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Ambassadors of Reconciliation

God's Mission through Missions for All



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Ambassadors of Reconciliation: God's Mission through Missions for All

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Chapter 1

Reconciling All Things

Missional Competencies in a Broken World

Al Tizon

Today's complex, globalizing world requires the church in mission to become aware of, and adept in, key arenas of twenty-first century life. The ultimate goal here is to understand what I call *competencies in reconciliation*. But before we go there, we first need to make the case for reconciliation, broadly defined, as the missiological paradigm for our times.

If I may get right to the point, *it is time to break out of a reductionist view of the Great Commission and to understand it as nothing less than joining God in God's mission to reconcile all things in Jesus Christ*. I'm not sure how this assertion hits readers initially, but I hope by the end that they will hear it as good news, even as it requires revisiting the underside of mission to appreciate it.

Reconciliation as Mission

A few years ago, I had the privilege of writing a book entitled *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (2018).[1] In it, I propose that reconciliation is the new "whole" in holistic mission. Holistic mission, as we know, has referred to an approach to mission that attempts to put back together the ministries of evangelism and social responsibility. Of course, 20/20 hindsight tells us that these two ministries should have never been divorced in the first place. My proposal for reconciliation as mission depends on the church's ability to keep evangelism and justice married.

I stress the importance of reconciliation because in a divided world, holistic mission can no longer be just about putting word and deed back together again; it needs to be about putting the world back together again. It needs to be about participating with God in the ministry of reconciliation between God and people, between people and people, and between God, people, and creation.

1 This chapter is taken from excerpts from *Whole and Reconciled* by Al Tizon, copyright © 2018. Used by permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

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Reconciliation is a rich, biblical, theological idea that is based on God's vision to make whole the world and everyone in it. Colossians 1:20 (NRSV) beautifully sums up God's agenda when Paul says, "Through [Christ], God was pleased to reconcile to [God's own self] all things, whether on earth or in heaven."

God's vision of reconciliation only makes sense in light of the biblical story of creation and fall. In the beginning God created *shalom*—a social order wherein perfect harmony existed between the Creator, humanity, and ecosystem—but that *shalom* was shattered by sin (Gen 1–3). Reconciliation is God's initiative to restore wholeness to a shattered creation. The ministry of reconciliation, therefore, to which God has called the church (2 Cor 5:18–20), refers to our participation in God's vision to reconcile all things in Christ. This is our mission. This is the Great Commission.

I will say more about the Great Commission as it relates to reconciliation. For now, allow me to say one more important thing about the nature of biblical reconciliation, namely, it is multi-dimensional. The church's message of reconciliation involves at least three dimensions: (1) the vertical (between God and people); (2) the horizontal (between people and people); and (3) the circular (between God, people, and creation). These dimensions provide the basic framework of the paradigm of "reconciliation as mission." The vertical, horizontal, and circular, or "'triple reconciliation' for individual persons, society, and creation" (Rice 2014, 58–59) point to the main arenas of God's mission and therefore the church's mission.

The greatness of the Great Commission requires evangelism, peacemaking, and stewardship; it requires God's whole mission of reconciliation if it is going to be truly great.

Missionally speaking, these dimensions express themselves in the ministries of: (1) evangelism, which facilitates reconciliation between God and people; (2) peacemaking, which facilitates reconciliation between people and people; and (3) stewardship, which facilitates reconciliation between God, people, and creation. The church as evangelist, peacemaker, and steward is the church as reconciler in the world; it is the church being commissioned by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to make disciples among the nations as it participates with God in the reconciliation of all things.

Our understanding of the Great Commission must be holistic in regards to reconciliation in order to call the Great Commission "great." Let me say it another way: the greatness of the Great Commission requires evangelism, peacemaking, and stewardship; it requires God's whole mission of reconciliation if it is going to be truly great.

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The Great Commission is not so great when it is one-dimensional instead of three-dimensional. Here, let me humbly reprimand us as evangelicals, among whom the very term "Great Commission" caught on like wildfire in the first place. We have essentially equated the Great Commission with the ministry of evangelism, with Matthew 28 earning the distinction of the premiere evangelistic missionary text. Inspired by it, we have gone about the task of world evangelization with abandon, creating strategies based on unreached people groups and territorial windows to help us fulfill the Great Commission.

I argue that a one-dimensional, evangelism-only theology and practice of the Great Commission is incomplete at best, dangerous at worst. It has in fact contributed to crimes against humanity under colonialism, as the church's collusion with the colonial project is undeniable.

As New Testament scholar Mitzi Smith disturbingly points out in the context of colonized Africa, "Many missionaries, in collusion with European colonizers, separated the physical, unjust, inhumane treatment and oppression of Africans … from the saving of their souls" (Smith 2014, 128–29). Referring specifically to the one-dimensional understanding of the Great Commission, she continues her strong critique, writing: "Teaching and baptizing black souls trumped the liberating of black bodies from the shackles of their white oppressors" (Smith 2014, 129).

