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**COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL**

**Biblical Foundations for Pastoral Approaches to Mission**

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**[Draft Paper]**

**Introduction:**

It is safe to say that, given current trends in the world, there is hardly a time in global mission that a pastoral approach to Mission is as needed as it is now. Realities in our world make this as urgent as can be not just in words but also in deed. The disruption of life for significant populations in various parts of the world, the mass movements of displace people as migrants or refugees in various contexts; the threat to human well-being by militant religious and other groups as well as economic recession in various nations, all raise pertinent questions on how mission should be done.

Today, it is said that there are about 59.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world. Of these, “15.4 million are refugees, 27.5 million are internally displaced persons (IDP's), and 800,000 are asylum-seekers hoping to achieve refugee status. In addition to displaced people, there are up to 12 million stateless persons worldwide who do not have citizenship in any nation-state.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In addition to these are Christians facing persecution in various parts of the world. The Centre for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that

100,000 Christians now die every year, targeted because of their faith – that is 11 every hour. The Pew Research Center says that hostility to religion reached a new high in 2012, when Christians faced some form of discrimination in 139 countries, almost three-quarters of the world's nations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

All these call for more intentional pastoral approaches to communicating the good news, both in word and deed. I will use some Biblical narratives to emphasize the need for this. It helps to begin by summing up that a pastoral approach to communicating the gospel has to be as incarnational, communal, caring, compassionate, comforting and empathetic as it has to be faithful to God’s righteousness and justice. A pastoral approach also exercises tough love. All these are reflected in the way the triune God reaches out to reconcile the world to Himself.

**Biblical Basis:**

The call for pastoral approaches to communicating the gospel is deeply rooted in the triune God’s self-revelation as a relational God. The triune God revealed Himself, not in an abstract way but as a personal, personable and pastoral God. God's self-revelation was uniquely linked to actual history, the history of a chosen nation that belonged to a particular culture, time and geographical region. It was in history and through history that God showed himself.

Missio Dei affirms God’s initiative in reaching out, redeeming and reconciling not only humans, but all of creation to Himself.

**The Pastoral Heart of God the Father:**

Pastoral theology is rooted in the Old Testament descriptions of God Himself as a Shepherd and the Nation of Israel as the sheep of His flock in the Old Testament underline the pastoral heart of God.[[3]](#footnote-3) God’s choice of shepherd-leaders like Moses[[4]](#footnote-4) and David to lead His people is important for our consideration. Concerning David the Psalm of Asaph says:

*He chose David his servant*

*and took him from the sheep pens;*

*from tending the sheep he brought him*

*to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,*

*of Israel his inheritance.*

*And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;*

*with skillful hands he led them.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Beyond God’s love demonstrated to Israel as a chosen nation the Biblical account of the story of Jonah the prophet provides lenses for seeing the pastoral heart of a missionary God on the one hand and a missionary prophet without a pastoral heart on the other. This is important for how to or how not to communicate the good news. This account, among many, demonstrates that the pastoral heart of God extended beyond his love for Israel as his chose nation to Nineveh a gentle city and its inhabitants. The distracting debates about the nature of the fish or the whale often easily distracts from the substance of the book itself. Some basic observation about the character of God and of his chosen servant, Jonah shows the difference between a pastoral heart and one that is not.

In pronouncing the warning about God’s judgment, there was no indication that Jonah proclaimed the good news of the possibility of the mercy of God if the city of Nineveh repents and turns from evil ways. The contrast between the pastoral heart of Yahweh and that of his missionary prophet is revealed in the latter’s reason for his initial flight from his call as reflected in his confession:

*Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live![[6]](#footnote-6)*

Although he had affirmed that ‘salvation belongs to the Lord’ (Jonah 2:9), Jonah the prophet had reservations on how that should be accomplished.

Perhaps the most poignant lesson in the encounters in this episode lies embedded in three primary questions that Yahweh asked his chosen prophet. In response to Jonah’s anger at God’s mercy on the Nineveh and its inhabitants, and his own treatment regarding the bush sheltering him, God asked Jonah ‘*Is it right for you to be angry?’*  For emphasis God repeated the question (Jonah 4:4 and (4:9). The other question God asked Jonah reveals the depth of His pastoral heart. “*And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”* (Jonah 4: 11)

Is it possible that in various approaches to mission today there is still an element of the Jonah type disposition in some of us, as reflected in some words penned long ago by Jonathan Swift in a piece of satire:

We are God's chosen few;

All others will be damned.

