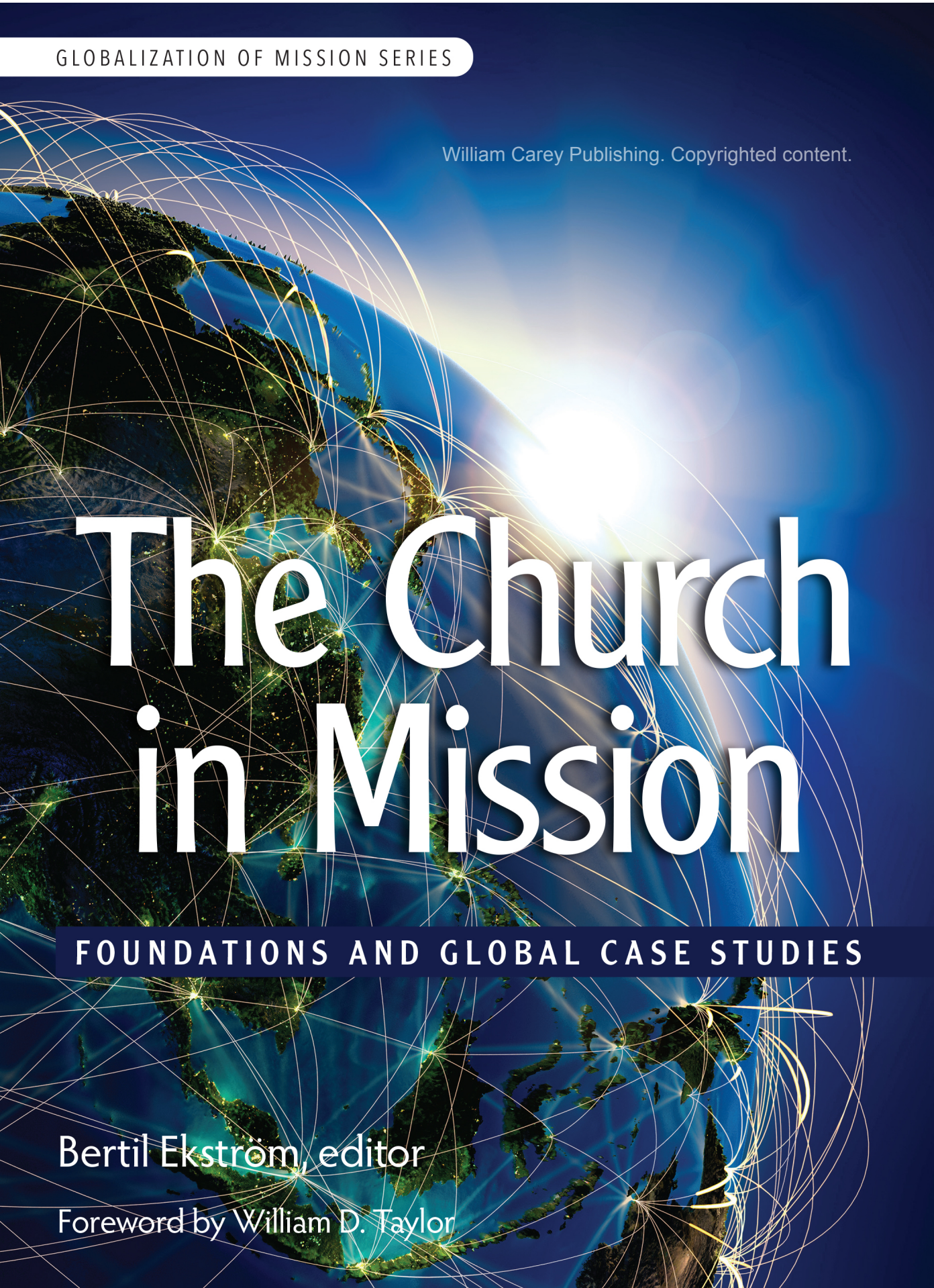
GLOBALIZATION OF MISSION SERIES

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The Church in Mission

FOUNDATIONS AND GLOBAL CASE STUDIES

Bertil Ekström, editor

Foreword by William D. Taylor

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We recognize the impossibility of adequately representing all nations and regions directly affected by persecution. We have attempted to present a substantive and broad-based sample.

