Humility, Integrity, and Simplicity

Christopher J. H. Wright

It is an honor and joy to be invited to participate in this tribute to Jonathan and Jean Bonk. It has been a personal privilege to be counted among their many, many friends around the world, especially in the global mission community. I got to know them best through many years of annual visits to the Overseas Ministries Study Center, where they were unfailling in the hospitality extended to me, not only while teaching there, but also when I used it as a home away from home for periods of writing. So it was a particular pleasure for me when Jonathan agreed to be a member of the Lausanne Theology Working Group in the years preceding the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town, 2010. He contributed to several consultations at which we examined the depths of meaning—biblical, theological, and missional—in the Lausanne slogan “The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.” In that way, he contributed indirectly also to the congress itself and to the missiological thinking that eventually found succinct expression in the statement emerging from that congress, the Cape Town Commitment.2

Many of us, including Jonathan, were concerned beforehand that the Cape Town Congress should not be merely a time either of celebrating the forward march of evangelical mission endeavors in the past decades or of compiling statistics, strategies, and plans for great efforts in the future. Doubtless celebrating and planning have their place. But we feared that God might not be as pleased with the state of world evangelism as we might be tempted to be pleased with ourselves. We lamented the prevalence of abuses perpetrated in the name of Christ—such as extreme forms of prosperity teachings and the unchristlike lives and behavior of some celebrity leaders. We were suspicious that some of the vaunted statistics of church growth, also the funds that they could generate for all kinds of “ministries,” were essentially “cooked”—unverified and lacking in integrity. We deplored the distorting influence of money and power in relationships between churches and mission agencies across the North-South divide. In short, we were convinced that Cape Town must include an element of self-examination and repentance if it was to be true to the claimed biblical foundations of the evangelical missions community it was bringing together.

This concern was accepted by the leadership of the Lausanne Movement in their planning of the congress program, and one of the six congress themes was defined as “Integrity: Calling the Church of Christ back to Humility, Integrity, and Simplicity.” I was invited to give the plenary address with that title. Knowing that those three words will echo warmly in the hearts of Jonathan and Jean, and that indeed they resonate with their Mennonite roots and personal characters, I offer below an edited version of what I said on that occasion.

Christopher J. H. Wright, international ministries director for Langham Partnership, was chair of the Lausanne Theology Working Group (2005–11). He was chief architect of the Cape Town Commitment, the statement issued by the Cape Town Congress. His books include The Mission of God (IVP Academic, 2006) and The Mission of God’s People (Zondervan, 2010).

God’s Mission and Ours

Some 4,000 years ago, God launched his global mission with the first Great Commission, given to Abraham, telling him to “Go... be a blessing... and through you all nations on the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:1–3, my translation).3 That is God’s great mission. That, says Paul in Galatians 3:8–9, is the Gospel that the Scriptures announced in advance to Abraham—that God chooses to bless all the nations on earth! Coming as it did in the world of “bad news” in Genesis 3–11, that is very good news indeed.

How would this worldwide blessing happen? God’s plan was that it should happen by God’s first creating a people, his own people, a people chosen in Abraham, redeemed through Christ, and called to “walk in the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice,” so that God could keep his promise to Abraham and bless all nations through him (Gen. 18:19, my translation). The whole purpose of election is ethical and missional. That is, our very existence as God’s people is founded on God’s intention to bless all peoples. The mission of the church flows from the mission of God. And God’s mission fills the whole of the rest of the Bible. The Cape Town Commitment summarizes both sides of the matter, with abundant biblical echoes:

We are committed to world mission, because it is central to our understanding of God, the Bible, the Church, human history and the ultimate future. The whole Bible reveals the mission of God to bring all things in heaven and earth into unity under Christ, reconciling them through the blood of his cross. In fulfilling his mission, God will transform the creation broken by sin and evil into the new creation in which there is no more sin or curse. God will fulfill his promise to Abraham to bless all nations on the earth, through the gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, the seed of Abraham. God will transform the fractured world of nations that are scattered under the judgment of God into the new humanity that will be redeemed by the blood of Christ from every tribe, nation, tongue and language, and will be gathered to worship our God and Savior. God will destroy the reign of death, corruption and violence when Christ returns to establish his eternal reign of life, justice and peace. Then God, Immanuel, will dwell with us, and the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever.4

