

# Learning, unlearning, and relearning

## to be effective in God's mission

‘When the paradigm shifts, we all go back to the start.’ I once heard this in a management class, and the point seemed to be that those who could unlearn what they thought they knew under the old paradigm, and learn the challenges and opportunities of the new paradigm – and do so fast – would gain the advantage of effectiveness in a changed environment. World Christianity and world mission have changed so radically and so rapidly in the past few decades that there is a lot of learning and unlearning to do, especially for those of us now on the peripheries of the world church – in the west and north. For that indeed is where we must start our new learning

### The New Shape of World Christianity

#### Learn the realities of majority world Christianity

At the start of the 20th century, only 10% of the world's Christians lived in the continents of the south and east. 90% lived in North America and Europe, along with Australia – New Zealand. At the start of the 21st century, at least 70% of all the world's Christians live in the non-western world – or the majority world as it would better be called. And the rate of growth in the

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south (especially among evangelical and charismatic Christians) far exceeds the more static or shrinking condition of the church in the west. There are more Christians worshipping in Anglican churches in Nigeria each week than in all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Britain, Europe and North America combined. More Baptists in Congo than in Britain. More people in church every Sunday in communist China than all western Europe. Ten times more Assemblies of God members in Latin America than in the USA.

The whole centre of gravity of world Christianity has moved south and east. The old peripheries are now the centre. The old centres are now on the periphery. Philip Jenkins has brought all this to popular attention in *The Next Christendom*, telling the world what many of us were saying in Christian circles for decades. Except that Christian leaders of the global south rather resent the implication in the title. They have no desire to be another ‘Christendom’ – wielding monolithic territorial and political power. Nor do they wish to be any kind of threat to the west, but rather to help Christians there in the struggle to shift from survival mode to mission mode – in their own lands.

#### Unlearn our ethno-centric superiority

But can the west be re-evangelized? Only if we in the west unlearn our default ethno-centric assumptions about ‘real’ Christianity (our own), and unlearn the blindness that simply doesn't see the extent to which western Christianity is horrendously infected by the gods of cultural idolatry. It may be more blessed to give than to receive, but it is often

harder to receive than to give. That reverses the polarity of patron and client and makes us uncomfortably aware that perhaps what Jesus said to the Laodicean church might apply to us in the west (Rev. 3: 10). The church in the west needs the humility to accept that we can learn from (and actually need) the vigour of the majority world church.

#### Re-learn normal New Testament Christianity

But that new learning will actually be no more than re-learning the original nature of biblical Christianity, which very quickly became poly-centric. Because of Acts 1:8 we tend to think of the church spreading out in ripples from Jerusalem as the centre. But in fact Acts subverts that pattern: Antioch is where followers of Jesus are first called Christians, and it becomes the centre of westward-oriented missionary work. Paul sees Thessalonica as a radiating centre for the message in Macedonia and Achaia. Ephesus clearly became a key metropolis for Christian witness in Asia Minor. Paul was keen to make Rome a base for his planned work further to the west in Spain. Jerusalem is simply one centre among many. For in any case, *Christianity has no territorial centre* – whether land or city. Our centre is the person of Christ, and wherever he is carried, there is another potential centre of faith and witness. So, as Andrew Walls has said, the emergence of genuinely world Christianity and the ending of western assumptions of heartland hegemony, is simply a return to normal Christianity, which looks much more like the New Testament than ‘Christendom’ ever did. We must learn to live in the real world

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## The New Patterns of World Mission

### Learn the multidirectional realities of mission

The growth of the multinational church has resulted in a swing to multi-directional mission. It is probably still true that the USA is the largest single contributor of Protestant cross-cultural missionaries. But which is the second largest? Not any other western country, but India. And it is very possible that India has already overtaken the States in the thousands of those involved in truly cross-cultural mission – within and beyond India. There are many more Korean missionaries than British, and some Nigerian evangelical mission organizations are larger in personnel than most western ones – and operate on budgets that are a fraction of western mission budgets. The fact is that already 50% of all Protestant missionaries in the world come from non-western countries, and the proportion is increasing annually. So you are as likely to meet a Brazilian missionary in North Africa, as a British missionary in Brazil. Indeed the ratio of Indian missionaries to western missionaries in India today is probably around 100 : 1. People involved in Christian mission of all kinds are criss-crossing the world in all directions in the most imaginative and creative forms of work and witness. Mission is from everywhere to everywhere.