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CHAPTER 1

THE GOOD LIFE?

Reflections on the Highest Goals of Human Life

Richard Tiplady

Riots and Reflections

During the summer of 2011, with the outbreak of rioting and looting that convulsed several English cities, I found myself unable to get away from the question of what is "the good life" and how do we define it in a society like the United Kingdom.

I found it interesting that much of what was looted from shops during that time were the symbols of our mainstream consumer culture: expensive trainer shoes, fashion clothing, smartphones and flat-screen televisions. Our culture aspires to such symbols, and those who looted seized the opportunity of acquiring these things free, even though some could clearly have afforded to buy them. Blackberry's Messenger service, BBM, was blamed for the coordination of the crowds who came to loot, so it wasn't being done by people who couldn't afford to buy such items.

Our politicians and media tried to occupy the moral high ground, but had no rights to do so: they themselves were caught up at the time in scandals over expense claims by some Members of Parliament (MPs) and phone-hacking by journalists. Some MPs had availed themselves of as much "free stuff" as the looters, just in different ways. Further, the economic stimulus actions of recent years have all been aimed at increasing consumerism, thus inflating the very bubble that led to the worldwide economic crash in the first place.

There is, therefore, a fairly clear idea of "the good life" circulating in my culture, shared across class and ethnicity, based on consuming, spending, and possessing.

I found myself wondering whether and how we as Christians really differ from those around us. True, some churches got involved in riot clean-up activities, but so did many other people. So it wasn't distinctively Christian, even if it was a good thing to do. Most of us Christians aspire to similar things as those around us: I live in a nice house, I drive a nice car, I have good quality clothes, a decent flat-screen television, a good laptop, a tablet computer, and a smartphone, and I take good holidays in warm places. So I'm not that different from those around me.

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The thought also struck me that our current missional focus in the West is often aimed at demonstrating "community" to a lonely, disparate, "networked" society. But isn't that what gang culture offers to its members as well?

Augustine and the Good Life

Augustine's concept of the *Summom Bonum* came to mind and I dug out my old copy of *The City of God* and began to look at what that great theologian had to say about Christian hope and responsibility when one's society and culture appear to be on the verge of collapse.

Augustine addressed the question of the *Summom Bonum* (the Final, Ultimate, Sovereign or Highest Good) because it was a matter of great interest to the Greek philosophical traditions with which he was engaging. It is that "to which we refer all our actions, which we seek for its own sake, not for any ulterior end, and the attainment of which leaves us nothing more to seek for our happiness" (*City of God*, VIII.8). He goes on to observe that most Greek philosophers located it in the human mind, body, or a combination of both, and mostly they did not seek to locate it beyond man himself. The one exception to this was Plato, who located it in the enjoyment of God: "Plato defined the Sovereign Good as the life in accordance with virtue; and he declared that this was possible only for one who had the knowledge of God and who strove to imitate him; this was the sole condition of happiness" (VIII.8).

Augustine's approval of Platonism ensured that it became influential in Christian theology until the rediscovery of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas and his scholastic contemporaries eight hundred years later. Augustine could write: "There are philosophers who have conceived of God, the supreme and true God, as the author of all created things, the light of knowledge, the truth of doctrine and the blessedness of life. They may be called, most suitably, Platonists; or they may give some other title to their school. … Whoever they may have been, we rank such thinkers above all others and acknowledge them as representing the closest approximation to our Christian position" (VIII.9).

