

IS THERE A HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL? DOES THE CHURCH HAVE A SOCIAL COMMISSION TOO?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Social missions are pervasive in today's business environment. We see it in the pink coloring of products indicating a small portion of the profit being given to *Susan G. Komen for the Cure* to help fight breast cancer, Chili's Grill & Bar encouraging its customers to make a donation for *St. Jude Children's Research Hospital*, Ruby Tuesday's *Cookies for a Cause* program, or Panera Bread opening *Panera Cares Community Cafes*. There are consulting firms that help businesses launch social initiatives.¹ Cause-related marketing is good for business. Sometimes the best public relations campaign is to be found doing something good.

Popular television shows incorporate social missions in their story lines and activities. *American Idol* has its "Idol Gives Back" fundraising segment. *The Amazing Race* (Fall 2010) had its teams take a day off in Ghana to paint a school. *The Bachelor* (Winter 2011) donated a solar panel for heating water to a school in South Africa.

¹ For example, Changing Our World, Inc. is a consulting firm that helps companies identify a social mission and incorporate it in their organization. See <http://www.changingourworld.com/site/PageServer> (accessed November 9, 2010).

Today's Evangelical church has not been left behind on this trend. A new Evangelicalism with a new social commission has emerged.

Believers in Christ are called to do good for people. Paul the Apostle exhorted, "While we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal 6:10). So, when a movement comes along that wants us to do good works, I'm sure we would agree, "Yes, let's do them." But what is being advanced is more than just doing good works. The Christian mission has been redefined and expanded.

Towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century many evangelical Christians have taken up contemplative spirituality,² a return to ritual,³ and a social and environmental mission on par with a spiritual mission. Does the church have a spiritual *and* social commission?

II. GENESIS OF THE EVANGELICAL SPIRITUAL/SOCIAL COMMISSION

The movement among evangelicals to take up a social and spiritual commission for the church began in a significant way at the First International Congress on World Evangelization called by evangelist Billy Graham, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974.⁴ John Stott, in an expanded version of his Lausanne address entitled

² See Philippe R. Sterling, "Christian Leadership and Mentoring: Contemplative Theology's Trojan Horse," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* vol. 20 no. 39 (Autumn 2007), 17-35.

³ See Philippe R. Sterling, "The Return to Ritual: Should Free Grace Churches Adopt Ash Wednesday, Lent, and Other Emergent Church Practices?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* vol. 22 no. 43 (Autumn 2009), 29-43.

⁴ See Jacob Thomas, *From Lausanne to Manila: Evangelical Social Thought* (ISPCK, 2003). Thomas traces the development of evangelical thinking about evangelism and social action from the first Lausanne Congress (1974) to the second Manila (1989) and the smaller conferences in between. See also *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Action*, Editor Bruce Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

Christian Mission in the Modern World, articulated the change from his earlier thinking, which reflected that of most evangelicals of the time, of understanding the Great Commission primarily as being “a preaching, converting and teaching mission”:

Today, however, I would express myself differently. It is not just that the commission includes the duty to teach converts everything Jesus had previously commanded (Matt 28:20), and that social responsibility is among the things which Jesus commanded. I now see more clearly that not only the consequences of the commission but the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus.⁵

The Lausanne Committee held a Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility at Grand Rapids in June 1982. The Lausanne Occasional Paper 21 *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment* emerged from this gathering.⁶ Section 4 C on the relationship between Evangelism and social responsibility asserts at one point “social activity not only follows Evangelism as its consequence and aim, and precedes it as a bridge, but also accompanies it as its *partner*. They are like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird.”⁷

David Bosch puts this conception of the church’s mission in a mathematical analogy: “Evangelism + social action = mission.”⁸ This mission is the total task that God

⁵ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 23.

⁶ The paper can be found online at <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-21.html>. Accessed January 25, 2011.

⁷ *Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1982), 23.

⁸ David J. Bosch, “In Search of a New Evangelical Understanding,” in the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism book, *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Action*, ed. Bruce Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 79. See also p. 82.

has set for the salvation of the world. The church's mission becomes one of saving souls and societies.

