

## Executive Summary

### *Holistic Christian Mission and an Old Testament Paradigm: L.E.G.S. and LeTourneau University's Call to a Servant's Work*

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To say that LeTourneau University claims a Christian mission envisioned to impact “every workplace and every nation” is a declaration of immense theological significance. This two-part essay is a humble attempt to begin a sustained dialogue regarding the biblical and theological basis of such a comprehensive university effort as well as the methodology for success. The immediate task was to wrestle with one particular question related to LeTourneau’s new vision, “Does LeTourneau University’s intent to “empower global solutions” (e.g. prosthetics, bio-waste food preservation, visual literacy, linguistics, etc.) for worldwide problems have strong biblical support as primary work of the gospel? The opinion of the author is that the initiatives of L.E.G.S. are indeed worthy of the descriptor, “gospel work.” That is, when salvation is understood in its fullest sense it requires a manifold call upon the Christian to cultivate social, physical, economic, political, international, cultural and environmental change indicative of God’s will “on earth even as it is in heaven.”

To defend such a comprehensive call intrinsic to the gospel and incumbent upon L.E.G.S. and the university as a whole, Mason presents a two-part essay that includes a discussion of holistic Christian mission (Part One) and a special investigation of Isaiah 61 within its canonical context (Part Two).

*Part One: Understanding Holistic Christian Mission* raises the idea that while most evangelicals do not quibble with the idea that Christian mission involves evangelistic proclamation as well as social action and justice of various kinds, the critical issue concerns what one views as most important. Mason shows that leading evangelical missiologists and biblical scholars call for a recovery of a holistic understanding of Christian mission whereby social action finds an essential place within mission to the degree that neither evangelism nor social action takes priority over the other. While not compromising the essential message of Jesus’ death and resurrection, holistic mission accomplished in the name of Christ, and in light of the restoration (i.e. new creation) that is only possible due to his sacrificial life and ministry, treats concerns of the “body” and not just those of the “soul.” Both reflect dimensions of spiritual reality. Jesus’ resurrection, and the same that awaits all Christian saints, is the ultimate expression of this truth. N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham and New Testament theologian, makes a similar observation regarding false dichotomies in mission in his recent book, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. Wright argues that Jesus’ own life and ministry usurps “the tired old split-level world where some people believe in evangelism in terms of saving souls for a timeless eternity and other people believe in mission in terms of working for justice, peace, and hope in the present world...[this] great divide has nothing to do with Jesus and the New Testament.”

Mason not only concurs with Wright’s conviction but also provides a number of brief examples from the New Testament that validate this assertion. What is arguably the most representative of a holistic approach to fulfilling the gospel is the classic *Nazareth Manifesto* of Jesus found in Luke 4. There, Jesus inaugurates his ministry and provides the closest thing to a personal mission statement by referencing words taken from Isaiah 61. The comprehensive nature of Jesus’ mission is self-evident from even a cursory reading of this reference.

What is striking regarding a biblical case for holistic Christian mission is the scarcity of biblical scholars and missiologists that engage the Hebrew Bible as a source of primacy on the subject. There is a noticeable deficiency in defending holistic Christian mission on the basis of Old

Testament understanding, as its own per se witness to the gospel. Mason believes that at least part of the problem is that many approach the Old Testament as if it reading “someone else’s mail.” Yet, these are the very Scriptures that give shape and scope to our understanding of the gospel and God’s expectation for salvation as fulfilled in Christ as Luke 4 illustrates.

*Part Two: Isaiah 61 in Context as an Old Testament Paradigm for Holistic Christian Mission* is devoted to illustrating the benefit of listening to the Old Testament in its own canonical context for insight into holistic Christian mission. Mason seeks to show that the same text alluded to by Jesus also has integrity on its own, and in even unique ways, beyond Luke’s direct appropriation of it for informing a comprehensive understanding of the gospel.

In examining Isaiah 61 within the context of Isaiah as a whole, Mason contends that *as “servants of the Servant” Christians are called to righteous action as a covenant obligation.* In order to understand the character of righteousness that pervades the book of Isaiah, one must understand the changing complexion of the idea throughout the narrative. Mason briefly shows that righteousness in Isaiah 1-39 is defined as adhering to a set of moral standards often closely associated with social justice. In Isaiah 40-55, however, righteousness is primarily understood as a *gift of God* that he accomplishes on behalf of his people. In Isaiah 56-66, the righteousness offered as a gift in 40-55 becomes an ideal to be performed in terms outlined in 1-39. Righteousness is both a covenant obligation and ultimately a covenant reward as the eschatological future draws near. Furthermore, in order best to understand Isaiah 61, one must recognize the transition in Isaiah 54 from the singular Servant, who successfully embodies the mission of Israel to the point of death, to the emphasis upon his servants in Isaiah 54-66 who are called to carry out his legacy. In Isaiah 61, a “servant of the Servant” arrives on the scene outlining the holistic ministry of a repentant and contrite individual who has responded to the Servant’s call by the power of God’s spirit. The work of the spirit of God upon this individual demonstrates the inseparable connection between God’s righteous standard and his powerful enabling for achieving it. It also reflects the holistic nature of mission inherent to the story of Isaiah.

Surveying Isaiah 61:1-11 reveals the holistic nature of salvation in the eschatological age. Mason demonstrates that the text calls for: a gospel of words and deeds, rescuing people from “exilic” conditions, pursuing comprehensive restoration, providing a reversal of circumstance, creating a people of testimony, empowering self-reparation, inculcating social equity, passing on a priestly vocation, providing firstborn status, ensuring God’s future justice and blessing, and receiving righteousness as salvation. Jesus not only fulfills the Suffering Servant text, but he also exemplifies the ideal servant of the Servant. The context of Isaiah 61 reveals a call placed upon all Christians interested in being a disciple of the Suffering Servant, not just Jesus in Luke 4. The text of Isaiah 61 teaches that righteousness is thoroughly action-oriented. Moreover, action is not just verbal but also physical, environmental, social, economical, political, etc., because salvation is inherently comprehensive as Isaiah demonstrates. And when holistic mission is pursued, a righteous legacy is established for succeeding generations.

Holistic Christian mission, with all of its contours, is also a responsibility of LeTourneau University as an institution with a Christian identity. The new vision and mission of L.E.G.S. is a significant aim to fulfill such a high and expansive calling indicative of a “servant’s” work.