

**A HOLISTIC GOSPEL**  
**WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER, LET NO ONE SEPARATE**

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## INTRODUCTION

In October 2004, God gave me a fresh awareness of the importance of Newbigin's words in *The Open Secret*, "Missions have never been able to separate the preaching of the gospel from action for God's justice" (Newbigin 1995:91). I was in the middle of preparing for a series on the seven deadly sins when I realized that I had never heard a single talk on the sin of gluttony. During my preparation for this talk, God created a situation in which I met Bishop Kaaleng, who helps to oversee 70 different churches in Kenya, face to face.

Twenty of us were sitting around my apartment listening to the Bishop tell us stories about life in Kenya. At some point in the evening, he shared with us how some of the people in his tribe were only able to eat one meal every three days because of the famine. A young man asked, "Is there any way we can help out?" When he said that, the first thought that raced through my mind was, "Don't ask that question. I already have enough on my plate." Soon, I sensed a loving rebuke from the Holy Spirit about my lack of love, especially as I began to study the sin of gluttony thoroughly. In time, it became extremely difficult for me to live with the reality that thousands of our brothers and sisters in the developing world are dying daily of hunger and preventable diseases, while one of the biggest problems in the West is obesity.

What do the scriptures have to say regarding issues such as these? How is it possible that I could have been a Christian for over ten years and never demonstrated much concern for the suffering in the world? Had I adopted a reductionistic version of the good news? Did I have a malnourished understanding of salvation?

The thesis of this paper is that when people attempt to separate personal from social salvation, the result is a faulty (reductionistic) version of the gospel and an unfaithful (anemic) missiology. The scripture declares that there is both a King and a kingdom, which means that as the kingdom's citizens we have been born into an alternative community under the rule of the King, where we are called to embody an economy of love, to practice justice, and to share our resources with one another. Embodying the ministry of reconciliation demonstrates that we have become a part of God's new creation.

At the beginning of *The Open Secret*, Newbigin asserts that throughout the twentieth century, the Church has struggled to determine the best way to interpret *missio Dei* (God's mission). Part of the Church looked at mission primarily as doing God's justice, while other parts looked at mission as a call to personal conversion.

Unfortunately, the Church still seems to be struggling to determine the best way to interpret *missio Dei*. Some still put a much greater emphasis on personal morality and our vertical relationship with the King, while others put a much greater emphasis on social justice and our horizontal relationships with others in the kingdom. Newbigin describes the problem well:

The concern of those who see mission primarily in terms of action for God's justice is embodied mainly in programs carried on at a supra-congregational level by boards and committees, whether denomination or ecumenical. The concern of those who see mission primarily in terms of personal conversion is expressed mainly at the level of congregational life. The effect of this is that each is robbed of its character by its separation from the other. Christian programs for justice and compassion are severed from their proper roots in the liturgical and sacramental life of the congregation, and so lose their character as signs of the presence of Christ and risk becoming mere crusades fueled by a moralism that can become self-righteous. And the life of the worshipping congregation, severed from its proper expression in compassionate service to the secular community around it, risks becoming a self-centered existence serving only the needs and

desires of its members. Thus both sides of the dichotomy find good reasons for caricaturing each other, and mutual distrust deepens (Newbigin 1995:10-11).

While a growing number of evangelicals are articulating a newfound interest in social justice, they still “keep personal salvation separate from social justice,” and therefore, give up the opportunity for the local church to “be a social politics of justice” (Fitch 2005, 156). In this paper, I hope to add my voice to this ongoing conversation by following a thread through the scripture that clearly ties the personal and social dimensions of salvation together in such a way that to tear them apart does violence to the text and to our understanding of God’s mission. Let us begin with Mark’s announcement of the good news.

## **SECTION ONE - THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM**

### **Announcing the Kingdom – Part I (Mark 1:1-15)**

Mark begins his gospel announcing the good news. Jesus said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (1:14-15). So what is the good news that Jesus came to proclaim? Was it personal or social in nature? How are we to best understand what Jesus means when he talks about the kingdom of God and repentance? Mark uses blindness and deafness as consistent metaphors throughout his gospel, which should alert us to the fact that we are often blind to reality and deaf to what God is calling us to do. We need Jesus to anoint our eyes with his saliva as he did with the blind man at the center of Mark’s Gospel if we hope to understand what Jesus means. If the disciples had difficulty understanding the good news, is it any wonder that we still argue over the essence of God’s mission? To understand what Jesus

meant by the kingdom and the good news, to discover if it is both personal and social, we must put ourselves back into his world, his culture, and his time.

