

REGAINING OUR FOCUS: A RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL ACTION TREND IN EVANGELICAL MISSIONS

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Today churches and missionaries are being told that to imitate the ministry of Jesus they must add social justice to their understanding of the church's mission. As pastors and missions committees embrace the idea that social action and gospel proclamation are "two wings of the same bird," the kind of work that they send their missionaries to do changes, and this has a negative effect on world missions. This article highlights those negative effects in an African context, offers historical, practical, and biblical critiques of the trend, and redirects the church's attention to understanding and fulfilling the Great Commission in the way the apostles did in Acts and the Epistles.

Introduction

Evangelical missions in Africa is changing. Or more accurately, it *has* changed. In the past, the bulk of the theologically conservative missionaries in Africa came to do church planting and leadership training. No longer. Today many of the new missionaries being sent are focused on social relief, with the church tacked on as a theological addendum. By all appearances there has been a mega-shift in evangelical missions away from church planting and leadership training toward social justice or social action.²

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² *Social action* and *social justice* are elastic, elusive, and basically interchangeable terms that include, for example, caring for the poor and promoting just government that keeps the wealthy from strengthening the vulnerable. Social justice also often includes the idea that everyone deserves his fair bit of his local or global society's affluence, and therefore, lobbies for some kind of forced or freewill redistribution of wealth.

What we used to do, we aren't doing anymore. In fact, mission agency representatives who visit the campuses of Christian colleges in the United States to recruit new missionaries report that the compass needle of student interest is clearly swinging away from gospel proclamation toward medical relief, orphan care, and digging wells.³ It's no surprise. The influential "missional" voices currently dominating the evangelical conversation about missions are promoting a new kind of mission: *shalom*, social justice, or the gospel of good deeds and human flourishing. Of course, because of their concern for biblical truth, the better authors and speakers emphasize the church and the preaching of Christ crucified for sinners. However, across the board a categorical shift in emphasis is unmistakable.

And it appears that the new generation of evangelicals—the Young, Restless, and Reformed—has bought in. Churches, keen to support their enthusiastic young missionaries, often loosen their purse strings whatever the theological significance or insignificance of the mission. And market-sensitive mission agencies, having noted the change, are reworking their images to accommodate the new Peace Corps mentality. As a result, the evangelical church in the West is commissioning and sending a generation of missionaries to Africa whose primary enthusiasm is for orphan care, distributing medicine, combating poverty, and other social action projects. For the most part, these new missionaries value the church, but in many cases they seem to view the church primarily as a platform from which to run and fund their relief projects. And in a surprising number of cases, their local church involvement is nominal.⁴

We have watched these trends in Africa with growing disquiet over the last few years, and that concern has led us to write this article. By doing so we hope to warn pastors and churches of the trend and offer an alternative. We will speak about the situation in Africa because that is the continent we are familiar with, but we have no doubt that what we say applies equally well to missions endeavors everywhere.⁵

To quantify his concern, one of the authors recently conducted a survey of missionaries in Malawi. The following graph shows some of the results:⁶

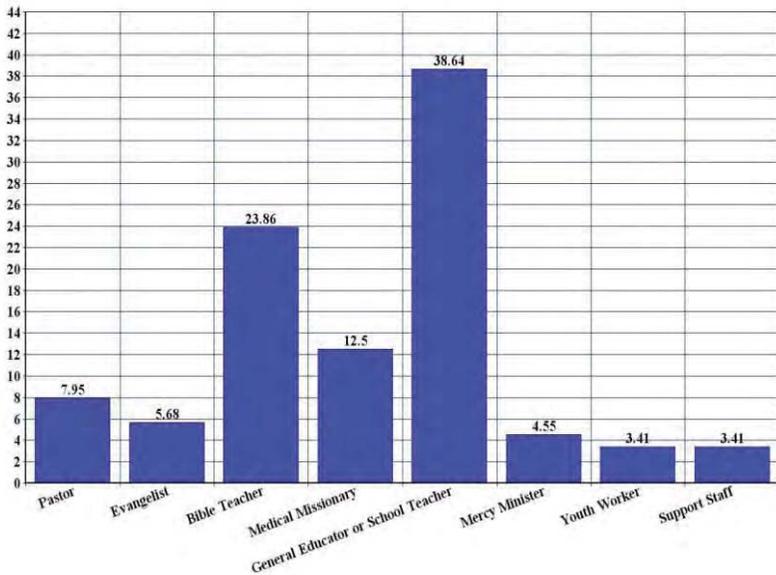
³ This is the report of a friend of the authors who serves as a recruiting representative for his mission agency, and of the other agency representatives with whom he rubs shoulders.

