

The Local Church: Local Change and Global Impact

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Since the First Global Consultation of the Micah Network, which was held in Oxford in September of 2001, all over the world an increasing number of Christians, both as individuals and as churches, have become convinced that in their life and mission they are called to keep Jesus' Great Commission and Great Commandment together. No longer are they inclined to accept that the mission of the Church can be reduced to proclaiming the Gospel for the sake of saving souls and planting churches. They concur with the Micah Declaration, that God's mission, in which the Church is summoned to participate, is *integral mission*—a mission built on the premise that, as the *Micah Declaration* affirms, "Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task." Three decades ago or so, those of us who held this position were quite often regarded by evangelical Christians as heterodox and sometimes even accused of Marxist leanings. A sign of the change that by God's grace has taken place in evangelical circles is the backing that integral mission is given in the *Cape Town Commitment*, which emerged from Lausanne III and explicitly states:

**God commands us to make known to all nations the truth of God's revelation and the gospel of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ, calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship.*

**God commands us to reflect his own character through compassionate care for the needy, and to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God's creation.*

At least in theory, for a large number of evangelicals the traditional dichotomy between evangelism and social responsibility has been overcome. The problem remains, however, with regards to the actual practice of integral mission. The real risk we always have to face is that of allowing the language of integrity to become a mere cliché that bears no relation to our lifestyle or to the way we carry out our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The challenge gets even more complicated when full recognition is given to the global character of the Christian mission. This is not the place to argue in detail that from a biblical perspective God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is God of all the nations and consequently his mission envisions the whole world as mission field. As the *CapeTown Commitment* puts it,

The whole Bible reveals the mission of God to bring all things in heaven and earth into unity under Christ, reconciling them through the blood of his cross. In fulfilling his mission, God will transform the creation broken by sin and evil into the new creation in which there is no more sin or curse. God will fulfil his promise to Abraham to bless all nations on the earth, through the gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, the seed of Abraham. God will transform the fractured world of nations that are scattered under the judgment of God into the new humanity that will be redeemed by the blood of Christ from every tribe, nation, people and language, and will be gathered to worship our God and Saviour. God will destroy the reign of death, corruption and violence when Christ returns to establish his eternal reign of life, justice and peace. Then God, Immanuel, will dwell with us, and the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever.

The question is, how can we practise integral mission so that it will contribute in a meaningful way towards the fulfilment of God's universal redemptive purpose? Granted that the mission of the Church does not only involve "calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship" but also "to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God's creation," how can common Christians be involved in mission on a world-wide scale?

My central thesis in this paper is that God's primary agent for integral mission—"the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel," as the *Micah Declaration* defines it— is the local church, through which the universal Church becomes visible. It is only to the extent that the local churches fulfil their mission to proclaim and to demonstrate the gospel in their own particular context that the universal Church can be recognized as Kingdom people. This may be the reason why almost all the occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament refer to the local church.

The mere recognition of the role that the local church plays in relation to integral mission, however, is by no means sufficient for a local church to fulfil her vocation. Several years of ministry with a wide variety of churches in Latin America have led us to the conclusion that for this to take place, the church itself must meet *certain conditions or requisites that qualify it to practise integral mission*. It has to be a community of faith that gives priority to 1) commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of everything and everyone; 2) Christian discipleship as a missionary lifestyle to which the entire church and every member have been called; 3) the vision of the church as the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and lives in the light of that confession in such a way that in it can be seen the inauguration of a new humanity; and 4) the use of gifts and ministries as instruments that the Spirit of God uses to prepare the church and all its members to fulfill their vocation as God's co-workers in the world.

1. Commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of Everything and Everyone

Integral mission is the concrete expression of commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of the totality of life and of all creation.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ

New Testament scholar generally agree that the confession “Jesus Christ is Lord” was the basic confession of the early church, the criterion that defined a person’s relationship with God and with the community of faith. The following observations are here in place

First, in the New Testament *Kyrios* (“Lord”) is applied to Jesus hundreds of times. Although it is certain that in many of these references, especially in the Gospels, *kyrios* does not have the connotation of deity, there are many more occurrences that leave no room for doubt that the term is used to present Jesus as one deserving the same honor that is offered to God.