The Lausanne Committee hosted the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization in Thailand. The theme of the Forum was "A new vision, a new heart, a renewed call." Occasional Paper No. 33 was produced by the Issue Group on Holistic Mission.⁹ In the paper Rene Padilla asks "How is the mission of the church defined? What is included in mission?"¹⁰ He answers, "The mission of the church is multifaceted because it depends on the mission of God, which includes the whole of creation and the totality of human life." He approvingly quotes from the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission, "Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together."¹¹ A number of statements summarize the church's mandate such as: "The church must pursue a holistic theology where economic justice is integral to its mission" and "A commitment to promoting health globally is mandatory for Christians and this includes a just distribution of resources." Bob Moffitt writes in the conclusion of Occasional Paper No. 33:

Redemption was completed on the cross, but God has given the church the task of administering the process of restoration until his return... the church is more important to the healing of human brokenness—hunger, sickness, political corruption, and economic injustice—than civil leaders, state governments, economic policy and development, or scientific advance. God

⁹The paper can be found online at http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP33_IG4.pdf. Accessed January 25, 2011.

¹⁰"Holistic Mission, Lausanne Occasional paper No. 33," in *A New Vision, A New Heart, A Renewed Call*, ed. David Claydon, Ed. Vol 1 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 216-20.

¹¹ See the Micah Declaration online at <http://micahnetwork.org/en/integral-mission/micah-declaration>. Accessed January 25, 2011. For a history of the Micah Challenge see Joel Edwards, "Micah Challenge: The Story So Far", in *Micah's Challenge: The Church's Responsibility to the Global Poor*, Edited by Maryke Hoek and Justin Thacker (London: Paternoster, 2008), 1-12.

will use these and other modalities to advance His purpose, but the church holds the principle ordination for this supreme assignment.¹²

Participants at Cape Town 2010 renewed the commitment to the visions and goals of the Lausanne Movement among which is the duty of evangelism and social-political involvement. Included in *The Cape Town Commitment—A Declaration of Belief and a Call to Action* was an affirmation of the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission.¹³

Many evangelical churches and organizations have taken up the spiritual/social commission mandate. A few illustrations follow.

III. EXAMPLES OF THE EVANGELICAL SPIRITUAL/SOCIAL COMMISSION

A. RICK WARREN'S PEACE PLAN

My first realization of the extent of the social/spiritual commission movement among Evangelicals was with the introduction of Rick Warren's peace plan. The dedicated website explains that the vision of the peace plan is to mobilize Christians around the world to address the five giant problems of spiritual emptiness, self-serving leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy.¹⁴ The church responds to these five global giants by five expressions making up the acronym peace: Promote reconciliation, Equip servant leaders, Assist the poor, Care for the sick, and Educate the next generation. When the program was first introduced the P stood for Planting churches, but the emphasis shifted to Promote reconciliation. The shift in emphasis reflected the effort to broaden involvement to

¹² *A New Vision, A New Heart, A Renewed Call*, 277.

¹³ See <http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11544/0/1>. Accessed January 25, 2011.

¹⁴ See <http://thepeaceplan.com/Vision>. Accessed January 25, 2011.

more churches and religious groups worldwide as well as public and private sector organizations.

Warren's peace plan broadens the mission of the church with a global social agenda. It also promotes an ecumenical, interfaith, governmental, and business partnership in the fulfillment of the mission.

B. RICHARD STEARNS' THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL

*The Hole in Our Gospel*¹⁵ is the bestselling book by Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision. It won the 2010 Christian Book of the Year award from the Evangelical Christian Publisher's Association. The book recounts Stearns' spiritual journey and decision to leave the corporate world and lead World Vision, one of the largest Christian humanitarian organizations. He tries to answer the question, "What does God expect of us?" He provides an answer that he says changed his life and might just change the world. The title of the book suggests that we have missed something essential about the gospel.

