

# **Evangelism and Social Responsibility**

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Over the past two centuries the modern Protestant movement has planted vital churches around the world. Today, the center of Christianity is moving to these younger churches. This growth has not been without its problems. One area of deep concern to many in evangelical circles is the division in proclaiming the gospel between evangelism and social concerns. Despite many efforts to present a whole gospel, the consequences of this dualism in missions and churches remain devastating.

The roots of this division go back to the eleventh century and the reintroduction of Greek thought into medieval Europe. In the ministry of Christ there is a wholism that does not seem natural today. During the middle ages, churches and monasteries were centers of worship, evangelism, literacy, relief, medicine and agriculture. By the eighteenth century, however, the church felt called to worship and mission, but education, medicine and agriculture became the domains of science and the modern nation state. This shift was due to the reintroduction of the Greek dualism between spirit and matter, supernatural and natural, and heavenly concerns and earthly concerns. This displaced the medieval worldview, rooted in Biblical thought, that divided reality between God the Creator, and Creation. In this view God was involved intimately in all of creation, and all creation, including spiritual and material concerns, was one. The shift to the Greek dualism was formalized in theology by Thomas Aquinas. The result was the increasing separation between religion and science, eternal concerns and earthly needs.

On the surface, the modern mission movement began with a whole gospel. Missionaries planted churches, started schools, hospitals, handicraft projects and agricultural centers. They ~~and~~ cared for the starving during times of famine, and called for social justice. Underneath these

activities, however, the Greek dualism persisted. Evangelism and church planting were seen as signs of Christianity, and education, medicine and agriculture signs of Civilization. Many missionaries saw it their task to both Christianize and Civilize the world. In much of the world, the people adopted science, technology and other manifestations of modern rational thought introduced by the missionaries, but rejected the Gospel they proclaimed. Consequently, Christian missions often became a secularizing force.

A second consequence of this dualism was that missions organized schools, hospitals and agricultural projects modeled after Western institutions, which did not fit local ways of social organization. These institutions required larger amounts of organization skill and money, most of which was brought from the West. When missions turned these institutions over to local churches, they became heavy burdens that the local churches could not sustain.

The division between evangelism and social concern reached its peak in the early twentieth century in the battles between liberals and fundamentalists, and the emergence of the Social Gospel Movement. Conservative churches increasingly focused their attention on evangelism and church planting, and left relief and development tasks to para-church agencies. In many parts of the world, Christianity is now seen as dealing with ultimate concerns, and with little to contribute to the urgent needs of the contemporary world.

In recent years there has been a growing effort in evangelical circles to restore a wholistic understanding of the Gospel. The Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission was held at Wheaton, Illinois, in 1966, sponsored by the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association and the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association: agencies that represented one hundred and two mission boards and thirty thousand missionaries. The congress, which had almost one thousand delegates from seventy-one countries, led to *The Wheaton Declaration*, which recognized the

need for the church to address contemporary issues such as racism, war, population explosion, poverty and family disintegration. This growing concern for a Christian response to social problems was due, in part, to the large number of participants from outside the United States, whose churches could not ignore the social evils around them.

The World Congress on Evangelism, sponsored by *Christianity Today*, was held in Berlin in 1966. It reaffirmed the importance of proclaiming the Gospel, but in the closing statement condemned racism, and called for repentance and unity in a sorely divided world. In the regional congresses that followed (Singapore, Minneapolis, Bogotá), the involvement of the church in social issues became a growing theme. In 1973 the Workshop on Evangelicals and Social Concern drafted the *Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern* which sought to transcend the traditional dichotomy between evangelism and social responsibility.

The International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, 1974, took a major step by affirming that both evangelism and social responsibility are essential to the mission of the Church. *The Lausanne Covenant* stated that ‘The message of salvation also implies a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist (section 5).’ The plea to keep evangelism and social concerns together was strengthened by a response to Lausanne affirmed by some five hundred participants. This effort to bring evangelism and social responsibility together led to sharp criticisms on the part of some mission leaders in North America, but for many, particularly those in the two thirds world, it was an invitation to proclaim a whole Gospel. This was affirmed in the All India Conference on Evangelical Social Action (1979), Second Latin American Congress on Evangelism (1979), and the Consultation on Simple Lifestyle (1980) sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical

Fellowship. Although attempts were made at the Consultation on World Evangelization (Pattaya 1980) to focus on world evangelism, many delegates called for inclusion of social issues in the conference statement.

The need to clarify the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility led to the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (Grand Rapids, 1982) sponsored by the Lausanne Committee, and the Consultation on the Church in Response to Human Need (Wheaton, 1983) sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship. Both affirmed that evangelism cannot be divorced from meaningful involvement with people in all their needs. In recent years, Christian agencies such as World Vision International, Food for the Hungry, and Mennonite Central Committee have begun theological and administrative reflections on how to implement the proclamation of the whole Gospel.

It is clear that as long as evangelism and social concern are seen as two separate entities that need to be integrated, the dualism that has weakened missions will remain. Some will reduce one to the other: conservatives will see social ministries as means to evangelistic ends, and liberals will see social ministries as ends in themselves. Others will try to balance the two: conservatives calling for a priority on evangelism, and liberals for attention to the urgent needs of a desperate world. Both approaches fail to integrate the different strands of the gospel into a single whole.

Christians will proclaim a whole gospel only when we reject the dualism between supernatural and natural realities, religion and science and evangelism and social concerns. One step in this direction have been the ministries of young churches in other cultures that make no division between spiritual and material realities. They often model ministries to whole persons and societies. A second step is the growing concern in evangelical mission agencies to present a whole gospel. This has led to a focus on people more than tasks, on partnership with young

churches in ministry to a lost and broken world, and on living communities of faith rather than bureaucratic institutions. Increasingly the church is being seen as a healing community where Christians gather to worship, to bear witness to the world, and to minister healing to people in the full sense of that term. Third, there has been a growing emphasis on a theology of the Kingdom of God, in which evangelism, church, ministry and prophetic witness are parts of the whole. This Kingdom, however, cannot be defined by theories of modern utopias, such as Marxism and Capitalism. It is defined by Christ, its King. He and his incarnation as a human bring together into one God's concern for all his creation, now and for eternity. His salvation is to restore *shalom* to all creation, manifest in a new heaven and a new earth characterized by righteousness, peace, justice, and fullness of life. On earth, *shalom* is to characterize the *ekklesia*, the 'assembly' or gathering of God's people, and the life of the individual Christian. Dan Fountain points out, "God's plan for the world is this: that all persons everywhere, in every nation, know God's saving health and be delivered from disobedience, disruption, despair, disease and all that would destroy our wholeness."

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### **Relevant Literature**

Bradshaw, Bruce. 1993. Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development and *Shalom*. Monrovia, CA: MARC.

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