

BIBLICAL DEVELOPMENT

by Bob Moffitt

Secular vs. Biblical Development

What is "development?" How is it defined? What are its characteristics? Secular development and biblically-based development provide very different responses.

Secular development is designed to improve living conditions. It supports and encourages a higher quality of life, as defined by development agencies or by beneficiaries. Secular development believes that people, individually and corporately, can improve their quality of life through intentional human effort. In the Two-Thirds World, secular development works primarily to meet physical and social needs—health, water, housing, agriculture, economic enterprise, education, or political liberation. Good secular development has two key characteristics. First, it helps people help themselves. Secondly, it is sustainable—after a time, it can be continued locally without ongoing external support.

A biblical perspective of development affirms much of the above, yet with a radically different orientation. This difference is critical. Secular development is man-centered. It is for man, by man, and is limited to what man can do for himself. Biblical development, however, is God-centered. It begins with God, seeks to honor God, and relies on Him as the principal participant in the development process. Biblical development does not exclude man, but it sees man co-operating under God in the process of man's healing. In biblical development "quality of life" is determined by God's intentions for His people as shown in Scripture. Biblical development is not limited to the tangible and visible arenas of man's needs, but intentionally includes the healing of the less visible and tangible areas of emotion and spirit. Biblical development does not limit man's healing to what man can do for himself, but is as limitless as God's power, love, and mercy.

Why are these distinctives so important? Secular development points to a false faith in man's ability to heal himself. No matter how successful achievements appear, secular development will ultimately disappoint those who work for it and those who receive its benefits. Development work which is not based on God's revelation of His truth cannot turn people to Him and to His compassion for man's need, His salvation from the consequences of sin, or His plans for man's restoration from the brokenness of the fall. Therefore, our questions need to be "What is it that sets a ministry of biblical development apart from man-centered development efforts?" and "What is the significance of the difference?"

Distinctives of Biblical Development

1. God's Intentions: The Goal of Development

All development work must have a goal, an objective, an agenda. The Christian's objective and agenda is directed by God's intentions. Secular development asks recipients, "What are your needs?" Christian development asks, "What are God's intentions for you?" and "What are His intentions for this particular need?" The answers set goals for Christian development. Put another way, biblical development reflects God's mind for man, while secular development's goals are developed from man's mind. Because man's mind is rebellious by nature, it must repent—be changed to see man's condition as God sees it. If we do not know the mind of Christ, if our world view is not found on God's Word, then our goals for development

will not reflect God's intentions.

2. God's Intentions: The Standard for Development Needs

Development is a response to human needs, and development workers need a standard by which they can evaluate needs. Felt needs, for example, are legitimate concerns in development work, but they are not the only concern. They are not necessarily reliable indicators of actual need. An addict may feel the need for heroin, while a pregnant woman may feel the need for abortion on demand and an American teenager may feel the need for a new car. These needs represent real feelings—they are "felt needs." However, responding to them may actually hinder development. Instead, development workers must ask, "What is the root need beneath the felt need?" and "What causes this felt need?" Unless the felt need is life-threatening—such as food for a starving child—development work is usually best directed toward meeting root needs.

Christians realize that most felt and root needs are related to spiritual needs. They know that beyond visible needs are underlying spiritual causes. Scripture describes man's spiritual need, the relationships of spiritual need to physical and social need, and God's solution. Before setting goals for development, Christians should go first to God, seeking to understand His intentions. Going prayerfully to Scripture, the surest source of God's intentions, the Christian development worker must ask, "Father, what is Your perspective of this need, what is its root cause, and what is Your solution?"

3. Jesus' Development: A Model of God's Intentions for Man

Although Jesus was divine, He was also man. His development provides a model for biblical development. Luke, a medical doctor, described Jesus' development in four domains—wisdom, physical, spiritual, and social—saying, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." (Luke 2:52) This is a good starting point for understanding God's intentions for man's development. Specifically, if Jesus grew and developed in all these areas, then man, too, must grow and develop in these ways. With Jesus' development recorded in Scripture, it is clear that God is concerned about the whole man—about all of man's needs. Likewise, development workers must reflect this wholistic, or balanced, concern in attitude and action if they desire to represent God's intentions.