### Unlearn the ‘mission field’ paradigm

So another piece of un-learning we must do is the habit of using the term ‘mission field’ to refer to everywhere else in the world except our own home country (in the west). The language of ‘home’ and ‘mission field’ is still regularly used in many churches and agencies, and fundamentally mis-represents reality. Not only does it perpetuate the rather patronizing view of the rest of the world as always on the receiving end of our missionary largesse, but it also fails to recognize the maturity of the churches in many other lands. Christianity probably reached India before it reached Britain. There was a flourishing church in Ethiopia a century before Patrick evangelized Ireland. There were churches in eastern Europe centuries before Europeans reached the shores of North America. There have been large Christian communities in the Middle East for two thousand years (though sadly decimated by the impact of western policies there). So it is discourteous (at best) and damaging (at worst) when western mission activity ignores all such ancient expres-

sions of Christian tradition and lumps all lands abroad as ‘mission field’, in comfortable neglect of the fact that the rest of the world church sees the west itself as one of the toughest mission fields in the world today. This is not, of course, to suggest that countries of ancient Christian churches need no evangelism, any more than we would exclude nominal western Christians from the need to hear the true gospel. But the real mission boundary is not between ‘Christian countries’ and ‘the mission field’, but between faith and unbelief, and that is a boundary that runs through every land, and indeed runs down our local streets. Mission effort must therefore run in all directions; not as a uni-directional flow from one bright corner of our world maps to the darkened sectors or shaded ‘windows’ somewhere else.

### Re-learn normal New Testament mission

And in this too we shall be re-learning the multi-directional nature of mission in the book of Acts. Once again, our pre-occupation with concentric circles drawn to illustrate Acts 1:8 have obscured the much more complex pattern of mission and movement that Luke shows us in Acts. For example:

- Philip goes from Jerusalem to Samaria, to Gaza, to Azotas and to Caesarea (8)
- Peter goes to Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea and then Antioch (9)
- People from Cyprus go to Antioch and initiate a multi-ethnic church there (11)
- Barnabas goes from Antioch to Tarsus to get Saul
- Timothy goes from Lystra to Ephesus, while Titus ends up in Crete (16, 1Tim., Titus)
- Priscilla and Aquila come from Italy and end up in Corinth (18)
- Apollos comes from Alexandria to Ephesus, and then ends up in Corinth (19).

There are criss-crossing lines of missionary movement all over the international Mediterranean world, and it is fascinating to see that the primary way it was all held together was a high commitment to relational trust. That is what lies behind the letters of recommendation, and the exhortations in 3 John to treat such travelling church-planters and church-teachers ‘in a manner worthy of God’ and to respect their self-sacrificing ‘going out’ for the sake of the name of Christ. (3 John is a much neglected missional tract for our times, by the way).

## The Original Shape of God’s Mission

### Learn that mission belongs to God

Perhaps what we most need to learn, since we so easily tend to forget, is that mission is and always has been God’s mission before it becomes ours. The whole Bible presents to us the God of missional activity, from his purposeful, goal-oriented act of creation through to the completion of his cosmic mission in the redemption of the whole of creation – a new heaven and a new earth. The Bible also presents to us, of course,

- *humanity with a mission* (to rule and care for the earth);
- *Israel with a mission* (to be the agent of God’s blessing to all nations);
- *Jesus with a mission* (to embody and fulfil the mission of Israel, bringing blessing to the nations through first bearing our sin on the cross and anticipating the new creation in his resurrection);
- *and the church with a mission* (to participate with God in the ingathering of the nations in fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures, by going to them with the good news of what God has done in Christ).

But behind all this stands *God with a mission* (the redemption of his whole creation from the wreckage of human and satanic evil). The mission of God is what fills the Bible from the brokenness of the nations in Genesis 11 to the healing of the nations in Revelation 21-22. So any mission activity to which we are called must be seen as a humble participation in this vast sweep of the historical mission of God. All mission or missions which we initiate, or into which we invest our own vocation, gifts and energies, flow from the prior mission of God. God is on mission, and we, in that wonderful phrase of Paul, are ‘co-workers with God’.

### Unlearn our obsession with our own agendas

This God-centred re-focusing of mission turns inside out a lot of our obsession with our own mission plans, agendas, goals, strategies and grand schemes.

- We ask, ‘Where does God fit into the story of my life?’ when the real question is where does my little life fit into this great story of God’s mission.
- We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored for our own individual lives when we should be seeing the

purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.