A number of years ago, I was introduced to some arguments that people have given when it comes to the origins of Jesus.

One person said, "I'm going to give you three good reasons why I believe Jesus was Italian: He loved to talk with his hands, he had wine with every meal, and he used olive oil quite a bit."

Someone from California stood up and said, "I'm going to give you three reasons why I believe Jesus was Californian: He never cut his hair; he walked around barefoot all the time, and he started his own religion."

Then, a black person stood up and said, "I'm going to give you three reasons why I believe Jesus was black: He called everyone brother, he liked gospel, and he couldn't get a fair trial."

After that, a woman stood up and gave the most compelling evidence of all, three proofs that Jesus was a woman: "He had to feed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food, he kept trying to get a message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it, and even when he was dead, he had to get up because there was more work for him to do" (Tomlinson 2003).

Each of us comes to the scriptures with a certain perspective that shapes and colors the way in which we understand Jesus and the kingdom he inaugurated. I realized through N. T. Wright and others that if I wanted to understand Jesus and His kingdom better, I needed to be much more acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures. When we read this passage in the book of Mark, we automatically realize that we are in the middle of an ongoing story and that our understanding needs to be informed by the prophets. Let us examine the message of Amos, since it is a common message of the prophets.

### **Understanding the Prophets through Amos (Amos 1-9)**

When a wicked king or ruler reigned in Israel, which was very often, God would often send his prophets to speak to his people to correct the situation in order to bring justice to the oppressed and to help the needy. In the first half of the eighth century B.C.,

Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom, Israel, while Uzziah was king in the southern kingdom, Judah (1:1). As one works through the book of Amos, one quickly senses that Jeroboam built his kingdom through violence, injustice, and a misuse of power. So God sent this peasant shepherd, Amos (1:1), to give Jeroboam a prophetic warning that an enemy was going to overrun his land and tear down both his winter and summer mansions that were adorned with ivory inside and out (3:13, 6:3-4). Why was Amos bringing such a negative message to Jeroboam while Amaziah the priest was giving Jeroboam a positive message?

This speaks to the nature of true and false prophets. One of the ways to perceive the difference between the false prophets and true prophets of God is that false prophets would promise peace, even in the midst of injustice (Jer. 6). False messengers would often encourage one to engage in various spiritual activities, such as fasting (Is. 58) or worship (5:21-24), yet never challenges one's social actions. In a sense, they saw salvation in purely personal terms. They happened to be the most popular messengers of the day. The true prophets, on the other hand, told the people the hard truth that there can be no peace without justice. Whether it was Amos, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, or Isaiah, the prophets of God made it clear that it is impossible to be right with God, while at the same time being unjust toward one's neighbor. The vertical and horizontal are interlocked.

Amos had a few basic themes that he was trying to express to Jeroboam. He was calling Jeroboam on his oppression of the poor (8:4-6) and the lack of justice in the land. Jeroboam had created laws that caused the rich to become richer and the poor to become poorer (2:7, 5:11-12, 6:12). When one examines the book of Amos, one quickly discovers that for God, justice equals righteousness. One also understands that justice is

not just individual, but structural. It is not just personal; it is also about evil systems. Under Jeroboam's rule, there was no justice in the land. Amos also rebukes Jeroboam because his people's songs of worship annoyed God (5:21-24). It is as if God were saying, "Do not pretend that you are worshipping me on Sabbath when you betray me the rest of the week by how you treat others. Your songs are like a noisy gong in my ear!"

Yet, while Amos was rebuking Jeroboam, Amaziah the priest was telling Amos to get lost and find a real job. I can imagine the conversation between Amaziah the priest and Amos the prophet if they had had the chance to talk before Jeroboam (7:10-17).

*Amaziah the priest:* "God tells us to worship, and so we obey."

*Amos the prophet:* "God tells us to act justly, and you do not obey."

