Is There a Hole in Our Holism?

As we wrestle with Holism, let us avoid the unhelpful generalizations which posit that those who are engaged in compassionate ministries do not proclaim, that those who evangelize do not touch with compassion, and that compassion or evangelism are best done through programs rather than inter-personally. Arguing against straw men generates heat but not much light.

The body is important, vitally so - there is no Biblical support for a gnostic dualism that devalues the body, temporal or resurrected - it is just that the soul is more important. Temporally the consequences of losing a part of your body are much less severe than losing a part of your soul. Losing your leg, tragic as that may be, can not be equated with losing your conscience. Temporally, the body can only inevitably wear out while the soul can eternally be ever young and grow from glory to glory. Ministry to the physical body is “necessary but not sufficient”. If as we feed, clothe, soothe, educate and medicate without ever proclaiming Jesus as the only Savior, we have hated not loved.

Biblical Holism values and cares for the needs of the temporal body while retaining a priority on the eternal soul. There is therefore an undeniable priority on preaching/verbal evangelism/conversion of the soul in Biblical Holism. Faith still comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). The prioritization of proclamation in life and mission need not and should not diminish ordinate attention to physical needs. Prioritizing verbal proclamation is no insult to compassionate touching in the same way that prioritizing loving God in no way diminishes love for my wife and children.

A hypothesizing of a primacy/priority of proclamation in Biblical Holism is based on the recorded action of Biblical figures. What the Bible relates about how Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul, Peter, John, and Stephen actually ministered is indicative of what the Spirit thinks is important.

Jesus

Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18-19 when He begins His ministry. Sometimes this reference is used to propose that social action is equal to (or can replace) verbal proclamation. This is impossible on three fronts. First, the preponderance of proclamatory verbs in the reference (“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed me to PREACH…heal, PROCLAIM, set at liberty, PROCLAIM…”) give a focus on proclamation, and the other verbs (heal and set free) were most often in the life of Jesus accomplished supernaturally and spiritually. Second Jesus gives multiple clear pronouncements on why He came (listed below), and taken in the collective there is a decided emphasis on verbal proclamation and the soul. Thirdly because Jesus’ life and ministry clearly prioritized verbal proclamation.

Jesus left no doubt why He came, His own testimony reveals His priority on the proclamation and the soul - and Jesus was undeniably holistic demonstrated by His healing of physical and emotional brokenness. In order to start on clear Biblical ground, let me state the times in the gospels where Jesus gives reasons for why He came. Taken together a clear priority on the soul and verbal proclamation emerges:

Matthew 10:35: “I have come to set a man against his father…”
Mark 1:38 : “Let us go into the next towns, that I may PREACH there also, because for THIS PURPOSE I have come forth.”
Mark 2:17: “I did not come to CALL the righteous, but [I DID COME TO CALL THE] sinners to repentance.

John 6:38: “I did not come to do my own will…”

John 8:42: “…Nor have I come of Myself, but He sent me…”

John 9:39: “For Judgment I have come into this world….”

John 10:10: “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”

John 12:46: “I have come as a light, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.”

John 15:22: “If I had not come and SPOKEN to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.”

John 17:13: “I have come to you, and these things I SPEAK in the world that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.”

John 18:37: “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world. That I should BEAR WITNESS to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth HEARS my WORD.”

Perhaps the clearest text advocating a priority on proclamation in the ministry of Jesus is the extended story found in John 6. The narrative of Jesus feeding the five thousand clearly shows His compassionate touch and care for the body while underlining the priority of proclamation in His own thinking.

After the initial feeding of the hungry, the crowd wants to be fed again. Jesus responds to them in John 6:26: “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal upon Him.” Jesus goes on to state He is the bread of life, a different bread than the repeated manna Moses provided in the wilderness. Jesus is a bread (gives a life) that physical bread and drink can not rival. Jesus goes on to say that we must feed on Him (John 6:57) which confuses and offends those who viewed him as a free bakery.