Second, to understand fully the significance of the confession of Jesus as *Kyrios*, we need to interpret it with reference to certain facts about the historical context in which this confession took shape during the first century until it became a sort of synthesis of the faith and message of the early church. One of these facts is that *Kyrios* is the Greek translation of YHWH (Yahweh), the name of God in the Septuagint. Therefore, to speak of the Lord is to speak of God, no more and no less. It is not surprising then that there are Old Testament texts that use the word *kyrios*, originally referring to God, which in the New Testament are quoted as referring to Jesus Christ. Another fact is that in the emperor worship of the first century, the emperor was referred to as *Kyrios* to emphasize the absolute nature of his authority, characteristic of a god. Furthermore, in the same period in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt there were religions in which the gods and goddesses (for example Isis and Osiris) also acquired the titles *Kyrios* and *Kyria*. The confession of Jesus as *Kyrios*, therefore, stands over against other confessions and allegiances present in the religious world. When these facts are taken into account, it becomes clear that the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is essentially a recognition of his sovereignty over the whole of human life and over the whole creation, and Christians are, by definition, “those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2; cf. Acts 9:14, 21; 22:16; 2 Tim 2:22).

In the third place, the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, which could well be considered the core of the apostolic message, amounts to saying that *the Kingdom of God has become a present reality in history, in the person and work of Jesus Christ*, an affirmation which is corroborated by the Gospels, without putting in doubt the future dimension of the Kingdom.

Among New Testament scholars there is a consensus that the Kingdom of God was Jesus’ principal message, and there are very few who would not recognize that for him that Kingdom was as much present as future. If in the

preaching of Jesus the Kingdom of God holds such a prominent position, however, why does it scarcely appear in the preaching of Paul and the other apostles? The best answer seems to be that in the Greek-Roman world it made much more sense to proclaim the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ in terms of his lordship instead of his kingly power as king David's heir. The use of *Kyrios* in the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles is a clear illustration of the contextualization of the gospel in the first century.

From Christology to Ecclesiology

The lordship of Jesus Christ is the foundation for both the life and the mission of the church. According Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus' commission to "make disciples" is preceded by the affirmation of universal sovereignty by the risen Christ: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he says. "Go *therefore* and make disciples of all nations" (vv.18-19, italics mine). Because Jesus Christ is the Lord of the whole universe, he must be proclaimed as such among all nations, and in all nations disciples must be made who will confess his name and live in the light of that confession. The Christology summarized in the confession constitutes the basis for the ecclesiology that sees the church as the community that confesses him as Lord of the whole of human life and of all creation.

Without the proclamation of Jesus as Lord, there is no integral gospel, and without integral gospel there cannot be integral mission. Here lies the problem with versions of the gospel that restrict the action of Jesus Christ to the realm of religion —"the spiritual"— and omit all references to his authority over all other aspects of human life and over God's creation. When the church loses sight of the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ, it ceases to be the church and is reduced to being a religious sect, incapable of relating its message to daily life and to public life. *The integral church is one that recognizes that all spheres of life and "mission fields" and looks for ways to assert the sovereignty of Jesus Christ in all of them.*

2. Christian Discipleship

Christian discipleship understood as a missionary lifestyle, to which the whole church and each of its members have been called, expresses in a word the essence of the church's mission. It involves the active participation in the realization of God's plan for human existence and the creation, revealed in Jesus Christ.

If, as we have stated above, the church is the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and lives in the light of that confession, it follows that the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and the all-inclusive invitation to submit to his authority are inescapable elements of the church's mission. The person who hears the gospel and responds positively sets out to follow Jesus, a process of transformation lasting a whole lifetime and extending to every aspect of life. Several comments are here in order.

First, in evangelical circles there has been a marked tendency to emphasize conversion as an event that takes place at a particular moment, in which a person passes from death to life, through a personal decision and (it is assumed) the action of the Holy Spirit. It is not uncommon, therefore, for the believer to give the date of his or her conversion. Of course, without repentance and without faith there is no discipleship. However, beyond the experience with which the Christian life begins and which one cannot always date, it must be affirmed that God's aim is to recreate in the believer the image of his Son Jesus Christ, the New Man, and that this involves a process of transformation which lasts throughout life. Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19-20 about *how* to "make disciples" call attention to this process: 1) "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (the rite of initiation into following Jesus and, therefore, into the Christian life), and 2) "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (the process of formation *in* the practice and *for* the practice of Jesus' teaching centered in the will of God, without which there can be no genuine discipleship). From a biblical perspective, *orthopraxis*, obedience to all that Jesus taught his disciples, is at least as important as orthodoxy, if not more so, since the disciples' goal is to live out the practice of love and thus to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Jesus' disciples are not distinguished by mere adherence to a religion, a Jesus cult, but rather by a lifestyle which reflects the love and the justice of the Kingdom of God. The church's mission, therefore, cannot be reduced to proclaiming the "salvation of souls." Her mission is to "make disciples" who will learn obedience to their Lord in all the circumstance of daily life, private and public, personal and social, spiritual and material. Integral mission is possible only when there are disciples who have the vision to ensure that the leaven of Kingdom values permeate every sphere of society.

