
What is Wholistic Ministry?

By Scott D. Allen

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When Englishman William Carey (1761-1834) arrived in India in 1793, it marked a major milestone in the history of Christian missions, and in the history of India. Carey established the Serampore Mission—the first modern Protestant mission in the non-English speaking world—near Calcutta on January 10, 1800.¹ From this base, he labored for nearly a quarter century to spread the Gospel throughout the land. In the end, his triumph was spectacular. Through his unfailing love for the people of India and his relentless campaign against “the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:12), India was literally transformed. Asian historian Hugh Tinker summarizes Carey’s impact on India this way: “And so in Serampore, on the banks of the river Hooghly, the principle elements of modern South Asia—the press, the university, social consciousness—all came to light.”²

Who was William Carey? He was exactly the kind of man that the Lord seems to delight in using to accomplish great things—in other words, the kind of person that most of us would least expect. He was raised in a small, rural English town where he received almost no formal education. His chief source of income came through his work as a cobbler—a shoemaker. He had an awkward, homely appearance, having lost almost all his hair in childhood. Upon his arrival in India, and throughout his years there, he was constantly harassed by British Colonists, deserted by his mission-sending agency, and opposed by the younger missionary recruits that were sent to help him. Yet despite these setbacks, he became perhaps the most influential person in the largest outpost of the British Empire.³

Carey didn’t go to India merely to start new churches, or to set up medical clinics for the poor. He was driven by a more comprehensive vision—a vision for discipling the nation. “Carey saw India not as a foreign country to be exploited, but as his heavenly Father’s land to be loved and served, a society where truth, not ignorance, needed to rule.”⁴ He looked outward across the land and asked himself, “If Jesus were the Lord of

¹ Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey, A Model for the Transformation of a Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), p. vx.

² Ibid, p. 10.

³ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴ Ibid, p. 24.

India, what would it look like? What would be different?” This question set his agenda, and led him to involvement in a remarkable variety of activities all aimed at glorifying God and advancing his Kingdom. Carey was a great champion of *wholistic ministry*.

What were some of these activities? The list is long, but following are a few highlights taken from an outstanding book, *The Legacy of William Carey, a Model for the Transformation of a Culture* by Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi:⁵

Carey was horrified that India, one of the finest, most fertile countries in the world, had been allowed to become an uncultivated jungle abandoned to wild beasts and serpents. As a result, he carried out a systematic survey of agriculture and campaigned for agriculture reform. He introduced the Linnean system of gardening and published the first books on science in India. He did this because he believed that nature is declared “good” by its Creator; it is not *maya* (illusion) to be shunned, but a subject worthy of human study.

He introduced the idea of savings banks to India to fight the all-pervasive social evil of usury (the lending of money at excessive interest). Carey believed that God, being righteous, hated this practice which made investment, industry, commerce and economic development impossible.

He was the first to campaign for the humane treatment for India’s leprosy victims because he believed that Jesus’ love touches leprosy patients, so they should be cared for. Until he arrived, lepers were often buried or burned alive because of the belief that a violent death purified the body on its way to reincarnation into a new healthy existence.

He established the first newspaper ever printed in any oriental language, because he believed that, “Above all forms of truth and faith, Christianity seeks free discussion.” His English-language journal, *Friend of India*, was the force that gave birth to the social-reform movement in India in the first half of the nineteenth century.

He transformed the Bengali language, previously considered “fit for only demons and women” into the foremost literary language of India. He wrote Gospel ballads in Bengali to bring the Hindu love of music to the service of his Lord.

He began dozens of schools for Indian children of all castes and launched the first college in Asia. He wanted to develop the Indian mind and liberate it from darkness and superstition.

He was the first man to stand against the ruthless murders and widespread oppression of women. Women in India were being crushed through polygamy, female

⁵ Ibid, pp. 17-25.

infanticide, child marriage, widow burning, euthanasia and female forced illiteracy—all sanctioned by religion. Carey opened schools for girls. When widows converted to Christianity, he arranged marriages for them. It was his persistent, twenty-five-year battle against widow burning (known as *sati*) which finally led to the formal banning of this most horrible of all religious practices.