*Amaziah the priest:* "What you call injustice, we call commercial prosperity.

What you call unrighteousness, we call good business practice."

*Amos the prophet:* "You cannot worship a God of justice in a state of injustice."

*Amaziah the priest:* "Leave this temple right now, while you are still able."<sup>1</sup>

Helen Montgomery summarizes Amos' ministry well when she says:

Amos...lays bare Israel's oppression of the poor, the luxury and parasitism of her women, and prophesies famine and desolation. With wonderful tenderness he laments his country's fate and beseeches her in God's name to seek good and not evil, that she may live; to let justice run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream. With a social passion that we are wont to think belongs to our own day, he foretells the sure destruction and captivity to come, when God will sift Israel among all nations as corn is sifted in a sieve. His book closes with a majestic prophecy of restoration (Montgomery 2000:33).

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<sup>1</sup> This conversation is similar to one that I recall from a talk, but I cannot recall the source.



## **Announcing the Kingdom – Part II (Mark 1:1-15)**

As Montgomery mentions, the prophets did not merely condemn, they also expressed a powerful hope for a day in the future when justice would reign, and love, joy, and peace would be the rule of the day. Isaiah probably talked more about this day and gave more pictures of what this day would be like than any other prophet (e.g. Is. 11, 40, 52, 61), which is why when Mark begins his gospel with some words from Isaiah, his audience took notice. The prophets and sages would consistently paint pictures of the day when God would finally establish His kingdom and His rule on earth, and the faithful longed for that day.

So what was the good news that Jesus was announcing? Well, according to New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, the average Galilean villager heard that Israel's God is at last going to become the king and set up His kingdom. He says, "In other words, God was now unveiling his age-old plan, bringing his sovereignty to bear on Israel and the world as he had always intended, bringing justice and mercy to Israel and the world. And he was going to do so, apparently, through Jesus" (Wright 1999:37). Here, we notice that the good news Jesus proclaimed was not simply about another time and place. The good news he proclaimed deals with the here and now, for he said, "The time has come... the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1:14-15). In other words, the poor and oppressed people in Galilee and other places where Jesus took his message understood the good news as including not just a new personal sense of forgiveness and a promised afterlife, but also new economic, social, and political realities. The time had come for the picture that the prophets had painted to come to

fruition. We will see this more clearly as we follow this thread through the scriptures. However, first, we must ask, “What did Jesus mean when he said, ‘Repent!’”

Today, if one were to go to the corner of Hollywood and Highland in the heart of Hollywood, California and find someone on the corner shouting, “Repent and believe the good news,” how would the typical person interpret that? Most would automatically interpret those words to mean that he or she needed to turn away from his or her private sins and find God by joining a church or the like. Yet, when Jesus said this, it meant much more.

N. T. Wright tells us if we want to obtain a better understanding of what someone would have heard in the first century, we need to look at the example of the Jewish aristocrat and historian Josephus, “who was born just a few years after Jesus’ crucifixion and who was sent in A.D. 66 as a young army commander to sort out some rebel movements in Galilee. His task, as he describes it in his autobiography, was to persuade the hot-headed Galileans to stop their mad rush into revolt against Rome and to trust him and the other leaders in Jerusalem to work out a better *modus vivendi*.” (Wright 1999:43-44). In other words, he told them to give up their agenda and their way of bringing about God’s kingdom and to trust Josephus instead. The words that Josephus used would have been absolutely familiar to the people in his day: “Repent and believe in me.” N. T. Wright goes on to say, “This of course did not mean that Josephus was challenging the leader to give up sinning and have a religious conversion experience. It has far more specific and indeed political meaning” (Wright 1999:44). Thus, when Jesus, forty years earlier, was going around Galilee telling people to repent and believe in Him or the gospel, how did they understand His exhortation? Jesus “was telling his hearers to give

up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom of God” to earth (Wright 1999:44), to trust his kingdom agenda, instead of the current views of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, or Essences. Jesus was calling Israel to trust in Him and His way.

Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God is now breaking into this world just as the prophets foretold and that the people of God needed to trust and follow him. His message of salvation, as that of the prophets before him, was both personal and social. As we look at Jesus’ announcement of His ministry in Luke’s account, we will see this with greater clarity. However, before we turn to Luke, we need to look at Leviticus 25 to unwrap the concept of Jubilee, because for Jesus, the kingdom of God is a Jubilee.