Jesus then drops the hammer: He states in no uncertain terms the priority of the soul over the body. John 6:61-63: “Does this offend you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before? IT IS THE SPIRIT WHO GIVES LIFE: THE FLESH PROFITS NOTHING. THE WORDS I SPEAK TO YOU ARE SPIRIT, AND THEY ARE LIFE.”

Jesus in no uncertain terms declares His priority on the soul, and His priority on the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Jesus’ incredibly shocking explanation is given in the context of refusing to meet an ongoing physical need of the body.

There is one clear distinction between Jesus and any before or after Him. Jesus was the living word whose primary destiny was to die as atonement for sin and to break death’s power by His resurrection from the dead. One could make an argument that Jesus’ one redemptive act outweighs all His spoken words, that all Jesus’s words were empty without the cross and that the cross would have been efficacious even without all of Jesus’s words. While this is obviously an unnecessary and hypothetical proposition even for Jesus, it cannot be true or considered for anyone else. Our deaths cannot atone for sin. We have no inherent resurrection power. We are not the Christ. There is one Christ and His work on the Cross is done. Our work is to proclaim what Christ has accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection. Because humans attribute their own meanings to the actions of others, the clearest way we have to communicate a truth is through verbal or written communication. This premise (that our primary role, the priority in
Biblical Holism is verbal witness of what Jesus has done) is borne out in the way that all the prophets, including John the Baptist, and the apostolic figures ministered.

The Prophets

What is interesting to note is that what remains of the prophetic contribution to holism is their spoken/recorded verbal proclamation. The holism of the prophets is generally implied not exemplified. We have little to no record of Isaiah’s, Hosea’s, or the other prophet’s social or compassionate action outside of their exhortation of others to the same. We correctly assume that they had the integrity to live consistent with their own exhortations: justice, orphan care, provision for widows, and kindness to the captive. The prophets were primarily oracles, speaking the word of the Lord. We know nothing of how Jeremiah or Ezekiel lived out their holism, what the Spirit records as important is their speaking ministry. To build a case for compassionate ministry being valid in and of itself outside of verbal proclamation from the prophets relies somewhat ironically on the prophetic word - not the prophetic deed. Did the prophets compassionately touch the poor? Undoubtedly! Was it their priority? Absolutely not! The priority of every Biblical prophet was speaking the word of God.

John the Baptist

Jesus declared that John the Baptist was the greatest human ever (Matthew 11:11). No one born of women was greater than John the Baptist. This is the same John who never dug a well, never held an orphan, never built a school, and never fed a widow - not at least as far as we know. What do we know about John the Baptist? He considered himself a voice (John 1:23), he preached repentance (Luke 3:3), and he offended a ton of people - even lost his head as a result of his words (Matthew 14:3,10). John - best witness ever - was a proclaimer. I am sure John loved on people, he had disciples after all, but the priority of his life was to open his mouth and preach repentance.

Paul

Paul’s priority was to preach the gospel. Paul saw his appointment in terms of being commissioned to proclaim: “I was appointed a preacher and an apostle…” (1 Timothy 2:7, 2 Timothy 1:11). Paul stated in passionate, fire in his bones fashion: “…woe is me if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16), and even gave the strategic ‘where’ to his fiery passion when he declared: “I have made it my aim to preach the gospel not where Christ was named.”(Romans 15:20). Paul told the Corinthians that he came to them “…with the gospel” and the aim to “…preach the gospel in the regions beyond.”(2 Corinthians 10:14-16). Paul obviously was eager to care for the poor (Galatians 2:10) but his undeniable priority was the verbal proclamation of the gospel - it was what he rejoiced in (Philippians 1:18) and the primacy of the eternal soul.