William Carey was a pioneer of the modern Christian missionary movement—a movement that has since reached out to every corner of the world. He was a Bible translator, translating Scripture into over forty different Indian languages. He was an evangelist who used every available means to illumine every dark corner of India with the light of the truth. William Carey was a man of simple origins who put his God-given genius at the disposal of his Creator. Whose burning passion was to see God’s Kingdom forcefully advanced in India. He was a great champion of wholistic ministry.

God’s Big Agenda

William Carey’s ministry in India can be described as *wholistic*. For something to be “wholistic,” there must be multiple parts, all of which are indispensable in contributing to a greater whole. What is the “whole” that all Christian ministry activities should contribute to? Through a careful examination of Christ’s earthly ministry, we see that the “whole” is glorifying God and advancing his Kingdom through the discipling of the nations (Mt. 24:14; 28:18-20). This is God’s big agenda—the principal task which he works through his Church to accomplish.

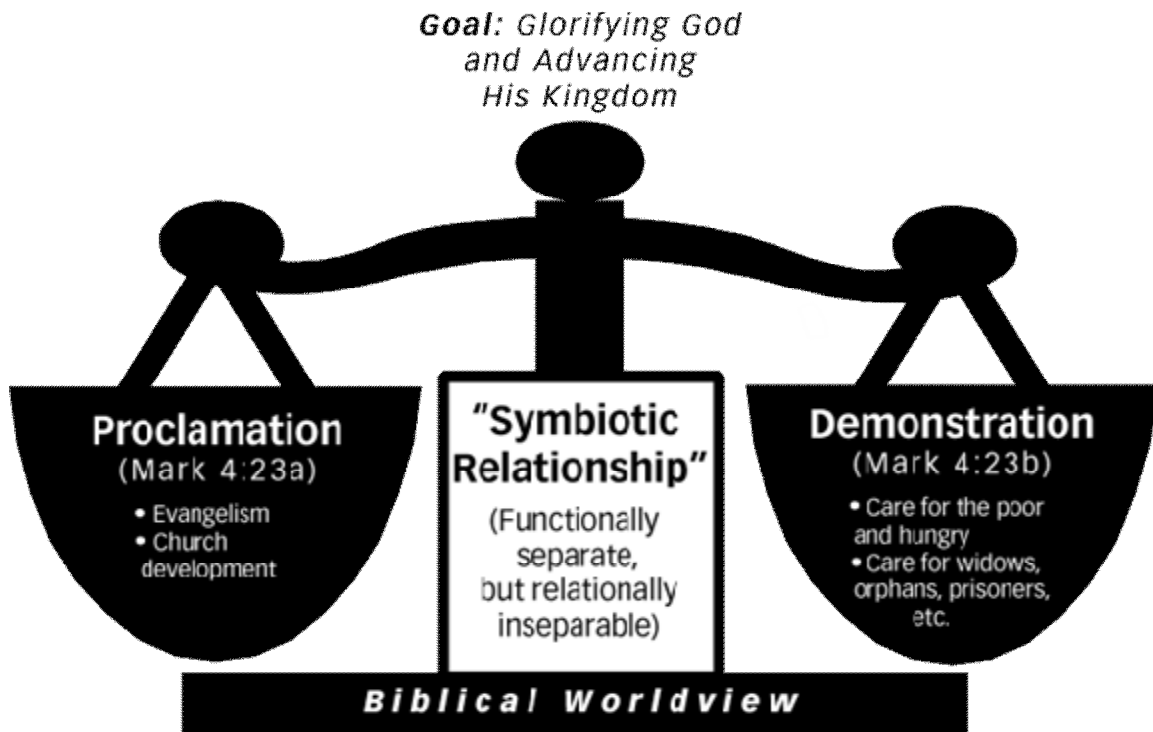
If this is the whole, then what are the parts? Matthew 4:23 highlights three essential parts. They are preaching, teaching, and healing. Because each part is so essential to the whole, let’s look at each one more carefully.

Preaching entails proclaiming the Gospel—God’s gracious invitation for people everywhere to live in his Kingdom, to have their sins forgiven, be spiritually reborn, and become children of God through faith in Christ. Proclaiming the gospel is essential to wholistic ministry, for unless lost, broken people are spiritually reborn into a living relationship with God—unless they become “new creations,” (2 Co. 5:17) –all efforts to bring hope, healing and transformation are doomed to fail. People everywhere need their relationship with God restored, yet “preaching” it is only one part of wholistic ministry.