### **Jubilee (Leviticus 25)**

We learn a great deal about the heart of God and the ways of God by looking at how He set things up in Israel through the laws He gave them. First, they were to observe the seventh day and keep it holy. This was for their personal renewal. Then, in Leviticus 25, Moses tells the people that in the seventh year, they are to give their land some rest. This helped to ensure environmental responsibility. Finally, we have the fiftieth year, the year of jubilee. During the fiftieth year, three things were supposed to happen: all debts would be cancelled, all prisoners would be set free, and the land would be redistributed.

In *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, Donald Kraybill says,

More important than the details of Jubilee are the theological principles undergirding it. There can be no question that the Jubilee vision called for social upheaval, for upsetting the social order. As the social blueprint for the people of God, the Jubilee touched three factors, which can generate inequality. (1) Control of the land represents access to natural resources. (2) Ownership of slaves symbolizes the human labor necessary for production. (3) Borrowing and lending money involves the management of capital and credit. The use and distribution of

these resources – natural, human and financial – tilts the balance of justice in any society. In the modern world, technology has become a fourth variable in the equation. By controlling these resources, some people become wealthy as others slide into poverty (Kraybill 2003:88-89).

Kraybill then outlines “six Jubilee principles that highlight the divine vision for the age-old problem of social injustice” (Kraybill 2003:89). The following is a summary:

- *Divine Ownership.* God owns all natural and human resources. Why shouldn't the land be sold perpetually? Because “the land is mine” (Lev. 25:23). Why should slaves be released periodically? “For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold” (Lev. 25:42, 55). A theology of stewardship underlies the entire Jubilee vision.
- *God's Liberation.* Why were God's people called to participate in this unusual vision? Why were the people called to forgive debts, liberate slaves, and restore land? God's liberation is the driving motivation. His decisive act in the exodus from Egypt provides the theological basis for the Jubilee. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (Lev. 25:38).
- *Jubilee Response.* The Jubilee was a response to God's gracious liberation and deliverance. As the people recalled how God freed them from slavery, their joyous response was to pass that freedom on by forgiving debts, releasing slaves, and redeeming the land.
- *Jubilee Compassion.* The Jubilee response has one eye on history, on God's gracious acts of deliverance. The other eye is on the less fortunate. Jubilee behavior responds to God's acts in history and to the cries of those crushed by injustice.
- *Upside-Down Revolution.* The Jubilee envisions a social revolution. Nevertheless, it is certainly a unique one. Revolutions usually erupt at the bottom of the social ladder, but Jubilee is an upside-down revolution. God's grace moves those in seats of power, as they now see with compassionate eyes and join the Jubilee by redistributing natural and human resources.
- *Institutionalized Grace.* The Jubilee concept is rooted in a keen awareness of human sin and greed. Without social controls, economic pyramids rise. Without constraints and periodic leveling, the weak at the bottom are stamped into the dirt. Societies must have special provisions to defend and protect the helpless. Without these, power and wealth accumulate in the hands of the elite. The Jubilee vision does not squelch individual initiative. It neither calls for communal living nor prescribes legal equality. It allows personal aspirations their place. However, it knows such things easily get out of hand. Therefore, it wisely mandates structural change at regular intervals to equalize the disparities that would otherwise run rampant (Kraybill 2003:89-92).

Kraybill concludes by saying,

In true biblical fashion, the Jubilee integrates spiritual and social dimensions. It weaves religion and economics into one fabric. Pulling the two apart prostitutes the biblical truth, which holds spiritual and economic life together (Kraybill 2003: 92).

The concept of Jubilee informs our discussion about the nature of the good news, because as we are told in Is. 61, when the Messiah comes, he will declare the Jubilee. Sure enough, after being handed the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus opens it up to Is. 61:1-2 and reads it to the crowd that had gathered at the synagogue.