God calls his people to share his mission. The Church from all nations stands in continuity through the Messiah Jesus with God’s people in the Old Testament. With them we have been called through Abraham and commissioned to be a blessing and a light to the nations. With them, we are to be shaped and taught through the law and the prophets to be a community of holiness, compassion and justice in a world of sin and suffering. We have been redeemed through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to what God has done in Christ. The Church exists to worship and glorify God for all eternity and to participate in the transforming mission of God within history. Our mission is wholly derived from God’s mission, addresses the whole of God’s creation, and is grounded at its centre in the redeeming victory of the cross. This is the people to whom we belong, whose faith we confess and whose mission we share.5
Obstacles to God’s Mission

But there were, and still are, many things that keep frustrating and hindering that great loving, saving mission of God. Which might we consider to be the greatest of those obstacles to God’s desire for the evangelization of the world?

I would suggest that it is not primarily:

- other religions. In truth, they are a major challenge, but the Lord knows those who seek him and reveals himself through Christ in surprising ways.
- persecution. Persecution is a terrible enemy, but sometimes it purifies and strengthens God’s people.
- resistant cultures. God has not left himself without a witness anywhere.

All these things and many more are indeed major challenges. But the overwhelming witness of the Bible itself is that the greatest problem for God in his redemptive mission for the world is God’s own people. What hurts God most, it seems, is not the sin of the world but the failure, disobedience, and rebellion of those whom God has redeemed and called to be his people, his holy, distinctive people.

In the Old Testament, the vast bulk of the words of the prophets were addressed to God’s own people—Israel—and only comparatively few chapters to “oracles against the nations.” By contrast, we tend to spend all our time attacking and complaining about the world and ignoring our own failures.

God’s calling on Old Testament Israel was very clear, as it is for us:

- God called Israel to be “a light to the nations.” But according to Ezekiel (5:6; 16:44–52), Israel sank even lower than the surrounding nations, including Sodom and Gomorrah. They were hardly a shining light in that condition!
- God called Israel to know him, to love and worship him alone, as the one true living God. But they constantly went after other gods, falling into repeated idolatry. This was a tragic squandering of the greatest privilege and blessing they had—the fact that they were God’s redeemed, covenant people, chosen for the sake of bringing God’s blessing to the rest of the nations. Israel itself was denying and hindering the very mission for which it existed.

Idolatry

The Bible gives us warrant for regarding idolatry as the biggest single obstacle to world mission. God’s mission is to bring all peoples into the blessing of knowing, loving, and worshipping him alone as the one true living God, the Creator and Redeemer of all. That being so, then the greatest threat to that goal is the worship of other gods, false gods, no gods. But the problem, as we see in the Old Testament very clearly, is not just the ignorant idolatry of the foreign nations and their false gods, but rather the idolatry that is rampant among God’s own people. When those to whom God has revealed himself, those whom God has redeemed and bound to himself in covenant relationship—when those people refuse to acknowledge God and “run after other gods,” as the Old Testament puts it, what hope is there for any faithful, life-giving witness among the peoples who do not yet know God in that way?

There are many false gods and idols in the contemporary world that can entice Christian people away from worshipping and serving the living God alone. Three in particular seem especially seductive, just as much for evangelical Christians today as for Israel of old: the idol of power and pride, the idol of popularity and success, and the idol of wealth and greed. The prophets, Jesus, and the apostles all challenge us with powerful, prophetic condemnation of these three destructive idols that can pollute and pervert the mission of God’s people.

But the overwhelming witness of the Bible itself is that the greatest problem for God in his redemptive mission for the world is God’s own people.

The idol of power and pride. It is very easy for people in leadership positions—including those in Christian leadership, in churches, organizations, or mission agencies—to exalt their own status and authority. They grow proud of their position, refuse to submit to the wisdom of accountability, and become impervious to criticism or rebuke.

Isaiah warns that such people face the humbling power of God. “The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled). . . . The arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. . . . and the idols will totally disappear” (2:12–18).