Peter and John

The first 8 chapters of Acts give us a concise overview of the effect of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit on the early apostles. Consistent with the breadth of scripture, the baptism of the Holy Spirit always affects the tongue. The same group who were filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:4, speaking in tongues, are assembled in Acts 4:31 and are refilled with the Spirit, speaking the word of God with boldness.
Peter, full of the Spirit, stands up, raises his voice and preaches (Acts 2:14-39) and his culminating recorded words are an appeal for the conversion of the soul. Peter and John do not give a handout - they pray out a healing in Jesus name, and the healing leads to extended, public proclamation (Acts 3:11-26) including the central theme “REPEND THEREFORE…” in verse 19. In Acts 4:19 Peter and John protest: “We can but SPEAK the things we have seen and heard.” Miraculous signs and healings were common (Acts 5:12-16) and the priority of the apostles ministry (soul over body, proclamation over service) is then clearly spelled out in Acts 6:2-4: “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables….we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

In this passage we again see the clear Biblical priority. Meeting physical needs is important - men full of the Spirit were appointed to wait on tables (Acts 6:3), but what was more important was prayer and the preaching of the word. There was an undeniable priority for the apostles. What is often overlooked is how Stephen fulfilled his service role.

Stephen

What do we know about Stephen’s holism? How many widows did he serve? What kind of programs did he run? The Bible is surprisingly silent on the logistical details of Stephen’s social ministry - and equally surprisingly verbose on Stephen’s priority of proclamation.

Stephen full of faith and power did great wonders and signs among the people.” Acts 6:8 “And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he SPOKE.” Acts 6:10 His enemies criticized him: “We have heard him SPEAK…” Acts 6:11, and then most informatively: “This man DOES NOT CEASE TO SPEAK…” Acts 6:13, for “…we have HEARD him SAY…” Acts 6:14. If Stephen is your model for holism then you have no hole - for while we know little of his compassionate work (which he surely did and was incredibly important) we have 52 verses (Acts 7:2-53) of his sermon, and the testimony of his detractors regarding his constant proclamation.

A priority on proclamation is not just for apostles, it is also for the layman, the everyday believer, the volunteer at the soup kitchen, the staff at the orphanage, the engineer digging wells, and the dedicated rescuer of the trafficked.

Missional Implications

Muslims and Secularists, Hindus, Buddhists, and pagans all love it when we meet their physical needs and all resent it when we address their spiritual condition. I sincerely advocate the importance and the necessity of touching the lost with the love of Jesus. My wife and I have started centers for women, humanitarian organizations for refugees, schools with feeding programs for children, and adult education centers for the illiterate. We have dug wells, built bio-filters and encourage others to do so. We believe completely that followers of Jesus should minister in word, sign, and deed to body soul and spirit.

AND we believe there is biblical priority on proclamation and the saving of the soul.

Whenever we have physically loved the lost (through compassionate acts) we have been embraced and lauded. Mohammed is reported to have said: “The worthiest acts are water for
the thirsty and knowledge for the ignorant.” Muslims love me when I help their bodies, they hate me when I help their souls. Often when we have spiritually loved the lost (by calling them to repentance) we have been vilified, rejected, and expelled. Let us not minister to the body and neglect the soul because that is how the world accepts us. Let us be careful that we do not cease proclaiming because of what it costs us. Let us with Stephen never cease to speak even as we wait on tables.

Let us further be careful that we do not take up institutional compassion because we are bereft of spiritual power. The Biblical blueprint for ministry to the sick is divine healing. Every follower of Jesus can pray for the sick. Jesus was not a medical doctor - nor was Peter or John or Stephen. Their ministry to the sick was to pray for divine healing. By all means, let us start clinics, dispense medicine, and bind up wounds- but let us never stop standing in faith, praying with risk that God would demonstrate His love and power through the miraculous. Let us with Stephen be used by God in divine healings, signs, and wonders.

For a Muslim to come to Jesus, it often takes an interworking of three encounters: Love, Truth, and Power. A love encounter is a physical act, it is life on life, it is loving compassion that meets a legitimate need in the body or emotions. A truth encounter is a verbal presentation of the gospel, some precept of the Bible, and a call to repentance. A power encounter is some supernatural intervention, a miracle, a healing, or some obvious answer to prayer.

Let us be truly Biblically holistic. Let our lives and ministries constantly include acts of truth, love, and power. If we lack any one of these three, there is a hole in our holism. Let us with Stephen, be full of the Holy Spirit and prioritize proclaiming the gospel verbally as we seek to save eternal souls.