ANNOUNCING THE KINGDOM:
THE STORY OF GOD’S MISSION IN THE BIBLE

----------------------------------------

A Book Review

Presented to

John Moldovan, Ph.D.
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

----------------------------------------

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for MISSN 7694

----------------------------------------

by

Mark Christy

March 7, 2009
What is the relation between God’s evangelistic mission and the humanitarian problems that plague the world? Should the focus be exclusively on one at the expense of the other? Or should missionaries develop a holistic model that calls for evangelism and social action to occur simultaneously? Arthur F. Glasser, Charles E. Van Engen, Dean S. Gililand, and Shawn B. Redford, who served on the faculty of Fuller Seminary’s School of Mission at the time of publication, conclude that the Kingdom of God motif in the Scriptures “breaks an impasse between evangelism and social action” (12).

**Summary**

The authors’ purpose “is to offer the reader a biblical study of the Kingdom of God and the worldwide mission of God’s people” (11). By doing so, they seek to establish a sound biblical foundation for both mission and social action where social action is a part of mission. Their thesis is that an in-depth study of the whole Bible will lead to “new wisdom and insight as to what should be the church’s mission in a new millennium” (12). The authors expect their readers to acquire this “new wisdom and insight” by studying the Kingdom of God motif in Scriptures.

To develop their study of the Kingdom of God motif in Scripture, the authors draw heavily on the works of Glasser who is credited as the initial source of this motif. Glasser discusses his views on the Kingdom of God in *Kingdom and Mission*, a privately published work used to teach a course at Fuller Theological Seminary on the “Biblical Foundations of Mission” (14). Glasser’s views on the Kingdom of God motif have been
expressed by other authors to advocate the view that social action and evangelism are not mutually exclusive. Ronald J. Sider argues that Jesus announced the Kingdom by confronting the kingdom of darkness, helping the poor and disenfranchised, advocating and modeling peace, and rebuking the religious leaders.¹

Both Sider and Glasser attribute missiological significance to evangelism and social action since both are presented as part of the Christian witness in the Scriptures. Their emphasis on the distinctions between evangelism and social action, their concern that both remain connected to the Christian witness, and their commitment that neither one be cast aside in favor of the other seem to find support in the Lausanne Covenant:

> Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless [those present] affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are expressions of [the] doctrines of God and man, [one’s] love for [one’s] neighbor, and [one’s] obedience to Jesus Christ.²

To their credit, the authors of this work set forth to establish the importance of performing social action alongside mission by examining the Scriptures. In chapter one, the authors argue that a correct understanding of mission must be founded on the study of both Old and New Testaments. Throughout Scripture, they discover seven themes related to mission: the universality of God, his demand for “personal commitment,” his call to service, the presence of Christ in God’s people, the call to mission, the suffering of those who participate in mission, and the future promise of redemption (23-27).


The authors discuss God’s relationship with humanity in the beginning down to the time of the patriarchs in chapters two through four. They note God’s desire to have a relationship with all humanity by pointing to his dealings with Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham despite the tendency of humanity to fall into disobedience. They suggest that God’s particular choice of Abraham from among the nations was part God’s plan to bring salvation to the nations through Christ, a descendant of Abraham (59).

In chapters five through seven, the authors present God’s missiological purposes through Israel. They explore the missiological significance for combining evangelism and social action in Moses’ encounter with Pharaoh, God’s dealings with the Canaanites, the ministry of the prophets, and the treatment of foreigners within Israel (71-124). Throughout these events, they note the continual struggle between God’s missionary purpose and the human tendency toward disobedience.

In chapters eight through ten, the authors discuss the exile of Israel, the need for a Savior, and the activities of the Jews in the Diaspora before the coming of Christ. They discover some great advice for effective missionary service from a careful study of Haggai and Zechariah (132-34). The authors then point to Christ and his connection to the believing remnant before exploring messianic prophecies and passages concerned with universal plans for salvation in biblical literature (141-55).

After carefully surveying the Kingdom of God motif in the Old Testament, the authors look to the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament to further highlight God’s mission of evangelism and social action in chapters eleven through fifteen. In chapter twelve, the authors point to the servant role of God’s people in the Old Testament which is continued in the ministry of Jesus to demonstrate the importance of social action
alongside of evangelism (205-206). During their survey of the Gospel of John, they point out the sending nature of God who sent Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and now sends Christians on mission (242-56).

In chapters sixteen through twenty, the authors discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in God’s mission through the church. They identify the Holy Spirit as the dominant source of “missionary motivation” among Christians by pointing to the change in the disciples at Pentecost (262-68). In chapters eighteen and nineteen, much of the discussion is centered on biblical evidence for church structures. The authors prefer to advocate missionary principles as opposed to missionary strategies and structures.