Jesus' development had a purpose—God's purpose. His purpose was to honor God, to serve, and to give His life for others. Man, also, should grow toward God's purpose—to love and honor Him and to love and serve others. Biblical development will lead man toward this purpose.

Jesus' development was in the context of adequacy, rather than affluence. God insured that Jesus had the necessary resources to grow in wisdom—a simple synagogue school in which the study of God's Law was the focus. He had the necessary resources to grow physically—shelter, clothing, food, water, sanitation, and physical labor. He had the necessary resources to grow spiritually—a God-fearing home and the ability to read the Scriptures. He had the necessary resources to grow socially—a loving, functional family who modeled appropriate relationships within the family and community. As representatives of God's intentions, development workers should plan and work to see that adequate resources are available for development in all these areas of human need.

4. God: The Primary Resource for Development

God is the original development Personality. He created all things. He sustains all

things. The Christian development worker is God's agent, representative, and steward. God has already provided resources which can be seen—and others which are not yet seen. As Jesus opened the eyes of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as he asked Peter to "see the fish" on the other side of the boat, so Jesus is the great revealer of resources. God has given man—as unique among His earthly creations—the heart, mind, and ability to discover and create "new" resources from the resources that God Himself has already provided. God empowers those who honor Him to see—to recognize—resources that they did not see before. As stewards of talents and other resources provided by God, development workers must prayerfully and courageously invest those resources in efforts that advance God's goals.

As Creator, God deals in the supernatural. He is not limited to the existing material world. He can and does miraculously intervene in human history. Because development workers are servants of the Living God, they are not limited to visible material resources. In the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties, they can take confidence in the biblical principal that the sacrificed (planted) seed of faith and works ultimately and always bears fruit. In II Chronicles 7:14 God promised Israel that, when His conditions for righteousness were met, He would "heal their land." Though given to Israel, this promise is true for God's people today. It is much more than a promise for political healing. It is a promise of healing for the people and their land.

Ten years ago I visited an impoverished village in central Mexico. Village leaders, recently converted, were committed to living God's way. They forgave each other of debts they formerly settled with blood. They weren't particularly interested in development. Yet, without the planned intervention of a development agency, the village was transformed by God's intentions from a place where families killed each other in blood feuds, to one where they served each other in love. Before, the village consisted of mud huts where pigs and chickens roamed freely; now, the mud huts have been replaced by tidy wooden houses. (In fact, the local people built the first seven wooden homes for the village widows.) Before, the only running water was a small stream and not one latrine; now, there is running water and sanitation. Before, the schoolhouse was empty; now, children attend school. It changed from a place of spiritual darkness to a place of spiritual life and freedom. Ten years ago, the prospect for development in this village looked bleak. However, God's intervention was not limited to visible resources. As the people of this village entered into a pact of righteousness with God—a pact in which they sought and followed His intentions—He "healed their land!"

5. Prayer and Obedience: Essentials for Biblical Development

Since biblical development relies primarily on God, connecting with God through prayer is vital. Prayer is work—hard work. The leaders in that developing Mexico village regularly went into the mountains to study Scripture and pray—for several days at a time. They stayed until they reached agreement about what God wanted them to do. They then returned and put their convictions into practice.

Prayer is the most essential aspect of development. Development efforts not initiated, covered, and sustained by the "work" of prayer are unlikely to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Such efforts will not produce lasting movement toward God's intentions.

The story of Nehemiah is one of Scripture's most powerful examples of the relationship between prayer and moving toward God's intentions in a development project. Before Nehemiah developed his plan for rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, he prayed. When he was confronted with what seemed like impossibilities, he

prayed. When God miraculously provided for the success of the project, he prayed. His actions exhibited obedience to God's direction—often at great personal risk. Those doing biblical development must authentically seek God's intentions and leadership—rather than simply ask Him to bless their plans. Authentic seeking requires obedient response.

6. Development: Conforming to God's Principles for All Cultures

Development that truly moves individuals or communities toward God's intentions must conform to His will and His laws. Development activities should acknowledge that God's blessings come not only by His mercy, but also by repentance and submission to His rule. Social breakdown is a result of sin, and rebellion against God's rule must be addressed.

