

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EVANGELISM

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Does social action constitute evangelism? The author speaks to this question. "It is time," he says, "to recognize that calling all kinds of good actions evangelism simply confuses the issue..."

A most important question in mission theory today is the relationship between concern for social justice and the propagation of the faith.

On the one hand, we live in a world where many aspects of society are sub-Christian. For example, here in the United States the inheritance from a sinful system of slavery still plagues the churches and hampers the development of a Christian civilization. Many Christians want this iniquitous denial of civil rights ended and are giving their lives and money to liquidate it.

Social injustice exists in every country of the world, in many of them in more aggravated form than here in the United States. For example, despite constitutional provisions in India, the lot of 60 million scheduled caste people (former untouchables) is still miserable. They suffer social disabilities far greater than those borne by Negroes in America. They live in abject poverty. Few of their boys and fewer still of their girls have an opportunity for schooling. They are, for the most part, landless labor. They do the dirty work of India—gathering bones, tanning hides and cleaning latrines. To crown it all, the iron of servitude has bitten so deeply into their souls that they believe themselves to be inferior.

Christianizing the Social Order

Many other illustrations of social injustice can be found. The relation between the classes and the masses in almost every land screams for rectification. To meet

this part of the world's need, many Christians consider themselves called to battle for social justice. They argue that since they are "Christianizing the social order," they are engaging in evangelism. "You can Christianize individuals," they would say, "or you can Christianize the framework of society."

On the other hand, we live in a world where enormous numbers of people yield Christ no allegiance and know nothing about him. They base their lives on false and inadequate doctrines about God and men.

Hundreds of millions are victims of animism. They fear the spirits of trees, rivers, fields, mountains and diseases. Their religion is largely placating evil spirits. Their ethic is largely local custom. They have no scriptures, no house of worship, no revelation, and no hope of eternal life.

'Nominals' Everywhere Need Christ

If nominal Christians are not unknown in the United States where churches, Sunday schools, Bibles, and huge amounts of Christian literature are available, and where every church has its band of devoted, dedicated Christians, how many more nominal Hindus, nominal Moslems, and nominal Buddhists are to be found! *Their* total runs into hundreds of millions. The nominals here in America are considered in urgent need of Christ. Why should the much larger numbers of them elsewhere not be?

Other hundreds of millions are materialists. "Their god is their belly." The Marxists, self-confessed materialists, are only a small part of the total. Some in Europe and America, many more in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—despite their considerable ethical achievements—profess to believe that God and the spirit do not exist.

Among all these, vast church-planting evangelism is urgent. These millions are those for whom Christ died. To meet this part of human need, many Christians consider themselves called to proclaim Christ and persuade men to become his disciples and responsible members of his Church.

Social action and evangelism! Tension exists between these two activities of the Church. With 150 years of Christian missions, propagating the Gospel has built up a large following and large resources. Those called to social action are today trying to re-interpret "missions" to include social action. They seek to obtain for social action part of the resources now given to missions as evangelism. Confusion reigns as to what mission really is.

Preaching to 'Conditions'?

"Industrial evangelism" is much talked about. The Christianization of parts of the framework of society is held to be essential mission. It is said that "the ends of the earth" are not necessarily geographical. There may be non-Christian living conditions next door. The Gospel must be "preached" to those conditions and they (brought under the lordship of Christ) must be converted and rectified. All this thoroughly confuses evangelism and social action.

An interesting case of such confusion arose recently when a Christian deeply committed to social action said, "Concern for social justice is most effective evangelism. It makes the oppressed see that Christians not only preach brotherhood but practice it. Why assume, therefore, that concern for social justice is not a means to convert?" The question is fair and the answer to it simple. As a matter of record, concern for social justice *has not converted*. Industrial evangelism does not propagate the faith. It does not add to existing churches or found new ones. It does not lead multitudes to put their faith in Jesus Christ and form living Christian communities, which enlist others. Industrial evangelism to date is an exploratory Christian activity which does not persuade many non-Christians to be baptized and live as committed Christians.

Factory Families for Christ

With the urgent need to win the masses to Christ, we have nothing but sympathy. Truly, Christians must find a way to present Jesus Christ so that factory populations by families and communities enlist with Christ, form Christian cells (churches), go out to convert others and found other cells. The test of whether a way has been found is whether it (in fact, not in hope) multiplies practicing Christians and churches.

