

Critiquing the Holistic Gospel

By Jim Harries

Galatians 1:6-7+9: “*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different Gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!*” (NRSV)

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Paul uses no uncertain terms in condemning that which sets itself up as an ‘alternative Gospel’. Anyone who advocates such a Gospel should be *anathema* (*αναθεμα*) according to Paul (Gal. 1:9). How has ‘holistic gospel’, presumably different from the non-holistic version, come to be and what is its impact?

I will look only briefly at the complexities of the origin of the term ‘holistic gospel’, sometimes nowadays also known as the ‘integral gospel’. One can say that the term holistic gospel has arisen from a combination of linguistic misunderstandings, guilt, and jealousy arising from great economic disparities that exist in today’s world. Lausanne (1974) is often considered to have been the hinge point from which time the holistic gospel gained in popularity and credibility.

Definitions for holistic gospel will surely be contested. What is central to it is that preaching should be accompanied by some good deeds. This sounds innocuous enough. Its difficulties and its contentiousness arise from its link with a divided world in which the capitalism of a few is enabling them (especially using modern technology) to dominate the rest of the globe. For the West, holistic gospel usually means that gospel preaching should be accompanied by some fruits of capitalism and of modern technology. This is where its problem arises.

Let me back-track a little, and consider the historical church. In New Testament times we find Jesus preaching the gospel, but also being concerned for people’s ‘holistic’ well being. Hence he ‘helped people’. The means by which he did this in addition to teaching them is by casting out demons from them and by performing miracles.

There is something we need to note about the biblical practice of casting out demons and of performing miracles. That is – that neither of these practices required either advanced technology, large amounts of money, or foreign donors to function. On the contrary – any person could be gifted by God directly to do these things – no matter what their social status, wealth, or presence or absence of influential friendship networks. Jesus and his disciples were not appealing for funds from Rome, or any other wealthy quarter. What Jesus advocated was not dependence creating.

Later in the course of history, in a period often known as the ‘enlightenment’ in the West, some Christians began to doubt the reality both of miracles and of demons. This has come to a head in the modern era, in which centuries of ‘wisdom’ have been rejected and considered little more than superstition in the shadow of the ever onward

march of materialist-scientific discovery. Modern western people do not 'believe in' miracles, or in demons.

The modern era came to affect the modern missionary. By the time the modern missionary force was penetrating Africa, miracles and demon casting had been relegated to marginal status, despite the fact that Jesus' disciples had been preoccupied in casting demons, and miraculously healing the sick (Mark 6:12-13). What remained was preaching the gospel.

To some, this preaching the gospel only, became a problem; there was no power. This problem was exasperated by wealth and prosperity differentials. Whereas African communities were materially frequently extremely poor, western society was learning how to produce and multiply material goods. The power that the western missionary had come from his own community, but did not appear to be in the gospel that he preached.

Some missionaries began to make the connection between the miracles and demon-casting of Jesus in his time, and the capability inherent in the West to do comparable things using accumulations of capital, and technological innovations. The rate of association between gospel mission and western rationality and capitalism and their products accelerated to such an extent, that it became *normal* for mission in Africa and beyond to be carried out through a combination of church, *hospital* and *school*. The idea behind the schools was that people should be enabled to access the power on which the missionary was depending. The schools, together with the church and the hospital, were to spread the message of the enlightenment together with that of the Gospel.

It is this anticipated role of the school that is proving difficult. Many peoples around the globe (notably in Africa) have simply *not* been able to become rational capitalists despite years of education in a foreign language through a mission and more recently government sponsored school system. This is amongst other reasons because people, including African people, are not blank slates just waiting to be written on. People have their own traditions and customs. They interpret new things that are brought to them in the light of who they are. They do not simply become 'little Englishmen'. Effective education needs to take account of and not simply to ignore existing circumstances. Setting up an educational system using an unfamiliar language and a borrowed curriculum that has almost no fit with the local context has proved not to be an effective means for the inter-cultural transportation of self-sustaining rational capitalism. This has left the global community with the problem that still besets it today. Namely – that provision of outside money and technology to Africa and other poor continents is not catalysing indigenously rooted economic growth, but is generating enormous dependency.

While this is happening, the debate on how to go about mission and how to go about development in the poor world is no more the prime property only of the West. Southerners have received education. Many have moved to and are moving amongst northern lands. Numerous examples could be cited of southerners who have begun to apply themselves from their own understanding bases to northern discussions about them. Even some who have remained geographically in the south have acquired a

northern audience and following. I think we can say that increasingly it is southerners who are guiding northerners on how to relate to southerners.

Those southerners of particular interest to us, and there are not a few of them, are those who observe the parallels between provision for those (now called the poor) from northern resources, and the ‘miraculous’ actions of Jesus in caring for the poor, hungry and sick in his day. Lacking the qualms of experienced missionaries who have seen how such provision generates corruption, splits churches, and results in enormous dependency, these spokesmen for the third world can be forthright in their insistence that wealth be shared. These southerners do not have to comprehend how this wealth is produced in order to advocate that it be shared. Some Christians amongst them have insisted that such sharing be a part of preaching, resulting in the prosperity gospel being born and nurtured. The Christian gospel has thus moved from being gospel plus miracle (healing / exorcism) to gospel plus western money.

