peter describes God’s mission as “preaching peace by Jesus Christ” when he first takes the gospel to the Gentiles by visiting the home of Cornelius (Acts 10:36). This concept of peace (*eirēnē*) is rooted deeply in the Hebraic understanding of shalom. Erich Dinkler argues that “the concept of *eirene* in early Christianity is essentially shaped by the adoption of the Hebraic concept of *shalom*.”⁷ Additionally, in the writings of Paul, “peace is christological, in that atonement and reconciliation are the gifts of Jesus Christ’s work on the cross.”⁸

³ John R. Yeatts, “Peace in the Old and New Testaments,” in *A Peace Reader*, ed. E. Morris Sider and Luke Keefer Jr. (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing, 2002), 15-16.

⁴ Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 27-28.

⁵ Westermann, “Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament,” 48.

⁶ *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 113.

⁷ Erich Dinkler, “Eirene--The Early Christian Concept of Peace,” in *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies*, ed. Perry B. Yoder and Willard M. Swartley, trans. Walter Sawatsky, 2nd ed. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 72.

⁸ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*, 43.

Missio Dei

We have seen that the life of Jesus was actually an expression of God's mission of peace for the world (Ephesians 6:15; Romans 10:15). In essence, Jesus is the *missio Dei* in that his life, death and resurrection are the means of bringing peace between us and God (Romans 5:8-10). However, it can be quite easy to develop a reductionist view of the salvation Jesus brought if attention is placed solely on New Testament texts while ignoring their historical context. Paul makes it clear in Romans 11:17 and Galatians 3:29 that Gentiles are Abraham's seed and are grafted onto the same tree as the Jews. It follows then that Gentiles will bear good fruit consistent with the type of tree to which they are now contiguous. Two Hebrew passages reveal the original mission that has been expanded, not restricted, in Jesus:

The first purpose is based on Genesis 18, when God expands on an initial charge to Abraham to go forth from his land to the land that God will show him. In 18:19, God adds a critical prerequisite that will enable Abraham to fulfill his destiny and become the father of a great nation. He is to obey God's commandments and "extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world," *la'asot tzedakah umishpat*.

The second purpose of Judaism is based on God's revelation to Moses, which is recounted in Exodus 19:6. The Jewish people are told to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," a *mamlechet kohanim* and *goy kadosh*. The Hebrew word for holiness—*kedusha*—comes from a root that means separate and apart.

Judaism is a religion based on a paradox: Jews are expected to maintain a holy apartness as God's chosen people and, *at the same time*, are expected to be

totally engaged with the world around them.⁹

This paradox is what Christians are grafted into; they are to spread the boundaries of righteousness and justice while simultaneously being somehow separate from the world. This mission given by God, the *missio Dei*, is demonstrated in the life of Jesus and in the mission he gave his disciples at the end of his incarnational ministry in Israel. Near the beginning of his ministry, Jesus proclaims justice and righteousness as central to his mission by applying the words of Isaiah to himself: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

The extending boundaries of justice within which the poor receive good news, captives are freed, and the Jubilee is manifest, mark the frontiers of the kingdom of God, the central theme of Jesus ministry (Mark 1:14; Matthew 3:2; 12:28; Luke 4:43; John 3:3). Even after his resurrection, Jesus again speaks to his disciples of the kingdom (Acts 1:3). We see that the mission of Abraham, who was called to be a blessing in Genesis 12:1-3, and Moses and was taken up by Jesus and expanded by the import of his death on the cross. It follows that Christians will take up both the original mission with the new view of Jesus’ death and resurrection as a means for furthering this kingdom. This context counters a reductionist view of salvation and instead emphasizes “the universal scope which characterizes the biblical vision.”¹⁰

Jesus is explicit in passing on to his disciples, and subsequently the church, both of the components of the mission described above relating to Moses and Abraham. In John 17:14-16

⁹ Sidney Schwarz, “Can Social Justice Save the American Jewish Soul?” in *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*, ed. Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2008), 4.

