

Total Christ Christianity through Gospel Centered Empowerment

“Mission *Anabaino* (“I am ascending) is mission greater things” relative to the incredible expectations that Christ promised for his ascension ministry today through church planting (John 14:12). Such expectations inspired Augustine in the 5th century to talk about *Total Christ* Christianity. One important ramification of a Total Christ Christianity is the way we seek to avoid the *either-or* dichotomies that are so prevalent in modernist facing Christendom such as to experience the “fullness of him who fills all in all in/with/through the gospel centered church (Eph 1:22-23). Modernist facing Christianity tended to be fundamentalist such as to reduce Christianity to nothing but this or that emphasis, often in political reaction to another emphasis. We envision greater things!

For instance:

A *Total Christ* effort will avoid the EITHER “old school” church focused Christianity OR “new school” gospel centered and *missional* focused Christianity (what for me during my early Christian years translated to an either institutional-church OR a spirit-filled para-church kind of dichotomy). However, we seek *total Christ* in being a both a gospel centered and church movement—or the church that by her very nature, when built upon the carefully designed foundation of the apostles, IS THE very missional, gospel centered presence of Christ as “fleshed out” in every cultural context. This is what Christ envisioned as the “greater things” when he explained that it was better for him to ascend into heaven such as to send the Holy Spirit wherein his temple presence could be mediated in every Christ centered and apostolic founded temple-church now in many places at the same time around the globe!

And again, a *Total Christ* effort will want to avoid a Christianity that is EITHER didactic/declarative (prophetic) OR contemplative/sacramental (priestly) OR life-on-life-/communal (kingly). Rather, we seek *Total Christ* wherein we participate in Christ as our Prophet, Priest AND King, ALL, by participating in the life of Christ vis-à-vis the spirit filled church. Rather than a reactive philosophy of ministry we seek a balanced and total Christ experience of Christ’s presence in our lives.

And, to our focus in this volume of Vision Anabaino, a *Total Christ* effort will avoid an either-or relation between “spiritual/evangelistic” and inward focused ministry in relation to gospel centered *transformation* OR a “social/material” outward focused ministry in relation to economic, vocational and medical *empowerment*. That is to say, we want to avoid any idea of humanity that is not concerned for the whole person, both inward and outward as related to a more holistic conception of persons who are being fully restored in the image of God. Such is the picture we get in the early church when in Acts 2, after describing a holistic participation in Christ’s mediated ministry of apostolic word, sacrament and spiritual shepherding and government, we read: *And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44-45).* And here again, we encounter the “greater things” envisioned by Christ, even as the result is exactly as Jesus anticipated it would be wherein *day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).*

Concerning then a holistic focused, *transformational* AND *empowerment* focused mission and ministry, did you know that it is our commitment in Mission *Anabaino* that in every church we plant, we include a church based and gospel centered empowerment initiative? And to be clear, the “outer person” that is being targeted can be economic poverty, but it can also be mental and psychological poverty in relation to mental health, it can be a poverty of leadership confidence as related to taking responsibility for church leadership, and on and on it goes—its any area of a persons life wherein they feel powerless to become self-sustaining and God reliant.

Now as it concerns empowerment ministry, we need to begin with a good dose of honesty. Whereas the "compassion industry" is almost universally accepted as a virtuous and constructive enterprise, its outcomes are often questionable, especially in so far as distinguishing "empowerment" vs. "entitlement" which then leads to "enablement" and powerlessness. This powerlessness is a very dangerous thing in that it puts people into a dependent relation with many of the potential "idols of our own destruction" that prevent a sustained dependence upon God. And so the question all this begs is: what exactly does gospel centered empowerment entail? Very briefly, it consists of at least three very important concepts:

Concept #1: Gospel Centered Empowerment distinguishes *crisis* from *chronic* related mercy and seeks to target the later for the sake of true empowerment. That is, true empowerment is not merely to rescue someone from a crisis, but to set a person free from the spiritual, mental and physical bondage to crisis. It is to target human self-reliance in relation to the fear and oppression concerning the things of this world, albeit in dependence upon God. This of course involves a whole range of transformative activity as related to spirit, mind and body. In a simple way, Paul states the goal of empowerment, however much it can be applied to all sorts of vocations and callings, as being enabled to "work with [our] own hands so that [we] may be dependent on no one." (1 Thess. 4:11-12). Paul's vision is not against charity, just charity that would put another person into a dependent relation with respect to his/her being empowered to be all that they are called to be in Christ. The key then to empowerment is to proactively target whatever spiritual, mental, social and physical issues that inhibit self-sustaining and systemic changes. Our commitment then is an asset-based community development (ABCD). Strategically which means:

- Never do for the needy what they can be empowered to do for themselves;
- Limit one-way help to emergencies and seek for mutual two way one-anothering instead.
- With respect to financial empowerment-- we seek to empower the needy through employment, micro-lending, micro-enterprise development, and training, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements.
- Focus on leadership development with an intentional strategy for training and steps of transfer as needed.
- Target long term and sustainable solutions over quick fixes

Concept #2: Gospel Centered Empowerment is *Church based* empowerment. As per our "Total Christ" understanding of Christ's ascension ministry today, we believe the church IS an essential element of the gospel centered gospel. It takes spiritual- cognitive/social/moral transformation for a person to truly flourish even as being worked out holistically in both the inward and outward person. As an empowerment concept, a church based strategy is a glass-half-full strategy that focuses on a church community's strengths more than its needs. It's to play with a full deck as it were in human restoration and empowerment. It takes seriously the gifts and talents that exist within a given communal context such as to provide a system of social reinforcement and accountability as carefully designed in the apostolic church. It results in a community oriented empowerment *with* one another approach rather than for one another approach, thus protecting people's dignity leading to sustainable self-reliance. Strategically, this means:

- The "target group" of gospel centered empowerment are members in good standing of a local, gospel believing and practicing church.
- The power of gospel centered empowerment should require participation in all the means of God's grace in word, worship and communal one anothering and shepherding.

- Each participant is helped not only to be served but to serve, recognizing that while each of us have gifts that differ, they are all important assets in a holistic ministry of Christ through the local church.

Concept #3: Gospel Centered Empowerment recognizes the close inter-dependent relation of the gospel as applied to both the inward and outward person. For instance, “spiritual depression” as spiritually treated (inward) is often (if not always) linked to “psychological depression” as medically treated (outward). Therefore, gospel centered Christian counseling with communal reinforcement (inward) may need medical treatment (outward). Economic poverty is often related to issues in identity such as to require both micro-enterprise (outward) and instruction in Christ centered identity reformation such as is related to our adoption and justification in Christ, as again lived out within a communal context of reinforcement (inward). As these two examples illustrate, the outward aspects of a holistic empowerment based ministry might involve a range of micro-enterprises such as to include all sorts of cooperatives as to include housing and mortgage cooperatives, general store cooperatives, medical cooperatives, job training, church leadership development and training, etc. Such initiatives, in so far as they don’t come under the spiritual jurisdiction and instruction of the church directly, might require the establishment of church based subsidiary organizations that are specifically designed to serve the interest of holistic church based ministry, but that involve non-church kinds of activities that are not directly related to word, sacrament and spiritual shepherding, both as to protect the church *acting as church* and para-church acting as mortgage lenders, vocational school, medical clinics, etc. and all the related secular and civil interactions that this will require.

In short, a gospel empowerment vision for Total Christ Christianity is a vision wherein the church, just being the church, is a transformational presence of holistic restoration in the world, if not of the world, for the world. In all of this, I’m reminded of a book titled *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) by John Howard Yoder that re-examined the slogan of the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly “let the church be the church.” Yoder was arguing for the “centrality of the church” as a “social strategy.” According to Yoder, to the degree that the church becomes a “restored society,” it does so *for the sake* of an authentic witness in the greater society. He notes:

The church must be a sample of the kind of humanity which, for example, economic and racial differences are surmounted. Only then will it have anything to say to the society that surrounds it about how those difference must be dealt with.¹

¹ Yoder, John Howard, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd Edition (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, (1972), p. 150-152.