Second, Jesus assumes that there is a whole body of teaching which he has entrusted to the keeping of his disciples and which they, in turn, need to communicate to new disciples. The assumption is that there is a tradition which is passed on from one generation to the next and is essential for putting into practice the commission to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is actually a reference to the *apostolic tradition* (or *teaching*) to which several later New Testament passages will refer (see, e.g., Acts 2:42; Rom 6:17; 1 Cor 11:23; Gal 1:8-9; Col 2:6-8). It must be kept in mind, however, that Jesus' teaching was not primarily doctrinal or theoretical, but practical and paradigmatic, geared to the fulfillment of God's will in the disciples' lives. The sort of teaching essential to the making of disciples will likewise have to be directed to reproducing in them Jesus' example of unconditional love for God and neighbor, humble service and solidarity with the poor, commitment to the truth, and unshakeable opposition to all forms of hypocrisy.

Third, the formation of disciples after the pattern of Christ takes place in the context of the community of faith, not separate from it. Jesus said: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). Clearly, for Jesus the mark of discipleship is love. However, nobody can learn to love in isolation from others. It is in the church as the family of God that disciples learn to love, and not only to love, but also

to serve, to pray, to renounce evil, and to do good. It is in the church as the body of Christ that disciples discover and use their gifts and grow into “the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Starting out on the road of discipleship clearly requires a personal decision, but those who embark on the way as followers of Jesus can only make progress in this pilgrimage to the extent that they are able to experience the grace of God *in* the church and *through* the church. The practice of integral mission assumes that the local church will help each of its members to give absolute priority to following Jesus in terms of a missionary lifestyle modeled on Jesus for the purpose of bearing witness, by word and action, to his lordship; a way of life centered in Jesus Christ as the Event through whom God has definitively wrought the re-establishment of his purpose for the whole of his creation.

3. A Biblical Vision of the Church

The church is the community that confesses Jesus Christ s Lord of everything and everyone and lives in the light of that confession in such a way that it may be seen as the initiation of a new humanity.

The church is not just the sum total of the individuals who come together on the basis of shared religious interests. From the point of view of the New Testament, the church holds a central place in salvation history because it is the testimony to God’s great purpose in Jesus Christ. Its witness, however, is not limited to words only. Its witness is essentially *incarnational*. What does this mean?

Obviously, this adjective refers to God’s central act in history: his incarnation in Jesus Christ. Without denying the singularity of Jesus’ life as well as of the mission that he accomplished through his “saving events”, we can still affirm that his work is prolonged and made effective in history, through the power of the Spirit, by means of the life and mission of the church in the extent that the church is centered on the Word of God who was made flesh. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ does not only provide the *why* and the *what* of the mission, but also the *how*. The risen Lord said to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). The implications are clear: the form of Jesus’ sending by the Father provides the model for the commissioning of the disciple for the purpose of making disciples. Each of Jesus’ saving events — his life and ministry, his death on the cross, his resurrection and exaltation— points toward integral mission as the means whereby the redemptive work of Jesus takes effect under present circumstances.

The traditional tendency to separate the death of Jesus from his earthly life and ministry in order to give prominence to his death on the cross has resulted in a sad lack of attention to his life and ministry for the mission of the church. A necessary corrective to this neglect lies in the recognition that what gave redemptive validity to Jesus’ death as “the atoning sacrifice for our sins for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10) was that it was the sacrifice of the perfect man, whose of life established the basis for the definition of what it means to love God above all things and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. His earthly life and his

ministry dedicated to the proclamation of good news to the poor, the preaching of freedom for the captives, the recovery of sight for the blind, and the liberation of the oppressed (Lk 4:18-19) is a basic criterion by which to assess how far the mission of the church today is really the continuation of the mission of Jesus of Nazareth. As John Perkins says, the church is to be “the replacement of Jesus in a given community, doing what he would do, going where he would go, and teaching what he would teach.”