### **The Jesus Manifesto (Luke 4:14-30)**

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor (Luke 4:18-19)

That was the year of Jubilee! That was the message that Jesus spoke to the people. It was a message that included both personal and social dimensions. While some people try to spiritualize this entire passage, one only has to read the rest of Luke, such as the "Sermon on the Plain," to understand that Jesus did not spiritualize this message of Jubilee. When speaking about the book of Luke in general and then Jubilee in particular, Nissen says,

It has often been discussed whether the central message of Luke is the forgiveness of sins or social justice. This is a discussion not only among biblical scholars but also among missiologists. Thus the "evangelicals" have asked the "ecumenicals" the question, "Do you weep for the lost?" However, the counter-question from the "ecumenicals" is, "Do you weep for the poor?"

In Luke's Gospel this is not an either-or. Jesus is presented both as "the friend of sinner" and as the spokesman for the poor. D. Bosch is therefore right in describing Luke's mission as "practising [sic] forgiveness and solidarity with the poor." The great majority of those who are considered "lost" are also those who are poor in the material sense of the word.

T.D. Hanks, a Latin American liberation theologian, has commented on the discussion as follows: “Some Christians wish to preach a gospel of socio-political liberation to the poor, whereas others want to offer forgiveness of sins to the rich. But Jesus does not offer us the luxury of two gospels, one for the rich and one for the poor... Luke 4:18-19 forbids us to remove the socio-political dimension from the gospel, *and* Luke 24:46-47 forbids us to limit the gospel to a purely horizontal level by ignoring forgiveness of sins.”

The Jubilee addresses the whole human situation in terms of oppression and liberation. It is a paradigm both of human need and of God’s good news in Jesus Christ. To proclaim repentance and forgiveness is not merely the ministry of absolution, but the announcement of total liberation of any form of oppression, in the power of the Spirit. Luke, then, sees salvation as a liberation *from* all kinds of bondage and as a liberation *to* a new life in Christ (Nissen 2007:66-67).

Nissen explains how personal forgiveness is included in the overall liberation, but to limit our liberation to only that which relates to our vertical relationship with God would be to reduce the good news that Jesus came to bring.

Some people such as Mark Van Steenwyk call this passage the Jesus Manifesto, because they believe that His announcement best summarizes his entire mission in life.

He says,

It is with these words from Isaiah that Jesus sets the trajectory for his ministry of subversive love. The rest of the Luke-Acts is the fleshing out of this manifesto – first for Christ and then for his Church. Luke understands the subversive implications of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus turns everything upside down. He challenges the economic, religious, and political assumptions of the time.

As the Church, we have been sent by Christ into the world just as he was sent by his Father (We told this in John 20:21). In other words, Jesus’ manifesto is our manifesto. What we read in Acts, the Epistles and Revelation is the Church struggling to live out the manifesto in the midst of Empire. (Mark Van Steenwyk, *The Jesus Manifesto*: Mark Van Steenwyk’s Weblog)

### **Summary of Section One**

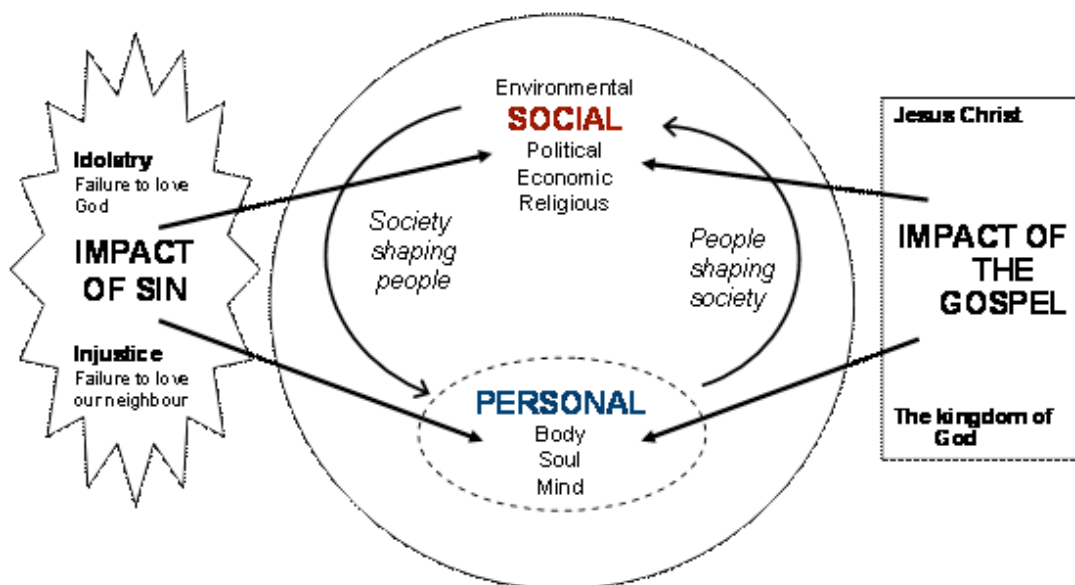
Now, we have found a common thread, from the law to the prophets and from the prophets to Jesus, asserting that the good news entails both personal and social dynamics.