When local values, customs, or world views are contrary to God's expressed or implied principles, they will prevent—or at least inhibit—development. Local customs need to be examined in light of Scripture—whether they concern man's relationship to God, to his fellowman, or to the rest of creation. Development goals, also, must be examined for consistency with biblical principles. Doing so raises questions like the following: Should development aim for adequacy or abundance of provision? In what circumstances? Is work God-ordained and God-honored, or is it something to be avoided or hastily completed? Is man to be God's appointed steward of creation, or is he in subjection to the created order?

How can people of any culture learn and apply God's principles? Who evaluates congruity between a local culture and a biblical world view? One effective cross-cultural missionary tells the local people he disciples that he doesn't want to share his ideas for applying biblical principles until they have first come to their own conclusions. He doesn't want his perspective of what God has spoken into his native culture—which is different—to unduly influence what God wants to say to the local people in their culture. He does, though, offer to serve as their guide through prayer and the study of Scripture—allowing the Holy Spirit to speak into the local culture by speaking to and through the local people. This missionary helps the local people discover that the Holy Spirit is just as willing and able to speak to them in their culture as to the missionary in his. Thus, the Holy Spirit's role is critical. The Holy Spirit is not limited by culture, but people are inescapably ethnocentric and cannot clearly delineate between God's standards and the values they acquire from their own cultures.

Biblical development workers should encourage and support local people to critique their cultures in light of the biblical plumb line. In fact, Christian development workers themselves should exhibit an ongoing, humble examination of their own values and customs, never assuming that these values fully represent God's intentions.

7. The Local Church: Active Participant and Leader in Development

Note: "Local church" includes semi-formal and formal groups of self-acknowledged followers of Jesus Christ in a local community, organized for the purposes of worship, sacraments, preaching, evangelism, discipleship, mutual support, and sometimes service to those outside the church.

The local church is to be the leader and active participant in development. However, an emphasis on the importance of the church in development must point beyond strategies and techniques. The importance of the local church in development is defined by what the church *is*—in the design and heart of God. Howard A. Snyder,

in *The Community of the King*, states:

So the Church is not to be understood primarily as a means to the end of transforming society. This would be to trample over the uniqueness and infinite worth to God of the Christian community. Besides, the amazing and profound fact is that the Church most transforms society when it is itself growing and being perfected in the love of Christ. In fact when the Church is taken merely as a means to transform society, very little is accomplished. For in that case the uniqueness of the Church is denied and we enter the battle on the same terms as secular and godless forces. We assume the battle for right and justice can be won by force, by technique, by doing. It can't. These very clearly are not the weapons of Christian warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20). Truly Christian transformation of culture comes through Christ-like (and hence sacrificial) love, community and being.

But this fact by no means cancels out the responsibility to do, to act, to walk in the words of God. Rather, the being and the doing go together. The being is fundamental, but the doing is the natural result.¹

The local church generally is the most visible and permanent representation of God's Kingdom in any community—regardless of the quality of that representation. Individual local churches in a community—or individual churches in a community working together—have more potential than any other Christian institution to reflect God's concern in each domain of man's need. Why? Other Christian institutions are committed to a particular focus—evangelism, education, health, water, housing, or economic development. Consequently, they are limited by their organizational mandates in their ability to represent God's whole concern for the whole person. However, the biblical mandate for development covers all of God's concerns for man. The local church, as the expression of God's will and ways, should be similarly concerned and actively involved in servant leadership—proclaiming and demonstrating God's love in the community. Wherever possible, Christian development and mission agencies should strengthen the local church to envision and carry out ministry to the whole person.

But there are problems. Often, local churches' narrow theologies exclude all but spiritually oriented ministry. Sometimes, the leadership of the local churches lacks the vision or experience to plan and carry out balanced ministry. Divisive and competitive spirits may isolate churches in the same community from one another. Sometimes, there is greater reflection of biblical values outside local churches than within, church members may not all be believers, and some churches may be churches in name only.

Because of these and other problems, parachurch organizations often take an easier route—working "alongside of," or "in cooperation with," or "independent of" local churches. Such solutions further weaken local churches and their ability to represent God's whole concern for the whole person. Christian missions and/or development agencies must give priority commitment to strengthening local churches—where they exist. If they do, there will be at least two results. First, local churches will grow in their ability to proclaim and demonstrate God's intentions for the people of their communities. Second, the potential for sustainability of the development work will increase.