Some may reply, "This talk of converting people offends us. It is proud and aggressive. The Christian should simply *be there*, quietly living as a Christian, worshipping as a Christian, meeting the issues of life as a Christian. Rather than seeking to aggrandize the Church and get people to join *his* church (a subtle form of ego inflation), he should simply pour himself out in quiet, kindly service and efforts to better the

common lot of both pagans and Christians." To them, it must be said, "If quiet living as a Christian does in fact extend the faith and the Church, if under today's circumstances that mode of mission is *more effective*, there is no quarrel between you and us. But if quiet living is in fact denial of the universality of the Gospel, then your retreat into quietism should be branded for what it is—denial of the lordship of Christ."

Churches for Laborers

The Pentecostal churches in Brazil and Chile, without calling their efforts industrial evangelism or trying to Christianize the framework of society, are doing much more of both than other churches in the world. *They are churches of the laboring masses*. Working men feel at home in them. Their leaders are horny-handed men accustomed to wield hammer and pickax.

Pentecostals are multiplying churches in an apostolic fashion. One can reasonably expect that they will win a sufficient number of the proletariat to influence the course of civilization in Latin America. Changing the framework of society becomes increasingly possible as living churches multiply in Chile and Brazil. *This is true industrial evangelism!* It converts and transmits potency to the new Christians, who proceed promptly to bring other laboring men and women to potent, relevant Christian living.

Is there, then, no place for "concern for social justice" which attacks the evils in society just because men are God's children and their social structure should not deny them opportunity to live as such? Certainly there is a place! Christians should work to Christianize the social structure.

William Wilberforce, Toyohiko Kagawa, Frances Willard and Martin Luther King have poured out their lives in highly desirable Christian activity. That is no reason, however, to confuse meaning and call their efforts evangelism. Christian social action is important in its own right. It does not need to take shelter under the prestigious word "evangelism."

It is theoretically possible that if the Church were to manifest great concern for social justice and were to redeem some section of society from its bonds, notable growth of the Church would follow. This, however, is not what one usually finds. The social reformations in England did not give rise to the Baptist and Methodist churches. It was the other way around.

When burning faith in Jesus Christ had remade several generations of laboring men, and Baptist, Quaker and Methodist churches had multiplied exceedingly across England, then social reforms became possible. The battle for brotherhood raging in the United States today depends for its success on numerous Christian churches among the Negroes and tremendous efforts of millions of Caucasian Christians.

On the other side, it is worth noting that Wilberforce's campaigns to free the slaves were followed by great church multiplications in the West Indies and eventually in Africa. Evidence supports the belief that winning the battle for brotherhood in the United

States will have a favorable effect on the spread of the Christian Church in Africa. It creates a climate in which the Church can grow. Nevertheless, such preliminary activity should neither be called "evangelism" nor substituted for it.

Experimentation Needed

Those intent on pleasing the Lord of the Harvest should try experiments in presenting the Gospel. In the complex, rapidly changing society of the twentieth century, readiness to experiment marks the Christian. But as soon as he sees that some new mode of commending the Gospel does not in fact communicate it, the obedient Christian lays it aside. It was a good try which did not work out. A chemical mixture intended to cause apple trees to fruit furiously but which had the effect of stunting them would merit speedy dismissal.

Focusing attention on unsuccessful experiments, and carrying them on decade after decade, is a luxury which only wealthy churches and missionary societies can enjoy. When the source of income is assured and it makes little difference what is done so long as it has promotional value, then "missions" can indulge in all kinds of interesting and attractive ventures. If they wish to do so, they can enjoy themselves and call this "evangelism." These good ventures do not bring in churches which in turn extend the faith, upbuild the Church, and remake the framework of society in a more Christian world; but no matter—a splendid program of mission work is being carried on.

Poor churches, however, made up of Nazarenes,

Wesleyans and Pentecostals, by obedience (Acts 13:51; Mark 6:11; Matt. 10:14; Luke 9:5; 10:11), or by necessity, or by both, abandon unsuccessful experiments and hurry on to where men obey the Gospel gladly, are baptized, and form living, multiplying, society-changing churches.

Does concern for social justice convert? Well, does it? That is exactly the question.

Everything Is Not Evangelism

It is time to recognize that calling all kinds of good actions evangelism simply confuses the issue. Each is a distinct action and should be used under suitable circumstances.

Evangelism creates new churches, new centers of life, new parts of Christ's Body, which in turn plant other churches. Social action in existing churches rectifying the social order. It does not create new centers of life; it is what parts of the existing body do.

In a society largely Christian, there is much room for the churches to Christianize parts of its social framework as well as to continue vigorous evangelism. In a society largely non-Christian (Africa south of the Sahara, for example) the primary need and the chief responsibility is to multiply churches. Social action done by new churches will be small and local. But by the time society has become substantially Christian, the possibility of its changing the national framework will have arrived. The only place large social action is possible is in countries where the majority of the population are members of Christ's Church. The unevangelized billions of the earth still call for mission considered as church-planting. |||