

Humanization and Salvation: which is the goal of Mission?

Salvation and humanization as two different goals of mission, two entirely different strategies to mission and two opposite theological emphases in missiology have been taking on the shape of irreconcilable and even mutually exclusive poles in the field of mission. At the first glance, this debate by the proponents at odds reminds me controversies of the past – Augustinian-Pelagian or Calvinistic-Arminian. As then so now, one pole stresses God and his spiritual activity, another man and his human activity. The tension is strong, yet, in my judgment, not necessarily unhealthy. It provides challenges to the adherents of both sides and leads to creativity in both academic and practical spheres of missiology. In this paper, I will give a terse analysis of these two approaches and allude to several historical precedents for the debate. Then I will consider some biblical passages in support of each side. Finally, in light of biblical data I will propose a third, more holistic, option to the issue of salvation and humanization.

In the twentieth century two opposite sides of the debate have been represented by particular Christian camps, namely by evangelicals (especially from the time of Lausanne Covenant) on the one hand, and ecumenicals (World Council of Churches) on the other. The former have argued that salvation of a human soul has always been and should stay the primary focus of Christian mission. The latter conversely have emphasized that God is at work in the secular events of our time beyond the boundaries of the church. Thus, according to them, failure on the part of the church to positively participate in the processes of industrialization, commerce, politics, social and moral order has isolated the church from the world and made the mission impossible. Humanization, i.e. change of the structures of society through technological progress, academic and scientific advancement, health and education care, ought to be the goal of Christian mission. They have argued that mission manifests itself in the struggle for economic

justice against exploitation, for human dignity against oppression, for solidarity against alienation. Consequently, evangelicals have emphasized the vertical dimension of mission through which individuals are transferred from eternal death to life, whereas ecumenicals the horizontal one, in which mission contributes toward the humanization of society. The first approach of course is much more theocentric, while the second is in essence anthropocentric. The role that the church plays in mission is realized differently too. In the first model, the church is the main place of God's activity and consequently the agent of mission, whereas in the second, the world is the primary locus of God's activity, and the church is just one of the examples of *Missio Dei* in the world. Not only mission per se but also the notion of salvation takes on entirely different meanings in these approaches. For evangelicals conversion is an individualistic act received by each person separately. However, for ecumenicals conversion happens on the corporate level in the form of social change.

Historically the tension between these two positions has been gradually developing and reached its peak in 1974 when evangelicals withdrew from the World Council of Churches and formed their own International Congress on World Evangelization. Its tenets have been clearly formulated and expressed the same year in the Lousanne Covenant. Thus, evangelicals have become guardians of the salvific effects of the gospel message, pointing out that social action is not the same as evangelism nor is political liberation salvation (section 5, *Lousanne Covenant*, 1974). Ecumenicals, on the other hand, made sure that the church would not depart from engagement with the dominant social issues and thus become escapist in her mindset. Finally, it should be noticed that although the debate still goes on and the two sides are far from reaching agreement, yet the positions of both evangelicals and ecumenicals have been developing. The debated obliged each camp to review its theological weaknesses, so as a result

evangelicals started to put more and more accent on humanization, whereas ecumenicals would try to emphasize that Christian participation in the struggles for justice must include promises of the kingdom of God (section 34, *Mission and Evangelism*, 1984).

Now, although evangelicals and ecumenicals vividly represent the opposite approaches to mission, the debate per se is not new. In fact, its roots go back to the church of the New Testament and patristic Christianity. Even the authors of the New Testament differed in their emphasis regarding the role of faith vis-à-vis communal and social involvement. For instance, Paul in Romans and Galatians underscores the importance of faith rather than deeds with regard to salvation, whereas James in his epistle is alarmed by deedless faith. James time and again is concerned with social justice. He encourages and comforts the poor but warns the rich (Jas 1:9-10; 5:1-6); he admonishes Christians to foster their relationships irrespective of their social status (Jas 2:1-7); finally, he denounces the faith that does not find its expression in charitable communal service, but praises that which actively serves to the marginals of society (Jas 2:14-26). This kind of faith for James, is the most pure form of Christianity, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Jas 1:27).

