So Send I You: A Study Guide to Mission by Roger Bowen

A response to the review of this book by Melvin Tinker published in *Churchman* vol 111/2 (p 171)

Chris Wright

So Send I You: A Study Guide to Mission Roger Bowen
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It is an inevitable fact of life that most of us read more book reviews than books and so there will be many readers of *Churchman* whose sole impression of Roger Bowen's book on mission will be formed on the basis of Melvin Tinker's review and not on reading the book itself. Sadly there will even be those who will choose not to read it at all on the assumption that the *Churchman* review tells them all they need to dismiss it. This is doubly unfortunate: first, because the review makes the hostile and astounding allegation that the author is presenting 'pure liberalism', and secondly because it explicitly implicates Crosslinks in the 'charge'. The review seems to have been written with an adversarial agenda, in its own words to 'substantiate' a 'charge', rather than to engage constructively with the book's strengths and shortcomings. It is of course a reviewer's privilege and duty to critique a book and express disagreement. If I myself were reviewing Roger Bowen's book I would disagree in a number of places, or prefer other ways of expressing a point. I would share some of Melvin Tinker's unease at times. But from that level of constructive critique between Bible-believing Evangelicals to the bald accusation of 'flagrant' liberalism is a quantum leap, which I regard as unfair and unjustified. I am sure that no liberal theologian or institution would ever accept Roger Bowen's book as liberal. A truly liberal reviewer would regard it as conservative and, in its explicit commitment to evangelism, would probably label it fundamentalist. It is no pleasant task to take issue with one good friend in defence of another but, since I think an injustice has been done, both to Roger Bowen and by implication to Crosslinks, I feel bound to make some response.

In comparison with some SPCK publications in past years, this survey of biblical, theological and contemporary issues in mission is actually remarkable and indeed is to be welcomed as a mark of the growing amount of evangelical missiology being published under their imprint. It should be a matter of rejoicing that the wide readership of SPCK materials around the world will actually be getting such Christ-centred and biblically-rich study material on mission, with such wide-ranging but helpfully concise evaluations of the positive and negative sides of significant contemporary phenomena such as the church growth movement, signs and wonders, liberation theologies, indigenous churches, urban mission, renewals and revivals (international phenomena about which the average British Anglican churchgoer knows woefully little). It should be a joy to envisage people being confronted with the book's clear rejection of religious pluralism and receiving instead affirmations such as: 'God can only be truly known in his Son Jesus Christ – if only we would truly proclaim him!'; 'No one can be right with God by means of his or her goodness, sincerity or religion ... Salvation is based only on what God does. Christ is the only means of redemption [because God has dealt with our sins] ... in justice in the death of his Son (Rom 3:25, 26)' (p 222). But no, according to the review, the book is 'pure liberalism' that will 'take us away from the Bible's own testimony'!

Before turning in detail to the points that lead to the charge of liberalism, it is worth commenting on a point which is not properly noted in the review (apart from quoting the book's title): the book is in the form of a Study Guide. It is part of a series (International Study Guides, originated by the Theological Education Fund of the WCC) which is widely distributed around the world, and especially in non-western countries. It is designed for student use and therefore it necessarily and quite properly presents various points of view about many matters, and then invites the student to think them through and evaluate them by means of questions, illustrations, case-studies and biblical criteria. Usually Bowen gives indications of which views he favours and which he deems risky or unacceptable. This textbook method makes the book highly usable in a classroom or syllabus. It may not sit easily with the wish of some that any book by an Evangelical should simply proclaim the evangelical position and ignore or denounce all alternative positions. Unfortunately such a book would suffer the fate of never being included in the syllabi of many institutions and thus would never be read by the very people one most wants to influence. For the fact is that thousands of theological students around the world are indeed exposed to 'pure liberalism' of the most rampant old-fashioned kind and, if they study mission at all (which many will not), will do so in a negative and hostile way. Here is a book, however, which presents biblical, theological, historical, cultural and contemporary materials of great variety and richness, all of which combine to show that

mission is central to the Bible, to the very essence of the church's life and purpose, and to the whole Christian faith, and manages to do so in a way which theological teachers can use within the normal framework of an academic curriculum (I hope theological colleges in the UK will make use of it). But again, rather than there being any sense of excitement and gratitude that the General Secretary of Crosslinks will have raised the profile of mission in many institutions around the world through this book, and in a way that is far more substantially evangelical than many of us would have associated with the ISG series in the past, the book is vilified as 'taking us away from the Bible'. I trust librarians around the world will not make their decision as to whether to purchase on the basis of the *Churchman* review alone.

When we come to the specific grounds for the 'charge' of liberalism, the first is that Bowen does not anywhere explicitly define the gospel in terms of substitutionary atonement. It is rather superficial to judge an author on the basis of what he does *not* say in any given piece of writing, and particularly to call him a liberal for that reason. Several of my own books do not include such an express definition of the gospel, though I assuredly believe it. Does that make them liberal too? Furthermore, by this criterion James was a liberal, and some of Paul's letters would fail this test as well. In any case, Bowen affirms (as quoted above) that the cross involved God dealing with sin 'in justice in the death of his Son (Rom 3:25, 26)' (p 222). And in his commentary on Romans (also in the ISG series) he clearly expounds a propitiatory understanding of the latter texts. Furthermore, in his discussion of the Eucharist he points out that the disciples were to 'remember his death on the cross for them' and that 'in the Eucharist the sacrifice is the one, final sacrifice offered once by Jesus on the cross' (pp 49-50). A strange kind of liberalism.

If we play the game of judging an author by what he or she does not mention, it cuts in all directions. In his book *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*, Melvin Tinker's own article 'Towards an Evangelical View of the Church' (an article which does not, incidentally, include a clear definition of substitutionary atonement either!) could be criticized for failing to include any mention of mission to the nations in its definition of the marks of the true church (a criticism also levelled at the Protestant Reformers by the spokesmen of the Counter-Reformation). Evangelism is mentioned briefly, but explicitly only as the task of individuals. 'The notion of "sending out" with a view to proclaiming the gospel is not the task of the church qua the church... but the task of individuals or groups of individuals' (p 103). I beg to differ, and would argue from the Old and New Testaments that the people of God, as a light to the nations, as a priesthood in the midst of the nations, is 'sent' in its broadest sense into the world, 'as the Father sent me'.

To me it is strange that an article on an evangelical view of the church can be so silent about the constant biblical emphasis on God's purpose for the nations, the promise to Abraham that God would bless all the nations (defined as the gospel by Paul in Galatians 3:8), the mission of the Servant (individually, corporately and in mission to the nations), Paul's missional ecclesiology in relation to Jew and Gentile etc, preferring to draw its definitional authority for 'the marks of the true church' from the Nicene Creed, the Thirty-nine Articles and Calvin. I would not, of course, suggest for one moment that Melvin Tinker (still less Calvin, Cranmer or the Creeds!) is liberal. But I am certain that on this point his ecclesiology is considerably less than fully biblical. This deficiency, however, has helped me understand a constant feature of my own ministry experience. I frequently preach at mission Sundays in evangelical Anglican churches around the country. I try to show the depth of the mission relevance of many parts of the whole Bible, Old Testament and New Testament. Time and again members of the congregation tell me afterwards: 'We have never heard Bible teaching with that kind of mission emphasis.' And I ask myself, what Bible are these evangelical ministers, some highly renowned, preaching from that they can manage to *avoid* God's passion for mission to the nations since it underlies so much of the theology of major sections of the canon? And I conclude that evangelical identity is not always as holistically biblical as it claims to be... My point here, however, to digress no further, is simply to observe the irony that Melvin Tinker can write on the church and all but skip mission, and yet accuse somebody who tries to demonstrate the centrality of mission to the Bible and the church of being a liberal.

The review goes on to question whether Bowen makes adequate distinction between the content of the gospel itself and its perception in different cultures or situations of need. He is accused of 'existential contextualisation'. But Bowen is not at all denying the unchanging nature of the gospel derived from its status as historical events. Indeed elsewhere he urges that our understanding of mission must emphasize 'the great New Testament events of the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost and the second coming. The church must live in the light of the cross and always renew and rediscover the mission which comes from God' (p 72). Rather he is pointing out that the good news that these events bring to us will (a) be presented, perceived and appropriated in different cultural ways (as true in modern mission as it was for Jew and Gentile in the evangelistic activity of the apostles in Acts) and (b) necessitate accompanying action as well as words (as Jesus and James both stressed). It is absurd to charge that Bowen's rhetorical 'If you are hungry, food *is* the gospel, the good news' implies that he literally equates or defines the whole biblical gospel in terms of food aid. Of course, if the above quotation is what makes him a liberal, then James must again face

the same charge. Not only does he not teach substitutionary atonement, he even *defines* 'religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless' in terms of care for the orphans and widows – a dangerously liberal social gospel. But then this kind of liberalism sticks in other awkward places. Did not Jeremiah praise Josiah because 'he defended the cause of the poor and needy', and then make the *defining* assertion: 'Is not this what it means to know me? declares the Lord' (Jer 22:16)? And what of Jesus telling the rich young man to keep the commandments (the social ones at that) if he wanted to enter eternal life (Matt 19:16-19)? But if the slightest hermeneutical care quickly exonerates James, Jeremiah and Jesus from liberalism, legalism, or even existential contextualism, why should not the same courtesy be extended to Roger Bowen in the light of the major and well-resolved evangelical debates of the last two decades over the inseparable integration of evangelism and social action in a biblical understanding of the gospel and of mission?

The review moves on to Bowen's discussion of the missiological significance of the Eucharist (in itself a refreshing connection of mission to the centrality of the church's celebration of the gospel, instead of the margins of church activity where it is often to be found). Tinker disapproves of Bowen's mentioning of liturgies which speak of social and political justice and care for the environment. But these biblical concerns are not confused in those liturgies with the central act of commemoration of the events of Christ's death. Rather they are included in the totality of all that the redeeming work of the cross relates to (covered, perhaps, by that wonderfully elastic Prayer Book phrase 'and all other benefits of his passion'). For it is biblically certain that there will one day be a new creation in which justice will reign and we look forward to that as part of the eschatological significance of the eucharistic hope. And as with all biblical eschatology, it must affect our lives and behaviour in the here and now. Hence there is nothing illegitimate about linking these and other dimensions of Christian mission to our response to the eucharistic celebration of the achievement of Christ on the cross. We do as much when we pray the Lord's prayer in the Communion service anyway – 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.' Does the reign of God and the will of God not include justice and the care of the earth?

More seriously, Bowen is accused of 'embracing' a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. The review quotes a few lines of the book, but I believe the total passage needs to be quoted in order to see clearly the balance of what Bowen is saying. Again, it is to be remembered that as a study guide the book aims to present various positions that Christians hold, or have held, and to give some evaluation of them so that students are exposed to a range of views.

> Therefore in the Eucharist Christians receive the benefits of Christ's death which sets them right with God. This is a movement of grace *from God to human beings, and we are passive receivers.* This is why, when we understand it in this way, the Eucharist 'proclaims' the good news from God to us (see 1 Cor 11:26), ie it is evangelism.
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> But we can also understand the Eucharist another way. Because Christ's death is also our death (Rom 5:4,5), and we are united to him by his Spirit, therefore when Christ consecrates and offers himself to the Father, we who belong to him share in that action. Thus the whole church takes part in the self-offering of Christ to the Father. The movement is *from human beings to God and we are active participants.* Both views have support in Scripture and in the liturgies of the early church. But the risk with the second view of the Eucharist is that it does not distinguish clearly between what Christ did for us by grace and how we respond to that in faith. God moves towards us first, before we respond by turning to him – and 1 Corinthians 11:29 may be a warning to the Corinthians not to lose sight of how important and central is what Christ did for us.

Now I agree with Tinker's point that the second view does not fit with the New Testament's way of linking us to Christ's death, and I would indeed prefer Bowen to have expressed this more definitely. However, it is much clearer than Tinker admits that Bowen himself favours the first view as preserving the proper biblical emphasis on the priority of God's saving grace and of 'what Christ did for us'. He leaves no room for merit or synergism. At least, from the above full quotation, it is clearly an unfair distortion to speak of an '*embracing* of the Catholic notion.'