There is no place in heaven for you:

We can't have heaven crammed.*[[7]](#footnote-7)*

**The Pastoral Heart of God the Son:**

God’s self-revelation in history culminates in Jesus Christ the incarnate word, the word made flesh. To humanities questions of ‘what is God like’, ‘how do we know God’? Christ embodies the fullest revelation of God to humanity and in Him is found the highest explanation of Life. Reference has already been made to the incarnational dimension of mission. It is within the incarnation that the ultimate pastoral approach to mission is demonstrated. That which is in God the father is as deeply embedded in the life and ministry of God the son who declared:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;*

*he has anointed me to tell*

*the good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to announce release to the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to set oppressed people free,*

*and to announce the year of the Lord’s favor.*[[8]](#footnote-8)

The gospel of Matthew sums up Christ’s ministry thus:

*Then Jesus began traveling throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every illness. When he saw the crowds, he was deeply moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

God the Son, as the good shepherd, always goes out of His way in a pastoral way to look for the sheep that are yet to come into the sheep pen. It is this ethos of life and ministry and its permeation of all history that would make people like Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese Christian leader and dedicated social worker who was imprisoned for his Christian principles during World War II, respond to such love by saying,

I am grateful for Shinto, for Buddhism, and for Confucianism. I owe much to these faiths. The fact that I was born with a spirit of reverence, that I have insatiable craving for values which transcend this earthly life, and that I strive to walk the way of golden mean, I owe entirely to the influence of those ethnic faiths. Yet these three faiths utterly failed to minister to my heart's deepest needs. I was a pilgrim journeying upon a long, long road that had no turning. I was weary. I was footsore. I wandered through a dark and dismal world where tragedies were thick...Buddhism teaches great compassion...But since the beginning of time, who has declared, 'this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for remission of sins?' [[10]](#footnote-10)

The ultimate demonstration of the pastoral heart of God the son lies in laying down his life on the cross for His sheep.

**The Pastoral Heart of God Holy Spirit:**

The continuity of the triune God’s intention for a pastoral approach to communicating the good news is further affirmed by the description of the Holy Spirit as ‘the comforter’. Beyond what all human endeavors can provide the presence and comfort of the Holy Spirit not only indwells but empowers all who are called to fulfil God’s pastoral approach to mission. The early Church was enabled to communicate the gospel with the same pastoral ethos by the renewing presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the disciples. Various narratives in the Acts of the Apostles confirm this. The account of the conversion of Cornelius the Gentile and his household, preceded by a reconversion experience for the bearer of the good news, Peter, not only illustrates this but also emphasizes the impartial pastoral concern of God for all humanity.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Like Peter’s reconversion experience one suggests that many of our approaches to communicating the good news and mission as a whole need constant re-examination if not reconversion.

**Beyond Mission as Going and Doing:**

Is it also possible that the notion of mission as primarily going makes us blind to the immediate pastoral needs around us? Howard Peskett & Vinoth Ramachandra remind us that

Mission is not primarily *going*. Or is Mission primarily about *doing* anything. Mission is about *being*. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural, multinational community among the nations. It is modelling before a skeptical world what the living God of the Bible really is like[[12]](#footnote-12)

This suggests that we are called to be and that Mission is not limited to those who can go or have resources to do so. For us evangelicals Chris Wright buttresses this by warning that

There is a danger that the expression “the whole church *taking* the whole gospel to the whole world’ turns the church into nothing more than a delivery mechanism for the message. All that matters is “getting the job done”- preferably as soon as possible.[[13]](#footnote-13)

He adds that “sadly there are some forms of missionary strategy and rhetoric that strongly give that impression” and suggests that

If our mission is to share good news, we need to be good news people. If we preach a gospel of transformation, we need to show some evidence of what transformation looks like. So there is a range of questions we need to ask about “the whole church” that have to do with things like integrity, justice, unity and inclusion, and Christlikeness.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The range of questions today would include what we do with relating and communicating the gospel with people in complex circumstances around us, including millions of internally and externally displaced people at our doorsteps. Is it possible that the refugee and migration crisis is an awakening call for a change in the paradigm of mission as going? And that the Church in any given context cannot be truly missional until it takes on the towel and basin of welcoming, receiving and meeting the diverse pastoral needs of the new comers to any and every geographical context of the world.