Stearns lays out the essential elements of his thesis in the introduction:

The idea behind *The Hole in Our Gospel* is quite simple. It's basically the belief that being a Christian, or follower of Jesus Christ, requires much more than just having a *personal* and transforming relationship with God. It also entails a *public* and transforming relationship with the world.¹⁶

The gospel itself was born of God's vision of a changed people, challenging and transforming the prevailing values and practices of our world... He called us to go out, to proclaim the

¹⁵ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

“good news”—to *be* the “good news”—and to change the world.¹⁷

The whole gospel is a vision for ushering in God’s kingdom—now, not in some future time, and here, on earth, not in some distant heaven.¹⁸

For Stearns, the whole gospel is spiritual and social. The mission of believers is to transform the world and usher in the kingdom. He writes in the concluding chapter:

Picture a different world. Imagine one in which two billion Christians embrace this gospel—the whole gospel—each doing a part by placing his or her piece of the puzzle and completing God’s stunning vision of a reclaimed and redeemed world—the kingdom of God among us.¹⁹

C. EVANGELICAL CAMPUS MINISTRIES

Christianity Today posted in 2009 an article entitled *A More Social Gospel*.²⁰ The following quotes from the article illustrate the social works and social service focus of Evangelical campus ministries today.

Cornerstones of evangelistic outreach to college students—concerts and pizza parties—are harder to find these days. One is just as likely to encounter nights spent with the homeless, meetings about human trafficking, and out-reach to gay students.

“There has been a definitive shift in how campus ministries think about connecting with students,” said Kara Powell, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary. “More and more campus leaders are realizing

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 278.

²⁰ C. L. Lopez, “A More Social Gospel,” *Christianity Today* (December 2009), 18. The article can be read online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/december/29.18.html>. Accessed January 31, 2010.

that the gospel is both personal evangelism and justice.”

Scott Bessenecker, associate director of missions for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, said students within the organization’s 850 groups on 562 campuses have focused more on social causes in recent years.²¹

Josh Spavin, an intern with the University of Central Florida’s (UCF) Campus Crusade for Christ chapter, said traditional evangelistic outreach still works, but times have changed with this generation.²²

Spavin said he hopes his chapter will launch an HIV/AIDS outreach with a campus gay and lesbian group.

Ministries with a sincere commitment to social issues can repair the “poor image of campus evangelicals” among peers who associate them with homophobia and political conservatism, said University of Alabama history professor John Turner, who wrote 2008’s *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ*.²³

“One way for evangelicals to counter these negative stereotypes and put themselves in a position to talk about Jesus is to engage in meaningful social justice work that even non-evangelicals can appreciate,” said Turner. “There is a danger of losing sight of evangelistic goals.

²¹ James Choung of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has developed a tool called “The Big Story” to share a broader gospel. Christianity Today devoted a major article concerning this: “From Four Laws to Four Circles,” *Christianity Today* (July 2008):30-33. Find this online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/11.31.html>. Accessed January 31, 2011.

²² Campus Crusade has a justice study curriculum for its small groups. See http://crupress.campuscrusadeforchrist.com/green/_assets/resources/IJM-Social-Justice-Bible-Studies.pdf. Accessed January 31, 2011.

²³ The subtitle of the book is, *The Renewal of Evangelicism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

But not taking these steps presents an even greater danger to those same goals.”²⁴

D. UNITE AND "GO AND BE"

Last year my church was invited to be part of “Go and Be 2010.” It was a campaign that mobilized 20,000 volunteers from 50 churches all over the Dallas area to forego attending worship services on the first Sunday in May to engage in social service projects.²⁵ Many well-known Evangelical and denominational churches participated.²⁶ “Go and Be 2011” will include the whole month of April. “Go and Be” is a collaborative service effort sponsored by a group called Unite. Concerning its mission it says on its website:

Unite is a diverse network of churches joining forces to engage and transform our communities for God’s glory and the advancement of His Kingdom.²⁷

Concerning its foundational beliefs it says:

Our partner churches are diverse in many ways including denominationally. As such, an important key to effective partnership will be a commitment to set aside differences in practices and doctrines that are secondary to our faith while coming together around those truths that we all hold as the foundation of our Christian faith. To that end, churches who wish to join with Unite should make sure they agree with statements contained in the Lausanne Covenant.²⁸

²⁴ Lopez, “A More Social Gospel,” 18.

²⁵ See their website <http://unitethechurch.org>. Accessed January 25, 2011.

²⁶ Some of which were Irving Bible Church, Stonebriar Community Church, Lake Point Church, and Watermark Church.

