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Christian Relief and Development and Its Role in Holistic Mission

BURT NOWERS AND RANDY STEGER

Introduction

Jesus had a special sense of mission to the poor and oppressed. Early in his ministry we read, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4.18–19). He cared for those in need by feeding the hungry. Large crowds gathered to listen to him. When they became hungry, his disciples suggested that Jesus send the people away to buy food. But he responded by saying “I have compassion for these people” (Mark 8.2) and he proceeded to perform miracles to feed them.

Contemporary Debate

In modern times the church has debated what God really expects from his people concerning the poor. We adopted terms like charity and benevolence, which can be traced back to the fourteenth century and meant a disposition to do good to others. We developed terms like “social gospel” and “rice Christians” in the debate concerning the relationship between the church and the poor. In more recent history, new terms like “holistic mission,” “integral mission” and “holistic transformation” have been used to describe the Christian viewpoint of helping others. In 2001, several evangelical development agencies from around the world met to form the Micah Network. The Micah Network issued a “Declaration on Integral Mission” which described this view:

Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world, we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world.¹

Is this new? From the Old Testament through the beginnings of the church, God’s good news reached out to the poor. As early as Genesis 45.5–8 we read how God sent Joseph ahead to Egypt in order to save lives during the famine. Deuteronomy 15.4 tells us the Lord expected that there should be no poor among his people. Proverbs 22.9 tells us of the blessings on those that serve the poor. In Ezekiel 16.49 and Jeremiah 5.28 we read of the consequences of not serving the poor. In Jeremiah 7.5–7 we read of the blessings to those that truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor. In Luke 10.25–27 Jesus tells us who our neighbor really is. And in the parables of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25.45–46) and of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 22.23) we read of Jesus’ condemnation of those who ignore the needs of the poor. In the early church, it’s

¹ *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor*, ed. Tim Chester (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 19

clear that they had all things in common and gave to the poor (Acts 4.32–35), and physical relief was readily provided by the church in Macedonia (2 Cor 8.1–4). The church was all about sharing their resources and taking care of everyone’s needs as they arose. There are over three hundred verses in the Bible that speak to the poor, social justice and God’s deep concern for both.

The Stone-Campbell Heritage and Churches of Christ

Through the centuries, churches, priests, monasteries and abbeys became the source of education and practical charity, and providers for the health and welfare of their community. In most countries where Christianity was the dominant faith, the schools, the hospitals and clinics were established and maintained by churches.² Through the early Restoration Movement of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, the gospel proclaimed was holistic, exemplifying the seamlessness between evangelism and social reform. Indeed, men like Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone and David Lipscomb had a unique perspective on social justice.

These men, in different ways, viewed the Kingdom of God as a real historical, social and political entity, one which demands allegiance over all others. Thus when the powers that be call us to kill our enemies, or to accumulate wealth, or to enslave other people, or to accept social standards of racism, they believed that those who participate in the Kingdom of God must reject such practices. In other words, there is no “sphere” or “realm” outside of the Lordship of Christ, and we are to obey Christ and Christ’s teaching in every facet of our lives.³

In fact, in 1867 David Lipscomb responded to the suffering of his fellow southerners by writing the following in the *Gospel Advocate*, “As highly as we appreciate the Bible, and its necessity to the temporal and spiritual well-being of man, a loaf of bread today, in the name of Christ, would do more good in opening the hearts of our Southern people to the reception of the gospel than any number of Bibles, tracts or preachers.”⁴ Clearly, holistic mission has been a central focus of the church.