8. Development: The Task of the Poor (As Well As the Rich)

In the "Parable of the Talents" recorded in Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus explained that nobody is exempt from the responsibility to courageously risk his or her resources

for the Kingdom of God. Missionaries and development workers must not view the poor as too poor to help themselves, unless the situation is one of their survival. Relying on outside resources to meet their needs often reinforces the poor's sense of powerlessness. If outside resources are provided before local people learn to value and steward the resources God has already entrusted to them, these resources themselves may create a long-term dependency on outside financial, material, and technical aid. The history of modern development is replete with examples of well-intended efforts which inhibited, rather than advanced, development.

God multiplies the gifts of the poor. In the biblical accounts of the "Widow of Zarahath," the "Feeding of the 5,000," and the "Widow's Mite," God acted supernaturally in response to their sacrificial expressions of love for Him. Development workers must trust even the poor to demonstrate God's love to those around them. For the poor, this is their gift from God.

In India village church members began to realize that they had a responsibility to invest the little they had to demonstrate God's love to their Hindu neighbors. Church women went out into the community to see what needs existed. They discovered that a dozen village women owned only one sari apiece. Every other day, when they washed and dried their saris, they could not leave their homes for shopping and other necessities. The pastor asked if any women in the congregation who owned three saris could give up one of them for the Hindu women's needs. The result? All twelve of the needed saris were given and delivered. At the same time some Hindu women also asked the Christians to visit them and pray to the Christian God for the protection of their unborn children. The pastor called for volunteers who would go to the Hindu women who requested prayer. The Hindu women received visits and friendship from Christian neighbors, and their needs were lifted before God. Matching needs with resources has become a part of the Sunday worship experience of these Christians. A church which had earlier seen itself as too poor to make a difference now entered a completely new dimension of outreach.

Calling the poor to sacrificial stewardship in no way excludes from responsibility those with abundant resources. Some people quote Jesus' statement in John 12:8 to excuse indifference to the poor, but His message was really very different. He said, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." Jesus did not mean that the plight of the poor is unchangeable. Instead, He was quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." God expects compassionate and liberal sharing of resources with those in need. Encouraging all people to risk their resources for the Kingdom is crucial in developing a strategy to help others. All people, rich or poor, are to use every resource entrusted to them to bless others, to honor God, and to expand the Kingdom.

9. Development: The Responsibility of All Believers

The first or greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is for believers to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind. Christians express and live out their love for God through what Jesus referred to as the second commandment—they are to love their neighbors as they love themselves. It is impossible for believers to love their neighbors without being willing to contribute to God's intentions for them in all their areas of need. This is clear in Isaiah 58, Matthew 7:12-28, Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 10:25-37, James 2:14, I John 3:16-18, and I John 4:20-21.

Christians are not saved by loving their neighbors. However, when Christ's spirit dwells within them, Christ's compassion drives them to joyfully help others move toward God's intentions for them in every area of His concern. Christians should be

available representatives of God's loving intentions—to family members, to brothers and sisters in Christ, to "neighbors" they know, and to distant "neighbors" whose needs they know.

10. Biblical Development: A Reason for Confidence

Biblical development workers walk in the faith and confidence that God honors obedience and uses it to bring people and history toward His grand plan. During her lifetime the widow who gave her mite at the Temple never knew how greatly God used her. Yet, God has multiplied one poor widow's obedient offering many times. Her example has motivated millions to greater sacrifice. When development is done on Scriptural principles, Christians can likewise be confident of the outcome—with or without immediate, observable results. From outward appearances, in fact, Jesus died as a failure. In retrospect we know that His life's work was the most spectacular success in all of human and heaven's history.

From a biblical perspective, no urban slum is hopeless. No human life is so broken that it cannot be moved toward God's intentions. In spite of the brokenness of our world and the brokenness of its people, families, villages, cities, and nations, here is the confidence that representatives of the Kingdom of God can claim as their spiritual birthright: Nothing is too difficult for God!

¹Howard A. Snyder, *Community of the King* (Illinois:Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 69-70.

[back](#)