

# My Response

by Christopher Little

When I submitted my article “What Makes Mission Christian” to the *IJFM* I assumed that it would be published as one miscellaneous article among many. I had no idea that it would become the lead article in this present edition [this issue, pp. 65–73] and that the editors would solicit responses [pp. 75–85]. Yet I am pleased about what has happened as it provides an opportunity for further dialogue.

## 1. The Current Divide

Although there is neither time nor space to respond in detail to every point my critics raised, I would like to speak to the following issues. First of all, the various responses bring into clear focus the present divide among evangelicals regarding the church’s missionary responsibility to the world. My brother Steve Hawthorne describes it as a “drift”, but there are those of us who have not changed our views with regard to the primacy of proclamation and therefore cannot be included among those who are drifting. By the way, not one respondent dealt with the question I posed in endnote five: “how can evangelicals expect to save themselves from the same fate of the WCC [World Council of Churches] when they incorporate ‘sociopolitical and economic agendas’ into the mission of the church”?

## 2. Annihilationism, Inclusivism

Second, the forerunner to evangelicalism’s holism, John Stott, leveled the playing field in 1974 with regard to evangelism and social action. It was more than a decade later that in 1988 we learned he embraced annihilationism (cf. *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal–Evangelical Dialogue*, 1988:319ff.). Whether this was the consequence of changing his mission theology or the source of it, I cannot say. Given this scenario, it is only appropriate to ask up front any holistic mission theologian or practitioner whether they have also embraced annihilationism, or perhaps the more popular view today, inclusivism. Obviously, if people who die apart from Christ eventually go out of existence or are saved through some other way than conscious faith in Christ, then preaching the gospel cannot be regarded as more important than meeting their physical needs here and now.

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### 3. *The Shift in Mission Spending*

Third, all concerned about the future of evangelicals in mission should take note of the data in the last two editions of the *Mission Handbook*. In 2001, agencies reporting evangelism/discipleship as their primary activity accounted for 58.7% of the total amount spent on overseas ministries whereas for relief/development it was 35.1%. In 2005, the figures were 47.5% for evangelism/discipleship and 46.1% for relief/development. In addition, the increase in income from 2001 to 2005 for relief/development was 73.4% while for evangelism/discipleship it was only 2.7%. Assuming the continuation of this trend to the present year of 2008, one can be fairly certain that the missions community in the USA is currently spending more on alleviating human suffering than on addressing the eternal destiny of the lost. This situation is all the more acute given the fact that in recent speaking opportunities I have had throughout the country, I no longer have had to justify the role of humanitarian work in Christian missions, but unexpectedly have had to defend the necessity of preaching the gospel. This indicates that the average evangelical in the pews is unsure about the fundamental meaning of God's missional call upon the church.

### 4. *A Need for More Exegetical Reflection*

Fourth, I regret that the responses generally did not offer more exegetical reflection. David Hesselgrave has written: "Unless [we] dialogue canonically, both theological and missiological dialogues are as apt to compound confusion as they are to dispel it" (*Paradigms in Conflict*, 2005:352). Taking his lead, I will discuss two critical passages which are often employed to justify holistic or integral mission. Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works [καλὰ ἔργα], and glorify your Father who is in heaven", is regularly taken to justify any number of philanthropic causes around the world in the name of Christ. Yet by follow-

ing the hermeneutical principle of interpreting Scripture with Scripture, a noteworthy truth emerges. The apostle Peter, who was there when Jesus said these words in the Sermon on the Mount, writes in 1 Pet. 2:12: "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds [καλῶν ἔργων], as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation." As I have noted, the same two Greek words here for "good deeds" are also used for "good works" in Mt. 5:16, signifying that the apostolic interpretation of Jesus'

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message concerning His disciples being light had to do with moral behavior and righteous living in the sight of unbelievers. Thus, to use this verse to justify almost any missional paradigm under the sun as is being done today (e.g., mission on the microbial level) is clearly an anachronistic reading.