²⁷ <http://unitethechurch.org>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

The reference to the Lausanne Covenant²⁹ brings us back to the genesis of the Evangelical spiritual/social commission movement. Let us proceed with an evaluation of the movement.

IV. EVALUATION OF THE EVANGELICAL SPIRITUAL/SOCIAL COMMISSION

A. DISSENTING VOICES AT LAUSANNE'S CONSULTATION

There were dissenting voices at the Lausanne Committee's Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility in 1982. Among them were Harold Lindsell, editor emeritus of *Christianity Today*, and Arthur P. Johnston, professor of World Missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Lindsell argued in his response to a paper that the mission of the church is Evangelism and that those major denominations in the USA that allocated time and resources to social action have declined in membership and in intent for Evangelism.³⁰ Their praxis showed that their theory was deficient. He feared the same would happen to Evangelical churches which included social action in their mission. He concluded his response by asking:

“May not the notion that changed men change society be the key to the problem? May not evangelism do more good than social action? Does social action belong to the mission of the church as church or to believers who make up the churches?”³¹

²⁹ This can be read at <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>. Accessed January 27, 2011.

³⁰ Harold Lindsell, “Response to ‘Evangelism and Social Responsibility—A Biblical Study on Priorities,’ by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden,” in *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility*, ed. Bruce Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 189-214.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

His answer was:

“The mission for the members of the churches describes a number of activities that the Church as Church is not called upon to do in the world.”³²

Dr. Johnston presented the paper “The Kingdom in Relation to the Church and the World.”³³ One of the conclusions of his study was:

The Kingdom of God is not to be identified with the progressive social improvement of mankind in which the task of the Church is to transform earth like unto heaven and to do it now. Citizens of the Kingdom do produce changes in society as the fruit of their redeemed lives. Spiritual revivals and improvements in society may be expected, but there can be no optimistic prospect of the moral and social well-being of mankind before the second coming.³⁴

In a book he wrote earlier in response to the first Lausanne Congress Dr. Johnston observed how the traditional view of saving individual souls had been challenged by the so-called Social Gospel in earlier decades and in the 1970s by a theology of holistic mission.³⁵ He cautioned that a shift from a primary emphasis on Evangelism as the mission of the church to a dual commitment to Evangelism and social work could lead to a singular interest in social concern and finally to a this-worldly preoccupation.³⁶ He advocated that in the theology of mission, Evangelism should be retained in its priority and primacy.³⁷ He observed that “Scripture simply supports Evangelism and discipleship as the primary mission of

³² Ibid.

³³ Arthur P. Johnston, “The Kingdom in Relation to the Church and the World,” in *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Action*, ed. Bruce Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 109-133.

³⁴ Ibid., 128.

³⁵ Arthur Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1978), 227.

³⁶ Ibid., 327.

³⁷ Ibid., 329.

the church.”³⁸ His concluding evaluation of the Lausanne Congress was:

Lausanne’s theology could have been strengthened...
in the theology of mission, evangelism should have
retained not only its priority and primacy, but also the
unique status it held...³⁹

B. SUMMARY OF OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON SOCIAL MISSION

Israel’s king had a spiritual, social and political mission (see 2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; Ps 72). He was the human ruler of a theocratic state. God appointed him to do justice and establish righteousness under the Law. The individuals of the nation were also in their personal lives to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8).

Jesus in establishing His messianic identity at His first coming healed the sick, performed miracles such as the feeding of the five thousand, raised the dead and so forth (see Matt 11:1-6). Still, he did not indiscriminately heal and perform miracles for everyone (see Luke 4:16-30). The establishment of peace and righteousness over all the earth awaits His second coming.

During the church age, a nation’s governing authorities are ministers of God to praise the good and punish the evil (Rom 13:1-7). The church itself does not wield political authority and does not carry the responsibility of establishing righteousness and justice in all the earth. The church is to concern itself with the spiritual mission of going into all the world proclaiming the saving message and making disciples (Mark 16:15; Matt 28:18-20). In the course of fulfilling the spiritual commission, the church and individual believers within reasonable limits are to do whatever good they have the opportunity to do for all

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

people and especially the household of faith (Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 5:3-16; 6:17-19).