Jesus observes that such pride in one’s status and power is characteristic of the way authority is exercised in the fallen, pagan world. But he explicitly told his disciples that it should not be so among them. “Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. . . . I am among you as one who serves’” (Luke 22:24–27). Tragically, many Christian leaders behave as if Jesus had commended, rather than condemned, the leadership style of the world. Some even make a virtue out of mimicking it.

When the apostle Paul talks about the life that is worthy of our calling in the Gospel, the very first thing he says is this: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). And when the apostle Peter speaks to the elders of the churches he is writing to, he urges them to be “shepherds of God’s flock . . . not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2–3).

These are just some of the strong biblical warnings against the sin of pride. It is destructive, divisive, and detrimental to effective mission. To be obsessed with our own status in Christian work is sheer disobedience to Christ and the Bible. It destroys the very thing we are trying to accomplish.

We are called back in repentance to humility—the humility of Jesus Christ himself, who said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29).
The idol of popularity and success. This idol is close to that of pride, but it particularly manifests itself in obsession with our own performance and the image we can build on the basis of that. We are anxious to prove how well we are doing. We crave good results and impressive statistics. We like the shining lights of being noticed, commended, applauded, and deemed a success. Again, sadly, the same temptations are rife in Christian ministry. Of course, this craving for celebrity will be overlaid with a cosmetic layer of appropriately spiritual terminology—as when people are said to be “mightily used of the Lord,” or when success is called “fruit for the kingdom.” The cult of celebrity, which is such a feature of our idolatrous pagan culture, has infected the church in ways that are damaging to the celebrities themselves and to those who idolize them. Obsession with these idols leads us into manipulation, dishonesty, distortion, and duplicity. Media hype is common in the secular world, but it amounts to sinful dishonesty when Christians indulge in it. Claims and statistics and stories and testimonies can all be polished and gilded to give the desired impression. Or worse, unverified and misleading statistics can be cited as a means of gaining funds. We tailor the message for whoever will pay for the cloth.

Such behavior is comparable to that of the false prophets in the Old Testament, who claimed to speak the word of God but were really acting in their own self-interest. They claimed to be men of God, but they were giving the people only whatever the people most wanted to hear or see at the time. They were popular and successful (like many today). The people listened to them eagerly, but they were false prophets in the grip of a false god. Micah describes them thus: “As for the prophetics who lead my people astray, they proclaim ‘peace’ if they have something to eat, but prepare to wage war against anyone who refuses to feed them. . . . Yet they look for the Lord’s support and say, ‘Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us’” (Mic. 3:5, 11).

And Jeremiah agrees: “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush” (Jer. 6:13–15; see the even more direct criticism in Jer. 23:8–32 and Ezek. 13:1–16). There is no need to blush, they must have thought, like some celebrity leaders today, when you are popular and successful, when you have thousands of followers, when everything you touch turns “mega,” and you have a lifestyle to match. But with all of that, you can still be a false prophet.

Even in the early church, Paul warned against those who “peddle the word of God for profit,” those who “use deception” and “distort the word of God” (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2). The church in Corinth was dazzled by these “super-apostles,” as he called them. They loved to boast about their credentials, their impressive speaking, their great popularity. They were the kind of leaders the church at Corinth wanted, because when a church has leaders like that, it can feel proud of its own image. Churches like to have popular, famous leaders so that they (the churches) can bask in the reflected glory of their big-name pastors. In that way, the idolatry of success and celebrity can become a vicious circle, a feedback loop of collusion between the self-glorifying ambition of the leader and the self-congratulating boasting of the people who follow him (and it usually is “him”).

Paul’s warning is severe: “Such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

The seductive power of this idol is very great. But when it generates deception, we must be on our guard. We cannot build the kingdom of the God of truth on foundations of dishonesty. Telling lies about our success or accepting what we know to be very questionable statistics in order to get, or to grant, funding for our projects is nothing short of bowing down to the idol of manipulated success. The pressures are sometimes very great. We can justify all kinds of questionable practices on the grounds of “doing God’s work.” But God’s work cannot be done by using the tools of Satan (that is, lies) to boost the statistics of our own success.

We are called back in repentance to simplicity—the integrity of Jesus Christ, who is the Truth and calls us to speak nothing but the truth.

