

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE GOAL OF MISSIONS:
HUMANIZATION OR SALVATION?

JOEL JUPP

DEERFIELD, IL

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In the context of Christian mission, our goal determines purpose, activity, and methods, so it is no surprise that the goal of missions is highly debated. On one hand, some missionaries focus on humanization, meaning that they are concerned about improving the humanity of an individual or people group.¹ On the other hand, other missionaries focus on salvation alone, thought of in terms of sin and the rescue of people from death. Neither extreme is healthy in the sense that an overemphasis on humanization can lead to colonialism and an overemphasis on salvation has sometimes led to crusade-like efforts. Between these options, therefore, this paper will argue that the goal of missions should take a three-dimensional approach to contextualize the gospel which integrates humanization, salvation, and Scripture.

In theory, humanization is beneficial because it introduces an improvement to an individual or society at large. Proponents of humanization argue that Christ influences culture, and we should share these redeemed aspects of culture to others. This is partly true. Jesus showed us what it meant to be truly human, and we should strive to share this perfect humanity with others. While critics sometimes define humanization as “civilizing the uncivilized,” the concept does not need to be understood in such a negative sense. As Westerners, we should not have a “guilt complex” and cease building schools and hospitals for those in need. As long as we are not forcing others into compliance, missionaries can *offer* these contributions in the name of Christ and *invite* others to allow Christ to redeem their situation. In that sense, there is nothing wrong *per se* with improving humanity.

However, problems result because it is impossible to make others “more human” without imposing our own culture – a culture that is adversely affected by sin. If humanization is our only goal, we will be misguided because we will impose our own sinful tendencies upon those

¹ This definition should not be confused with more negative uses of the term “humanization.” Sometimes, the word can have a very negative connotation, but this paper has retained the word because of its historical usage.

we are trying to reach. For instance, Western missionaries could leave behind Western tendencies (such as isolationism or greed) which are actually contrary to true humanity, thus negating the effort to humanize. Influenced by the Enlightenment, proponents of humanization tend to elevate humanity too high, thus neglecting the prevalence and effects of sin in their own efforts.

Additionally, humanization as a goal suffers from a lack of clarity. That is to say, even though Christ has given us an example of true humanity, which aspects of his humanity are trans-cultural, contextual, cross-cultural, and cross-cultural? Unfortunately, this approach often leads down the path of personal subjectivity, where we select whatever seems most pleasing to us. Whatever we deem as replaceable in a receptor culture, we replace – even if it harms that culture. As a result, we tend to impose too much of our culture, and given enough time, we become cultural colonialists.

On the other side of the spectrum, many Christians, including evangelicals, consider salvation to be the ultimate goal. Throughout Scripture, God is described as the God who saves His people. God saves the Israelites from Egypt, God saves a remnant from annihilation, and God saves followers of Christ from eternal damnation. Because salvation is such a central concept in the Old and New Testaments, we should expect that missions would be concerned with the salvation of people from the effects of sin. As a consequence, rather than the cultural mandate, most evangelicals are focused on the salvific message more than anything else.

Challenges arise when trying to define what salvation entails. For some, salvation involves intellectual assent to a propositional statement. For others, salvation involves the whole being of a person. And for others, salvation means something entirely different. A common thread between these, of course, is an emphasis on the spiritual. To summarize the various

views, then, we can define salvation in a narrow sense (an individual being saved from eternal damnation) and in a broad sense (a world being saved from the effects of sin). Both senses could be included within the goals of Christian mission, but we should not conflate these definitions in order to make a narrow goal for missions.

For the many reasons mentioned above, the goal of missions should incorporate the best aspects of both humanization and salvation, finding the proper balance through faithfulness to the scriptures. A missionary should keep these in tension, so that neither aspect is neglected. In the journey towards true humanity and salvation from sin, faithfulness to Scripture must also be a part of the process, so that a missionary can continually define and re-define what “true humanity” and “salvation” mean. Without Scripture, there will always be a tendency to stray from the goals that God has given us. Certainly, we do not want to derive our definitions from 17th century Europe, so we must partake in the crucial work of interpreting what Scripture means in our particular context.

While we might assume that all missionaries have always depended upon Scripture for guidance, this is not always the case. To begin with, there are some missionaries who are more concerned about their own ideologies than Scriptural truth. For evidence of this, all we need to do is remember some of the Catholic missionaries who came to the New World. Even for those who claim to adhere to Scripture, there is not always careful dependence upon the text. Because of these realities, this paper proposes ongoing dialogue between the humanizing and saving goals of missions, but kept in balance by Scripture.

When this three-dimensional model is followed, three benefits result: (1) a missionary can both cherish a receptor culture and help it become “more human” in the likeness of Jesus Christ; (2) a missionary can both care for the salvation of individuals and salvation for the entire

cosmos; and (3) a missionary can strive towards both of these goals at the same time, while being open to redefining these goals in light of Scripture. The benefits of a balanced approach, of course, also include avoiding the tragic errors inherent with one-dimensional approaches to missions.

In conclusion, rather than choosing between humanization or salvation, this paper has argued for a more integrative approach to missions. This approach finds value in the contributions of liberals and conservatives, but also recognizes the weaknesses of both – i.e., when they stray from the text of Scripture in favor of a narrower perspective of missions. The goal of missions, therefore, should be three-dimensional in that humanization, salvation, and faithfulness to Scripture are brought together, so that there can be interaction between them. An integrative model such as this will provide a more holistic and effective approach to Christian missions.