- We wrestle to ‘make the Gospel relevant to the world’. But God is about the mission of transforming the world to fit the shape of the Gospel.
- We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness.
- I may wonder what kind of mission God has for me, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for *his* mission.
- We invite God’s blessing on our human-centred mission strategies, but the only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning, the centre and the end.

### Re-learn a holistic missional theology of the cross

Most of all we need to go back to the cross and re-learn its comprehensive glory. For if we persist in a narrow individualistic view of the cross as a personal exit strategy to heaven we will fall short of its biblical connection to the mission purpose of God for the whole of creation, and thereby lose the cross-centred core of holistic mission.

Our mission flows from God’s mission, and God’s mission has many dimensions as we trace the theme of his saving purpose through the different strands of Scripture. But every dimension of that mission of God led inexorably to the cross of Christ. The cross was the unavoidable cost of God’s mission. *So we need a mission-centred theology of the cross.* Think for a moment of some of the contours of God’s redemptive purpose.

It was the purpose or mission of God:

- **to deal with the guilt of human sin**, which had to be punished for God’s own justice to be vindicated. And at the cross God accomplished this. God took that guilt and punishment upon himself in self-substitution through the person of his own Son. For ‘the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa. 53:6), and ‘Christ himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree’ (1 Pet. 2:24).
- **to defeat the powers of evil**, and all the forces (angelic, spiritual, ‘seen or unseen’), that oppress, crush, invade, spoil and destroy human life, whether

directly or by human agency. And at the cross God accomplished this, ‘having disarmed the powers and authorities, ... triumphing over them by the cross’ (Col. 2:15).

- **to destroy death**, the great invader and enemy of human life in God’s world. And at the cross God did so, when ‘by Christ’s death he destroyed the one who

holds the power of death – the devil’ (Heb. 2:14).

- **to remove the barrier of enmity and alienation between Jew and Gentile**, and by implication ultimately all forms of enmity and alienation. And at the cross God did so, ‘for he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier... to create one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility’ (Eph. 2:14-16).

- **to heal and reconcile his whole creation**, the cosmic mission of God. – And at the cross God made this ultimately possible. For it is God’s final will ‘through Christ to reconcile all things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross’ (Col. 1:20 – the ‘all things’ here must clearly mean the whole created cosmos, since that is what Paul says has been created by Christ and for Christ (vs. 15-16), and has now been reconciled by Christ (v. 20).

So then, all these huge dimensions of God’s redemptive mission are set before us in the Bible. God’s mission was that:

- sin should be punished and sinners forgiven
- evil should be defeated and humanity liberated
- death should be destroyed and life and immortality brought to light
- enemies should be reconciled, to one another and to God
- creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its creator

All of these together constitute the mission of God. *And all of these led to the cross of Christ.* The cross was the unavoidable cost of God’s holistic mission – as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: ‘not my will, but yours, be done’.

A full biblical understanding of the atonement (of which the above points are the merest sketch), goes far beyond the matter of personal guilt and individual forgiveness. That Jesus died in my place, bearing the guilt of my sin, as my voluntary substitute, is of course the most gloriously liberating truth, to which we cling in glad and grateful worship with tears of wonder. That I should long for others to know this truth and be saved and forgiven by casting their sins on the crucified Saviour in repentance and faith, is a most energising motive for evangelism. All of this must be maintained with total commitment and personal conviction. *But there is more in the biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to biblical mission than evangelism.* The Gospel is good news for the whole creation (to whom, according to the longer ending of Mark, it is to be preached, Mk. 16:15, cf. Eph. 3:10). To point out these wider dimensions of God’s redemptive mission (and therefore of our committed holistic participation in God’s mission), is *not* ‘watering down’ the gospel of personal salvation, (as is sometimes alleged). Rather, we set that precious good news for the individual firmly and affirmatively within its full biblical context of all that God has achieved, and will finally complete, through the cross of Christ for the whole of creation.