It speaks to both our vertical relationship with the King and our horizontal relationship

with those in the kingdom. Through this thread, we learn that one of the reasons why it is dangerous to disentangle the personal from the social is because people and social systems are interrelated, which is why God consistently addressed both. When Bryant Myers summarizes E. Stanley Jones' thoughts on this topic, he reminds us of this danger.

While people create the political, religious and economic institutions of their society, at the same time these institutions shape (create) the people who live in them. The impact of sin, and hence the scope of the gospel, includes both the personal and the social. If we reduce the gospel solely to naming the name of Christ, persons are saved but the social order is ignored. This is a 'crippled Christianity with as crippled result'" (Myers 1999:48-49).

In other words, to emphasize one at the expense of the other or to try to disentangle the two would be to accept a malnourished understanding of the good news of the kingdom as well as a deficient missiology. I have found the following diagram extremely helpful when it comes to understanding the personal and the social implications of sin and the gospel. The diagram demonstrates the futility of trying to separate these two dimensions of salvation. (Diagram 1.1 – Myers 1999:48)



So how did the Apostle Paul, the one who penned the majority of the New Testament books, look at this issue? Did his good news include both personal and social dimensions that are intertwined?

## **SECTION TWO - THE GOOD NEWS OF PAUL**

### **The Ministry of Reconciliation (II Cor. 5:14-21)**

What we find when we get to Paul is that he articulates the mission in a very holistic way. Being able to speak from a post-death and post-resurrection perspective, he makes it clear that through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has reconciled all things to himself. He then calls us to embody the ministry of reconciliation. What we see through this passage is that the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness. Paul tells us that it is the aim of God to restore everything that was lost at the fall, to restore communion on the part of humans with God, with one another, and with all of creation. In other words, if Jesus has in fact died and risen again for all, if anyone has been placed into the body of Christ, this is evidence that the kingdom has broken in and that the new creation has indeed come. Thus, Paul asserts, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (II Cor. 5:17-20).

In the above passage, Paul makes it clear that God is on mission and that his mission is to renovate this world and to restore it to its intended purpose. Therefore, He sent His Son in order to reconcile the world to Himself, and now, He sends us with this message of reconciliation. This message is holistic because as Christ ambassadors we are to follow the way of Christ, which means we take up his manifesto and learn to embody an



economy of love, to practice justice, and to live generously toward one another. Paul says, “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Cor. 5:21). What does the righteousness of God mean?

In *The Justice of God*, James Dunn states,

The key to understanding the theme of righteousness in the Bible, together with its related ideas of justice and justification, is to recognize that we are dealing with concepts of *relationship*. . . . In Hebrew thought righteousness is something one has precisely in one’s relationships as a social being. That is to say, righteousness is not something which an individual has on his or her own, independent of anyone else – as could be the case with the Greco-Roman concept. Rather, righteousness is a matter of the responsibilities which arise out of social relationships. People are righteous when they meet the claims which others have on them by virtue of their particular relationships.

Thus in particular, the king is righteous when he fulfills his responsibilities as king towards his people. The servant is righteous when he obeys his master. . . . in other words, righteousness and relationship were two sides of the same coin (Dunn 1993:32-33).

