

The Challenge of Integral Mission

Ask any group of people the question 'For the ordinary person in the street, who has been the best witness to Christianity?' you will almost always hear a list of people including William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Desmond Tutu. Why do these names get so consistently mentioned? It's because these are all people whose Christian faith has been displayed through the power and courage of their actions. These are people who integrated their faith in contexts of injustice and hardship and made a real, concrete difference to the world. This kind of commitment speaks of God's love more powerfully than any doctrine or creed.

The witness of these high profile names is just one illustration of the power of integral mission which connects words and actions. For integral mission is fundamentally about how faith in Jesus Christ is embodied in all aspects of life - and how it makes a difference to way we act in the real world.

The gospel message should always challenge us on a personal basis but it should never stop there. In the Bible, inward beliefs can never be divorced from outward application - loving God will always mean loving your neighbour.

Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Amos¹ denounced religious activity that had become detached from the reality of life and ignored the injustices of the day. And in the teachings of John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul and John² there is a constant emphasis on the importance of producing 'fruit'.

As Jesus said "wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matthew 11:19) and taught us that following him will have a profound effect on our whole lives - our use of time and money, where we chose to live, who we invite to dinner, our approach to career and status - indeed all of the things that bring security and comfort.

As evangelicals we must be aware of the theological techniques that are used to dilute the whole-life challenge of Jesus. As Jim Wallis has written, 'the churches have individualised the kingdom by restricting it to inner recesses of the heart; they have spiritualised it by removing it entirely to heaven; or they have futurized it by speaking of it only in connection to apocalyptic events at the end of time.'³

¹ For example: Isaiah 1:13-17, Jeremiah 7:2-8, Micah 3:1-12 and Amos 5:21-25, 11-15

² For example: Matthew 7:15-23, Luke 3:8f, Galatians 5:22-25 and 1 John 3:16ff

³ Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People*, Harper and Row, 1984

So how do we avoid these dangers? How can we best be faithful to ‘full message of this new life’ (Acts 5:20) that God has charged us to take into the world?

The answer is to get practical, to commit to Christianity with its sleeves rolled up. Brennan Manning wrote that ‘the greatest cause of atheism is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him with their lifestyle.’ We must communicate our message in ways people can hear and understand. And in a world dying for transformation, the best way is through practical acts of love and service in the communities in which we are part. It is through integrating our faith with a passion for community and social justice that our neighbours, colleagues and friends will most clearly see our faith in God.

At its best the Church is a community of people propelled by a mission to live out God’s purposes of love and justice through all they are and do. This is the heart of an integral mission – a call to go beyond the shallow waters of personal preference and religious ritual and venture deeper into the risky places where we really do need courage and conviction. And let us pray that as followers of Jesus we will bear witness to God himself – that the world may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven.

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For more on this subject, you can order the booklet *Integrated Faith* published by Livability (formerly Shaftesbury Society). You can order this by contacting the Community Mission team jclark@livability.org.uk