There are literally millions of what I call "victims of the Great Commission"—people, primarily among black and brown cultures, whose dignity, lifeways, and loved ones were destroyed in the service of the one-dimensional Great Commission-inspired evangelization of the world.

Our Fractured World

This undeniable history of colonial missions screams of the necessity of rethinking the Great Commission, and I contend that we do so by defining it in terms of God's mission to reconcile *all* things—the three dimensions of reconciliation—in Jesus Christ. With this biblical warrant, plus the fact that the world seems more broken than ever, seeing the Great Commission as participating with God in the reconciliation of all things offers freshness, a ring of relevance, a compelling way of addressing the fractures that mar our world today by way of our missionary endeavors.

These global fractures are more acute than ever. Due to governmental atrocities, there are more refugees or displaced peoples than the world has ever seen. Bully dictators are emerging everywhere, from the United States to Russia to North Korea to India to Venezuela to Colombia. Personally, I believe the United States is headed for another civil war based on the old line of racism. The misunderstanding and hatred between peoples are simply out of control.

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Mass shootings in this country and elsewhere are numbing. The rich get richer and the poor poorer. Sex trafficking is the most lucrative industry on the planet right now. Youth suicides are on the rise. People the world over are fast losing hope.

I admit that this is a dismal perspective on life, but can anyone deny that this is in fact the state of our world today? To be good news, to live out the Great Commission, we need to go and make disciples of all nations, inviting them to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and to join God in God's mission to reconcile all things.

Competencies in Reconciliation

So how do we, as missionaries, pastors, activists, and teachers practice reconciliation in the world, as we strive in the Spirit to live out the Great Commission? Part of the answer is to develop what I call *competencies in reconciliation*. More than ever, we need to become aware of, and adept in, certain competencies that address the brokenness of our world today. These competencies speak primarily to the horizontal dimension of reconciliation; they speak in part to what the church needs to be and do if we are going to be Great Commission Reconcilers in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Theological Competency: Embracing the Kingdom Dream

Theological competency is foundational. Theology matters, and it is for everyone. Researching and *writing* theology may not be for everyone but being theologically competent enough to know the difference between what's true and untrue, authentic, and hypocritical—that is for all of us.

By "theological competency," I mean interpreting reality through the eyes of the gospel. This requires a clear grasp of the reign or kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the socio-political expression of biblical *shalom*—a world characterized by God's best intentions for creation and everyone in it, because Jesus Christ reigns, and where God in Christ reigns, peace, justice, and reconciliation are established between God and people, between people and people, and between God, people, and creation. To the extent that God in Christ rules, righteousness, peace, mercy, justice, and love shape reality, from the domain of the human heart to the socio-political structure of nations to the order of the cosmos.

The gospel of the good news, of the *shalom* kingdom is the embodied announcement that God in Jesus Christ is restoring *shalom* upon the earth. Naturally then, this news is especially good for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the traumatized in the world.

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Theological competency requires being captivated by this kingdom vision—the kingdom dream, if we wish—so much so that other dreams begin to lose their shine. The *American* dream, for example, is not big enough for children of the king. In fact, the kingdom dream not only overshadows the American dream, but it also challenges it on two fundamental fronts.

The first front is economic. The American dream is built on the pursuit of material success, and I argue that those who were raised in market-based societies default to this pursuit. We've been programmed to climb the ladder of financial and material success, and for the most part Christians have not demonstrated anything different. As Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow argue in *Christianity Incorporated*, "the church … has become a chaplain to capitalism, a sanctifier of the vision and goals of the American dream" (Budde and Brimlow 2002, 24). As such, the church allows itself to be shaped by the wrong dream. If this is true, one word comes to mind: Repent! For as Jesus said, we "cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt 6:24). Our theological competency enables us to see the hold that pursuing wealth has had on us, to repent of it, and to begin pursuing the kingdom dream instead.

In addition to the economic front, the American dream is characterized by an inherent nationalism that the kingdom dream also challenges. Theological competency enables us to see any version of "America-first" thinking as far too small for the people of God. The kingdom dream is for Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The kingdom dream refers to God's *global* agenda, and any overly patriotic, nationalistic, militant agendas run contrary to the kingdom dream.

As the church becomes more theologically competent, we turn from mammon and nation worship and begin to embrace God, God's kingdom, God's *shalom*. Doing so is crucial for the Great Commission that sends us out to reconcile all things in Christ.

Intercultural Competency: Affirming Diversity

Another area in which we need to become adept is intercultural competency. Our world today is defined by the increasingly multicultural milieu that describes our neighborhoods and communities. Missionaries have entered deeply into that milieu; so theoretically, we're more poised than most to help the church become more competent in this area, even as we ourselves continue to grow in it.

Missionaries or not, we need tools to develop this competency. For example, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is an assessment tool that precisely measures one's intercultural competence. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, the denomination to which I belong, missionaries,

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