The cross represents the culmination of Jesus’ surrender in submission to the will of God for the redemption of humankind. “He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). This is at the very heart of the gospel. However, *the cross also represents the cost of discipleship and of faithfulness to God’s call to take part in bringing to fruition his redemptive purpose.* The mission of the church provides the link between the death of Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and the appropriation of the justice of God —justification— on the other. As Paul states, the work of reconciliation has two closely related aspects: God “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18). The practice of the ministry of reconciliation has its cost, however, both in terms of sacrificial surrender for the sake of others—a self-giving that reproduces that of Jesus Christ—and in terms of suffering for the sake of the gospel. The cross was also the means whereby, according to Paul, Christ broke down the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles, thus producing a new humanity, one body (Eph 2:14-16). The church therefore is called to demonstrate, both in her life and in her message, this reconciliation with God and between individuals and groups. Among those who gather beneath the shadow of the cross of Christ, ethnic, social and gender divisions disappear so that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female,” but “all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The church provides a glimpse of a new humanity that in anticipation incarnates God’s plan—that plan which will be brought to fruition in “the fullness of time, to gather up all things, things in heaven and things on earth in Christ” (Eph 1:10).

The resurrection of Christ was the dawn of a new day in the history of salvation. It was the confirmation that his sacrifice had succeeded in overcoming the fatal consequence of sin, which is death. For those who put their trust in him, therefore, death does not have the last word. “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:56-57). Because death has been vanquished, Christian hope in the final victory of God’s plan is based on a solid foundation. The risen Christ is the first fruits of the great harvest, a new humanity. By his resurrection he has introduced into history a principle of life which guarantees not only the survival of the soul for all eternity, but also the permanent validation of all that the church does through the power of the Spirit for the cause of Jesus Christ, that is, the cause of love and justice. That leads to Paul’s exhortation, “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1Co 15:58). *The cause of Jesus Christ is the only*

cause that has a future. So it makes sense to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and to strive so that the power of the resurrection may become manifest in the here and now, and in every sphere of human life and in the whole of creation.

The close relationship between the present dimension of the Kingdom of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit who works in history to make the mission of the church possible is clearly seen in Jesus’ reply to a question that his disciples, inspired by Jewish nationalistic aspirations, ask him just before his ascension: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus replies: “It is not for you to know the times and periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:6-8). A few comments are here in place. First, these are Jesus’ words just before his ascension and they summarize the narrative of the advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome throughout the book of Acts. In the whole process, the church occupies a vital place, but *the church in the power of the Spirit*. The mission is no mere human project. It is the result of Jesus’ mission being extended in history, an extension made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit. As such it is brought to fruition, not only by what the witnesses to Jesus say, but also by what they *are* and *do* empowered by the Spirit. In the second place, Pentecost follows immediately upon the ascension and is inseparable from it. Jesus Christ is enthroned as “Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36), King of the universe, and from this position sends his Holy Spirit to equip the church for the purpose of making disciples of all nations. The universal horizons of the mission are foreshadowed by the presence in Jerusalem of “devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem” (2:5). Third, with the exaltation of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a new era has been inaugurated in salvation history: the era of the Spirit, which is at the same time the era of Jesus Christ exalted as Lord and Messiah, and the era of the church and her mission to make disciples in the power of the Spirit. Fourth, Jesus’ promise to his apostles that he would be with them “always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20) —a promise which accompanied his commission to make disciples of all nations— is fulfilled through the presence of the Spirit and the Word, the combination that made possible the existence of the church and the success of her mission. Finally, Acts 2:41-47 clearly shows that the result of the Pentecost experience is no ghetto-church, devoted to cultivating individualistic religion and an exclusive, separatist church. On the contrary, it is a community of the Spirit, a community that becomes a center of people’s attraction, “having the goodwill of all the people” (v. 47), because it incarnates the values of the Kingdom of God and affirms by its way of life the lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, including economics. It is a missionary community that preaches reconciliation with God and the restoration of all creation by the power of the Spirit. It is a community that provides a glimpse of the birth of a new humanity, and in which can be seen, albeit “in a mirror, dimly” (1Cor 13:12), the fulfillment of God’s plan for all humankind. Although immersed in this world, by her way of being she points to a new world.

