

A Holy Mission: Mission in Social Holiness

by Lieutenant Xander Coleman

It sometimes seems that when we start to talk about the things of God, words fail us. The differences in meaning between technical theological words break down because the fullest meaning of each word is wrapped up in the meaning of others. Often that means that in articulating our belief we grasp at words like ropes of sand, knowing that they are inadequate, yet somehow we are able to navigate through them to get to the heart of who God is and what he is like. This has been my experience with the word 'mission' for some time now. Perhaps this reveals the theological lens through which I interpret the world, but every time I hear about this aspect of mission, or this theme or key to mission, my head screams out, 'is that not just social holiness?!' In exploring the links and overlaps between social holiness and mission, this paper will consider the biblical idea of *shalom* as the 'end result' of mission and the definition of true social holiness.

What is mission?

David Bosch, that eminent missiologist, concedes that 'ultimately, mission remains undefinable'.¹ That notwithstanding, he argues that Christianity is inherently missional,² because God is inherently missional.³ God's mission (*missio Dei*) is 'God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate'.⁴ This definition is almost too broad to be useful, that mission is anything that God is doing in the world that the church may or may not be involved with. The role of the church, as the community of God's people, in God's mission is perhaps easier to nail down. One understanding of the church's mission is 'to give visible evidence of the kingdom and its ethics within its own community and in its ministry to the world'⁵. Here, the church exists to make the kingdom of God known – to establish the reign of God – in the world and, interestingly, 'within its own community'. This points to the church not as a static organisation but as an organism in the process of becoming. In that regard, it might be argued, even discipleship of Christians within the church towards holiness of life is one aspect of mission. And so we come to a point where the definition of mission is so broad that everything is 'mission', and the word loses its usefulness in communicating. Chilcote is perhaps a little more helpful in offering that 'mission, on its most basic level, is nothing more or less than offering Christ to others through concrete actions'.⁶ There is of course the tension between evangelistic actions of mission, which seek to introduce people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and ministries of justice and compassion, which seek to alleviate suffering and meet human need in a display and foretaste of the kingdom. Bosch warns against separating 'the spiritual or personal sphere from the material and

1 Bosch, 1992: 9

2 Ibid: 9

3 Ibid: 10

4 Ibid: 10

5 Assemblies of God Brussels Statement (AOGBS), 1999: 115

6 Chilcote, 2011,

the social' in missional activity.⁷ People are whole, and a whole-person or holistic approach to mission needs to be taken. Both aspects of mission arise out of God's love for humanity in general and individuals in particular, because 'love is the law of the kingdom of God'.⁸ John 3:16 denotes the source of mission as God's love for the world through Jesus Christ. It is this same love injected by the church into the world through concrete acts which constitutes mission.

The end result of mission: *Shalom*

If missional activity is a signpost to the kingdom of God, then that kingdom is the end result of mission. It is very infrequently that missiologists will discuss what the end result of mission is – what mission hope ultimately to achieve – and how the church will know when she gets there. This may be largely due to differing eschatological perspectives, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the links between eschatology and mission. Nevertheless it maybe helpful to have an image of what the kingdom of God – for which we work and pray and watch – looks like. I argue that the Old Testament picture of *shalom* is such an image, illustrating what the kingdom of God is like. *Shalom* is translated in most English bibles as 'peace', which is accurate enough, but the Hebrew understanding of that word goes far deeper than the English word 'peace' gives it credit for. Brueggemann argues that *shalom* embraces ideas of 'love, loyalty, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessing, righteousness' and resists 'tendencies to division, hostility, fear, drivenness, and misery'.⁹ For Brueggemann, '*shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation,' referring to 'all those resources and factors which make communal harmony joyous and effective'.¹⁰

This beautiful Hebrew word (from a verb “to bring to completeness”, “to make whole”) speaks of a totally integrated life with health of body, heart and mind, attuned to nature, open to others, in joy with God; of sharing, mutuality and love; of justice, freedom, interdependence, reciprocity. (Punton, 1975)