Donald Guthrie has done a helpful review of NT teaching on social responsibility.⁴⁰ His conclusion is “Social relief and social reform are not the gospel, but they flow naturally from it.”⁴¹

C. GEORGE W. PETERS AND THE MISSIONARY TASK

My Missions class at Dallas Theological Seminary had as its main text *A Biblical Theology of Missions* by George W. Peters. He maintained that in order to define the mission of the church precisely that there needed to be a clear grasp of the twofold mandate of God to man set forth in the Bible.⁴² The first mandate was given to Adam as representative of the race and included the natural and social aspects of man such as habitat, politics, social and moral order, physical care, etc. The second mandate was given to the apostles as representatives of the church of Jesus Christ and majored in the spiritual liberation and restoration of man although it does not overlook his physical and social welfare. The second mandate involves evangelism, discipleship training, church-planting, church care, and benevolent ministries.

Christians as members of the human race are not exempt from the responsibilities of the first mandate. But this does not constitute their divine calling and mission as the church. Care must be taken not to confuse the two mandates and speak of them on equal terms as the mission of the church. If the mandates are too closely inter-related or blended the gospel suffers and divine priorities

⁴⁰ Donald Guthrie, “The New Testament Approach to Social Responsibility,” *Vox Evangelica* 8 (1973):40-59. The article can be found online at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol08/social-responsibility_guthrie.pdf. Accessed January 31, 2011.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴² George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 166-71. Peters writes from a premillennial perspective. Richard Stearns in *The Hole in our Gospel* seems to have embraced an amillennial or postmillennial eschatology.

are blurred. This was the case with the social gospel and liberalism.

D. A VOICE FROM 1934

As the Preacher observed in Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Some critiques of the Old Social Gospel apply to the Evangelical Spiritual/Social gospel. Joseph Harris offers a helpful analysis in a *Bibliotheca Sacra* article in 1934.⁴³

Harris points out that the fact that the NT Gospel has social implications and effects for the regenerate and unregenerate is evident from the NT itself and from history. But such effects are limited by the nature of sin and the existence and activity of Satan. He counsels:

It is best for the church to stay by the old message of personal salvation and to leave the social fruit of the faith thus produced to work out its own development. Undue emphasis on social service may only hinder...The wise servant of Christ will not place his hopes in the illusive glamour of a “social” gospel, but will patiently accept the revealed fact that God’s time for removing Satanic influence upon the world of men and restraining their sin so as to make millennial conditions possible is the Second Advent of His Son.⁴⁴

E. SUMMARY

What’s wrong with a more social gospel? It burdens the church with an added mission that can sap most of its resources. It can lead to a loss of focus on the primary mission of evangelism and edification. It ultimately fails for the church will not transform the world and usher in the kingdom. That awaits the coming of the Lord.

⁴³ Joseph Edwin Harris, “Sin, Satan and the Social Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October 1934), 447-56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 455-56.

The church's primary mission is Evangelism and discipleship. If we try to combine and balance a spiritual and social mission we may end up doing neither well and may eventually minimize the spiritual mission and drift to a primary social mission. The YMCA and Salvation Army are good examples of such a drift.

If we focus on the spiritual mission then social work can be a by-product. For example, Wycliffe Bible Translators has focused on the spiritual mission of Bible translation and has as a by-product made greater literacy possible for the people that received the Bible in their own language.⁴⁵

Are we commanded, "Go into the world and do social works and bring about social justice"? No! The church does not have the responsibility of transforming the world. The coming of the Kingdom is not dependent on the church's social justice work. The church has a spiritual mission of evangelism and edification (Eph 4:11-16).

V. RECOMMENDATION

As I illustrated in the introduction concerning the social initiatives of businesses, social actions are not unique to the church. There are many non-Christians engaged in social mission serving the needs of the poor, the afflicted, or the homeless. Government and non-profits do this. The church has a unique spiritual mission.

Don't change the mission of the church. The church should focus on the spiritual mission of sharing the saving message and making disciples and let social works simply be a by-product or fruit. The church does not have a spiritual and social commission. It has a spiritual commission.

⁴⁵ See <http://www.wycliffe.org/go/careers/typesofwork/languagework/literacy.aspx>. Accessed February 26, 2011.



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