There is also the well-known Matthew 25 passage where Jesus concludes His interaction with the righteous by saying, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (v. 40). My brother Ron Sider and others assume that when Jesus mentioned the words "these brothers of Mine", He was referring to the poor masses around the world. What is being overlooked, however, is that there is a close parallel to Mt. 25 in Mt. 10 where Jesus sends out His disciples and informs them that they will face difficulties and dangers along the way. He then concludes by stating in verse 40ff: "He who receives

you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.... And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple [that is, those disciples whom He has sent out], I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward." This phrase "little ones" can also be translated "least ones" and carries the same meaning as "the least of these brothers of mine" in Mt. 25:40. In light of this, D. A. Carson (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1984:520) and others have concluded that Jesus is teaching that the nations are judged on the basis of how they respond to and treat Christ's emissaries who are sent out by Him, not that Christians will be judged on the basis of how we take care of the poor. As such, this passage is not teaching that Christians who do not feed the hungry and clothe the naked are going to hell, in a kind of salvation by works scheme as Sider postulates, but rather the nations will be separated into the sheep and goats on the basis of how they receive the message which Christians proclaim.

### 5. *Were Jesus and the Apostles Mistaken?*

Fifth, those who advocate any missional paradigm in which proclamation is either downplayed or removed altogether, must ultimately deem Jesus and the apostles a disappointment. At any particular time, both Jesus and Paul could have directed their energies toward dismantling the unjust Roman tax system, undoing the slave trade, confronting temple prostitution, advocating for animal rights, etc. However, Eckhard Schanbel notes, "Jesus never attempted to attack or change the social and economic structures of Galilean or Judean society" (*Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church*, 2004:1577), and according to Roland Allen, Paul "never directly engaged in any such work nor endeavored to direct the Christian churches of his foundation in the doing of them. He could not have done so. Social activity of this kind was a fruit of the Spirit and it could not be expected to appear until

the apostles had done their work and had ministered the Spirit" (*The Ministry of the Spirit: Selected Writings of Roland Allen*, 1960:104–5). In addition, mission history has demonstrated over and over again that when socio-economic benefits accompany the preaching of the gospel, it has given birth to rice Christianity. It was from my brother Ralph Winter that I first heard of David Paton's *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God* in which he describes the Western missionary efforts in China in the twentieth century as a "debacle" since it had been so closely aligned to economic and political agendas (1996:66ff.). As such, he among all people should realize the inherent risks of mandating that word always be accompanied by deed. While serving in Mozambique, I witnessed over and over again people showing up at churches to receive material assistance but when that assistance ran out they abruptly disappeared without any heart change at all.

Winter asks the question, "Can't we agree that neither 'wordless deeds' nor 'deedless words' can suffice?" No, we can't. As I stated in my article, when Jesus was pressed by the crowds in John 6 to do another miraculous deed, He turned to word, indicating that there is a time when word supersedes deed. Yes, this was all preceded by deed as my brother C. René Padilla pointed out, but the point being made was that Jesus continued His mission at that juncture through word and not deed. In light of this fact, and because I cannot think of one instance in His ministry where He refrained from doing word in favor of deed, I maintain "word apart from deed is a perfectly legitimate expression of Christian mission" as it provides the means by which estranged humanity might be reconciled with God. Moreover, if "deedless words" cannot suffice, what are we to make of Paul's ministry in Syrian Antioch among Gentile proselytes, in Berea among Jews, in Athens among philosophers, and in Rome while in chains, all of which was not accompanied by any demonstrable deed? We could,

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of course, say that he was mistaken in these various places along with all others who likewise preach the gospel apart from deed. Yet I cannot join the company of those who would do so.

### **6. Falling Short in Europe and the Majority World?**

Sixth, and related to the previous comments, I fear that we are discounting vast portions of territory and entire segments of the body of Christ by promoting holism as a missional paradigm in the third millennium. The fact of the matter is that places like Europe have quite substantial and very effective governmental programs to which people turn when in need. Are we to conclude that since those who are committed to the Great Commission may not have the resources to match such programs, their proclamation of the word is an insufficient expression of Christ's mission, especially given the level of biblical illiteracy among Europeans today? Furthermore, to carry on mission in a holistic manner requires vast amounts of resources in an effort to improve the well-being of those less fortunate. Are we to then presume that the growing missionary force in the majority world which does not have access to such resources but nevertheless perseveres in evangelizing the lost falls short of the biblical mandate to disciple the nations? This is a judgment I cannot pass and a burden I cannot place upon either those committed to reaching Europe or those with limited resources around the globe proclaiming that salvation is only through faith in Christ.