Augustine outlines the various possible alternatives of the Final Good as offered by Greek philosophers, many of which sound rather contemporary: "Men long for pleasure, which is a stimulation of the bodily senses that gives delight; or for repose, the state in which the person suffers no bodily distress; or for a combination of the two (which Epicurus lumps together under the one name of pleasure)" (XIX.1) or the Stoic "first things according to nature," being "the wholeness and health of the body's parts and the sound condition of the whole organism." He expands this to include not just a relaxed and healthy life but also involvement in one's community or with friends: "the first, without being slothful, is still a life of leisure passed in the consideration of truth or the quest for it; the second is busily engaged in the world's affairs" (XIX.2) and "this happy life is social, and for its own sake values the good of friends as its own, just as it wishes for them, for their own sake, what it wishes for itself" (XIX.3).

All of this sounds perfectly reasonable, but this was Augustine. *The City of God* was written primarily in response to the Visigoths' sack of Rome in 410, for which Catholic Christianity

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was blamed, and so he was in no way minded to affirm such aspirations. On the contrary, for Augustine the City of God is characterized by those who forget earthly pleasures in order to commit themselves to the eternal truths of the Christian faith, in contrast with the City of Man whose inhabitants immerse themselves in the cares and pleasures of this passing world.

The effect of Augustine's idea of the City of God was to develop the Christian idea of heaven as a spiritual place for which we long, and this world as a place through which we are simply passing. He describes the Christian view very simply—"eternal life is the Supreme Good"—and goes on to show the weakness and risks inherent in locating the *Summom Bonum* in the mind, the body, social or community life (XIX.4–9). He then repeats the Christian position (as he sees it), rather cleverly changing the meaning of the Bible passage he quotes to suit his purposes: "the name of the City [of God] itself has a mystical significance, for 'Jerusalem,' as I have already said, means 'vision of peace' [here alluding to Psalm 147:12–14]. But the word 'peace' is freely used in application to the events of this mortal state, where there is certainly no eternal life; and so I have preferred to use the term 'eternal life' instead of 'peace' in describing the end of this City, where its Ultimate Good will be found" (XIX.11). For Augustine, then, the Ultimate Good is eternal life, in conscious contradistinction to this life.

Augustine was clearly heavily influenced by the Platonism he admired, quoting as he does from a Greek comedy to illustrate his argument of the inadequacy of locating the *Summom Bonum* in social life: "I married a wife, and misery I found! Children were born, and they increased my cares" (XIX.5). This somewhat cynical and despairing quotation is far removed in tone and aspiration from the longings and ideals expressed in the Old Testament:

> I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. (Eccl 3:12–13)
>
> This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart. (Eccl 5:18–20)

This last quotation from Ecclesiastes links us quite nicely back to the 2011 riots and looting in England, the question of what this tells us about the *Summom Bonum* of our contemporary Western culture, and what we as Christians might have to say in response to this. The looting of flat-screen televisions, smartphones, and fashion clothing tells us something about what these people value as the Ultimate Good. But before we get too condemnatory, we should recognize that all they were doing was "finding a way of joining the party," as one journalist noted:

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> Obscene inequalities of wealth have disfigured our civil society, so is it any wonder that the dispossessed stop playing by the rules? We have created a world in which human worth is measured by crude material gain—is it surprising then that those without decide to acquire it by whatever means?

Ecclesiastes seems to say more that connects with the *Summom Bonum* of contemporary Western society than does Augustine. For even today's "feral youth," when asked, say that what they really want are the things that most of us aspire to, that is, a job, a home, a husband or wife, and children. It is the perceived difficulty in attaining or sustaining such aspirations that drives them to frustration and anger. To give them Augustine's message—the pleasures of this world are passing, and what you should be longing for is heaven—might sound Christian, but is it really going to connect?

And is it really even that Christian? For, as I have suggested, Augustine was perhaps overly influenced by the Platonism to which he sought to respond. Is "heaven" or "eternal life" really the *Summom Bonum* for Christians? Or would it be better to say that our *Summom Bonum* is "resurrection"?

