
Salvation without Evangelism

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A review article on MISSION AND MEANINGLESSNESS, by Peter Cotterell, SPCK, 1990, 332 pp, £12.95.

Subtitled, 'The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder' this is an important work from the new Principal of the London Bible College. It claims to be 'the first book by a leading British Evangelical to recognise God's saving activity among those who live without the Church. It holds out a special challenge to traditional Evangelicalism, while also having much to say which Christians of all persuasions will find stimulating and refreshing.'

The contents of the book

The book itself is divided into four parts. Under the heading, 'Religion, Religions, and the Apparent Meaninglessness of Life', **the first part** seeks to draw attention to the fact that between the two apparent boundaries set to human existence, birth and death, life seems to make no sense. All religions, we are told, recognise this problem and seek to explain it. Man-made religions, however, not only fail to provide an adequate explanation of '*dukkha*' (Buddhism's word for the general unsatisfactoriness of life), but are hopelessly contradictory in the explanations they offer.

Having subjected the pluralism of John Hick and the inclusivisms of Karl Rahner and Hans Kueng to rigorous examination Dr Cotterell turns to the exclusivism of the Bible. This he finds confirmed by the teaching of both its Testaments but, in view of the fact that many live and die without overtly hearing the gospel of Christ, he wonders whether there is biblical warrant for 'some more general revelation available to all, irrespective of the special revelation through Scripture and the incarnation' (p 60) which could be regarded as salvific.

Acknowledging that there is some support for a general revelation in the New Testament (eg Jn 1:9; Rom 1:18ff) he refrains, however, from drawing the conclusion that these passages describe this revelation as salvific. Instead, he finds hope for such a conviction in Acts 17:24-27.

Criticism is then focused on some of those whom he describes as holding to 'The Historic Conservative Position of General Revelation', while at the same time taking some encouragement from what he deems to be the current views of Sir Norman Anderson and John Stott. Even Charles Hodge is enlisted in support of the view to which he is moving! Following this he goes on to consider two other contentious, but related issues: conditional immortality and annihilationism. This first section then concludes with 'Ten Theses' which are his attempt to state a biblical answer to the dilemma posed by the exclusivist claims of Christianity and the fact that many face an eternity without having heard the gospel.

Part two is concerned with 'Mission as Response to the Apparent Meaninglessness of Life'. In addition to providing an exegetical response to the problem posed, Dr Cotterell seeks to formulate a Christian response in terms of mission. This, we are informed, requires an understanding of the nature of the Church, the human predicament she is to confront and the content of her mission.

In Matthew's Gospel we are invited to see our Lord's own identification with *dukkha*; one that will culminate in his passion. In the combination of his words and deeds we find an understanding of human disorder and the promise of its ultimate reversal. His dual mission is but a foreshadowing of that to be taken up by the Church. 'Mission is in essence', he says, 'the Church's struggle to resolve the apparent meaninglessness of life, through its proclamation of Good News, and through its compassionate ministry of sharing its resources, and through its programme of confronting all oppressive powers, secular and spiritual, in the power of the Spirit and in the name of Christ' (p 136).

In his discussion of the relationship between calling and election he clearly shows a preference for Barth's view that 'in Christ we are all potentially elected' (p 140). But should man choose darkness rather than light, then the only alternative to grace is wrath. However, if the choice is light, then this must involve imitating Christ, and part of the Church's genius is that through her life and witness something of eternity is seen to be breaking into this present world.

The third section examines 'Alternative Response to Meaninglessness: Islam, Marxism and Liberation Theology'. This is a short but useful section providing surveys of each response and identifying the various ways in which groups and individuals have reinterpreted their founders views. There is also an assessment made of the inadequacies of each of these responses to the problem of meaninglessness.

The final part takes on the book's overall title, 'Mission and Meaninglessness'. Here Dr Cotterell concludes that the Christian mission is to include a holistic response to the human condition. Christian mission has something to say and, importantly, action to take in respect of every occasion of meaninglessness. Although the Church is not able to explain every experience of *dukkha*, she is able to assure people that justice will prevail in the end and our own sufferings will help us to understand those of others. In terms of action, the Church is to identify with the oppressed even to the point of disobeying unjust laws (providing we are willing to submit to the consequence of our disobedience), oppose unholy alliances and demonstrate by her own community practice her belief that there should be no needy people in the world. 'Mission', he concludes in his postscript, 'is more than the multiplying of missionaries or even churches. It is rather the confrontation of the human condition, of human meaninglessness, and in the name of God so resolving it that God's Kingdom comes' (p 278).

