Missional Theology in Word and Deed: Biblical Wisdom for the 21st Century

Wagner Kuhn
Andrews University



Missional Theology in Word and Deed

If we want people to find transforming freedom, healing, hope, and salvation, then the knowledge of God cannot remain on the level of theology; theory needs to be put into practice



Questions to Reflect

- How can our theology be practical enough so that it is charitable and redemptive?
- How do we consistently come up with words that heal and save, with deeds that are compassionate and transformational?
- What are the implications of this model for church administrators, pastors theologians, and lay people?



More Questions to Reflect

- For Theology (Doctrine):
 Who is Jesus Christ for us today?
 or Who Christ really is, for us today?
- For Mission (Discipleship):
 Who are we for Jesus Christ today?

See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine, xxiii, 2019



Biblical Wisdom for the 21st Century

Wisdom in the Bible is the knowledge of God (theology)—the will of God—put into practice.

If that is so, then, what should our response be in practical terms as theologians, pastors, and members of the Seventh-day Adventist church, and as followers of Christ?

Rediscovering Adventist Identity and Mission in 21st Century Europe



Missional Theology in Word and Deed

"Before it became a university department, theology was done in, for, and by the church, and it was done to help people mature in the knowledge of Jesus Christ."

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Hearers and Doers, xxiv, 2019



Biblical Wisdom – Blueprint

I believe the words of Christ in Matthew (25:31-46) provide a blueprint for a mission theology that considers relief and development activities as the knowledge of God in word and deed, in other words, the will of God for humankind put into practice, into action



"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.



"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'



"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'



"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.



"For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'



"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:31-46).



Christ's Wisdom

These words of Christ were put to practice while he lived on this earth. He came as a servant and as such to serve, to heal, to teach, to feed, to forgive, and to help those in need. His religion is the only religion whereby the other is as important as oneself, it is the religion of the neighbor.



The "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) implies that our life, our work, our attitudes, and our actions are in line with Christ's, as his life and the gospel he came to preach was manifested both in words and deeds—indeed, the gospel (theology) in human clothes, in human shoes.



Apostle **Paul** describes the **life of Christ** as that of taking the place of a **servant**, as one who compassionately and selflessly **loves the neighbor**, **loves the other**, surrendering to, and aligning himself with the will of the Father.

Paul states:



"Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:



Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:1-8).



Counter-Cultural or Counter-Self-centeredness?

This text provides the reason why the 2nd chapter of Philippians has been reported to be "the most countercultural chapter in Bible." The theological meaning and missiological implications of this passage speaks of biblical wisdom—the knowledge of God lived out in theory and practice, in word and deed.

Bill Hybels, quoted in C. Gene Wilkes, Jesus on Leadership: Discovering the Secrets of Servant Leadership from the Life of Christ, 1998, 39.



This biblical wisdom occurs when our thoughts and actions are in alignment with Jesus' life, with his thoughts and actions, and as such we will have the same mind, the same attitude as he did (verse 5).



"Politics is the art of the possible; translation is the art of the impossible." The impossibility of translating the good news of the gospel into human reality becomes possible in Christ. The Word becomes flesh and incarnates into humanity to demonstrate this wisdom, this good news in word and deed.

Andrew F. Walls, The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 26.



As God became flesh and dwelt among us, the unique story of the incarnated Christ is communicated into my language. When his story, words, and actions are lived out into human reality, they become real human stories as he transforms people's lives. As we share Christ, his acts of mercy and compassion, people are attracted to and become more like him.



The incarnation is the translation of God's good news into human reality. It is the gospel in an audible, visible, and touchable form. In Jesus, God becomes human—he takes the initiative to bring divinity into humanity, to connect heaven with earth in word and deed. This reality becomes mission theology for the 21st Century, and for the last days.



In Christ, God unites himself with human beings, connecting heaven and earth—the divine with humanity. The life of Christ reveals God's love and wisdom, his will and knowledge in the most objective and visible form. "To this sin-darkened earth He came to reveal the light of God's love—to be 'God with us'.... By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels. He was the Word of God—God's thought made audible."

Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 15.

Rediscovering Adventist Identity and Mission in 21st Century Europe



Christ is God's redemptive action translated into human reality, into human language. He is God's good news lived out in word and deed—the eternal gospel made visible. Jesus reveals God as he walks among humanity—he is God's message, God's thoughts translated into an audible, visible, and touchable reality.



Christ's unique divine-human intercessory ministry through the incarnation and now at the heavenly sanctuary have translated God's good news, his love, and grace into human reality and understanding. God's charity in words and deeds—Immanuel: God with us! This is the reality of Immanuel—God in Christ descending to be with, to help, and to save his people.



Biblical Examples

Isaiah describes well what Christ has done on our behalf: "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.



"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:3-7).



The Spirit of God also led many followers/believers to live out in their own lives God's biblical wisdom. These, in a way were (and are) pre or post examples of the Incarnated Christ. By the grace of Christ and the Spirit's power they serve as examples of mediators—intercessors that have lived out the message and good news of the gospel as they followed the gentle Savior.



In the Old Testament: Job

"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was **Job**. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). This means total commitment and surrendering to God. Note that his life exemplifies this commitment to God into redemptive and mediatorial actions towards his neighbors, towards those most in need of help:



"Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist them. The one who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth" (Job 29:11-17).



It seems that Job as a judge becomes the mediator on behalf of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. He intercedes and takes their place, becoming eyes for the blind and feet to the lame. Job acts as a father and as a rescuer, using the highest virtues of benevolence and charity in order to help and mediate in favor of those most needed and oppressed of society. (more on Job in the workshop)



Moses' example also illustrates that the prophet has to live out the message in his own life. God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and reveals His own will to him (Exodus 3). Moses in turn communicates God's knowledge through his own life and ministry, by word and powerful deeds, but also in written form. He exemplifies God's patience and mercy in his own life; a personalized translation to the Israelites of the message, character, and will of God (theology).



He writes: "But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Exodus 32:32). This indeed missional theology in word and deed, it is intercession at the highest and most profound level.



"By faith Moses, ... refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt. ... He persevered because he saw him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:25-27). By faith, and in words and deeds, Moses followed the invisible Word, the invisible and powerful God, making Him visible to others in his own life and writings.



Isaiah also understands the human condition, and 'translates' it as his own, which is fallen, sinful, mortal, and finite. ..."I am ruined [he states]! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).



The prophet understands the reality of human sinfulness and the desperate need for God's forgiveness in his own life. His answer, "Here am I, send me" (Isaiah 6:8), comes from the revelation of God and understanding him as high priest, interceding and offering his pardoning grace.



God's wisdom and will to the people of Israel is also uniquely exemplified in the message and life of prophet Hosea. "The Lord said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites'..." (Hosea 3:1). Again, the prophet—and servant—incarnates the content of the message and knowledge of God in his own life.



God's love and care is 'translated' through a visible demonstration of forgiveness through the story of Hosea and his wife, Gomer. In Hosea's life, forgiveness is proclaimed and lived out as biblical wisdom—in powerful words and compassionate deeds. Forgiveness was mediated through Hosea's own life, and as such, he is an example of Christ: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).



And not only **Job**, or **Moses**, or **Isaiah**, or **Hosea**, but all those who have followed Christ have also lived to become mediators on behalf of those most needed, those most marginalized, and those most enslaved and oppressed.

The example of the **Moravian missionaries** attests to this fact.



As **self-supporting missionaries**, many **Moravians** went to the extreme of selling themselves as slaves in order to live the life of Christ, translating biblical wisdom into human reality with the purpose of helping, healing, and reaching the slaves in various parts of the West Indies. Indeed, they had the mind of Christ as they followed his example and shared in a missional theology that was incarnational in both word and deed.