The Good Life: Living in the Light of the Resurrection

New Testament scholar Dominic Crossan asks a provocative question about the resurrection of Jesus: "If Jesus did rise from the dead, then so what? Very nice for him, but what's it got to do with anything else? Why should he be so specially favored? If God can pull off a stunt like that, why can't he intervene and do a lot more useful things like stopping genocide and earthquakes?"

German theologian Wolfhart Pannenburg gives a clear answer to this question in his book *Jesus: God and Man*, summarizing the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for his followers and his contemporaries: "In the historical context of first-century Palestine, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead did not need to be interpreted—it would automatically be understood as the beginning of the general resurrection of the dead, as the beginning of the last days."

The New Testament presents Jesus' resurrection as the foretaste, the "first fruits," of the resurrection of the dead that the Jews expected at the end of the age (1 Cor 15:20–23). As such it has brought the full saving work of God into human history. Resurrection takes as its basis the assumption that there is something fundamentally good about bodily life, that it was created by God and that it is not evil (in supposed contrast to the good "spiritual" life). The resurrection of Jesus affirms that this life is not meaningless, nor has it been abandoned by God.

If the last days have begun in the resurrection of Christ, then all the expectations of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ. Nicholas Wolterstorff notes, "Israel's religion was a religion of salvation, not of contemplation—that is what accounts for the mantra of the widows, the orphans, the aliens and the poor. (It is) not a religion of salvation from this earthly exis-

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tence, but a religion of salvation from injustice in this earthly existence." In Jesus, the "first-born from the dead" (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5), God has broken into the world, establishing his reign of righteousness and justice, not just at the end of the age as the Jews expected, but in history itself. Creating a better future for this world is not an afterthought to the gospel, as if it were an extra, a mere add-on. It is part of it.

If this is what God did and is doing through the resurrection of Jesus, then how will he bring it about? Not by magic, but through the church, the people of God. This may sound like a bold claim to others, but it is unavoidable. Perhaps surprisingly, the church is also called the "first fruits" in the New Testament (2 Thess 2:13; Jas 1:18) and so we are part of this resurrection work of God. We are called by God to be his people, set apart for him, who will be a sign and an agent of his purposes that will ultimately be fulfilled and completed at the end (1 Cor 15:24). Before we get too carried away with this claim, we should note its sobering responsibility. God's resurrection work is not just to be served by the church, but to be exemplified by it and embodied in it. In many of his letters, Paul sees the church as the new humanity, Jew and Gentile united, no longer hostile and divided but one. For this reason he found Christian unity essential to our mission. Our disunity and conflict is a scandal, and something which rightly undermines the very claims we make about God.

At the very end of a very long exposition of the implications of Jesus' resurrection, Paul writes: "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Because of Jesus' resurrection, our work is not in vain. Because of Jesus' resurrection, what we do matters. The resurrection of Christ demands a personal response to Christ, and a personal commitment to his cause. Evangelism is not just announcing the great fact of the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:18, 31–32) and inviting a response, it is also an invitation to join with the great cause of God.

The scope and impact of Jesus' resurrection is not just national, but global. An Old Testament expectation of God's work in the last days would be that all peoples would worship Israel's God (Isa 60:1–3). We should see the Spirit-led explosion of mission in Acts 8–11 as the first example of this. First Samaritans, then an Ethiopian, then Cornelius the Roman soldier, and finally Greeks in Antioch—all of them respond to the message of Jesus. Paul's mission from Antioch in Acts 13 is not the first Christian mission; it was just the next step in something that began with the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and is something which has continued to this very day.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has decisively and finally broken into human history, to bring his redemption and transformation to the whole of life. This fact demands a personal response—not just our allegiance, but our whole life, committed to God's purposes. If we understand "heaven" not as our final destination but as the "place" where the will of God is done (Matt 6:10), then perhaps one of the best descriptions of life in the light of Jesus' resurrection is "grabbing chunks of heaven and dragging them down to earth."

And if this is our calling and our purpose as Christians, then perhaps we have something concrete to say about an alternative *Summom Bonum*, one which leads to transformed lives today, lived for others and for God.

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