Similarly, Patristic age has not avoided this tension between horizontal and vertical expressions of faith. The Greek Fathers were more concerned with Christology whereas Latin Fathers with soteriology. The former emphasized the incarnational model of Christ, whereas the latter his substitutionary death on the cross. Evidently the incarnational model of Christ promotes social activity – “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mat 25:40), while substitutionary model stimulates faith in Christ – “the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (Jn 6:29). Again, both models are grounded in Scripture. For

instance, Mathew in the parable of the sheep and the goats underscores the tangible social dimension of faith – we must feed and clothe the poor, take care of the sick and visit the imprisoned ones. Whereas John concludes the narrative of Jesus walking on the water by highlighting the spiritual dimension of faith, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life” (Jn 6:27).

The space of this paper does not allow showing how historically the emphases on vertical and horizontal dimensions of Christian faith resulted in opposing theological schools and movements. Suffice is to say that the tension has been present throughout the history of the Church and in the twentieth century, especially in the field of missiology, it assumed the poles of salvation versus humanization represented by evangelicals and ecumenicals respectively. Yet the recent advances in both camps give hope that a new approach in mission, which integrates both models, could be developed. In my judgment, both Scriptures and the history of two millennia of Christianity provide the possibility of overcoming the dichotomy of spiritual vs. social, transcendentalism vs. immanentism, salvation vs. humanization.

The Bible in its entirety has both emphases. I have already pointed out to the passages in Scripture that advocate each of them. Yet, I would like just to add a few scriptures that incorporate both poles. For instance, Paul writes to Ephesians that salvation “is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:8-10). Thus, salvation comes through vertical dimension of faith, but inherently has the horizontal – good works of service. The same holistic paradigm is evident in the earthly ministry of Jesus: “He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing” (Lk 9:11). Thus, Jesus was concerned with spiritual as well as natural needs of the

people. If his followers became preoccupied with natural provisions, he would warn them, as in the case when he was asked to divide the inheritance between two brothers (Lk 12:13-32). When people saw him only as a political hero, whose mission was to improve their social status, he would retreat, as in the case when the crowd wanted to make him a king (Jn 6:14). However, Jesus' teaching was not leading to escapism. He taught his disciples not only to love the Lord their God and their neighbors as themselves, but also to do good to their enemies. Identifying them as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he evidently had in mind the social dimension of their faith – “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). The church in the book of Acts followed the holistic model of Jesus' ministry. Therefore, when the communal needs were neglected, as in the case of widows of Hellenistic Jews, they would respond by adequate social acts (Ac 6:1-7). Similarly, when Paul got the permission of Jerusalem church to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, he was charged to remember the poor (Gal 2:10).

In conclusion, my short answer to the question whether the goal of mission is humanization or salvation, is “yes.” It is not “either...or” but both. The church has to take seriously both spiritual and social mandates. We should not polarize the harmony of the gospel by emphasizing its one side at the expense of the other. The section 33 of ecumenical document *Mission and Evangelism* is right stating that the ‘spiritual gospel’ and ‘material gospel’ were in Jesus one gospel. I agree that salvation of human souls remains the primary task of mission. Yet, if the mission becomes detached from the conditions in which those to whom the message of salvation is presented, it will certainly fail. The opposite is also true: if the social involvement becomes a substitute for proclamation of the gospel, it is not any longer mission, at least not in a biblical sense. The right paradigm for mission should avoid either of these extremes. I fully

agree with David Bosh who citing Moltmann concludes that the alternative between evangelization and humanization, between interior conversion and improvement of conditions, or between the vertical dimension of faith and the horizontal dimension of love is untenable. We must pursue the balance, which is captured in the prayer of a saint, “Lord, make me intensely spiritual that I might be genuinely human.” In fact, the result of true spirituality always has produced the fruit of social involvement.

I suggest that as the cross has two bars, one vertical and one horizontal, so has the mission. They are not meant to be poles apart, but poles crossed and dependant on each other. Avoiding tragic dualism which has plagued missionary activities in the past we must strive towards doing the mission in the wholeness of the gospel.

Works Consulted

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