During the early to mid-twentieth century a split began to develop between conservative evangelical Christians and liberal Christians. The former emphasized personal evangelism and the latter emphasized the “social gospel” or social issues.⁵ This view was not held universally. Social outreach in the 1940s by E. H. Ijams and A. M. Burton at the Central Church of Christ in Nashville is often cited as our fellowship’s apex of social concern.⁶ Central was well-known for providing free dental and medical care to the poor, and even operating two supervised dormitory buildings for young men and women who had moved to Nashville in search of a better life.⁷

In general, however, a divide appeared between: 1) those that maintained the primacy of evangelism, 2) those that maintained the primacy of evangelism but also called for a return to a socially-engaged evangelism, and 3) those that called for an uncompromising sociopolitical commitment to biblical compassion and justice.⁸ In 1974, a group of evangelical Christians, led by Billy Graham and others, met in Lausanne, Switzerland, to discuss this divide. After much debate, they produced the Lausanne

²“Christian NGOs in Relief and Development: One of the Church’s Arms for Holistic Mission,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, June 20, 2011, <http://trn.sagepub.com> (accessed June 26, 2012).

³Lindy Adams, “‘Social Justice’ seminar conducted,” *The Christian Chronicle*, June 30, 2001, <http://www.christianchronicle.org> (accessed September 19, 2012).

⁴Robert E. Hooper, *Crying in the Wilderness: The Life & Influence of David Lipscomb* (Nashville: Lipscomb University, 1979, 2011), 89.

⁵Brian Woolnough and Wonsuk Ma, *Holistic Mission—God’s Plan for God’s People* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books, 2010), 6.

⁶Adams, “‘Social Justice’ seminar conducted.”

⁷<http://www.centralchurch.info> (accessed September 21, 2012).

⁸Woolnough and Ma, *Holistic Mission—God’s Plan for God’s People*, 65.

Covenant which included a section on Christian Social Responsibility. They wrote of expressing penitence for the neglect of the Christian's social responsibility and "for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive."⁹

The 1970s and Beyond

It is not unexpected that the social and political upheaval of the 1960s along with renewed discussion of the nature of mission in the 1970s, as expressed in the Lausanne Covenant, should also have an impact on our community of faith. Church mission efforts began to incorporate "good works" alongside evangelism efforts. Mission began to involve "doing" as well as "sending" and "preaching." Short-term mission trips in which United States Christians took part jumped from 540 in 1965 to over 1.5 million annually, according to Dr. Robert Priest in a 2008 article in *Missiology: An International Review*.¹⁰ Alongside this movement was the birth and growth of Christian relief and development organizations, or Christian Non Governmental Organizations (Christian NGOs). War and conflict, carried into western homes first by radio and then by television, hastened the exposure of Christians to the suffering of people around the world. Organizations like World Vision, Compassion International, TearFund and many others started during this time.¹¹ Within our fellowship many churches and organizations became involved in relief and development works and ministries. Ministries such as International Healthcare Foundation—Nigerian Christian Hospital, Christian Relief Fund, Health Talents International, White's Ferry Road Relief Ministries and Partners in Progress began during this period. Some of these ministries organized under a board of directors while others under an eldership. Both are examples in recent history of our fellowship working in unity to help people who are suffering.

Over the past three to four decades, Christian relief and development work has continued to increase. This work has had an enormous effect in bringing relief and development to many countries and has had a tremendous impact on healthcare, water resources, food security, HIV/AIDS, disability, at risk children and the elderly, among many others, all in the name of Jesus. Churches and Christian NGOs have responded quickly to disasters like earthquakes, floods and tsunamis. Through giving, going and praying, Christians have been able to show the love of God to people in need, often resulting in holistic transformation of broken lives.¹²

Challenges for the Twenty-First Century

So what challenges do Christian NGOs face in the twenty-first century? As we seek to build on the past successes of holistic mission, what lies ahead?

We will continue to face secular pressures to conform to the world around us. We must remember our mission and be confident of the evangelistic goals of our social involvement in people's lives. Matthew Parris, a confirmed atheist writes,

I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGO's, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.¹³

⁹"The Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary by John Stott," The Lausanne Movement, 1975, <http://lausanne.org> (accessed September 21, 2012).

¹⁰Cited in "Short Term Mission Trips: Are They Worth It?," *The Huffington Post*, May 24, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dennis-j-horton-phd/shortterm-mission-trips-a_b_866197.html (accessed September 21, 2012).