But it is equally true, and biblical, to say that the cross is the unavoidable centre of our mission. All Christian mission flows from the cross – as its source, its power, and as that which defines its scope. *We also need a cross-centred theology of holistic mission.*

It is vital that we see the cross as central to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission – that is, of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a mistake, in my view, to think that, while our evangelism must be centred on the cross (as of course it has to be), our social engagement has some other theological foundation or justification. Why is the cross just as important across the whole field of mission? Because in all forms of Christian mission in the name of Christ we are confronting the powers of evil and the kingdom of Satan – with all their dismal effects on human life and the wider creation. If we are to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of the reign of God in Christ - that is, if we are to proclaim that Jesus is king, in a world which likes still to chant ‘we have no king but Caesar’ and his many successors, including mammon – then we will be in direct conflict with the usurped reign of the evil one, in all its legion manifestations. This – the battle against the powers of evil - is the unanimous testimony of those who struggle for justice, for the needs of the poor and

oppressed, the sick and the ignorant, and even those who seek to care for and protect God's creation against exploiters and polluters, just as much as it is the experience of those (frequently the same people) who struggle evangelistically to bring people to faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord and plant churches. In all such work, social or evangelistic, we confront the reality of sin and Satan. In all such work we are challenging the darkness of the world with the light and good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through him.

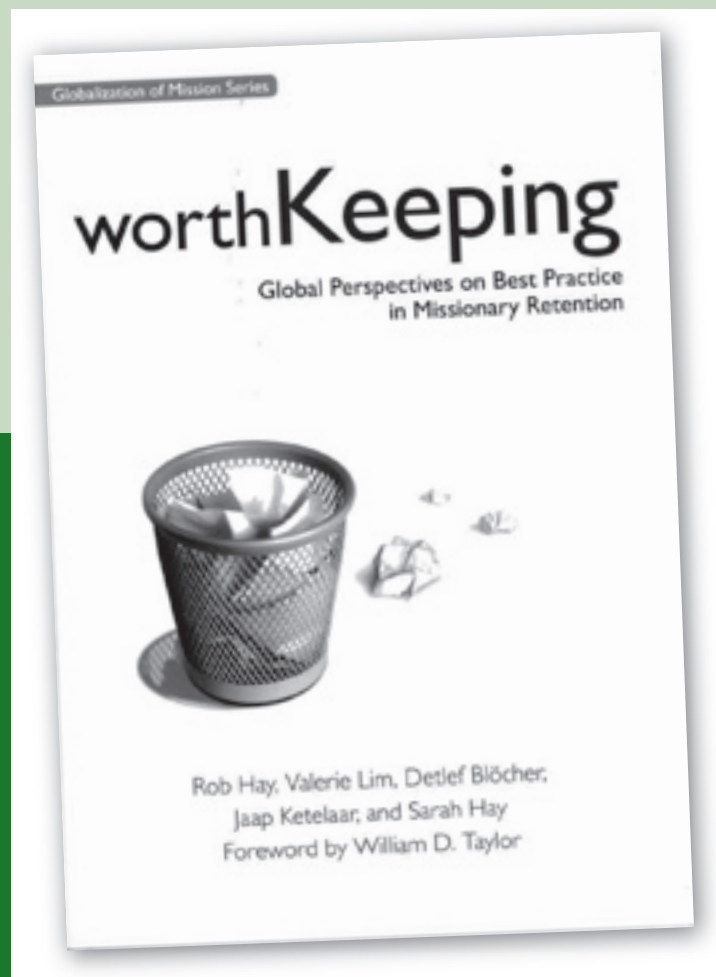
By what authority can we do so? With what power are we competent to engage the powers of evil? On what basis dare we challenge the chains of Satan, in word and deed, in people's spiritual, moral, physical and social lives? Only the cross. Only in the cross is there forgiveness, justification and cleansing for guilty sinners. Only in the cross stands the defeat of evil powers and all oppression and injustice. Only in the cross is there release from the fear of death and its ultimate destruction altogether. Only in the cross are even the most intractable of enemies reconciled. Only in the cross will we finally witness the healing of all creation.

The fact is that sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the cross of Christ is good news for every area of life on earth that has been touched by sin – which means every area of life. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess. And by God's incredible grace we have a gospel big enough to redeem all that sin and evil has touched. And every dimension of that good news is good news utterly and only because of the blood of Christ on the cross.

*Ultimately all that will be there in the new, redeemed creation will be there because of the cross. And conversely, all that will **not** be there (suffering, tears, sin, Satan, sickness, oppression, injustice, corruption, decay and death), will not be there because they will have been defeated and destroyed by the cross..*

So it is my passionate conviction that holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the cross. That includes the conviction that the cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power, no other resource, no other name, through which we can offer the whole Gospel to the whole person and the whole world, than Jesus Christ crucified and risen. <<

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