Strengths and weaknesses

Whatever may be said in terms of the weaknesses of this book, it needs to be acknowledged that **there is also much of value here**. For example, one of its

real strengths is to be found in the way the author brings together a wide range of useful information and analysis. His treatment of Islam, Marxism and Liberation Theology is most helpful, as is his treatment of pluralism and inclusivism. His opposition to prosperity theology is quite devastating and his assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Church Growth movement seem fair. He correctly identifies many of the ills of modern Europe and is to be commended for seeking to keep on the agenda of our all too often indifferent hearts the appalling suffering experienced by many in our modern world.

And yet despite all this - and in addition to the major problem of the so-called 'special challenge to traditional evangelicalism' - **there are some important weaknesses** that need to be considered. For example, we think that there are times when he comes perilously close to undermining the perspicuity of Scripture (p 167) and it is certainly unhelpful to suggest that inerrancy should be relegated to a list of secondary issues (p 187).

Furthermore, his treatment of conditional immortality and annihilationism is such that, while he does not specifically identify himself with these positions, he makes clear that his real sympathies are with those who do. It is revealing that although he is forced to confess that the existence of an eternal hell is clearly taught in Scripture (p 74), in referring to 'imagery' and 'time' he does so in such a way as to undermine the awful prospect of its endlessness.

Perhaps more central to the author's immediate concern is his treatment of the Church. In our view, this is most unsatisfactory. Certain statements (see pp 133,134) force us to the conclusion that his definition of the Church is far too broad and that almost anything with a Christian label attached to it is to be viewed as making a contribution to the truth.

Questions ought also to be raised in connection with Dr Cotterell's perception of the role of the Church in the world. Although it has become increasingly common for evangelicals to think of mission in broader terms than the evangelization of the lost, serious doubts ought to be raised against this trend. It is not that we are against Christians being socially and politically involved, but we are concerned about the Church and missionaries seeing this as their legitimate role in the world. Part of the problem here is that insufficient consideration is given to the distinction between the legitimate role of the individual Christian in the world, and that of the Church and its appointed labourers. In our view the 'Great Commission' passages do not support the wider role for the Church and history suggests that whenever the temporal is raised by the Church to the same level as the spiritual, it is the latter that inevitably suffers.

The salvation of the unevangelized

No matter what critics may say to the contrary, Dr Cotterell is in no doubt that the Bible does make exclusive claims for salvation in Jesus Christ alone. It is because he takes this seriously and, as he sees it, the need to preserve the integrity of God, that **he looks for a salvific remedy in general revelation.** It is the fact that there are, and always have been, vast numbers of people who

have never heard the gospel, which makes this a very important issue.

His position is perhaps best summarised in the first of his ten theses calculated to address this problem. There he states that, 'To any reasonable person it would appear to be unjust to condemn people to an eternal hell for failing to avail themselves of a medicine of which they have never heard and, moreover, of which they could not have heard' (p 75).

Dissatisfied with the reply that 'the unevangelized do not die because they are unevangelized but because of their sin' (p 68), he suggests that we must find a solution which will not 'outrage common sense and our common ideas of justice' (p 83).

Now it has to be said that it is difficult to see how he can imagine that he has Scripture on his side at this point. Even Acts 17:24-27 does not help him because the point that the apostle is concerned to make is not that men and women do seek and find God through the vehicle of general revelation, but that all are without excuse for having refused the revelation to which they have had access.

Moreover, since when has 'hearing' been the crucial issue? We admit that it is an important issue, but surely not the crucial issue. What about the grace necessary to respond? Do all men naturally possess this, And if not, is not the logic of Dr Cotterell's position certain to drive us on to insist that it would be unjust of God not to provide this grace for everyone?

This, in turn, raises another question in our mind. Why is it that a proper treatment of Original Sin and its consequences is so noticeably absent from this work? Is this merely a coincidence? Its deliberate exclusion would certainly go some way towards explaining, for example, **his virtual deification of common sense**. Are we really justified in being so confident about fallen man's view of that which constitutes justice? It is true that Dr Cotterell does construct a doctrine of lostness in which he refers to man's fall and sin, but it is the doctrine Original Sin that is crucial to our understanding and expectation of man. One cannot help but conclude that he would be less confident about the importance of 'hearing' to the preservation of God's justice if this doctrine were clearly set out in orthodox terms. Moreover, it would make him more cautious about suggesting that natural man, when faced with general revelation, does not inevitably use this knowledge perversely (p 64). Paul seems to suggest that in receiving the knowledge of God through revelation, it is natural for man to 'suppress' it (Rom 1:20).

We believe that those who adopt the traditional position which Dr Cotterell opposes are, in fact, scripturally closer to the dictates of justice. **For God will not condemn men and women for that which they have not heard. They will be judged only for their sins**, including their distortion and rejection of the knowledge which they do possess. From those who have heard the gospel, of course, much more will be required. This is justice.

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