¹⁰ John Driver, “Messianic Evangelization,” in *The Transfiguration of Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 199.

Jesus states that both he and his disciples are not of the world; they are separate as Moses called the Israelites to be separate. And at the same time, the disciples were very much in the world (John 17:11), where they were given the task of doing what Jesus had been doing—healing the sick, driving out demons, and preaching that the kingdom of God is near (Matthew 10:5-25). That is, being a blessing to the nation. Jesus’ ministry, which was consistent with the Jewish mission, has now been given to the twelve disciples. In Luke 10 this mission is given to seventy-two disciples; the kingdom mission is expanding in a fractal pattern. This expansion finds its apex in the Great Commission where Jesus instructs the disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18b-20a).

In summary, we see that the *missio Dei* of spreading righteousness and justice was developed in the Hebrew scriptures, was owned and lived by Jesus, and was bestowed upon the disciples. This gospel of peace or ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18) was not a limited, mental ascent to a set of dogmas, but was rather an all encompassing way of life. Driver stresses this point by stating, “in light of the scope of God’s salvific intention, no aspect of life within the created order lies outside our evangelization concern.”¹¹

Peace and Mission—Methods

Something must be said about the appropriate method of extending the boundaries of justice and righteousness. What means are available to the disciple to achieve these ends, to spread the gospel of peace? Here again the example and teachings of Jesus are normative for disciples of all ages. Just as God sent Jesus into the world to do God’s will, Jesus sent the

¹¹ Ibid., 200.

disciples into the world (John 20:21). It follows that this progression from God to Jesus to the disciples will be similar in method, and not in authority alone.

Ellen White write, “Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”¹² At least four features stand out from this quote about the methods of spreading the kingdom. First, Christ’s method is centered on caring for others. This compassionate concern for others, including one’s enemies, is repeated throughout the teachings and life of Jesus (Matthew 25:37-40; Luke 12:33).

Second, actions preceded words. Relationships were formed and the kingdom was put on display, even if only for a short time, before an explanation or invitation was given. Bryant Myers notes this trend of action provoking conversation in the book of Acts.¹³ Peter’s powerful sermon at Pentecost came as a response to people’s questions as they observed the Spirit alive in the disciples (Acts 2). The next sermon in the book follows the astonishment of the people when Peter heals the crippled beggar (Acts 3). And the next major speech is by Stephen after his arrest, which resulted from the wonders that he performed (Acts 6:8-7:53). This leads Myers to conclude that a proper Christian witness is visible and “provokes the question to which the gospel is the answer.”¹⁴ The faith community of disciples embodies an alternative reality that draws attention to Jesus who is lifted up.

This description of witnessing is consistent with the attraction model of the early church described by Krieder.¹⁵ He points out that the early church did not use seeker-friendly church

¹² *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 143.

¹³ *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, 209-211.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁵ *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

services or public evangelization programs to fuel the exponential growth in the first few centuries of the church. Tertullian insisted that people “became Christians because the Christians, marginal though they were, were intriguingly attractive.”¹⁶ As “communities of compassion,” the early church embodied the other-centered love of Jesus, and this example did in fact draw people to the movement.¹⁷

Critical to this witness is notion that this witness is an expression of the character of God, not merely a recruiting ploy or tactic. God has routinely taken the initiative in closing the distance between himself and the estranged, and his method for closing this gap has been the display of compassionate care. In the Garden of Eden, God came looking for Adam and Eve after they sinned. In the process of dealing with the new reality, God provided clothes for them and promised that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3). Later, before giving the Decalogue, which was a binding covenant between the Israel and its God, Yahweh recounted how he had saved them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:1-3). Jesus himself was the fullest expression of this progression. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God proactively sent his son to die for us, and this unfathomable sacrifice is the model that we are called to follow (Matthew 10:38). It is neither masochistic nor a mere marketing ploy; rather, it is an invitation to put Jesus on display that people may be drawn to him.

