

# Holistic Christianity? Yes! Holistic Mission? No! ... and Yes!

by David J. Hesselgrave, Executive Director Emeritus (Spring, 1997)

Sound confusing? Assuredly so! For years holistic (wholistic) mission issues have clouded the evangelical missiological landscape, especially since the mid-1970s.

We have been told that John 20:21 takes precedence over Matthew 28:16-20 and that it makes Jesus' messianic ministry (Luke 4:17-19) a model for ours. We have heard that Jesus' parable of the judgment of the *ethne* (Matthew 25:31-46) teaches that when we minister to the physical and social needs of the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless and imprisoned we minister to Jesus and will be rewarded accordingly. We have been urged to accede to Baby Boomers (and Xers?) who give priority to "holistic mission" over "traditional evangelism/church planting mission" rather than risk losing their participation and support.

Now arguments and admonitions such as these have been shown to be highly suspect on both exegetical and logical grounds. Nevertheless they persist and often prevail. And the problem faced by anyone who cannot agree with these interpretations and embrace "holistic mission" of this type is that he/she is unceremoniously dismissed as one who disregards the "Great (love) Commandment" and thinks of people as "souls with ears." So she/he had best be prepared to answer questions such as, "How can someone who is dying of starvation be expected to listen to the gospel?"

The answer to such questions-and the way out of this confusion-seems to me to be both simple and biblical. Christianity indeed is holistic. True Christians care and minister to the needs of the whole person. Jesus commanded it when he said "Love your neighbor as yourself." The early church demonstrated it when they sent relief to the Jerusalem saints. Paul enjoined it when he wrote, "Do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). True Christians, including Christian missionaries have regularly practiced it for centuries. That should settle it. Christianity is "holistic."

Christian missionaries, then, operate "holistically" because they are Christian! But, many a popular appeal notwithstanding, all Christians are not missionaries any more than all are evangelists, prophets, pastors, teachers or for that matter, elders or deacons! Some Christians are called and sent as missionaries, and therefore have the special and particular task of discipling the *ethne*! That is to be accomplished by going to them, by baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to observe all that Christ commanded (Matthew 28:16-20).

So one can say that Christian responsibility is inclusive and non-specific and, in this sense, holistic. But Christian mission is exclusive and specific and, that being the case, is particularistic and only in a secondary sense is it holistic.

Ironically, as numerous missiologists from Rufus Anderson in the early 19th century to the late Donald McGavran have pointed out, the most serious failures of the modern missionary enterprise have not had to do with deficiencies in meeting the social, medical and educational needs of people. They have had to do more with evangelistic/church planting strategies and methodologies. In recent years two weaknesses have been especially apparent. One has to do with misconstruing the command to "make disciples" and disconnecting the "winning of converts" from the "training of disciples." The other has to do with disregarding the responsibility to "teach

all" Christ commanded and truncating the Gospel message. As a result large numbers of "converts" do not find their way into Christian churches, and many who do become part of the church receive but minimal instruction in biblical truth and not the whole counsel of God.

It follows that, if the term "holistic" is to be maintained in the context of mission, it requires redefinition in line with Great Commission commands and goals. Our Lord said that we are to make "disciples" of the *ethne*. "From the word 'Go'" the goal is to persuade them to become Christ's followers, placing all aspects of their lives under his teachings and discipline. To that end, all Christ commanded is to be taught--all he taught through Moses and the Prophets who testified of him (John 5:39), and all he taught through the Apostles who witnessed of him John 15:14).

Happily, more and more students and practitioners of mission are adopting this understanding and taking this approach. And more and more mission fields and churches are reaping the benefits. Future missiologists may yet look back and conclude that this kind of holistic mission was a primary contribution of the missiology of our day!

### **Response To David Hesselgrave**

by Evvy Campbell, Associate Professor Wheaton College Graduate School

David Hesselgrave candidly restates the failures of the modern missionary enterprise: emphasizing making converts over training of disciples and failing to teach the whole counsel of God. And his suggested remedy-persuading believers to become true Christ followers-is clearly helpful. But using the term "holistic mission" as part of the remedial process is likely to complicate the confusion of terms. There is no common agreement on what "holistic" means in a Christian context. "You shall not steal" is clear. "You shall practice holistic Christianity" or "You shall engage in holistic mission" is not, neither in semantics nor substance. Indeed, the use of the invented "wholistic" is prevalent in Christian circles because of the desire to distinguish the ideas from New Age associations of "holistic" and "holism."

The heart of the issue is that the North American church *does* lack a grasp of God's vision for Biblical wholeness. There is little understanding of the church as God's channel for the transformation of society. Biblical wholism involves the restoration of persons and communities and the movement of those people and communities toward God's intended plan of abundant life both for now and eternity.<sup>1</sup> In theory we discuss wholeness but in practice we operate out of a secular world view that divides people into parts needing attention-spiritual, mental, social, and physical-and then develop ministries to address those needs. While the criticisms of Baby Boomers and Xers may give offense because of the self-congratulation they sometimes mask, the truth they contain deserves a response. After some twenty years of involvement in missions and relief and development work I could not say "Christian missionaries, then, operate 'holistically' because they are Christian!" Only some do. when our Christianity becomes Biblically holistic then holism in the context of mission will also be a given.

<sup>1</sup>Fountain, Daniel E. (1989). Health, the Bible, and the Church. Wheaton, IL: BGC Monograph.

Editor's note: In a recent letter, Dr. Hesselgrave wrote, "We are considering a network of those who are committed to rethinking contextualization and missionary strategy along biblical theological lines. It may prove to be The most important thing that is happening in missions today." If you would like to be part of such a vital network, please contact us at the EMS Website [[www.emsweb.org](http://www.emsweb.org)].