

Historical Development

Rene Padilla presented this historical overview of evangelicalism at the Micah Network conference held in Oxford in 2001.

Integral Mission and its Historical Development

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To what extent should the church be concerned for justice in society? Should Christians regard human rights as necessarily included within the sphere of their responsibility? If justice is a Christian concern, how can the church promote it in society? What are the biblical and theological criteria to evaluate the present-day global economic system? How can evangelical agencies best respond to the needs of the poor and oppressed in a globalized world? What are the priorities of international advocacy work from a biblically-shaped perspective? How does action for justice relate to evangelism?

That we can raise these questions today throws into relief the changes that have taken place in the last few decades among a significant number of evangelicals around the world with regard to their understanding of the mission of the Church. To be sure, the importance of integral mission is not unanimously accepted by evangelicals. Yet today many people who in the past dismissed such questions as irrelevant to mission are now open to a more holistic approach to mission.

The itinerary of the concept of integral mission can be traced by surveying the international evangelical conferences of the last few decades. A complete survey is not possible within this paper, but the attempt will be made to describe the process by which integral mission became a part of the evangelical agenda beginning with the 1966 Wheaton Congress on the World Mission of the Church and concluding with the 1983 Wheaton Conference on the Church in Response to Human Need.

From Wheaton 1966 to Chicago 1973

With almost a 1,000 participants coming from 71 countries, the Congress on the World Mission of the Church (Wheaton 1966) was an important effort to re-think the mission of the Church globally. The Wheaton Declaration was regarded by some as ‘a thoroughly conservative statement from a conservative source’. The Wheaton Declaration had, however, the virtue of recognizing that ‘we are guilty of an unscriptural isolation from the world that too often keeps us from honestly facing and coping with its concerns’. It confessed the ‘failure to apply scriptural principles to such problems as racism, war, population explosion, poverty, family disintegration, social revolution, and communism’. It urged ‘all evangelicals to stand openly and firmly for racial equality, human freedom, and all forms of social justice throughout the world’.

Clearly, a new attitude with regard to the Church’s responsibility to the world was finding its way into evangelicalism. This new concern was related to the contribution of a number of participants from the Two-Thirds World. According to a conservative observer, ‘their recommendations weighed heavily in determining the final shape of the Declaration.’ This helps to explain how such a document could come out of a mission conference held in the United States at a time when evangelicalism in that country was simply not interested in social change or social activism.

The next important international meeting, the World Congress on Evangelism (Berlin 1966) met under the motto, ‘One Race, One Gospel, One Task’. Despite participants from 100 countries, the Congress was ‘predominantly Western in organization and expression’. In his opening address Billy Graham reaffirmed his conviction that ‘if the church went back to its main task of proclaiming the Gospel and people converted to Christ, it would have a far greater impact on the social, moral, and psychological needs of men than it

could achieve through any other thing it could possibly do'. He thus voiced a basic premise of the Congress organizers and no advance was made towards a more comprehensive concept of mission. More significant were the follow-up regional congresses sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. At all of them, with surprising regularity, speakers brought up the question of Christian social involvement as an issue intimately related to evangelism.

A sensitive social conscience is an essential ingredient of integral mission and a milestone in the awakening of the evangelical social conscience in the United States was the Thanksgiving Workshop on Evangelicals and Social Concern held in Chicago, 1973. The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern was enthusiastically received by many people who saw in it evidence that evangelicals were transcending the traditional dichotomy between evangelism and social responsibility.

Lausanne 1974

With all these antecedents, no one should have been surprised that the International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne 1974) would turn out to be a definitive step in affirming integral mission as the mission of the church. In view of the deep mark that it left in the life and mission of the evangelical movement around the world, the Lausanne Congress may be regarded as the most important worldwide evangelical gathering of the twentieth century. It became a catalyst for evangelism and a matrix for theological reflection on issues that were placed on the evangelical missionary agenda by the Lausanne Covenant. On the relationship between the evangelistic and the societal dimensions of the Christian mission paragraph 5 of the Lausanne Covenant stated:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

This is not merely an affirmation of the Christian duty towards social sin in terms of injustice, alienation, oppression and discrimination. It is also a rationale for Christian involvement in these social evils, beginning with the recognition of God as 'both the Creator and Judge of all men'. Christian social action is thus regarded as having a theological basis, as an expression of definite convictions with regard to God and humankind, salvation and the kingdom.