Shalom is, quite literally, life in fullness – the abundant life which Jesus promises in John 10:10. Thus, if interpreted messianically, the prophecy in Isaiah 9 takes on a strong missional flavour: 'Of the increase of his government (reign) and peace (*shalom*, fullness) there will be no end' (Isaiah 9:7, TNIV). In that short sentence, God's reign and *shalom* are inaugurated by Jesus and established in ever-increasing measure. *Shalom* is 'the goal of His mission'.¹¹

As well as being intrinsically linked to the aim of mission, Chilcote writes of an 'understanding of *social holiness* as our calling to be “servants of *shalom* in the world”'.¹² In the Old Testament, the aim of the law was that the holiness of the community of Israel would lead to the experience of *shalom*. Israel was to be different

7 Bosch, 1992: 10
 8 AOGBS, 1999: 115
 9 Brueggemann, 1990: 16
 10 Ibid: 16
 11 Punton, 1975
 12 Chilcote, 2011 (emphasis mine)

from the nations surrounding it, exhibiting the reign of YHWH. The entire thrust of the Old Testament, argues Christopher Wright, is a message about 'social and economic justice, about personal and political integrity, about practical compassion for the needy', and there is no biblical evidence that this thrust is 'in any sense provisional or dispensable' under the New Covenant.¹³ Holiness of life under the Old Covenant led to *shalom*, but Mike Riddell suggests that 'there is a qualitative change in the concept of holiness from the Old Testament to the New.'¹⁴ This seems to come from a two-dimensional understanding of Old Testament holiness as ritualistic and removed from relational accountability. Yet, argues Wright, 'Jesus endorsed the moral principles of the Old Testament and thereby the Scripture-based missional priorities of God's people'.¹⁵ Chilcote argues, 'Jesus' mission was characterized by healing those who were sick, liberating those who were oppressed, empowering those who stood on the margins of life, and caring for the poor. In all of these he incarnated *shalom*, God's vision of peace, justice, and well-being for all'.¹⁶ Ultimately, *shalom* speaks of a community exercising love towards one another. In commanding his disciples to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:37, 39, NRSV) Jesus stipulated the conditions of the reign of God and imparted how his *shalom* could be established. This greatest of commandments - love for God and love for neighbour – forms the sum and substance of what holiness is. The social part of that – love for neighbour – is what is referred to as social holiness.

Social Holiness

'The church has for much of its history accepted uncritically the separatist approach to holiness', accuses Riddell in a challenge to traditional holiness teaching.¹⁷ This statement is simply untrue – it has been the pietist and holiness movements over the last four centuries that have been at the vanguard of holistic missional engagement with the poor, as I will demonstrate below. Riddell is correct in stating that 'separation and mission are not easily compatible',¹⁸ but his claim that holiness thinking is obsessed with purity and separateness and therefore detrimental to mission is inaccurate. He reduces the rich theology of those movements to this statement: 'When followers of Christ regard daily life as a minefield which threatens their purity, it is only to be suspected that they will be fearful and recalcitrant in their dealings with "outsiders"'.¹⁹ Rather than legalistically pursuing external righteousness and avoiding contamination from 'sinners', as Riddell portrays holiness to be, holiness as expressed by John Wesley is described as 'perfect love'.²⁰ There has been a great missional thrust of the holiness movement which was motivated by love for neighbour. Though misguided in setting up such a straw-man argument against traditional holiness teaching, Riddell nevertheless

13 Wright, 2006: 305

14 Riddell, 1998: 73

15 Wright, 2006: 306

16 Chilcote, 2011

17 Riddell, 1998: 74

18 Ibid, 1998: 74

19 Ibid: 77

20 Maddox, 2001: 32

correctly concludes that 'True holiness will not keep us from the world, but drive us into it in faith'.²¹