¹¹Woolnough and Ma, *Holistic Mission—God's Plan for God's People*, 10.

¹²*Ibid.*, 239.

¹³"Matthew Parris: As An Atheist I Truly Believe Africa Needs God," *The London Times*, January 7, 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk> (accessed September 22, 2012).

We must remember that as a Christian NGO, our aims are different. We seek holistic transformation rather than materialistic improvement.¹⁴

A growing trend affecting all of this is that financial donors for churches and Christian NGOs are becoming more prudent with how their money is being used. Measureable results, accountability and transparency are characteristics for which we should strive. Christian NGOs and churches should be accountable and transparent with the funds and goods entrusted to them. Organizations like Charity Navigator and Guidestar are good resources for an initial investigation of how well a charity manages and uses the resources entrusted to it. But ultimately how are results measured? What do we measure and how do we judge success? If we believe wholeheartedly in what we are doing, we must be willing to subject it to serious scrutiny. It is relatively easy to measure the number of mouths fed, wells dug, surgeries completed or amount of food distributed. It is far more difficult to measure holistic and especially spiritual transformation.

Some have begun to question whether the aid we provide does more harm than good? Much has been written recently about aid dependency and the impact of aid on local economies. Often this has done nothing to help the plight of the poor and has in fact helped to decimate local economies. Well-intentioned charity can cause dependency in the receiver and a God-complex in the donor. In addition, in their book *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert state: “One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make—by far—is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the answer.”¹⁵ We often fail to recognize that not all poverty is created equal. Because of this, the poor are often poorer than before. Christians need basic guidelines for discerning whether relief, rehabilitation, or development is the appropriate intervention.¹⁶

What do we mean by development and what is development for? This question was asked by the Commission for Africa and different cultures had different answers. “Many in western countries see it as being about places in Africa ‘catching up’ with the developed world. In Africa, by contrast you will be more likely to be told something to do with well-being, happiness and membership of a community.”¹⁷ These are certainly two different views. In applying our holistic mission model, we need to be very careful not to miss this distinction. Additionally, we need to balance “good development” with a Christian understanding of lives created in God’s image. Good development requires both a focus on advocacy and holistic mission. Christians are to be wise. On the other hand we have many examples of ministries that serve humbly those beyond human hope. They remind us that sometimes, Christian development may not be strategic or efficient or even effective, in human terms. In Christianity, the individual matters. “A belief that every person is loved by God, be they degraded, destitute or degenerate (‘the least of these’) compels service to them because of who they are, not because of what development goals may be achieved.”¹⁸

Conclusion

So what does God expect from his people when it comes to helping others? We began by looking at how Jesus ministered to the poor and oppressed. Whether he was talking to a Jew or a Samaritan, he always related to people at their level of understanding. He helped even when he was tired and it was not convenient to help. He practiced stewardship, not to waste even small bits of food. He taught us not to focus on what we don’t have when it comes to helping the poor but to look at what we do have. Even when it is just a few pieces of

¹⁴“Christian NGOs in Relief and Development: One of the Church’s Arms for Holistic Mission,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, June 20, 2011, <http://trn.sagepub.com> (accessed June 26, 2012).

¹⁵Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How To Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . And Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 105.

¹⁶“Our Approach: Distinguish Between Development and Relief,” The Chalmers Center for Economic Development, <http://chalmers.org> (accessed September 22, 2012).

¹⁷“Our Common Interest—Report of the Commission for Africa,” Commission for Africa, March 11, 2005, <http://www.commissionforafrica.info> (accessed September 25, 2012), 30.

¹⁸Woolnough and Ma, *Holistic Mission—God’s Plan for God’s People*, 158.

bread and fish, if we will remember to give thanks to God and give HIM the credit for our efforts, then HIS love is expressed to a hurting world. Today as we pursue holistic mission, we must remember that evangelism and social involvement in people's lives go hand in hand. In today's complex and unstable world this can seem like a daunting task. But if we keep our focus on Jesus, it becomes much more simple and achievable. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt 22.37-39).

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