



Dialogues I & II: Some reflections

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The over-riding impression left by Dialogue I, between Wesley and Ian was one of mutual respect expressed in the language of Scripture. ‘Church’ and ‘cross’ are key terms for both. Ian presented a powerful image of the outside of Gorbals Church, which has a cross depicted at the front, and the words ‘Café’, ‘Venue’, and only then ‘Church’ on the signage. Wesley spoke of mission coming out of the nature of God, and related not to the building up of the Church, but to the following of Christ. ‘Church’ for both had relationships at its heart and the building of partnerships through humility. Mission is not owned by the Church, but is about joining in where God already is.

In the question time following Dialogue I, it was the discussion about overcoming the fear of failure which seemed to provoke the most heartfelt response. This was in response to what Wesley had said about risk-taking leadership, emboldened by an eschatological imagination, taking up the challenge to try new things and not being afraid to fail. The new creation described in Romans 8 offered a hope to work towards.

Ian had spoken of the fragility of life, its vulnerability and its preciousness, in which the Church participates and to which it brings the possibility of trust in a hopeful future within the purposes of God. In response to questions, both agreed that no-one is drawn to a group which is marked by anxiety, and that fear was the opposite of love. When mission offers a place where people feel safe, there is an experience of God’s love. That shared vision has led both Ian and Wesley to attempt things which have failed, or at least, things have not worked out in the way they had hoped, particularly around opening

up leadership roles to others. As they acknowledged, this might have consequences for those who were given these roles, but continuing support in times of vulnerability and anxiety is a mark of the Church.

A further area of discussion from the floor centred on how to take a kingdom perspective in mission, how to remain aware of the grace at work in the other. Wesley spoke of the profound blessing he had received from opening his flat to others on a Friday afternoon in the Upper Room Church, when he has encountered another culture and received the blessings which have flowed from that. Opening themselves to the other, for both, involved admitting their own vulnerability at the centre of their ministry and prayer life. Being alongside those who are vulnerable is a powerful reminder of one's own needs before God. In addition, God's gifts come through offering generous hospitality to others from a position of shared need rather than an attitude of power.

Wesley introduced the theology of Miroslav Volf in his talk, which speaks of a process of welcome, waiting, embrace and then release and sending out into the world. Embrace by its nature involves a mutual relationship, rather than a donor/recipient relationship. An embrace is shared, rather than given. There is no embrace when the contact is not returned, and the period of waiting acknowledges this: the first move comes from those who have been welcomed in. The image offers a powerful and compact interpretation of mission, which both Ian and Wes affirmed.

The coherence around Scripture was a notable aspect of both Dialogues I and II, which opened and closed the day. Wes focused on the story of the woman caught in adultery from John 8, noting that Jesus told the woman her sins were forgiven before he told her to sin no more. He also found theological importance in the ordering of the creation stories in Genesis, noting that Genesis 1 affirms the goodness of creation before the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 is introduced. Acknowledging the 'alreadiness' of God's presence in the world, messy and complicated as it is, has implications for mission which goes beyond the Church.

In Dialogue II, Ian reminds us that Scripture does not say, 'God so loved the world, he sent his Church' in John's Gospel; nor does Jesus

in the Sermon on the Mount tell the curious yet uncommitted in the crowd that ‘You could be the salt of the earth, *if*...’: rather, he asserts, ‘You *are* the salt of the earth ...’.

All of these interpretations would be open to further discussion, of course. For Jesus to speak of ‘Church’ in the context of John’s Gospel here would be incongruous, and the audience of the Sermon on the Mount is at best disputed, with the disciples (rather than a wider group) as the most obvious candidates, at least at the beginning of the sermon. As Wes acknowledged, the canonicity of the story of the woman taken in adultery is debateable; and the ordering of the creation stories is not necessarily an issue of timing, but of hermeneutics and editing. If we had had more time, we might have probed these uses of Scripture in the context of mission, and the differences of interpretation might have been illuminating.

A novel exegesis of a biblical story which Ian offered in Dialogue II illustrates the point. In Luke 17:11–19, ten lepers are healed but only one returns to Jesus to glorify God and give thanks – pointedly, a Samaritan. Ian suggested that the judgment usually heaped on the nine is misplaced, as they are engaged in living the life of fullness which Jesus’ healing has offered them, although they have not recognised it as such. Wes hesitated to agree, wanting more time to consider the story. And in that hesitation was probably the nub of the difference between both men, expressed only obliquely.

The Lukan story certainly indicates that the one who came back to glorify God and thank Jesus is the one who is implicitly praised. Jesus asks ‘Where are the others?’, and it is to this stranger alone that ‘wholeness’ is offered, as well as healing. The narrative thrust and importance of the story is about the impact of Jesus spreading and being responded to beyond the confines of its origins, rather than about the ministry of Jesus which is freely offered to all who need it. But Ian finds support for his understanding of mission in the work of Jesus which is indeed offered at the point of need. Wesley, for his part, takes the later offer of wholeness to the one who is moved to respond to that healing as a driver for his own ministry and mission. It is not a case of either/or, of course, but the difference is in the emphasis.

The dialogues between the two suggested deep respect and warmth, and my pointing out the difference in emphasis seems rather petty in comparison. In the polyvalence of Scripture which they both prize so dearly, perhaps both perspectives can be held together in the service of mission and to the glory of God.