In a world torn apart by civil strife, ethnic intolerance and political violence the Lausanne Cape Town Commitment suggests some ways in which the Church at large can be the instrument of God’s peace by being more pastoral in mission by indicating that such aspiration, rooted in the gospel, calls us to:

* Embrace the fullness of the reconciling power of the gospel and teach it accordingly. This includes a full biblical understanding of the atonement: that Jesus not only bore our sin on the cross to reconcile us to God, but destroyed our enmity, to reconcile us to one another.
* Adopt the lifestyle of reconciliation. In practical terms this is demonstrated when Christians:
1. forgive persecutors, while having courage to challenge injustice on behalf of others;
2. give aid and offer hospitality to neighbours ‘on the other side’ of a conflict, taking initiatives to cross barriers to seek reconciliation;
3. continue to witness to Christ in violent contexts; and are willing to suffer, and even to die, rather than take part in acts of destruction or revenge;
4. Engage in the long-term healing of wounds after conflict, making the Church a safe place of refuge and healing for all, including former enemies.
* Be a beacon and bearer of hope. We bear witness to God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It is solely in the name of Christ, and in the victory of his cross and resurrection, that we have authority to confront the demonic powers of evil that aggravate human conflict, and have power to minister his reconciling love and peace.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**The Antecedent of Samuel Ajayi Crowther:**

If humans are ‘homo narratus’ in the words of H. Stephen Shoemaker, as Rosalee Velloso Ewell aptly reminded us some days ago, let me, as an African who is very much so, indulge us with a narrative.

You may have heard of the African slave boy who became Bishop.[[16]](#footnote-16) Although the late Victorian view of Crowther romanticized him as ‘the slave boy who became Bishop,’ portraying him almost as an accident of history. Andrew Walls described Samuel Ajayi Crowther as ‘probably the most widely known African Christian of the nineteenth century’ whose ‘life spanned the greater part of it - he was born in its first decade and died in the last.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Hanciles corroborates their views by describing Crowther as

a man whose missionary initiatives and enterprise, in the century leading up to Edinburgh 1910, did more for the expansion of Christianity in Africa than any other single individual—African or European. Bishop Ajayi Crowther was not only the premier pioneer missionary of his day, he was also the most celebrated African Christian of the 19th century and one of the leading architects of the modern African Church. [[18]](#footnote-18)

In the last decade of his life, and in a context in which Mission Newsletters are looked out for defining stories of progress on the field, questions were asked as to why Bishop Crowther was so tolerant of his native Agents on the Niger Mission. In response to accusation of not dismissing offending missionaries and native workers, Crowther, in a rare use of his mother tongue in correspondence, responded by giving a Yorùbá proverb: in one of his letters.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the Appendix, Bishop Crowther wrote,

This often reminds me of the Yoruba saying.

‘Gbogbo igi ina li o léfin’

‘All firewood is smoky’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

After giving the English translation, Crowther interpreted the proverb with a story. The message is important enough for the full story to be quoted here;

It is applied in this way. A certain Cook got a pot full of yams ready to be boiled, and placed the pot on the firestones with embers between them; on the embers he placed the end of several firewood, and left the embers to perform the rest. In the meantime the ends of the firewood caught fire from the embers, and unbearable dense smoke filled the room; this being the case someone in the room suggested, that one particular firewood was the smoky one and that it should be taken out; which was done; but the smoke continued; another person pointed to another firewood as the smoky one; that was also taken out; but the smoke continued; and to lessen the smoke the firewood was taken out one after another, till there was no more firewood under the pot, so the yams could not be boiled, why? Because all the firewood was smoky and were taken out. All this time, it did not strike any one to suggest, that if a fan were used, the slumbering embers would have been roused to a flame, and set the smoky firewood on fire and boiled the yams to a wholesome meal. Though this is a heathen idea of an assisting stimulating force, yet, it is very suggestive of correcting influence on the want of zeal, on the part of some of our fellow labourers of the Niger Mission, instead of taking them out one after another.

[S. A. Crowther, Bishop, Niger Territory - Dec 9th 1889[[21]](#footnote-21)

The lesson of Bishop Crowther’s story is clear enough; rather than have the offending staff dismissed other means should have been used by the CMS to correct the situation on the Niger Mission.