Third, Jesus’ method was invitational and had no strain of coercion or threat. Jesus knew that true power comes from serving and sacrificing (Matthew 20:28). He would draw all men to himself through his sacrifice (John 12:32). At times the disciples disrespected or even wished to harm those who did not value Jesus. For example, when passing through Samaria, the Samaritans

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

would not accept Jesus because he was en route to Jerusalem. James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven on those who had rejected Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them strongly. If this village had been violently punished for rejecting Jesus, then others might be motivated to follow Jesus out of fear or out of a desire to use the power to harm others.

Fourth, Jesus' invitation was to *follow him*, to come after him, learn from him, and begin to emulate him. This encompasses each of the characteristics just mentioned. Those who chose to follow Jesus were to (a) live with compassion for others, (b) model the alternative community of the kingdom before articulating it, and (c) freely invite others to join the movement so the new comers could also follow Jesus and repeat the cycle.

Following this model would have averted a number of errors and tragedies in Christian history. I will highlight three major examples, though there are many others that could be cited. The Constantinian shift was pivotal for Christianity. During this shift Christianity moved from being an illegal sect that faced harsh persecution to a legal religion and finally the favored religion of the empire. By the end of the fourth century new motivations were introduced to bring people into the faith. Inducements included “imperial conferred benefits for church leaders, including immunity from onerous public duties; the enrichment of churches; the advancement of the careers of civil servants who had become Christian; and the respectability that adherence to the emperor’s religion now entailed.”¹⁸ Compulsion to join the church also began to grow: “[I]n 416 an imperial edict specified that only professing Christians could be hired by the imperial armies and civil service; and in 529 an edict of Justinian made conversion—including the baptism of all infants—compulsory.”¹⁹ Ellen White describes the effect of these changes:

¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The nominal conversion of Constantine, in the early part of the fourth century, caused great rejoicing; and the world, cloaked with a form of righteousness, walked into the church. Now the work of corruption rapidly progressed.

Paganism, while appearing to be vanquished, became the conqueror. Her spirit controlled the church. Her doctrines, ceremonies, and superstitions were incorporated into the faith and worship of the professed followers of Christ.²⁰

The second example of disregarding Christ's method of carrying out the *missio Dei* comes some 500 years after the Constantinian shift. With the European crusades starting in 1095, we see the most striking example of deviation from the model of Jesus. Rather than the suffering servant, knights and peasants alike are enjoined to travel to Jerusalem to take it back from the easterners, the Saracens. In 1095 Pope Urban II offered immediate forgiveness of sins to all who would go on the pilgrimage and fight the crusade.²¹ Once in Jerusalem, the pilgrims attacked and slaughtered nearly 40,000 people, most of whom were noncombatant civilians.²² This brutally violent means of retaking Jerusalem for Christendom was just the first of many crusading onslaughts. The crusades have had a serious deleterious effect on Muslim-Christian relations, a reality that continues to the present, which adversely affects the ability for introducing Muslims to Jesus message of nonviolent love.

The medieval pilgrims may have been ignorant of Revelation's teachings on the conquering lamb, but the religious leaders who called them to battle must have intentionally ignored these verses. Chapter 5 of Revelation is pivotal, as the focus moves from the seven churches to seven seals. Here the reader learns who has conquered history and how this was

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1888), 49-50.

²¹ Abhijit Nayak, "Crusade Violence: Understanding and Overcoming the Impact of Mission among Muslims," *International Review of Mission* 97, no. 386/387 (October 2008): 275.

²² *Ibid.*, 278.

achieved. “The Lion of the tribe of Judah... has conquered,” through the paradox of its reality as the slaughtered lamb (Revelation 5:5-6). Chapter two and three repeatedly mention conquering (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21); in chapter five the method of conquering is revealed—through suffering and patient obedience rather than through violent and aggressive force.