4. The Common Priesthood: Gifts and Ministries

Gifts and ministries are the means used by the Spirit of God both to equip the church as an agent of transformation in society and thus reflect God's plan for human life and the whole creation, and to equip all the faithful for the fulfillment of their priestly vocation as God's co-workers in the world.

The church is essentially the eschatological community, the community of the end time, empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to the Jesus Christ as Lord of everyone and everything. This empowerment is offered in the form of various gifts and ministries, which all members receive in order to exercise their common priesthood for the edification of the Body of Christ. As Paul says from his trinitarian perspective, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Cor 12:4-6).

The importance of this statement for the articulation of an ecclesiology for integral mission cannot be exaggerated. And yet, all too frequently evangelical churches display a considerable deficiency in this area. The reasons for the deficiency are many and varied, but perhaps the most important is a tendency to reduce Christianity to a religion given over to the satisfaction of those needs most closely linked with the human sense of the sacred and with worship services divorced from life. Seen in those terms, Christianity depends on professional "priests" who undertake the function of mediators between God and the faithful. From this standpoint the church is a religious institution managed by specialists in religious matters, dedicated primarily to worship services and the care of the "spiritual needs" of the people. There is a sharp distinction between "clergy" and "laity", between "religious life" and "daily living", and between "the sacred" and "the secular".

It must be admitted that the New Testament does not provide answers for all the questions that may be asked about the church, especially those concerned with institutional matters. That is the case with certain matters of church governance, which is an occasion of dissent among different Protestant denominations. But what is certain is that a New Testament perspective provides no basis for making the church a hierarchical institution in which a small elite holds a monopoly of gifts and ministries, leaving the majority to limit themselves to "submitting" to their leaders.

Integral mission demands the "declericalization" of ministries and a "laicization" of the clergy. In other words, it requires a recognition of the apostolic nature of the whole church. This implies, on one hand, that all members, by the simple fact of being disciples of Christ, share in the commission to go into the world in the name of Jesus Christ, as his witnesses. It also implies, on the other hand, that the leaders are a part of the *laos*, the people of God, just like the rest of Christ's followers, no more and no less.

What, then, is the place for the leaders of the church? Is there no place for “specialized” ministries such as those exercised by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers mentioned in Ephesians 4:11? There is nothing in all that has been said so far that would preclude a positive answer to these questions: the risen and exalted Christ has distributed gifts and established these ministries for the fulfillment of his plan. But the list of gifts in Ephesians 4 (in this case person-gifts rather than special skills) needs to be seen alongside another three lists, two in 1 Corinthians 12 (vv. 7-11 and 28-30) and one in Romans 12 (vv. 6-8). Putting the four lists together leads to the conclusion that there is no hierarchy of gifts, that all are equally valuable, and that all have been conferred by “one and the same Spirit, who allots to each [member of the body of Christ] individually, just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor 12:11). What is essential in the church to carry out her task as witness to Jesus Christ is not a hierarchy but a community of gifts that complement each other and contribute equally to the common good. Peter’s exhortation to the elders or “presbyters” (pastors) show the extent to which each there was a longing to avoid that the leaders become dependent on formal rights of office as they exercised leadership in the community. In the community of the Spirit two principles apply: the principle of service and the principle of example. These principles were embodied in Jesus Christ as basic norms for the exercise of power. The church needs leaders, to be sure, but servant leaders; it needs teachers, but apprentice-teachers.

In conclusion, more than a theology integral mission is an approach to the mission of God, an approach in which all local churches are seen as called to cooperate with God in the transformation of the world through the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel —a gospel centered in Jesus Christ as the Lord of the universe whose sovereignty provides the basis for the church’s life and witness. The mission of the church is the formation of disciples from all nations, disciples who are identified with Christ in his death and resurrection through baptism, and who are in the process of learning the obedience of faith in every aspect of life. The church depends for her incarnate witness on the “saving acts” through which Jesus brought about redemption, namely, his life and ministry, his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his exaltation. Through the power of the Spirit the church constitutes the beginning of a new humanity, and in what she is, does and says bears witness to Jesus Christ and cooperates with God in the fulfillment of his redemptive plan. It is a community of priests endowed with gifts and ministries; a community of hope, faith and love, structured for the task of integral mission for the glory of God.