### **7. The Kingdom of God**

Seventh, I confess that it is difficult for me to comprehend the present infatuation with the kingdom of God motif on the part of evangelicals given the fact that there is no agreement among biblical scholars as to the

dominant theme of Scripture. Even if scholars could agree on its main theme, it would not be the kingdom of God. With regard to the New Testament, Andreas Köstenberger in his article "Diversity and Unity in the New Testament" offers the following two criteria for determining whether a particular motif is central or not: 1) the motif must be found "in all the major NT corpora, the Synoptics as well as John, Paul as well as the General Epistles"; and 2) the motif must be "a shared, foundational belief of Jesus and the early church" (*Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect*, 2002:154). The kingdom of God falls short on both counts—it is weakly represented in John and, according to I. Howard Marshall, the proclamation of the early Christians "shifts in emphasis from the kingdom to the Messiah, and consequently it is not so much a repetition of what he proclaimed as rather a proclamation of him . . . With the shift away from the emphasis on the kingdom of God there comes an increased emphasis on the experience of salvation and eternal life" (*New Testament Theology*, 2004:205). Other shifts are detectable in the New Testament as well. Jesus mentions *basileia* over a hundred times in connection to His own person and mission but spoke of *ekklesia* only three times. Paul, on the other hand, refers to *basileia* only eight times but to *ekklesia* no less than forty-three times. Thus, if the "good news of the kingdom" is so central to theologizing in mission today as Sider and Padilla maintain, why the shift from Jesus to Paul? I answered this question in endnote sixteen of my article. But suffice it to say that Paul feels free to speak of the gospel completely apart from the kingdom (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4–6) and so should anyone who believes the apostolic interpretation of the Christ event as contained in the epistles is authoritative for the church committed to mission in any age.

This is not to discount the importance of the kingdom but rather to put it in proper perspective. The idea that kingdom realities are displayed through “spiritual” experiences in the lives of believers for which Hawthorne criticizes me comes from Arthur Glasser. I am standing on his shoulders in this regard and for good reason as Paul states: “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Furthermore, when disciples of Christ live out these kingdom realities, it clearly contributes to the glorification of God signifying that the kingdom is penultimate to the glory of God as Gisbertus Voetius rightly observed long ago (see endnote seventeen [this issue, p. 73]).

### ***8. We Can't Have it Both Ways***

And last but not least, the evangelical missions community stands at a crossroads. Either it will repeat the mistakes of a whole generation of Christians in the past century or it will articulate and affirm a biblical theology of mission with priorities as delineated in the Lausanne Covenant. These priorities are derived from biblical categories which entail non-negotiable dichotomies. The Bible points to several significant dichotomies: life and death, light and darkness, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, God and humans, the transcendence and immanence of God. In relation to the present discussion, God's word also reveals a temporal/eternal dichotomy. This is not a Hellenistic category as Hawthorne postulates but a biblical one which should not be blurred nor compromised. Human beings upon death simply will no longer continue to exist in the state they were physically born into. At that point, they will face judgment by the One who will determine their eternal place of residence (cf. Lk. 12:4–5; Heb. 9:27). A person will either embrace this Christian worldview or they will deny it ending up either as a monist or a secularist. Whatever the case, no one can have it both ways.

### ***Conclusion***

As such, and by way of summary, I conclude with the following three points:

1) Given the fact that the greatest problem fallen humanity faces is alienation from God, the greatest demonstration of compassion toward humanity can only be the solution to this problem and that is the message of reconciliation through Christ. In other words, because eternal needs outweigh temporal ones, the priority in Christian mission must be proclamation. As C. S. Lewis wisely noted: “there are a good many things which would not



be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live forever” (*Mere Christianity*, 1952:59). Yes, hell is eternally worse than any temporal disease (cf. Mt. 25:46; Heb. 10:31; Rev. 20:11–15), and only the church has been entrusted with the solution.

2) It is certainly true that social transformation of any given society is dependent on socially responsible Christians, but it is also certainly true that to have socially responsible Christians to bring about such transformation, the gospel must first be preached. Therefore, the surest path to societal transformation is through the conversion of hearts. That is, in order for people to abide by the Great Commandment which is to love God and neighbor, the Great Commission must first be implemented so that people can be saved. All of this points to the priority of proclamation of the

Christian message in order to bring about societal change.