Southerners who engage with northerners in missiological and other debates are usually less dualistic than are westerners. (That is, whereas westerners separate the material from the spiritual, southerners do not. For southerners the material arises very much from the spiritual and vice versa, whereas to westerners these are largely distinct categories. This philosophical and epistemological difference has wide and massive implications.) This results in their using English, a language which for mother-tongue speakers is very dualistic in its basis, in a monistic way. Such difference in the foundation of language use generally being implicit and not explicit and thus concealed from view makes it difficult for either side to present their case clearly to the other.¹ Widespread compassion for the poor combined with the appearance given by the holistic gospel of being concerned for poverty in a way that is acceptable in the modern paradigm may have contributed to the popularity of holistic mission amongst many northern scholars and practitioners. The problem now however, which threatens to hit the scale of being a ‘disaster’ is one already mentioned above – that this results in western domination that creates dependency instead of indigenously sustainable change.

An additional problem for the gospel arising from the above can be added. The holistic gospel undermines indigenous Christian agency. This is because when the holistic gospel (as understood in the modern world) takes hold the legitimacy of Christian leaders comes to be gauged by the level of their material prosperity. High levels of material prosperity are most commonly found amongst those Third World church leaders who have access to western donors. Because donor money invariably has strings attached, these leaders are to some extent controlled by the West. Those church leaders who reject western control end up not having a lot of wealth, and therefore their churches are depleted.

The system in which church ‘success’ arises from one’s link to donors is often extremely divisive. This is because anyone within a donor funded church who gets independent direct access to a donor is likely to split the church. That is to say – when compliance to a church hierarchy arises from financial dependence then there is less point to remaining under such hierarchy when one has an independent source of finance. Because people in the church recognise that the money their leader has comes

¹ A non-Westerner and a Westerner can often use the same words to talk about different things without realising that this is happening.

from donors and comes for free, they have less deep respect for their leader, and are less inclined to give materially themselves to the church. Heavily donor funded churches tend as a result to be weakened and divided.

Those who escape these problems are churches that reject western theological orthodoxy. Many donors will avoid such non-orthodox churches. Churches with orthodox (in the eyes of the West) theologies are being encouraged to enter into partnerships with the West in which they will benefit materially. It is hard for them to resist such partnerships that come with numerous material inducements. Meanwhile acquisitions of wealth that result boost church membership and prestige and emphasises the role of the church as a place of material advance. Because Third World churches are not able to imitate western wealth-producing practices in a way that does not perpetuate dependency (see above), material progress comes in hand with dependency and other vulnerabilities.

Inter-church competition in the Third World for links to the west that bring prosperity to their members are won hands-down by those 'orthodox' churches who have links with donors. Other churches who follow orthodox teaching but do not manage to acquire donors find their ministries shrinking and dying. 'If you can't beat them join them' – so more and more churches and church leaders seek partnerships with the West. The recent communication revolution is enabling more and more partnerships to be set up. Soon we can be reaching a situation in which the only churches with orthodox theology who can prosper are those funded from and therefore also increasingly being controlled by the West.

The notion of 'control from the West' deserves more careful consideration. Can western donors sitting at their computers in their homes and offices perhaps making occasional visits 'control' African people and churches? Clearly they can do so only to a limited extent. They can try hard to control certain things. Dependent African populations soon learn the name of the game and become proficient at pleasing foreign donors, even though their own orientation as to how to use resources is vastly different from that of their benefactors. Lies begin to creep in, then rush in to save funds that have become a lifeline. The 'truth' that has become important is the story that pleases the donors, whether it is true or not. Lies' becoming the norm weakens the churches. Churches with orthodox theology are weakened.

Parallel things are of course happening outside of the church. Those in the non-West who opened their doors to western languages, western money and western religions can be taken ever closer to the brink of crisis.

Let us return to our immediate concern: the holistic gospel. It should be clear to my reader that this means different things to different people. To the westerner – holism in the gospel is a combination of preaching with capitalism/rationality and their products. Very often the non-westerner has what is frankly a more Biblical understanding – that it is preaching plus miracle (healing and casting of demons – as in Mark 6:12-13, cited above). What the Westerner does using rationality is easily interpreted as miracle in the non-West. Amongst the outcomes of this are gross dependency, and a kind of idolatry of the western man – especially in Africa of the white man.

This concern raises issues – especially regarding the doing of miracles, and the casting of demons. It will not be possible to do justice to all these issues in this short piece. It would seem that ‘just preaching’ may not be enough. Many African people accept Christianity when they see its power and not primarily through being convinced by its truth claims. But using technology and donor money for the purpose of power-display is also proving problematic. Combining both demon casting and miracles with displays of wealth, as practised by many Pentecostal preachers from the West and imitated by many Africans, fans the flames of the prosperity gospel.

An additional problem with the practice of combining what are sometimes known as spiritual warfare practices with contributions of outside funds; is that it easily becomes the communication of a lie. The ‘lie’ I am referring to arises from local people’s assumption that a western missionary 1. will be honest and 2. will be showing them how to acquire the kinds of wealth that are known to exist in the West. It is my understanding that the discipline of economics, adherence to which has contributed greatly to the expansion of wealth in the West, is rooted in dualism. That is to put it bluntly – the primary engine of western economic growth has not been the ability to remove demons, but the adoption of a style of dualistic rationality. For a preacher who implicitly represents western wealth to make a heavy emphasis on spiritual activities such as miracles and demon casting is therefore effectively to communicate untruth.

Ways of witnessing to Christ need to be found that do not implicitly create dependency. Holistic gospel does not qualify, especially because it is understood differently in Africa than in the West. I believe we need to go back from the holistic gospel, to the gospel as Jesus brought it. There is a need for some western missionaries who consciously avoid being emissaries of western resources in their ministries. For more on this see www.vulnerablemission.org.

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