The work concludes with some chapters on how the church is to engage in the missionary tasks of evangelism and social action. Despite their desire to combine social action and evangelism, the authors state their firm commitment to Jesus as the only means of salvation (345-58). They conclude their work by cautioning against “the wholesale condemnation of the non-Christian world to eternal damnation” and express the view that salvation can be attained by merely responding to the “inner working of the Holy Spirit” in the absence of hearing the gospel message (371-72).

**Critical Evaluation**

This book offers a comprehensive biblical theology of mission by surveying both Old and New Testaments. The authors’ use of the Kingdom of God motif provides an excellent method for understanding God’s missionary message throughout the Bible. Overall, the authors make excellent decisions on which passages to study in-depth, which ones to briefly discuss, and which ones to exclude.

Within this comprehensive theology of mission, the authors attempt to develop
a case for combining social action with evangelism. Almost every chapter has its theme related to a call to social action. Perhaps the strongest argument presented in this work for the combining of social action and evangelism is the “cultural mandate” given to Adam and Eve by the Lord (38). The “cultural mandate” is God’s directive to humanity to care for and oversee the creation (38). Just as marriage between one man and one woman has been ordained by God, so has caring for creation by humanity. The authors, however, assign the duty of caring for the world to the Church (38). God’s directive, however, was given to all humanity. Surely the Church must participate in social action at some level just as they participate in marriage ceremonies. But should the Church grant social action the same level of primacy as Christ’s call to evangelism?

The authors state, “The New Testament does not separate evangelism from social responsibility” (39). The boldness of this statement requires careful scrutiny from the informed reader. One should consider Christ’s action primarily in regard to social action followed by a cursory examination of the apostles’ actions before making a decision on whether or not to combine evangelism and social responsibility. The Lord tells a Canaanite woman seeking his help that he was sent to the Jews (Matt 15:22-24). Even though Jesus eventually helps her, his interaction with her reveals that he was not focused on all the world’s problems. His exclusive focus on the Jews may suggest that any church considering its role in social action should be hesitant to give it the same level of priority as evangelism.

Jesus also rebukes the disciples when they express their concern that the expensive perfume, which a woman had poured on him, should have been sold to generate money for the poor (John 12:3-8). He affirms the woman’s actions and assigns
himself a place above the poor. This story seems to express the idea that evangelism (calling people to Christ) must take precedence over social action.

Christ’s actions as well as the actions of the apostles all seem to place primacy on the task of evangelism. This does not mean that Christ and his apostles do not express their concern for the poor nor does it mean that he is not expecting the church to be active socially. The Bible, as this book affirms, offers ample evidence that social action is expected by God of all people, especially his Church. But does the world need relief from poverty as much as they need to hear the gospel?

In chapter three, the authors provide an explanation for “the sons of God” in Genesis 6:2. It seems odd that they choose to bring up such a highly debated passage and then conclude so decisively that the expression refers to angels (47). How does this material affirm their primary argument for combining evangelism and social action? Perhaps they should consider the implications for asserting that redeemable humanity has inter-related with fallen angels which are not redeemable. Does not their interpretation lead to the conclusion that some sections of humanity, who are descendants of such unions, may be beyond redemption?

The authors conclude chapter three with a sharp condemnation of those who choose to be apolitical sense they regard “human civilization” to not be the exclusive “domain of the devil” (55). But should one condemn those all who are apolitical giving the complexity of this world? While attempting to help the world through being politically responsible, it may be hard for some to stay properly informed so that they are able help through political action. What about the poor immigrant who works several jobs to provide for his family? They may not be able (or even eligible) to perform informed
political action. Throughout the book, the authors seem to forget the immense amount of effort it takes from the individual or even the Church to meet the many calls to social action that are occurring around them. What if the Church focuses on evangelism while teaching people to help their neighbor whenever possible?

While this book presents an uncompromising opinion for the combination of evangelism and mission, the authors strongly condemn the liberation theologians that consider violence an appropriate action to relieve poverty. Liberation theologians, while leading the Church to reconsider their role in regard to the poor, tend to give primacy to the poor in their interpretation of God’s mission. In making this brief condemnation of the excesses of some liberation theologians, the authors clearly present their view that the mission of Christ should not be subjugated to any social cause.

In chapter six, the authors briefly discuss Israel’s violent occupation of Canaan and conclude that the violence done by Israel gives “legitimacy to the defense of state against hostile neighboring states” (91). While they may or not be correct in their conclusion, it seems interesting that the authors neglect to discuss the implications of God’s actions through Israel, especially during the conquest of Canaan, in connection with the authors’ strong affirmation that the missionary God desires the combination of evangelism and social action. They certainly are not claiming that Israel’s God-ordained violence was a form of social action. Perhaps God’s redemptive purposes through Israel took precedence over the worldly needs of the Canaanites. Instead of considering this point, the authors simply say that the Christ’s “Kingdom activity in the New Testament” establishes his non-violent mission. While Christ’s mission of earth is void of the type of violence witnessed during the Israelite conquest of Canaan, the same missionary God is
in control throughout both events. While it seems inappropriate at this point to make an argument for the justification of warfare, God’s actions to redeem humanity in both the conquest of Canaan and Christ’s earthly mission suggests his primary concern is with the eternal redemption of humanity as opposed to their momentary redemption from suffering.