This engagement rather than separation is what Wesley referred to as 'social holiness'. Wesley famously wrote, 'the gospel of Christ known no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness'.²² In context, Wesley was railing against the separatist brand of 'holiness' that Riddell lambasted. 'To Wesley, "Holy solitaries" were no more likely to exist than holy adulterers'.²³ Holiness is perfect love, and love must be expressed in the context of community. 'While the original meaning had to do more with the importance of accountability groups,' contemporary interpretations have 'developed to do with ministries of social justice and works of mercy'.²⁴ While personal holiness was an essential experience for every believer, for Wesley the purpose of that personal holiness was a social holiness that would transform the world and ring in God's reign. American holiness movement leader Phoebe Palmer insisted that 'holiness made one a servant',²⁵ and there is a clear link in holiness teaching between holiness and mission. In the current Salvation Army Song Book, under the heading, 'The life of holiness' is found the subsection 'Consecration and service'.²⁶ These two ideas – dedicating one's life to God unto holiness and serving him as an agent of mission in his world – are inseparable in the sung theology of a holiness movement that has consistently sought to deliver holistic mission throughout its history. The chorus of a classic Salvationist prays,
*For thy mission make me holy,
 For thy glory make me thine,
 Sanctify each moment fully,
 Fill my life with love divine.* (SASB 463)²⁷

Here, God's mission is empowered by a holiness that endows the seeker with divine love for the world. 'Contrary to the stereotype' perpetuated by the likes of Riddell, 'the joy of the holiness life often spilled over into social ministry'.²⁸ Indeed, the experience of 'sanctification by faith freed enormous energies for the service of others'.²⁹

Social Holiness and the Holiness Movement

This 'understanding of social holiness' as a 'calling to be "servants of *shalom* in the world"³⁰ was amply demonstrated in the holiness revivals of the nineteenth century. An example of this holistic approach to mission is Phoebe Palmer, a holiness pioneer who sought to bring renewed emphasis to the doctrine of sanctification in American Methodism. Palmer 'merged the personal piety of a second work of grace...with an

21 Riddell, 1998: 81

22 Drury, 2010

23 Ibid

24 Chilcote, 2011

25 Kostlevy, 2004: 29

26 The Song Book of The Salvation Army, 1986

27 Brindley Boon, The Song Book of The Salvation Army, 1986

28 Kostlevy, 2004: 28

29 White, 2004: 21

30 Chilcote, 2011

active approach to social action'.³¹ If a person need not wait for heaven to experience Christian perfection, she reasoned, why should society need to wait? Could *shalom*, like entire sanctification, not be experienced here and now? 'As holiness missionaries saw individual lives transformed, they believed social transformation was a distinct possibility.'³² Bringing about the sanctification – perfection of love – of both individuals and society became the driving force for holistic mission for Palmer's disciples. Palmer opened a mission house in the Five Points district of New York City, which was a 'frightening warren of brothels, low-grade dives, decayed tenements, street gangs'.³³ It was not enough to parachute in from the middle-class suburbs: holiness missionaries sought to express God's love by engaging incarnationally with the community. 'The mission house at Five Points incarnated God's love by allowing workers to live among the poor and by giving the poor a place to live as they took their first step out of poverty'.³⁴ From the Five Points mission food was distributed to the starving, clothing to the cold and naked, medical supplies to those who could not afford them.³⁵ It also provided employment and transitional accommodation for up to 500 poor women and their children.³⁶ Kostlevy posits that 'the Five Points work became the model for later Protestant institutional missions in American cities,³⁷ and continues to influence how inner-city mission is done around the world. The growth of similar holiness missions in urban centres across North America was such that Drury can assert, 'social action was as much a part of the American holiness movement as was personal holiness'.³⁸ As late as 1924, a homelessness study in San Francisco discovered that almost all services to the homeless that city 'were being provided by holiness-inspired urban ministries, such as the Peniel Mission, the Volunteers of America, and the Salvation Army'.³⁹

Drawing the parallels

Far from separating themselves from society, the holiness movement engaged the world in which they existed to challenge its evils and to love it with the love of God. 'Social holiness, in this sense, therefore, has everything to do with mission'.⁴⁰ In seeking to bring about the perfection of society according to the divine law of love, holiness missionaries demonstrated the kingdom of God and displayed a movement towards *shalom*. 'There is great missional and evangelistic power,' observes Wright, 'in lives shaped by the standards of biblical holiness and goodness'.⁴¹ Indeed, the Assemblies of God Brussels Statement goes further by claiming that holiness of life itself demonstrates the kingdom and is thus mission:

31 Drury, 2008
 32 Kostlevy, 2004: 30
 33 Paul Boyer, cited in White, 2004: 20
 34 White, 2004: 20
 35 Drury, 2008
 36 Kostlevy, 2004: 28
 37 Ibid: 28
 38 Drury, 2008
 39 Kostlevy, 2004: 29
 40 Chilcote, 2011
 41 Wright, 2006: 390

*The transforming impact of this reconciliation on all dimensions of the lives of those who are part of God's redeemed community provides an observable signpost to the reign of God... and is a powerful witness to the world of the redemptive mission of God.*⁴²

Personal holiness, even apart from social holiness (absurd though that concept is) is missional in that the beauty of holiness is provocative, according to the Brussels Statement.