3) The church is capable of doing any number of good things for the world. For example, it is a good thing to teach people to read and write, to provide clean water for people, to feed the hunger and clothe the naked, and to care for God's earth. But the fact is the world can also do all of these good things and actually does them. Yet it is only the church that has been called by God to do what is best for the world since the world is incapable of doing that for itself, namely, preaching the gospel. Accordingly, we cannot afford to sacrifice what is best on the altar of what is good. Too much is at stake, indeed, the very eternal destiny of the lost is at stake. The church, therefore, must concentrate and focus on what the world refuses to do. This argues for the priority of proclamation with regard to the church's missionary obligation to the world and therefore I remain a priorist. **IJFM**

## Editor's Note on Christopher Little's "My Response"

by Ralph D. Winter

*Editor's comment: Note that the headings below correspond to the numbered headings in Little's response, e.g., Issue 1 below refers to Little's first point on pg. 87.*

Many things have been clarified by our respondents including Christopher's response to the responses. We can appreciate the very careful and thoughtful points that have been made. But some things are still not clear.

### Issue 1 (p.87)

In his response, Little speaks of a "divide among Evangelicals regarding the Church's missionary responsibility to the world." I rather see it as a divide regarding the *proper nature of proclamation*—is our proclamation ineffective if we are unable to demonstrate the glory of a God of love? It is not a "responsibility to the world" but a responsibility to the command to glorify God. We are not divided on that.

He fears that we might slide into the this-world social gospel extreme. Fine. Does that mean we must choose an individualistic next-world extreme?

### Issue 2 (p.87)

He notes that John Stott made room for good works and now believes in annihilationism. Does that mean that everyone who upholds good works will come to believe in annihilationism or universalism? Or, is this merely a helpful warning and not a suggestion that good works are dangerous to one's theology?

### Issue 3 (p. 88)

He fears that a concern to "alleviating human suffering" will dim concerns for "eternal destiny." This confuses things since in the Bible and church history this kind of a concern has been the very thing that has given credibility and power to a gospel of eternal destiny.

### Issue 4 (p.88)

In what may be the most serious confusion, Little, on the one hand, rightly claims that glorifying God

through good deeds, as in Matt. 5:16, refers to "moral behavior and righteousness." He apparently assumes that this refers merely to individual traits, not larger efforts like social action. It also involves relative abilities. Proverbs 3:27 says, "Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it"—here actions which may vary depending on our ability. Thus, "moral behavior and righteousness" for a Hebrew slave in Egypt or a black slave in Virginia obviously did not confer the ability to do what Wilberforce was able to do in the British Parliament. Yet the same "moral behavior and righteousness" explains those scales of behavior. It is not anachronism to note that obligation is in proportion to ability.

He expounds correctly the fact that Matthew 25 and Matthew 10 both refer to kindness to Jesus' disciples, not poor people. However because holistic thinkers often miss this point in quoting "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," does in no way deny that many other verses are concerned with the poor.

### Issue 5 (p.89)

Little also rightly points out that neither Jesus nor Paul attempted to do away with slavery. But he then quotes Roland Allen saying that (at least) Paul "could not have done so." *Can we agree that God does not expect us to do what we are not able to do?* But does that mean He also does not expect us to do what we are able to do?

That, in fact, is almost the main point. In the case of Hebrew slaves in Egypt or American slaves in Virginia or non-college people in America (for seventy years in the first half of the last century), only so much could be done. But Jesus in Luke 12:48 said "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required." Those earlier Evangelicals two centuries ago (1815–1848) exercised great social influence and did great things. They are credited even by secular historians today as setting the moral foundations of this country (far more so than the earlier "founding fathers").

Today Evangelicals are coming again into both wealth and influence (what better explains the frantically anti-Christian books today?) and, as a natural result, are going beyond the polarization of the last century and are gaining an increased sense of responsibility far beyond individual "morality and righteousness." It is truly a shift, not necessarily a drift. It is the natural expansion of obligation with increased opportunity. Thus, when Little points to the lack of major social achievements on the part of Jesus and Paul he really is reading anachronistically.

He insists rightly that words apart from deeds are common in the New Testament. For example, words from the Bible are loaded with references to deeds that portray God's character, His love. If those deeds were not in the Bible, its words would be powerless. Also, if our deeds do not reflect that same integrity and love, the words we may quote from the Bible cannot have their full effect. We must walk our talk.

### Issue 6 (p.89)

He suggests quite rightly that today vast spheres of the world Church consist of disempowered people from whom we must not expect plans and efforts in massive social reform.

He asks if we are not passing judgment on non-Western missionaries who cannot enlist such "vast . . . resources in an effort to improve the well being of those less fortunate." Passing judgment? If any judgment is involved or implied it would be the opposite: It would be judgment upon those who possess or could enlist vast resources to improve the well-being of those less fortunate, but don't do so. However, judgment is the wrong word in either case. The key factor is increased responsibility deriving from increased opportunity.