The Cape Town Commitment issued this call:

We call on all church and mission leaders to resist the temptation to be less than totally truthful in presenting our work. We are dishonest when we exaggerate our reports with unsubstantiated statistics, or twist the truth for the sake of gain. We pray for a cleansing wave of honesty and the end of such distortion, manipulation and exaggeration. We call on all who fund spiritual work not to make unrealistic demands for measurable and visible results, beyond the need for proper accountability. Let us strive for a culture of full integrity and transparency. We will choose to walk in the light and truth of God, for the Lord tests the heart and is pleased with integrity.

The idol of wealth and greed. The idolatry of greed infected the religious leaders of Israel too. Micah observed: “Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money” (Mic. 3:11). Isaiah saw a whole culture of greed, accumulation, and covetousness, which is reflected on an even vaster scale in today’s world: “Woe to you who add on an even vaster scale till no space is left and you live alone in the land” (Isa. 5:8).

Moses, who rejoiced in the expectation that God would provide abundantly for his people when they got into the Promised Land, also warned against the danger of surplus and surfeit: “When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Deut. 8:12–14).

Jesus gave the same stern warning: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a person’s life does not consist

We are called back in repentance to simplicity, the simplicity of Jesus himself, and the spirit of generosity, which is the greatest antidote to accumulative greed.
in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15, my translation). And neither, he could have added, does a person’s ministry. Yet it seems that some Christians actually rate great leaders and megapastors by how wealthy they are. How far we have strayed from the standards set by Jesus!

We are called back in repentance to simplicity—the simplicity of Jesus himself, and the spirit of generosity, which is the greatest antidote to accumulative greed.

### The Temptations of Jesus

It is interesting to notice that Jesus himself faced the same three fundamental temptations.

- The devil offered him power and status over all nations, from a high mountain. Jesus refused it, choosing to worship God alone. Jesus chose the path of humility and obedience.
- The devil suggested he become a popular celebrity by manipulating the admiration of the crowds with a spectacular, death-defying miracle. Jesus recognized the way Satan was twisting Scripture to get him to achieve success. He chose the path of integrity in his trust in God.
- The devil dangled before him the lucrative prospect of abundant food for himself and the hungry masses. Turn stones into bread! Why, you could make a fortune for yourself with such a miracle! But Jesus resisted with the scriptural truth that God could supply bread, but human beings need greater food for life than that. He chose the path of simplicity in dependence on the promises of God.

So Jesus resisted these temptations to give in to the false gods—the idols that Satan easily inhabits. But tragically, it seems that so many Christian leaders (including mission leaders) blatantly fail these tests at precisely the points where Jesus overcame them. They cannot resist the temptations of elevated status, manipulated success, and selfish greed.

The whole church pays the cost of their failure, in the loss of integrity and credibility. What right have we to speak to the world when we are no different from it? Whenever we point a finger of prophetic criticism at the sin of the world, the world tells us, bluntly and rightly, “Clean up your own back yard!” When the church falls into the ways of the world (as the Old Testament again so effectively puts it, “going after the gods of the peoples around you”), then the church itself becomes a scandal, a stumbling block to the mission of God.

### The Need for Reformation

In the pre-Reformation church of medieval Europe, we see these same three idols—pride, popularity, and greed—masquerading in the corrupt ecclesiastical system. There were proud and powerful bishops, wielding enormous wealth and political influence. There were highly popular and successful cults of saints and shrines, making all kinds of fraudulent claims about their relics and miracles to manipulate the masses. There were people making enormous wealth from selling indulgences—exploiting the poor with promises of good things in the life to come.

Meanwhile, the ordinary people lived in ignorance of the Bible, which was neither available in their language nor preached from their pulpits. Reformation was the desperate need of the hour. Surely the same desperate need is with us again, five hundred years later. And, I dare to propose, such reformation needs to begin in the worldwide evangelical community. For there are some parts of the so-called evangelical church today where the same three idols are rampant.