Ultimately, in talking about mission and *shalom* and social holiness we get down to semantics. But semantics are important in conveying attitudes and values and in communicating using helpful language. What the liberal Christian refers to as holistic mission demonstrating and establishing the reign of God, the Old Testament scholar or Messianic Jew would describe as ushering in YHWH's kingdom of *shalom*, and the Christian in the holiness tradition would speak of as perfect love in action bringing about corporate, social holiness. The Salvation Army comes undeniably out of the holiness tradition and for many Salvationists describing mission in terms of agitating for social and societal holiness would be helpful to engage them in a theologically familiar way. Certainly, as a holiness movement we must ensure that we maintain our tradition of a holiness that is not separatist, but engages with the world. 'True holiness will not keep us from the world, but drive us into it in faith'.⁴³ As God enables us to express perfect love for our brothers and sisters through missional holiness, we will see the *shalom* of God hinted at, signposted, revealed and established in our midst. The holiness that we are called to is one that will quite literally win the world for Jesus.

42 AOGBS, 1999: 116

43 Riddell, 1998: 81

Bibliography

- 2007 *New Revised Standard Version Bible Anglicized Edition*. London, HarperCollins
- 2005 *The Holy Bible, Today's New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan
- Assemblies of God Brussels Statement (AOGBS)
1999 'Pentecostal Mission and Social Concern'. In *Mission as Transformation*. 1999. Eds. Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden. Oxford: Regnum Books.
112-117
- Bosch, David J.
1992 *Transforming Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books
- Brueggemann, Walter
1990 *Living Toward a Vision*. New York: United Church Press
- Chilcote, Paul W.
2011 *Servants of Shalom in the World*. [Online]. 2011. Available from: <http://www.gbod.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=nhLRJ2PMKsG&b=6519811&ct=3171011>.
[Accessed 03/06/11]
- Drury, Keith
2010 'There is no holiness but social Holiness'. [Online]. 31st August 2010. Available from: <http://www.drurywriting.com/keith/no%20holiness%20but%20social%20Holiness.htm> [Accessed 16/05/2011]
2008 *The Holiness Movement's Heritage of Social Action*. [Online]. August 2008. Available from: <http://www.drurywriting.com/keith/holiness.movement.social.action.htm> [Accessed 03/06/2011]
- Eli, R. George,
1993 *Social Holiness Defined*. [Online]. 1993. Available from: <http://www.cscoweb.org/sochol.html>. [Accessed 03/06/2011]
- Green, Roger
2010 *Why Social Holiness?*. [Online]. 2010. Available from: <http://e-summit.org/conference/Why-Social-Holiness.html>. [Accessed 03/06/2011]
- Kostlevy, William
2004 'Saving Souls & Bodies'. *Christian History & Biography* 82 (2004): 28-31
- Maddox, Randy L.
2001 'Be Ye Perfect?'. *Christian History* 69 (2001): 32-34
- Oden, Tom
• 'Weeds in the Garden'. *Christian History* 69 (2001): 43-45
- Punton, Jim
1975 *The Community of Shalom: God's Radical Alternative*. [Online]. 1975. Available from: <http://johndavies.org/jimpunton-shalom.pdf>. [Accessed 08/06/2011]
- Riddell, Michael
1998 *Threshold of the Future*. London: SPCK
- Salvation Army, The
1986 *The Song Book of The Salvation Army*. London: The Salvation Army

- White, Charles Edward
2004 'Holiness Fire-Starter'. *Christian History & Biography* 82 (2004): 16-21
- Wright, Christopher J. H.
2006 *The Mission of God*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic