

A NARROW VIEW OF THE GOSPEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONS

by Bob Moffitt

The Unbelievers

In 1984 a friend of mine conducted a survey in the small town in Guatemala where she was working. The majority of the people were nominally Roman Catholic. One purpose of the study was to discover how they perceived the evangelical Christians in their area.

The survey indicated that the Roman Catholic majority held these views about the evangelicals in their community:

- The evangelicals are "unbelievers" because they do not believe in:
 - the Virgin Mary
 - going to Mass
 - praying to the Saints
 - the Pope

... In short, they are a "cult."
- The evangelicals have nightly religious meetings, primarily for "recruitment" purposes.
- Evangelical church members believe that involvement in the present world is bad. The future life—after death—is what matters.
- After joining the "cult," the evangelicals often drop out of close relationships with family and friends.
- The evangelicals don't play soccer, pool or cards. They don't participate in local fiestas or drink with friends. They are not very friendly or sociable.
- Members of the evangelical "cult" think and act as if they are better than the other people in the community. They look down on people who are not part of their church.
- The evangelicals are not very concerned about problems of people who are not in their own group.
- The evangelicals probably would not be interested in working to improve the community.

Not an Isolated Case

Chavanne Jeune, a leading Haitian evangelical, says that conservative Protestant Christians in his country are often accused of preaching a gospel of "resignation." He explains that critics charge evangelicals with teaching their people to resign themselves to present injustices and to the struggle to survive because all will be

well when Jesus returns or when they die and go to heaven.

Several years ago Harvest became involved with a local church in Central America that was affiliated with one of the largest Protestant denominations in its country. The denomination was started by missionaries more than ninety years ago, and the local church had been in the community for almost twenty years. With Harvest's encouragement, the church began an outreach program for single mothers who needed a day-care program for their children. One of the denomination's administrators told us that the day-care program was the first outreach of the denomination in its ninety-year history in that country that was not designed to meet spiritual needs only. (Note: The day-care center was a vision of the young people of the church. They wanted to provide an alternative for single mothers in the community who sometimes were prostituting themselves in their homes in order to feed their children. The mothers had no place to leave their children to find other work in the city.)

At Harvest, we have seen many Third World churches with similar histories of limited ministry to physical or social needs. Although most of the churches faithfully preach the Gospel of spiritual salvation and teach their members to live a separated life, they often have not reflected a biblical compassion for the physical or social needs of the people of their communities. Tragically, then, many people who live in communities where there is desperate need have the same impression of the church that the Guatemalan survey indicated. They perceive that the church is unconcerned and irrelevant to the pressing physical and social brokenness around it.

The Bible clearly expresses God's intentions that His people proclaim *and* model His love to the broken lives in their midst. Why, then—if they believe the Bible and desire to be faithful to it—do conservative Protestant churches neglect physical and social ministry?

Historical Background—the Neglect of Physical and Social Ministry

From the Reformation until the mid-nineteenth century, the Protestant church was a leader in social reform. Then, things began to change.

First, *theological liberalism* began to emerge as a major influence in Protestant Christianity. This liberal Christianity believed that all people would be saved (universalism) and that Christians would bring in the Kingdom of God by working to correct the problems of society. At its extreme, liberal Christianity denied the need for personal salvation and preached the "good news" of the gospel of societal salvation through good works. This perspective came to be known as the "*social gospel*."

In reaction to this "social gospel," theologically traditional, conservative Protestants strongly promoted the need for personal salvation, and they tended to reject—or relegate to minor importance—issues of physical and social concern. They identified social and physical concerns as part of the theologically liberal movement and its "social gospel." The conservative Christians became known as fundamentalists, evangelicals, or Pentecostals.

A second theological movement, called *dispensational theology*, developed about 1840. It, too, had a strong influence on Protestant, conservative Christianity's involvement in social issues. This theological movement, founded by John Nelson Darby, has been responsible for much of evangelicalism's past and present pessimism about the future of our world. Darby believed that the world would inevitably get worse until Jesus comes to establish His Kingdom—and efforts to improve things in this life are doomed to fail. If the Kingdom of God is not for here

but for the future, then Christians should put their energies into the salvation of souls, according to dispensational thinking. Saving, rescuing, or redeeming a doomed society would be a waste of both time and resources. The Christian's priority would be to save people from hell, not to keep them from physical starvation.

Third, Western missionaries came from cultures which were relatively more affluent and technologically developed than the non-Western cultures in which they served. Missionaries often viewed host cultures with *paternalism*—poor, lacking in technical resources and skills, and unable to develop without help. This perspective sometimes kept the missionaries from teaching biblical stewardship to the poor. They thought, "Why teach stewardship when there is little to steward?"

Fourth, physical and social ministry was sometimes considered a *means for evangelism*—rather than an obedient expression of God's character that was offered regardless of the recipient's faith. (In fact, some ministries were manipulative—recipients "accepted" the Gospel in order to receive physical help.) Hospitals and schools are historical examples of physical and social ministries which gave evangelism as their primary reason for existence. Additionally, these ministries were often large, making them dependent on technology and funds from the missionary culture. They could not easily be duplicated or sustained in local economies.

Many of the conservative, Protestant churches in the Third World today have been strongly influenced by missionaries who came with one or more of the following: (1) a tradition that rejects liberal theology and the associated concern for social issues; (2) a tradition of pessimism about a redeemed society; (3) a perspective that sees "native" peoples as unable to lift themselves out of poverty without outside (Western) money and technology; (4) a model of social ministry as a means for evangelism, often unreplicable or manipulative.

As a consequence, many churches planted by these missionaries emphasized spiritual salvation, but discounted or neglected the physical and social concerns of people both inside and outside the church. Sadly, this emphasis continues in many Protestant churches of fundamentalist, evangelical and Pentecostal traditions today.

A Narrow View: A Contemporary and Historical Problem

The problem we have described is the result of emphasizing only one part of God's concern for man—the spiritual part. It comes when people have a limited perspective, an incomplete picture, a narrow view of the Gospel. Scripture is full of reflections of God's concern for man's physical and social needs. The Bible not only reflects God's concerns for all areas of man's life, but it mandates that God's people also reflect His concern by ministering to all of those needs.

Circumstances in ancient Israel differed from those at the time of the New Testament church. Yet, God found it necessary to address His people in both the New and Old Testaments about their tendency to focus on the spiritual and neglect the physical and social needs of those around them.

In Isaiah 58, God tells Israel that their worship of Him misses the mark. They think that their liturgy, their fasts, and their prayers are a sufficient expression of obedience—of spirituality. God, however, tells them that the kind of worship He wants is for them to reach out to the physical and social needs of those around them. He tells them He doesn't hear them when they pray because they have failed to live out their worship of Him by serving the needy. There are many other related passages in the Old Testament. (See Psalm 82:3,4; Proverbs 14:21,31; Proverbs 31:8-9; Ezekial 16:49.)

Similarly, Jesus, Peter, James, and Paul call for Christians to be involved in ministering to physical and spiritual needs. Three of the most familiar New Testament illustrations of this call are found in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); Jesus' account of the future judgment (Matthew 25:31-46); and James' admonition that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:14-17). A less familiar passage is Hebrews 13:14-16, where we are encouraged to do good in the present, but look to the future. In three New Testament passages, the Law of God is summarized by the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 7:12; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14). Throughout human history, there has been a tendency to think we can please God with "spiritual" piety, without addressing the physical and social needs of our needy neighbors.

Jesus and the Church—Witness to Wholism

Jesus' message was the "Good News" of the Kingdom. The Good News was that God was bringing restoration to all that was broken in the Fall (Colossians 1:20). When God sent Jesus into this world, he was concerned for more than man's fallen spiritual condition. Jesus preached and modeled this Good News of God's broad concern for people. He ministered not only to spiritual needs, but also to physical and other needs of the people he encountered. He taught a balance of reconciliation and service directed toward God, and reconciliation and service directed toward others. He taught his followers to preach and live that same balance. I believe this balance is what creation waits for with "eager expectation" (Romans 8: 19-21). The full revelation of the sons of God may not come until the full expression of the future kingdom, but Christians are to model that full expression and balance now, just as the first ripe grape of the season models the coming richness of the future harvest.

A Gospel that proclaims only one aspect—spiritual, physical, or social—is narrow, weak, and disobedient. It dishonors the Father. The world—especially the part of the world that is physically, socially, or emotionally broken—has a difficult time understanding God's compassion unless it hears *and* experiences God's love, wherever it feels the hurt of brokenness. Thus, churches and Christians who want an effective witness must be churches and Christians of the "whole" Gospel.

Implications for Ministry

There are several implications for ministry. The first implication is personal. We need to examine ourselves and see if we have adequately reflected God's concern for ministry to the whole person. Whether we have been aware of God's commands or not, we need to repent if we have not been reflecting His concern for all areas of need. We need to begin to be the Kingdom ambassadors He has called us to be.

Second, we need to examine our own churches in a similar manner. Are they proclaiming and living a limited, narrow, or partial Gospel? If they are, they need to see and confess their errors and begin to follow their Lord's instructions to minister in biblically-mandated balance. If you are the pastor or a leader of your church, I challenge you to be the catalyst in this process of examination, confession, and correction.

Third, new churches should be planted to proclaim and live the whole Gospel. Churches being planted today tend to have the narrow view of the Gospel that their planters inherited from their own pasts. This can be corrected only if church-planters have a vision for balanced ministry and know how to carry it out. Generally, this means training, which leads to the next implication.

Fourth, those who train church leaders and those who plant new churches need

theology and skills for balanced ministry. Seminaries, Bible schools, and Christian colleges and universities need to strengthen their curriculum. Those who are trained to lead or plant local assemblies should be equipped to plant churches that have a vision for balanced ministry. They should be equipped to reflect God's concern for the whole man. Training materials are needed for discipleship, Bible studies, sermons, and courses for future church leadership.

Strengthening a training institution's curriculum for balanced ministry will not be easy. First, the emphasis of balance goes against more than one- hundred years of tradition. Second, there is little tested curriculum available to equip local churches for balanced ministry. Most pastoral and missionary training institutions have little, if any, curriculum for ministry to physical and social needs in the Third World. Most of the current expertise in this field is found in relief and development agencies. These agencies are not often engaged in church planting or in strengthening local churches to minister wholistically. If they work with the local church at all, they work alongside it, not through it.

But there is good news. Some mission agencies and training institutions are catching a vision for balanced ministry through local Third World churches. Training programs are being developed for church planters, pastors, and church leaders. Harvest is participating in this effort. Our Leadership Development Training Program, initiated in 1987, was our initial commitment to address the need for balanced-ministry training. Subsequently, Harvest developed an expanded curriculum for use in institutions which train pastors and other church leadership, with field-testing beginning in 1997. This seven-course curriculum is called "Wholistic Ministry for the Local Church." Harvest welcomes collaboration with like-minded followers of Jesus. There is much to be dreamed, much to be researched and written, much to be tested and evaluated. The investment of time and energy will be high. The goal of equipping the local church to faithfully represent God's great intentions for our needy brothers and sisters is, without question, worth the investment.

May Thy Kingdom come, Lord Jesus. May Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

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