Beyond being true to his native culture, in which ‘black sheep’ of families are not thrown out but kept within the household to be corrected and reformed, Crowther was also being true to the Scripture of which he was a messenger. If indeed Scripture is the hermeneutic of culture and tradition as Kwame Bediako has stressed,[[22]](#footnote-22) a legitimate question arises, ‘what would Jesus have done with the deviant?’ In the context being examined, should Crowther have expelled the culprits for them to continue their deviant behaviour elsewhere, or was he right in keeping them within the reach of the church for rehabilitation? In a way Crowther’s new European missionary counterparts come across like those who brought a woman caught in adultery before Jesus demanding the punishment prescribed in the laws of Moses. On his part Crowther, conscious of the injustice of disconnecting the native agents without proof beyond reasonable doubt, exercised caution and restraint. He would rather err on the side of mercy than strict punitive measures, even if this meant his resignation from the Finance committee. In the end he did just that.[[23]](#footnote-23)

You may be wondering why I have recounted this story. The exclusion or removal of smoky wood that are perceived to be contaminating or extinguishing the fire is not too different from our exclusion of persons or traditions that we may feel uncomfortable with. If and when we do not bind the wounds of our broken hearted or fallen soldiers as we ought to, it has serious implications for our external witness. How can those who claim to bear the good news of God’s saving and reconciling grace not practice what they profess or proclaim? Hence we must ask, how do we treat those who may have left one Church tradition to embrace others? Are they heretics or still members of God’s family?

**Some Implications towards Conclusion:**

From my African context, the call for a pastoral approach to mission challenges us to ask what the gospel is if it does not address the needs of street children and orphans; or the cry of dispossessed widows, the cry of those infected or affected with HIV and AIDS. More recently in the West African context we’ve had to ask how to communicate the gospel with bereaved families of Ebola victims. There are hardly easy answers to this for someone like me who lives in a context in which the addictive so called gospel of prosperity empowers a select few and alienates vast numbers of vulnerable people. This is why a pastoral approach to mission cannot afford to be neutral, as we were reminded yesterday by Valdir Steuernagel, especially on matters related to vulnerable people.

On a Pastoral note I end with the words of Ian Maclaren (pseudonym of Rev. John Watson) was a Scottish author and theologian, sometimes misattributed to Plato or Philo of Alexandria.

"Be gentle with each person you meet, for each of them is fighting a great battle."*[[24]](#footnote-24)*

September 4, 2015

1. <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/maps/mapping-displaced-people-around-the-world/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/christians-the-worlds-most-persecuted-people-9630774.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Ezekiel 34: 30-31) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Exodus 3:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Psalm 78: 70-72) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jonah 4:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Guzik, “Commentary on Jonah 4", *David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible".* http://classic.studylight.org/com/guz/view.cgi?book=jon&chapter=004>. 1997-2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Luke 4:18-19- International Standard Version) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Matthew 9:35-36) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Toyohiko Kagawa, *Christ and Japan* (SCM, 1934), pp-100, 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Acts Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Howard Peskett & Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission*, (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 2003), p. 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2010), p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2010), pp. 29-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Julia Cameron, (Series Editor), *The Cape Town Commitment, A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action,* (The Lausanne Movement, 2011), pp. 41-42 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. My Research on Crowther examined the development of his thought regarding British and African culture within a period of 70 years of active life and ministry, beginning with his dislocation from his native home in 1821 and ending with his death at the end of 1891. It also re-interprets several narratives that have presented him less original than he was in his thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 155; Lamin Sanneh described him as the “most distinguished churchman of his native continent” and “an unrivalled pioneer of Christianity’s post-Western development.” See Sanneh, Lamin, *Disciples of All Nations, Pillars of World Christianity,* p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hanciles, *In the Shadow of the Elephant: Bishop Crowther and the African Missionary Movement*, (Oxford: Inaugural lecture at the Opening of the Crowther Centre for Mission Education, CMS, Oxford, March 2008), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. CMS Archives, G A3/0/1889 S. A. Crowther Bishop, Niger Territory , Appendix 7, p. 410, Dec 9th 1889 to letter of December 9, 1889. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. CMS Archives, G A3/0/1889 S. A. Crowther Bishop, Niger Territory , Appendix 7, p. 410, Dec 9th 1889 to letter of December 9, 1889. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. CMS Archives, G A3/0/1889 S. A. Crowther Bishop, Niger Territory , Dec 9th 1889 to letter of December 9, 1889. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Kwame Bediako, ‘Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 4, No. 1 (June 2001): pp. 2-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Ajayi, J. F. Ade, ‘Bishop Crowther: A Patriot to the Core’, pp. 85-99, in Falola, Toyin, *Tradition and Change in Africa: Essays of J.F. Ade. Ajayi* (Africa World Press, Inc., Trenton, 2000), p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ian Maclaren (pseudonym of Rev. John Watson; 3 November 1850 – 6 May 1907) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)