- There are self-appointed super-apostles and other mighty and elevated leaders, unaccountable to anybody, popular with thousands of followers, exploiting the flock of Christ, unconcerned for the weak and poor, showing none of the marks of an apostle as described by Paul, and with no resemblance to the crucified Christ. That is nothing less than the idolatry of pride and power.
- There is a craze for “success,” for “results,” to win the largest number in the shortest time. There is obsession with statistics and outcomes, leading to wild claims, unsubstantiated numbers, untrue reports—blatant manipulation and collusion in falsehood, all for the sake of funding, ministry success, and growth. That is the idolatry of success.
- There is the so-called prosperity gospel. Now we should certainly affirm what the Bible says about God’s blessing (including material blessings), about the miraculous power of God’s Spirit and the victory of God over all that crushes and curses human life. But many promoters of this teaching distort the Bible (if they use it at all). They appeal to human greed or exploit human need. They have no place for the Bible’s teaching on repentance, on suffering, and on taking up the cross. They succeed only in enriching themselves and indulging in a consumerist, wealth-flaunting lifestyle that is utterly contrary to the teaching and example of Christ. This is surely the idolatry of greed.

As in the pre-Reformation church, so also today: the ordinary people of God in many churches around the world live in ignorance of the Bible. They have pastors who neither know the Bible themselves nor have the willingness or ability to preach and teach it clearly and faithfully. Reformation, a twenty-first-century reformation, is once again the desperate need. And it needs to start with us.

How, then, should we respond? It seems to me that we need a renewal of Christlike leadership, and we need a return to the Lord himself.

### A Renewal of Christlike Leadership

Once again the Cape Town Commitment identifies one dimension of the problem.

The rapid growth of the Church in so many places remains shallow and vulnerable, partly because of the lack of disciplined leaders, and partly because so many use their positions for worldly power, arrogant status or personal enrichment. As a result, God’s people suffer, Christ is dishonored, and gospel mission is undermined. “Leadership training” is the commonly-proposed priority solution. Indeed, leadership training programmes of all kinds have multiplied, but the problem remains, for two probable reasons.

First, training leaders to be godly and Christlike is the wrong way round. Biblically, only those whose lives already display basic qualities of mature discipleship should be
appointed to leadership in the first place. If, today, we are faced with many people in leadership who have scarcely been discipled, then there is no option but to include such basic discipling in their leadership training. Arguably the scale of unChristlike and worldly leadership in the global Church today is glaring evidence of generations of reductionist evangelism, neglected discipling and shallow growth. The answer to leadership failure is not just more leadership training but better discipleship training. Leaders must first be disciples of Christ himself, the good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

Second, some leadership training programmes focus on packaged knowledge, techniques and skills to the neglect of godly character. By contrast, authentic Christian leaders must be like Christ in having a servant heart, humility, integrity, purity, lack of greed, prayerfulness, dependence on God’s Spirit, and a deep love for people. Furthermore, some leadership training programmes lack specific training in the one key skill that Paul includes in his list of qualifications—ability to teach God’s Word to God’s people. Yet Bible teaching is the paramount means of disciple-making and the most serious deficiency in contemporary Church leaders.

A Radical Return to the Lord

We need to take heed to the prophetic word from the prophets and apostles of God, and from the Lord Jesus Christ himself: “Repent, and believe the gospel.” Jesus preached that message and delivered that command, not to pagan unbelievers, Gentile outsiders, people of other faiths, but to those who already claimed to be God’s covenant people. The command to repent comes first to the people of God—in both the Old and the New Testaments.

If we believe in going out to the world in mission, we must first come back to the Lord ourselves. If we want to see change in the world through the Gospel, we must first change our own hearts and our ways (Jer. 7:3–8). If we wish to see the revelation of the living God challenging the false gods of all human cultures and religions, then we must first renounce and repent of the false gods among ourselves in the Christian church.

The call to mission is not only a call that sends us out to make disciples. It also calls us back to the core characteristics of being disciples ourselves, in humility, integrity, and simplicity.

Notes

1. This article is based on the address given on Day five of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, Cape Town, South Africa, October 2010.


3. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the New International Version.

4. Eph. 1:9–10; Col. 1:20; Gen. 1–12; Rev. 21–22.

5. CTC I.10.


8. 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Tit. 1:6–9; 1 Pet. 5:1–3.

9. CTC IID.3.