After tracing this idea of righteousness through the prophets and the Apostle Paul,

Dunn sums up with the following passage:

The biblical understanding of justification/justice/righteousness is all of a piece. In particular, it involves two important aspects: righteousness as essentially involving relationships, arising out of relationships, expressed in relationships; and righteousness, as both horizontal and vertical, as involving responsibility to one’s neighbour [sic] as part and parcel of one’s responsibility towards God. Unless these two aspects of biblical thought are firmly grasped the concept of righteousness, of justification and justice is bound to become distorted. In Hebrew and earliest Christian thought it would not be possible for someone to be righteous apart from, without reference to, that individual’s responsibility to others; it would not be possible to be righteous before God while involved in unjust relationships with fellow humans. And central within this understanding of the justice looked for by God was the recognition of society’s responsibility towards the disadvantaged and the concern to conform social relationships to the model of the caring family (Dunn 1993:42).

No wonder the best way for Paul to sum up mission was with the word reconciliation.

This is because the good news, by its very nature, is about the restoration of relationships, our relationship with God, with one another, and with creation.

## **Summary of Section II**

As we have followed this thread throughout different parts of the narrative of scripture, we have discovered that to try and separate personal from social salvation is to argue with the law, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

## **SECTION THREE**

### **MISSIONAL APPLICATION**

#### **So What?**

So, why is it so important to understand that personal and social salvation are interlocked? What are the dangers of adopting a faulty version of the good news? What are the benefits of understanding that personal and social salvation cannot be separated? What are the missional applications for congregations in North America?

#### **An Unfaithful Messenger**

This issue is a vital one to understand because a faulty version of the good news leads to unfaithful messengers. Living in the North American context has some similarities to living in the courts of Babylon or Pharaoh's court. It is easy for us to live insulated and materialistic lives where we turn a deaf ear to the hungry and poor. Those we count as poor among us are well off when compared to world standards. The more I studied the world in which we live, trying to understand how my actions directly or indirectly affect my brothers and sisters in the world, the more I felt overwhelmed. I realize that often, I unknowingly, help perpetuate injustice and fall under the woes that

Jesus pronounces in Luke's Gospel (Luke 6:20-26). I suspect that many of us are open to the kind of prophetic rebuke James gave in his day when he says,

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you" (James 5:1-6).

It seems to me that one of the reasons James had to write his letter was because a number of people had forgotten the social dimension of the good news and had easily excused themselves from caring for the poor and the oppressed. I have discovered that when we in North America separate personal from social salvation, we easily spiritualize many passages in the scripture, especially the ones that discuss the poor and the rich. I know that I am terribly uncomfortable in my honest reading of the many passages that deal with the rich. It is here that I believe a holistic understanding of the good news can serve us. When we recognize that the good news is both personal and social in nature, we begin to perceive the suffering around us. Finally being awakened to the truth of this thread through the scriptures has moved me to actively care for the poor and oppressed, though I still feel half blind.

### **A Faithful Messenger**

I contend that when we understand the nature of salvation, we will have less spiritual monads running around North America, waiting for the rapture to take place so that they can escape reality instead of following Jesus and transforming the places to which he leads us. When we understand that reality contains both a king and a kingdom,

we will also recognize the need to live with integrity when it comes to our “private” lives. Those who show great concern for the kingdom, sometimes live as though the King is blind to what occurs in the dark. Some have been convinced that God does not care about their thought lives or sex lives, that He is only concerned with social justice. They may be surprised on judgment day. There is the King and His kingdom, and we cannot afford to do away with either. There are personal and social dimensions to salvation, and we cannot afford to do away with either. We need to experience the full liberation that the good news brings in order to be faithful to our missional God.

A proper understanding of the gospel lends itself to a better understanding of the nature of election. It is clear from the scriptures that we have been blessed in order to be a blessing, but if election is only about privilege, we may need to ask if we are part of the elect. Montgomery makes a crucial point when she asserts,

The central sin of Israel was its failure to discern the meaning of God’s election of his Servant Nation. What God meant for man, Israel monopolized...the election to service was transmuted into a charter for privilege. Pride in their distinctive calling became the ground of the narrowest exclusiveness (Montgomery 2000:21).