Redemption from temporal suffering in general and poverty in particular may simply require a change in “the structure of society” according to the authors (118). While they may have a point, how does this relate to the mission of the Church? The Church will likely influence societal structures (like they have in the western hemisphere) by sharing the gospel and helping people develop a Christian worldview with biblical beliefs and values. But any change in societal structures should be a by-product of mission as opposed to the mission itself.

In an attempt to demonstrate God’s concern for the welfare of the poor as a necessary component of mission, the authors claim that the Assyrians (Isa 10:5-11) and Babylonians (Jer 25:8-11) were sent to destroy Israel and Judah specifically for their ill treatment of the poor (128). While the Israelites may have been guilty in their disregard for the poor, it does not follow, even from the aforementioned passages given as proof by the authors, that God’s judgment on Israel was only related to this one issue. The authors do, however, distance themselves from liberation theologians who use similar arguments to conclude that war is just when it is war against poverty.

In chapter twelve, the authors take a bold stance against the ecclesiastical establishment that exists today. After surveying Christ’s centripetal mission in chapter eleven, they accuse the organized Church of becoming “static” and being concerned with
“internal life and institutional maintenance” (200). Unfortunately, they seem to feel that the primary correction for this problem requires the development of an outward focus on evangelism and social action (200). Perhaps the authors should give the Church’s problems a little more thought. Church structures are not biblical; rather, they serve only to help the church fulfill its biblical mandate. One must ask whether or not the Church’s structures are effectively fulfilling the biblical mandate. These authors may then wish to consider whether or not the Church’s structures are effectively creating disciples who care not only about the spiritual needs of others but their physical needs as well.

The authors focus on Jesus as an example for a ministry of discipleship that includes “prayer, example, and instruction” (209). They note the necessity of “active participation in church life” and even mentorship as excellent means for discipleship (235). Discipleship, then, requires community where the individual members practice accountability (236-37). While many readers may readily agree with this statement, it would help to see the authors take this stand while at the same time offering solutions for making communal discipleship a reality within the Church.

After giving an excellent discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit in mission in chapter sixteen, the authors discuss the evangelistic efforts of the Early Church. For some reason, they take a particularly strong stand against those Church Growth scholars who portray Acts as a definitive manual for organizing and structuring churches and their ministries (274). While their criticism has merit, they may wish to consider whether or not some Church Growth principles of Acts can be applied to church structures. Acts 2:42-47, for example, presents the same commitment to community outlined by these authors previously.
Despite their strong emphasis on community, the authors do not find “in Acts and the epistles [a] highly structured, small group approach to discipling that characterized [the] Lord’s training of the Twelve” (292). The authors appear to be suggesting that the small group approach to church ministry lacks validity. With this line of thought, one could ponder endlessly on the validity of any organized mission structure. Perhaps they should note the overall lack of biblical foundation that almost all church structures share in common. Structures, for the most part, are not biblical; rather, they are simply human creations designed to help the Church accomplish its mission. Small groups serve a purpose of helping people develop relationships (fellowship) while discussing the Bible so that they can hold each other accountable. Small groups are an excellent structure to combat the individualistic mindset in the West. People will find biblical community (love one another, encourage one another, admonish one another, etc.) very difficult to achieve if they do not know one another. To their credit, the authors are most likely trying to avoid a dogmatic mentality when it comes to structuring the Church for mission (299).

This avoidance of dogmatism, however, seems not to be applied when they suggest that the common practice of many evangelical churches to have one person serve as the sole elder develops a “monarchical role” whereby their local ministry under the sole elder takes precedence over mission (306-307). They state, “When one steps into the world of the New Testament, one finds little that resembles modern churches, with their life and service revolving primarily around the activities of one person” (307). Given their overall goal to develop a theology of mission, this assertion seems very divisive. Even so, it may be that this common practice may have an extended impact on mission.
While this reader agrees strongly with these authors on this matter, more discussion on how the issue relates to mission would have been helpful.

**Conclusion**

Glasser and the other authors offer the reader one of most extensive theologies of mission and provide an excellent source for anyone seeking to understand God’s missionary message in the Bible. Their combination of evangelism and social action under the banner of mission may lead some students to neglect evangelism and focus too heavily on the overwhelming temporal needs of humanity. Despite their combination of evangelism and social action, the authors certainly help the Church understand the importance of evangelism while at the same time reminding them of their responsibility to help those in need.