### Issue 7 (p.89, 90)

Little acknowledges the distinctly mounting creativity and interest in the purposes of the Kingdom resulting quite naturally from the massive increase of U.S. Evangelicals' resources

and influence. But he calls this "infatuation with the Kingdom of God." In any case, there is a great shift. It seems certain that Evangelicals spend more on non-essentials per year than the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation can draw on to spend in twenty years.

He points out the differences between the ministries of Jesus and Paul, as if there is something like a dispensational shift (although he does not call it that). It is simply a change of venue. Jesus' recorded words are most often directed to the average person in society. Paul's recorded ministry is most often directed very specifically to godly Gentiles (God-fearers) whose lives, by definition, were already filled with faith and works. God-fearers may have listened for years to the Word (and its many accounts of good deeds). Their remaining problem was that they needed to hear and believe that Jesus' blood forever replaced the blood of bulls and goats. Naturally, therefore, Jesus and Paul had different ministries. Nevertheless, Luke describes Paul's ministry as being punctuated regularly by sheer miracles.

Little states eloquently, "When disciples of Christ live out these kingdom realities ["righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"], it clearly contributes to the glorification of God." Exactly. That is all I want to claim. That is the very foundation and empowerment of proclamation! Living out the gospel in word and deed has been the steel rails on which the church has moved across the centuries.

### Issue 8 (p.90)

He affirms the Lausanne Covenant. Under the fourth section, "The Nature of Evangelism," it does not say words have a higher priority than deeds. It says plainly, "Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism." That means everything to me about the inadequacy of words alone.

Now Little's concluding three points.

1. He states "the greatest problem fallen humanity faces is alienation from God...." That statement could well imply that we have humanistically or

anthropocentrically thought that we humans are the apple of God's eye. That may be true, but humans are not His only concern. He is out to restore all creation, not just the nations. And those who do find new life in Him inherit immediately the whole range of His concerns. If not, we misrepresent Him. The Bible says, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil" (1 Jn. 3:8). If the Father has sent us even as He sent His Son, that larger-than-nations description of His purpose requires much more of our evangelistic campaigns. Billy Graham's ministry has constantly assailed social problems.

But, in any case, good works in the life of the evangelist and in the community of those who believe—who send the evangelist—is an essential basis for empowered evangelism. Little properly notes that "hell is eternally worse than any temporal disease." This is precisely why an evangelism based on a visible, recognizable, effective demonstration of the character and love of God is so crucial—it relates to the eternal destiny of the hearer.

2. He says,

[In order] to have socially responsible Christians to bring about [social] transformation, the Gospel must first be preached.

This is certainly true but it does not deny the fact that if the life and community of the evangelist is not emulating good works, the converts may not do so either. They may say to themselves, "I can't be bothered with social transformation, I am told I must be focused on the higher priority of evangelism, and that my converts will take care of social problems." This simply means that we are always going to be depending on the "next" generation to demonstrate God's love in good works. It's the reverse: Love and good works are the basis of evangelism.

3. He says,

it is a good thing to teach people to read and write, to provide clean

water for people, to feed the hunger and clothe the naked, and to care for God's earth. But the fact is the world can also do all of these good things and actually does them.

What Little is referring to is happening in only certain parts of the world. And in those parts he may be forgetting how many centuries of Gospel witness and Bible study it took, say, to move the head-hunting Irish savages to become some of the most renowned Christian scholars of all Europe. But it took the words of a Patrick, a transformed individual whose very life witnessed of the character of God. Can you separate Patrick's words from his deeds, from his very life?

We actually can be very proud of the fact that the church has taught the world (including governments) how to do good works. The fact, however, is that this is no time for the church to stop intentionally leading the way in conquering evil. Millions of Americans are leaving or staying away from the churches due to the relatively low-level of church concern for ongoing demonstration of God's purposes.

A little girl in North China a century ago was sent by her parents to work in the home of a newly-arrived missionary couple. She knew her family needed money, but she was urged to serve, not to listen to, these "foreign devils." She didn't listen to their words, but she saw the husband open the door so his wife could go ahead of him. That, and other things that she only saw, became her path to faith. Her grandson is Thomas Wang, possibly the most widely respected Chinese Christian in the world today. Deeds have always been a powerful aspect of communication. Proclamation is obviously the highest priority—if it is of the kind that does not try to do without demonstration. In that sense I too am a "priorist." **IJFM**