Separating the personal from the social dimension of salvation can certainly lend itself to some who think they are part of the elect being surprised on judgment day. The world does not exist for the sake of the elect, but rather, the elect are chosen for the sake of the world. Leslie Newbiggin’s thoughts on election are instructive here:

It is here in this argument of Romans 9-11 that the inner consistency of the biblical doctrine of election become most clear. There is no salvation except in a mutual relatedness that reflects that eternal relatedness-in-love which is the being of the triune God. Therefore salvation can only be the way of election: one must be chosen and called and sent with the word of salvation to the other. But therefore also the elect can receive the gift of salvation only through those who are not the elect. The purpose of God’s action for salvation in Christ is nothing other than the completing of his purpose of creation in Christ. It has in view not

“the soul” conceived as independent monad detached from other souls and from the created world, but the human person knit together with other persons in a shared participation in and responsibility for God’s created world (Newbigin 1995:77).

Finally, possessing a solid understanding of the nature of salvation informs us how to share the good news. When we understand that the personal and social are intertwined, our gospel will sound much more like Jesus’ than the truncated versions that litter the land today. I have a sense that when we learn the art of sharing the gospel well, we will see how it is the power of God to transform lives. I appreciate the way in which David Fitch articulates what an invitation might look like:

Imagine what it would be like in our churches, if there were no division (between evangelism of individuals and social action). If we were not invited to go forward as individuals to receive something, but instead come forward to become part of something, what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ - the reconciliation of all men and women with himself, each other and all of creation, which BTW inextricably includes my own personal reconciliation with God.

I believe the bifurcation of personal from social salvation cannot help but make justice into an add-on. It is something people do after they have been saved. It then becomes a program. As I said in *the Great Giveaway*, “For evangelicals therefore, social action is primarily saved individuals acting as Christians out in the world against powerful sinful social forces. And we confine the work of social justice largely to the arena outside the church.” Justice becomes a program individuals sign up for instead of a way of life we live and inhabit the world with (David Fitch, *Reclaiming the Mission: The Weblog of David Fitch*, comment posted March 14, 2007).

### **Final Thoughts**

The scriptures and life experience testify that when people try to separate personal from social salvation, the result is a faulty version of the gospel and an unfaithful missiology. This is a vital topic because if we have misunderstanding here, we can multiply unfaithful messengers; on the other hand, if we have a solid understanding, we

can multiply faithful messengers. When we begin to see the beauty of the good news in all of its fullness, we can better be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom.

Newbigin poses a question for us that demonstrates the strength of a congregation that understands a holistic gospel:

The question which has to be put to every local congregation is the question whether it is a credible sign of God's reign in justice and mercy over the whole of life, whether it is an open fellowship whose concerns are as wide as the concerns of humanity, whether it cares for its neighbors in a way which reflect and springs out of God's care for them, whether its common life is recognizable as a foretaste of the blessing which God intends for the whole human family.<sup>2</sup>

So, how can we have congregations as those described above? Newbigin gives us six characteristics that will help the local church faithfully live out her calling:

- It will be a community of praise.
- It will be a community of truth, a community remembering and rehearsing the true story of human nature and destiny.
- It will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood.
- It will be a community where men and women are prepared for and sustained in the exercise of the priesthood in the world.
- It will be a community of mutual responsibility, a foretaste of a different social order.
- It will be a community of hope (Newbigin 2006:152-157).

In the hope that the congregations I help start and lead, both now and in the future, will faithfully share the good news, I submit the prayer below.

Father,

We yearn to be the church you want us to become.  
Shape us into something beautiful.  
We recognize that you are the Potter and we are the clay.  
Please continue to mold us into the image of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, I do not remember the source of this amazing quote, but I still felt it was important to include it, as it captures the heart of the argument.

We want to join in what you are already doing in the world.  
In our worship and life together, in our ministry and service to  
others,  
we want to give people a glimpse of your intentions for the whole  
world.

Help us to welcome the outcasts, love our enemies,  
and form a Community that is visibly different from the culture  
around us  
as a sign of what you are doing in the world.

Help us experience your love and grace,  
grow in our relationship with Jesus,  
and experience the power of your Spirit  
as we offer your good news to others.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I cannot remember if I wrote this at some point or found it somewhere, but I felt it a great prayer with which to end this paper. I was planning on putting this in the appendix since this prayer just makes me just go over the twenty page limit, but I felt it flowed better in the heart of the paper. Please consider this in grading. Thanks.

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