The importance of this statement coming out of a conference in which a high number of participants had all too often regarded evangelism and social concern as 'mutually exclusive' can hardly be exaggerated. The Lausanne Covenant not only expressed penitence for the neglect of social action, but it also acknowledged that socio-political involvement was, together with evangelism, an essential aspect of the Christian mission. In so doing it gave a death blow on attempts to reduce mission to the multiplication of Christians and churches through evangelism.

The following years, however, showed that, far from settling the matter, the Lausanne Congress had done little more than point to the need to deal with the role of social involvement for the sake of the integrity of the church and its mission. Already during the Congress a large group had issued a document called A Response to Lausanne that aimed at highlighting issues of justice which had not been properly emphasized in the Lausanne Covenant. Its definition of the gospel of Jesus Christ as ‘good news of liberation, of restoration, of wholeness and of salvation that is personal, social, global and cosmic’ provided the strongest statement on integral mission formulated by evangelicals up to that date.

From Willowbank 1978 to Pattaya 1980

The Lausanne Covenant was received all over the world with great interest and even exhilaration by Christians of different theological persuasions. By contrast, others interpreted Lausanne as a dangerous departure from biblical truth and a tragic compromise with so-called ‘ecumenical theology’. John Stott in particular came under fire for defining social action as a ‘partner of evangelism’, thus dethroning evangelism as ‘the only historic aim of mission’.

In spite of its opponents, most of them identified with the North American missionary establishment, integral mission continued to find support among evangelicals, especially in the Two-Thirds World. The issues it raised became the motivating force for several world-wide consultations that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which explicitly dealt with, or at least touched on, the question of justice. At the International Consultation on ‘Gospel and Culture’ (Willowbank, 1978), for instance, it was recognized that ‘too often we have ignored peoples’ fears and frustrations, their pains and preoccupations, and their hunger, poverty, deprivation or oppression, in fact their “felt needs”, and have been too slow to rejoice or to weep with them’. The conference underlined the need to take the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as a model for Christian witness. Even more significant is a paragraph on ‘power structures and mission’. After referring to the poverty of the masses in the Two-Thirds World, it says ‘their plight is due in part to an economic system which is controlled mostly by North Atlantic countries’. In the face of this situation, the prophetic document calls for solidarity with the poor and the denunciation of injustice ‘in the name of the Lord who is the God of justice as well as of justification’. It expressed concern about ‘western-style syncretism’ – ‘perhaps the most insidious form of syncretism in the world today’ – which is ‘the attempt to mix a privatized gospel of personal forgiveness with a worldly (and even demonic) attitude to wealth and power’.

The same concern for integral mission is reflected in other statements emerging from various conferences held in this period. The Madras Declaration on Evangelical Social Action, drafted at the All India Conference on Evangelical Social Action (1979), laid down the basis for responsible Christian action in the face of ‘the increasing oppression of the underprivileged classes, the continuing entrenchment of casteism and the rising rate of communal violence’. The Pastoral Letter issued by the Second Latin American Congress on Evangelism (Lima, Peru, 1979) echoed a deep concern for ‘those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, those who are deprived of what they need in order to survive, marginalized ethnic groups, destroyed families, women who have no rights, young people dedicated to vice or pushed to violence, children suffering because of hunger, abandonment, ignorance, or exploitation’.

Of particular importance for the consideration of integral mission was the International Consultation on ‘Simple Lifestyle’ (Hoddesdon, England, 1980). Despite its conciseness, the document issued at the end of the meeting, An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle, turned out to be a significant statement of evangelical concern for justice. The conference participants, ‘disturbed by the injustices of the world, concerned for its victims, and moved to repentance’ for their complicity in it, denounced environmental destruction, wastefulness and hoarding, and recognized their own involvement in them. They affirmed that involuntary poverty is ‘an offence against the goodness of God’, that ‘God’s call to rulers is to use power to

defend the poor, not to exploit them', and that 'the church must stand with God and the poor against injustice, suffer with them, and call on rulers to fulfil their God-appointed role'. They committed themselves to re-examine their income and expenditure 'in order to manage on less and give away more' and 'to contribute more generously to human development projects'. Acknowledging, however, that changes in lifestyle without changes in the systems of injustice lack effectiveness, they claimed that 'servants of Christ must express his lordship in their political, social and economic commitments and their love for their neighbours by taking part in the political process'. Accordingly, they expressed their purpose to 'pray for peace and justice, as God commands' and to 'educate Christian people in the moral and political issues involved'. They said that 'all Christians must participate in the active struggle to create a just and responsible society', including 'resistance to an unjust established order' and to be ready to suffer, for 'service always involves suffering'. Scherer is right in commenting that this conference touched on a number of 'themes seldom articulated with such passion in evangelical mission circles'.