A third error that can easily be made when ignoring the method of Jesus is “the tendency to privatize salvation,” where “the content and methods of... evangelization have concentrated less on the forming of disciples of Jesus and more on communicating the church’s teachings about Jesus.”²³ The fundamental error in this instance is the absence of the call to “Follow me.” This has been the common error of fundamentalists in the United States who have “emphasized preaching an evangelistic gospel in order to save souls for heaven” and distanced “themselves from advocacy of social service ministries and to insist on evangelism as their priority.”²⁴ In decrying this reductionism of the gospel, Ron Sider asserts, “We must combine—rather than divide—prayer and action, evangelism and social transformation. One of the great tragedies of the contemporary church is its one-sided Christianity, where so few congregations enthusiastically and whole-heartedly do all of these.”²⁵

While there certainly are other significant errors than can be made, these three examples represent mistakes that are all too easy for Christians to repeat. Following Jesus method of life and witness is critical for a balanced and honest testimony for the world.

Peace and Mission—Priorities

The priority of the early church that first attempted to embody the teachings and way of Jesus was the community. I will briefly address five key issues that naturally proceed from this commitment to community—compassion, nonviolent conflict resolution, unity in diversity,

²³ Driver, “Messianic Evangelization,” 199.

²⁴ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1995), 45.

social justice, and love for all. First, compassion was shown to those who were in need, in line with the example of Jesus (1 John 3:17; Hebrews 10:24; 13:16). Those with financial resources supported others who were less fortunate, so that it could be said “There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 2:43-45; 4:32-37). Paul said he was eager to help the poor (Galatians 2:10), and caring for widows and orphans was described as pure religion (James 1:27).

Second, conflict was inevitable, which demanded that the community become skilled at peacefully resolving conflict in order to preserve their cohesiveness and their witness to the world. Jesus’ taught simple steps for resolving disagreements (Matthew 18:15-17), and he also taught that dealing with conflict is more important than participating in religious practices (Matthew 5:23-26).

Third, unity in diversity was held up as essential to community health just as the body is only healthy when all parts or members are equally valued and contribute to the life of the other parts. This unity was expressly visible in the gifts of the spirit that built up the church (Romans 12:4-13; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:1-16). Furthermore, members from different social stations in society (e.g., slaves, slave owners, men, women, rich, poor, Gentiles, Jews, etc.) were to be received equally without favoritism or partiality (Colossians 3:11; James 2:1-13).

Fourth, justice was important for the community (Matthew 23:23; James 5:1-6). This characteristic was consistent with the call of the Hebrew prophets for the community to live according to the covenant that they had made with their Creator. Cries for justice had been heard from many of these prophets (Micah 6:8; Jeremiah 22:16; Isaiah 1:15-17; 56:1; 58:6-7; Amos 5:21-24; Proverbs 31:8; Psalm 82:3).

Fifth, love was central to every aspect of community life (Matthew 22:36-40). Love was called a more excellent way than spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13), and in conflict

²⁵ *I Am Not a Social Activist: Making Jesus the Agenda* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008), 31.

followers of Jesus were called to even love their enemies and overcome evil with good (Matthew 5:43-48; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; Romans 12:21).

These five themes are inextricably linked; they are each required for the other characteristics to thrive. If there is no love, the using gifts can become a dry formality. If acts of compassion are left undone, then love has no expression. If conflicts are not resolved, then community members cannot work together for social justice. Only when all five are nurtured can a community experience true fellowship (1 John 1:7) and be a witness of peace and unity to the world (John 17:23).

Conclusion

My working thesis was that the church's mission is to obey God, bring him glory, announce his kingdom, spread his love, and proclaim the gospel of peace. By obeying God's call to love enemies, care for others, resolve conflicts, value diversity and pursue justice, we are in fact building a community that is a light to the world. This holistic and healthy community simultaneously glorifies God's name, announces the kingdom of heaven, spreads divine love and demonstrably proclaims the gospel of peace.

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