Teaching entails instructing people in the foundational truths of Scripture. It is associated with *discipleship*—helping people to live in obedience to God and his Word in every area of life. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus tells his disciples to “teach [the nations] everything I have commanded you.” Unless believers are taught to *obey* Christ’s commands, their growth may be hindered. Colossians 3:16 says: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom...”

Healing involves the tangible demonstrations of the present reality of the Kingdom in the midst of our hurting, broken world. When Jesus came, he demonstrated the present reality of God’s Kingdom by healing people. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor,” reported Jesus to his cousin John the Baptist in Matthew 11:4-5. Jesus didn’t just preach the Good News; he demonstrated it by healing all forms of brokenness. Unless ministry to people’s physical needs accompanies evangelism and discipleship, our message will be empty, weak and irrelevant. This is particularly true where physical poverty is rampant. The Apostle John admonishes, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18).

Here’s a picture of the basic elements of a biblically balanced, wholistic ministry:



First, there are multiple parts—preaching, teaching and healing. These parts are distinct. They are functionally separate, yet they are inseparable. They are all essential in contributing to the whole, which is glorifying God and advancing his Kingdom. Lastly, each part rests on the solid foundation of the biblical worldview. In other words, how each part is understood and implemented must be informed by the basic presuppositions of Scripture. In summary, preaching, teaching and healing are three indispensable parts of wholistic ministry—ministry whose whole purpose is the advancement of God’s Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10). Without these parts working together seamlessly, our ministry is less than Christ intends, and it will lack the power to transform lives and nations.

Broken Relationships

To comprehend the nature and purpose of wholistic ministry, two concepts must first be understood. First, we must understand the comprehensive impact of humanity's spiritual rebellion. Second, we must understand that our loving, compassionate God is presently unfolding his plan to redeem and restore all things broken through the Fall.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-6) the consequences of their sin were far-reaching, comprehensive and devastating. It resulted in far more than the loss of their relationship with God—it affected the very order of the universe. At least four relationships were broken through the Fall. First, Adam and Eve's intimate relationship with God was broken (Gen. 3:8-9). This was the primary relationship they were created for, the most important in their lives. When their relationship with God was broken, their other relationships faltered, too—their relationship with themselves (Gen. 3:7), with each other (Gen. 3:12-13) and with the rest of creation (Gen. 3:16-19). The universe God created is wholistic. It has multiple parts, each of which depends on the proper functioning of the others. All parts are governed by laws imposed by God. When the primary relationship between God and humanity was severed, every part of the original harmony of God's creation was affected. The results of this comprehensive brokenness have plagued humanity ever since. Wars, hatred, violence, environmental degradation, injustice, corruption, idolatry, poverty and famine all sprang from original sin.

Thus, when God set out to restore his creation from the all-encompassing effects of this rebellion, his redemptive plan could not be small or narrow. It could not focus only on a single area of brokenness. It was not limited to saving human souls, or teaching, or even healing. Rather, it combined all three seamlessly. It included the restoration and healing of *everything*, including each of these four relationships. Colossians 1:19-20 provides a picture of God's wholistic redemptive plan:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Author's italics added).

God's intention is that *all things* be redeemed. Through Christ's shed blood on the cross, we have access to salvation from sin and renewed fellowship with God. Not only that, but we have the hope for substantial healing within ourselves, with others, and with the environment. The Gospel is not only good news after we die. It is good news here and now!

Ministers of Reconciliation

The task of the Church today is to join with God in his “big agenda” of restoring all things. We are called to be “ministers of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18-20).” In the words of missionary evangelist Francis Schaeffer, we should be working “on the basis of the finished work of Christ... [for] substantial healing now in *every area* where there are divisions because of the Fall.”⁶ We are to believe that such healing *can* be a reality, here and now, in every area, on the basis of the finished work of Christ. This healing will not be perfect or complete on this side of Christ’s return, yet it can be real, evident and substantial.

Preaching, teaching and healing—substantial healing—in every area where brokenness exists as a result of the Fall. This is what wholistic ministry is all about. It was this wholistic vision for ministry that set the agenda for the work of William Carey in India. Its the same wholistic vision that set Christ’s agenda for his ministry. Its the same vision that should set the agenda for our ministry as well.

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⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), p. 68.