Clearly, as reflected in these documents, evangelicals had turned a corner at Lausanne with regard to their understanding of the social implications of the gospel and the mission of the Church. It would not be difficult to prove, however, that the organizers of the next major international conference sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, the Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE, Pattaya, Thailand, 1980), made a special effort to ensure that the task of world evangelism was regarded as the mission of the Church. Under the motto 'How Shall They Hear', Pattaya was to be 'a working consultation with the main objective of developing realistic evangelistic strategies to reach for Christ hitherto unreached peoples of the world'. That the organizers were almost exclusively concerned with the how of the (verbal) communication of the gospel was evident from the materials circulated in advance which focused on 'people-groups' and 'homogeneous unit principle'. This pre-occupation explains the tight control exercised by the leadership during the conference – there was the fear that discussion of the social aspect of mission would divert attention from evangelism. In the words of one participant, 'Pattaya was somehow pre-packaged'.

Much creative thinking, however, was done in the mini-consultations of the conference that met to consider the strategy to reach non-Christians in people-groups. As a result, the attempt to keep the Conference within the straitjacket of a narrow definition of mission was counterbalanced at the grassroots level. Some of the Lausanne Occasional Papers published after the Thailand Consultation demonstrate that several of the mini-consultations left aside the 'official' concern for strategy and 'went ahead on the gains of Lausanne'. Some of the issues discussed in these groups became the basis for a Statement of Concern on the Future of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization which without the help of official publicity was signed by 185 people within 24 hours. This Statement chided the Lausanne Committee for not being 'seriously concerned with the social, political and economic issues in many parts of the world that are a stumbling block to the proclamation of the gospel'. It called the Lausanne Movement to help Christians 'to identify not only people-groups, but also the social, economic and political institutions that determine their lives and the structures behind them that hinder evangelism' and to give guidance on how evangelicals lending support to repressive regimes or to unjust economic policies 'can be reached with the whole biblical gospel and be challenged to repent and work for justice'. This Statement was presented to the LCWE as a 'genuine attempt to build bridges between evangelical Christians who at present are not yet agreed about the relationship between evangelization and socio-political involvement'. The Conference leadership ignored it and no plenary discussion of it was allowed.

The Thailand Statement, adopted at the end of COWE, ratified Christian commitment to both evangelism and social action. At the same time, however, it made clear that at least for the organizers of the consultation the time had come to reaffirm 'the primacy of evangelism'. Thus, under the influence of the American evangelical establishment, the statement made in the Lausanne Covenant that 'in the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary' was endorsed, even though it was also said that 'nothing

contained in the Lausanne Covenant is beyond our concern, so long as it is clearly related to world evangelization'. As Bosch rightly comments, 'the significance of this sentence lies in what it does not say – that nothing in Lausanne Covenant is beyond our concern, so long as it clearly fosters Christian involvement in society'.

From Grand Rapids 1982 to Wheaton 1983

In June 1982 the question of integral mission was taken up again at the International Consultation on the Relationship of Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The consultation defined the relationship between evangelism and social action in three ways. First, Christian social action is a consequence of evangelism since those involved in it are Christians. In fact, they must be involved because they are saved 'for good works' and that means that social action is also one of the purposes of evangelism. Second, social action is a bridge to evangelism since it expresses God's love and through that it eliminates prejudices and opens the way for the proclamation of the Gospel. Third, social action is a partner of evangelism and is related to it in the Christian mission like two blades in a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird.