(see more on the Moravians on the workshop)



The Lord's Prayer as Biblical Wisdom: Christianity as the Religion of the Other

- Biblical wisdom in word and deed
- The Lord's Prayer as a model of intercession on behalf of my neighbor (the other).
- More than just myself or my family. Christ's religion is for my neighbor as well, it is for the other Let's read it:



"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give me today my daily bread. And forgive me my debts, as I also have forgiven my debtors. And lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from the evil one" (Matthew 6:9-13).



An attentive reading of The Lord's Prayer can certainly provide us with a clearer picture of the concern God has for the other. Normally when I pray The Lord's Prayer I'm not thinking about the other, about my neighbor, about the one that is in need or sick, or in another country in prison and dying of starvation

Some of the comments is this section (Lord's Prayer) have been taken from ideas shared by Pat Gustin in a devotional presented at the Global Mission Centers' Directors Meeting. New York City, September 13, 2013. See also Marty Troyer, "Identity, Community, and Mission: Part 7, 'Jesus and Community'".



I'm thinking about myself, about receiving blessings, getting bread, and being forgiven. The reason is because we normally see this prayer through "glasses" that are conditioned by our secular culture, ethnocentrism, tribalism, worldview!



When, however, God helps us to see this prayer through his eyes, we will think and act differently—"Our Father," "Give us our daily bread," "Forgive us our trespasses," "Lead us not into temptation." It is a group, a communal prayer (even when we pray privately). What if I always thought about the other, about the community when I prayed?



"Our Father"—Yes, he is my Father, too, but how often do I remind myself that the man who sits next to me in an airplane also wants to arrive home safely? And the old lady who is in a nursing home is in need of companionship? And the poor Korean (from the north) who is in an orphanage needs his daily bread? And the list goes on... and they are all my siblings! Do I ever think of them as family? Do I think of them when I pray?



"Give us our daily bread." Do I ever really think communally—about the others, when I'm worrying about my bills, or when I'm shopping for my groceries on a tight budget? "Forgive us our trespasses." Do we seriously consider corporate repentance, like Daniel, Isaiah, and other individuals in the Bible? Do I want to forgive those who have sinned against me?



Normally in our prayers and in our lives, we are very focused on our own needs and our families. Do I (you) realize that people in other parts of the world can teach us a great deal about the "other" who is in need and about God that can provide, often through me?



Whole families and clans and villages and tribes think of themselves as first of all part of an "us", part of a "we."

This communal thinking, which is focused on the "other" (the neighbor) is biblical, and thus, should be viewed as the will of God for his creation, for humanity, in these last days.



Many of the stories of God's people throughout history somehow echoes a similar kind of story we find in the Bible as we read what Luke wrote: "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said; "God has come [down] to help his people" (Luke 7:16). The gospel of Christ is the gospel in work boots, it is the will of God put into practice—biblical wisdom.



Moreover, the intercessory stories found in the Bible and communicated to people as they walked with God and shared in the lives of his children are some of God's ways of mediating the gospel into words and actions so that we can understand some of what God does and who he is (theology).



God's Word is best communicated by Christ's very own life lived out through my (our) own life on behalf of others. It is through the reading and rereading, the telling and retelling and the living out of the powerful story of Jesus that our words and concepts, our thoughts and actions receive new meaning.

See Lesslie Newbigin, Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History (2003), 117-118.



This is missional theology in word and deed—it is biblical wisdom. And thus it is redemptive mediation, it is salvation.



Biblical Wisdom Mission Theology in World and Deed

- Who is Jesus Christ for us today (Theology)?
- Who are we, for Jesus Christ today (Mission)?

Are they together? And Are we together as families, and as members of the body of Christ?



"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"

Matthew 5:16



Questions

- 1)- What other biblical examples reflect this Missional Theology in World and Deed
- 2)- What examples in Christian history or of today can you remember about this knowledge of God put into practice (Biblical wisdom)?
- 3)- What can you do today in your own life, studying, praying, and put into practice the Lord's prayer in a communal way?