Turning to the review's comments on Bowen's chapter on 'Inter-Faith Encounter', we are told that 'Roger Bowen is clearly an inclusivist'. Actually it is virtually impossible to be 'clearly' anything in this extraordinarily complex debate about the Christian understanding of other religions. Unfortunately some people so identify an evangelical view on the matter with 'exclusivism' that they assume that 'inclusivism' must be the polar opposite. In fact the two are more closely related than the terms themselves (which are lamentably less than helpful) would suggest. The one thing Bowen is 'clearly' is that he is clearly not a '*pluralist*' (the view that salvation can be found in any religion). Inclusivism has many varieties, with one affirmation in common with exclusivism, namely that Christ is central, unique, and the sole source of salvation. But whereas the exclusivist primarily argues that the truth of Christ excludes all other religions as sources of truth or salvation, the inclusivist is prepared to say that Christ, as the Truth, must include all that is genuinely true in other faiths. There is, then, some degree of general revelation there. Some

inclusivists would go further and say that other religions may, in God's providence, provide some means of obtaining the salvation that is actually achieved only by Christ, but that is certainly not Bowen's position. He entirely affirms the biblical truth that nobody is saved by any religion, for religion does not save us: God does.

There are also various positions among exclusivists, from the 'restrictivists', who insist that salvation is restricted ultimately to those who hear and respond to evangelization, to 'non-restrictivists', who believe that there may or will be some whom God will save through the sacrifice of Christ who will not have heard of him in their earthly lifetime. Even among the latter there are differences of view as to how that may happen and how many there may be who will be so saved.

In other words, the debate is complex and there are many shades of opinion even among evangelical scholars who are united in affirming the uniqueness and finality of Christ. Bowen does not attach any of the standard labels to himself, though I think he is what I would call a 'non-restrictivist exclusivist' (though others describe the same position as 'soft, or evangelical, inclusivism') – that is Christ is exclusively the final revelation of God and the only means of salvation, but only God knows who will finally be saved through Christ and the number may be wider than we will ever know until we stand in the new creation with him and them. My own survey of the whole debate may be found in my book *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Jesus* (Monarch).

Melvin Tinker's comments are themselves somewhat confused. He seems to think Bowen is comparing Abraham's faith with the faith of other religions as such, whereas he is talking about people who turn in faith to God but have not heard of Christ (like Abraham). 'People cannot be designated "believers" if they are "ignorant of Christ"' says Tinker. If that were true it would leave Hebrews 11 pretty empty. Even Enoch was a 'saved' believer and he was ignorant not only of Christ, but also of Moses and the whole covenantal revelation entrusted to Israel. According to Hebrews 11:5-6, the grounds of his being able to please God and come to him were that he believed in God's existence and earnestly sought him. The faith of Old Testament believers has to be taken seriously in this debate. It is not a matter of reducing faith to some vague 'ill-defined sense'. Old Testament faith was quite specific, but it was not faith in Jesus in its 'conceptual content', even though in its saving efficacy it was of course ontologically based on the work of Christ yet to come in human history but effective from all eternity. To be open to the possibility that God may save through Christ's work on the cross those who are as informationally ignorant of that event as the Old Testament believers were, but who turn in some way to God in belief and repentance, is a responsible

position held by many Evangelicals in many eras. It cannot be dismissed either as suggesting that there is some other way of salvation apart from Christ (for it strenuously denies that), or as lessening the fundamental biblical mandate for evangelism (any more than Luke's description of Cornelius in terms that would have marked him as a devout and acceptable believer in Old Testament terms lessened Peter's obligation to preach the good news about Jesus Christ to him). It is in fact a position that seeks to exalt the sovereignty of God's grace in election and salvation and not to restrict it solely to the evangelistic obedience or success of the church.

The review is also unhappy with Bowen's discussion of how we wrestle with the name 'God' as used in, for example, Christianity and Islam. Of course Bowen does not believe that the term 'god' is univocal (ie has the same meaning for whoever uses it). But there is no doubt that meanings do overlap and it has been an issue for biblical faith from the very beginning as to how the Creator and Redeemer is to be known and named in the midst of human cultures with variant names for deity. Doubtless Melvin Tinker, along with the rest of us English speakers, is content to call the biblical deity 'God'. Doubtless too he would not wish to be thought to be accepting all the meanings and worldview attached to that Anglo-Saxon monosyllable by first-century inhabitants of these islands (or indeed by late twentieth-century British neo-pagans). Yet at some stage in the Christianizing of those early European peoples their generic name for multiple deities was deemed capable of being used to convey and be filled out with the truth about Yahweh Elohim as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, with similar problems as early Christians faced in using θεός and *deus* in Graeco-Roman culture.

Of course there are 'rival understandings of God', as Melvin Tinker says (using the Anglo-Saxon term), but it is not a simple matter of getting the right name. Yes indeed Elijah compelled people to choose between Yahweh and Baal. But his own personal name embodies another Ancient Near Eastern name for deity – El (etymologically related to Arabic Allah, and in its Aramaic form used by Jesus on the cross), which Old Testament Israel was quite content to use in relation to Yahweh, even though the whole Canaanite belief system in which El also functioned was incompatible with the historical faith of Yahweh. I have no satisfactory explanation (as yet) to offer as to why Baal was utterly rejected as a divine name whereas El was quite acceptable for identification with Yahweh. Both were names of gods in the Ancient Near East and Canaanite pantheons: the matter is discussed more fully by John Goldingay and Christopher Wright in '"Yahweh our God Yahweh One": The Old Testament and Religious Pluralism' *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* Andrew D Clarke and Bruce W Winter edd (Paternoster 1991) pp 34-52. But my point is simply that the matter of how

the supreme biblical deity is to be named in cultures and languages other than the original languages of the Bible itself has been a complex missiological problem since biblical times. It cannot be answered at the level of simplistic questions like 'Is Allah the same as God?' – a question which cannot be answered with a simple Yes or No without a lot of sub-questions being answered first. Roger Bowen is concerned to point out that our theological wrestling with such questions has to be carried out in the missiological context of actual encounter with people of other faiths, and the examples he gives of such encounter from the everyday life of ordinary Christian folk in Britain illustrate the difficulty of confining the whole debate to neat theological formulae.

Again, because I think the review is in danger of giving the distorted impression that Bowen adopts an uncritical acceptance of other religions, it is worth quoting the full text of his own summary of his position.

> It is still true that God can only be truly known in his Son Jesus Christ – if only we could truly proclaim him! However, five definite points need to be made in order to clarify the situation in the light of the Bible:
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> 1 No one can be right with God by means of his or her own goodness, sincerity or religion, however impressive these may appear to be. Salvation is based only on what God does.
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> 2 Christ is the only means of redemption. God did not pass over the sins of past believers like Abraham because he had forgotten to be just but because he would deal with them in justice in the death of his Son (Rom 3:25, 26). The same must be true of other believers, although they are ignorant of Christ.
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> 3 Any true light which people receive comes from Christ (John 1:9), even though this light may not be brought explicitly in his name.
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> 4 As far as we know, no one can recognize and respond to God's love except through hearing about Jesus. There may be exceptions to this rule, but these exceptions should only make Christians more ready to witness to Jesus because (a) they know that God is already at work out there (see Acts 18:9,10) and so they need not be discouraged by their own weakness; and (b) they know that the only certain way of salvation is through turning to Jesus Christ.
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> 5 In the end, we cannot know what is, and what is not, a genuine revelation from God, apart from the revelation given in Christ, or a genuine response of faith. (pp 223-4)

Finally, the reviewer is distressed by 'an incipient universalism'. Here, as I said at the beginning, I do share his unease with Bowen's questions and would want a more careful discussion. Nevertheless, there is a properly biblical dimension of 'universality' in the mercy of God which cannot be ignored. Bowen has not here asserted the universalist view that everybody will be saved in the end, no matter what they have believed or how they have lived, but rightly gives biblical grounds for the affirmation that nobody is beyond the scope of God's mercy no matter what cultural or religious context they live in. His discussion certainly does not, in my view, constitute 'flagrant disregard' or 'mischievous extension' of the Scripture. In fact, Bowen carefully avoids the universalist interpretation of the classic old universalist proof texts (Rom 5:18 and 1 Cor 15:22) when he writes: 'Just as the destiny of the sinner Adam is shared by all who belong to him, so *all who belong to Christ* share Christ's obedience and righteousness' (my italics).

So I submit that the review's accusation that Bowen has taken some 'clever route' to 'pure liberalism' is unwarranted and offensive, unless liberalism has been re-defined to mean anything over which one evangelical school of thought disagrees with another over. There is nothing in the book, or in its author's leadership of Crosslinks (since the review implicates that as well), which weakens or denies the fundamental, non-negotiable cornerstones of evangelical identity: the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the deity of Jesus Christ and his uniqueness as the final revelation of God and the only Saviour of human beings, the atoning sacrifice of the cross of Christ and the cosmic victory of his bodily resurrection, and the abiding missionary mandate of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. I hope that readers will get the book and, like the worthy Bereans, see for themselves whether these things be so.

CHRIS WRIGHT, the Principal of All Nations Christian College, is President of Crosslinks.