Of the primacy of evangelism the Grand Rapids document said that such primacy can only be affirmed in a limited, not in an absolute, sense. It considers that the primacy of evangelism is, in the first place, logical since 'the very fact of Christian social responsibility presupposes socially responsible Christians, and it can only be by evangelism and discipling that they have become such'. Second, the primacy is theological since 'evangelism relates to people's eternal destiny, and in bringing them good news of salvation, Christians are doing what nobody else can do'. But the Grand Rapids report also admits that the choice between evangelism and social action is 'largely conceptual' and that in practice 'the two are inseparable' and 'they mutually support and strengthen each other in an upward spiral of increased concern for both'. If both evangelism and social action are so intimately related that their partnership is 'in reality, a marriage', it is obvious that the primacy of evangelism does not mean that evangelism should always and everywhere be considered more important than its partner. If that were the case, something would be wrong with the marriage!

Some critics feel that this Consultation did not entirely succeed in avoiding a dualism between evangelism and social involvement. According to them, by taking for granted that evangelism may be reduced to the verbal proclamation of the gospel, the Grand Rapids document laid the basis for a concept of mission as a marriage in which the two partners – word and action – are 'equal but separable'. A more biblical concept of mission suggests that there is no evangelism without a social dimension and there is no Christian social action without an evangelistic dimension. It must be noted, however, that the Grand Rapids document itself states that 'evangelism, even when it does not have a primarily social intention, nevertheless has a social dimension, while social responsibility, even when it does not have a primarily evangelistic intention, nevertheless has an evangelistic dimension'. Such a statement can hardly be improved.

The strongest evangelical affirmation of commitment to integral mission in the last quarter of the twentieth century was the Wheaton 1983 Statement, Transformation: The Church in Response to Human Need, which was drawn up at the end of the Consultation on the Church in Response to Human Need (Wheaton, Illinois, 1983). It recognizes that 'only by spreading the Gospel can the most basic need of human beings be met: to have fellowship with God'. But it is also critical of Christians who 'have tended to see the task of the church as merely picking up survivors from a shipwreck in a hostile sea'. It makes no allowance for any type of acquiescence in the face of social evil: 'either we challenge the evil structures of society or we support them'. It objects to 'many churches, mission societies, and Christian relief and development agencies [that] support the socio-economic status quo, and by silence give their tacit support'. It asserts that 'evil is not only in the human heart but also in social structures' and points to Jesus' example, who 'through his acts of

mercy, teaching and lifestyle ... exposed the injustices in society and condemned the self-righteousness of its leaders’.

In the section dedicated to the local church the Wheaton 1983 Statement holds that congregations must not limit themselves to traditional ministries, but ‘must also address issues of evil and social injustice in the local community and the wider society’. It calls upon aid agencies ‘to see their role as one of facilitating the churches in the fulfilment of their mission’ and warns them against the danger of exploiting the plight of the poor ‘in order to meet donor needs and expectations’.

The final section is a strong affirmation of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ as the basis for integral mission. ‘We affirm,’ it states, ‘that the Kingdom of God is both present and future, both societal and individual, both physical and spiritual ... It grows like a mustard seed, both judging and transforming the present age.’ From this perspective, eschatology is not an encouragement to escape into the distant future, but an incentive ‘to infuse the world with hope, for both this age and the next’. ‘As the community of the end time anticipating the End, we prepare for the ultimate by getting involved in the penultimate’, and this means that we must ‘evangelize, respond to immediate human needs, and press for social transformation’.

The Wheaton 1983 Statement is quite an accomplishment as a synthesis of the theological basis for integral mission and a summary of the most significant questions that may be raised with regard to the Church as God's agent for holistic transformation. It would be difficult to find in evangelical circles around the world any document drawn up after 1983 that would go further than the Wheaton 1983 Statement in recovering an integral view of the Church and its mission. The Manila Manifesto, issued by the Second International Congress on World Evangelism (Lausanne II), which took place in Manila in July 1989, did ratify in general terms the Lausanne Covenant, including the Covenant’s support of socio-political involvement. But the lack of adequate attention to the question of justice during the Congress was clearly articulated by Valdir Steuernagel from Brazil in a ten minute speech that he was allowed to give to the plenary at the very end of the Congress. In no way did the Manila Manifesto reach the level of the Wheaton 1983 Statement in its affirmation of integral mission. In unequivocal terms the Wheaton Statement affirmed social and political involvement as an essential aspect of the Christian mission. As Bosch has pointed out, ‘For the first time in an official statement emanating from an international evangelical conference the perennial dichotomy [between evangelism and social involvement] was overcome’.