⁴ In his Ph.D. research project involving missionaries in Malawi, Brian Biedebach discovered that one-third of the missionaries who focus on social relief do not attend the same church on a weekly basis.

⁵ It is no surprise that international missions is a place where the issue of social action comes sharply into focus. In 1923, contrasting the liberals' social mission with a more biblical philosophy of ministry, J. Gresham Machen wrote in *Christianity and Liberalism*, "This difference is not a mere difference in theory, but makes itself felt everywhere in the practical realm. It is particularly evident on the missions field" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 156.

⁶ This survey was conducted by Brian Biedebach for his doctoral dissertation *Making Disciples in Current Missionary Practice in Malawi* for the University of Stellenbosch. Seventy-two percent of the missionaries surveyed had been in Malawi for five years or less, meaning these figures naturally reflect what the most recent generation of missionaries is doing.

Q11. What missionary position best describes your role here in Malawi?



According to the survey, thirty-eight percent of the missionaries in Malawi are involved in direct gospel-proclamation ministry, such as evangelism, church planting, and theological training. Sixty-two percent are involved in social action or serve as support staff. In fact, there are as many Western school teacher missionaries in Malawi as there are evangelists, church planters, and theological instructors combined. Some argue that the church needs to emphasize social action in missions to correct the imbalance of too many years of focusing on proclamation ministries. In light of these figures, one wonders exactly what imbalance is being redressed.

When asked if they share their faith with others, twenty-five percent of the missionaries surveyed responded by ticking the *seldom* or *never* box. Thirty-one percent said that they are not currently discipling anyone. These are the patterns that concern us: numerically speaking, social action efforts are outstripping gospel proclamation efforts, and compounding the problem is the fact that social relief missions do not seem to easily lend themselves to fulfilling Christ's commission to make disciples. These figures reveal a trend, but where has the trend come from?

Sources of the Current Trend

The tug of war between proclamation-oriented missions and social action is not new; however, it has become a prominent debate again in our generation. Recent key voices in evangelical circles enthusiastically promoting social action in missions include John Stott, Tim Keller, and popular Emergent authors.

John Stott's influence has been felt both through his leading role in the Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization and through his many books.⁷ At the 1974 Lausanne Conference, more than 2,000 attendees signed the Lausanne Covenant which declared that "evangelism and socio-political involvement are part of our Christian duty."⁸ However, the Covenant also explicitly said that, of the two, gospel proclamation is of higher priority: "In the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary."⁹

In spite of this clear statement, an astonishing event took place on the last day of the conference. Approximately 200 conference attendees drafted a statement entitled "Radical Discipleship" that gave social action equal status with gospel proclamation. While it was too late to change the wording of the Lausanne Covenant, Stott (who had chaired the committee that drafted the Covenant) publically affirmed the alternative Radical Discipleship position the last night of the conference.¹⁰ It was a watershed moment for world evangelization, essentially redefining the church's mission.

After the 1974 conference, in the face of resistance from Billy Graham and others, Stott continued to press for an equal role for social action in Christian missions.¹¹ By 1982, the triumph of Stott's view was clear. In that year he chaired a Lausanne committee tasked to write a report on the subject. Under Stott's guidance, the report again recommended that the church make social action and evangelism equal partners in the fulfilling of the Great Commission:

They are like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird. This partnership is clearly seen in the public ministry of Jesus who not only preached the gospel but fed the hungry and healed the sick. In his ministry, *kerygma* (proclamation) and *diakonia* (service) went hand in hand. His words explained his works, and his works dramatized his words. Both were expressions of his compassion for people, and both should be ours.¹²

More recently, Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, has played a leading role in promoting social activism through his books *Generous Justice* and *Center Church*, and through his prominent role as co-founder

⁷ Examples include *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975, 2008) and *The Cross of Christ* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986, 338–39).

⁸ Lausanne Covenant, paragraph 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.

¹⁰ John Stott, "The Significance of Lausanne" in *International Review of Mission*, vol. 64, issue 255 (July 1975): 288–89.

¹¹ Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138ff. For a summary of the post-Lausanne debates, see <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2013/05/08/when-john-stott-confronted-billy-graham/> (accessed May 5, 2013).

¹² "Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment," Grand Rapids Report No. 21, Consultation on the Relationships between Evangelism and Social responsibility (CRESR) (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1982).

of the Gospel Coalition.¹³ Peter Naylor sums up Keller’s view succinctly: “Keller’s main thesis is that the church has a twofold mission in this world: (1) to preach the gospel and (2) to do justice, which involves social and cultural transformation and renewal.”¹⁴

Key figures in the Emergent Movement also avidly promote social justice—not just as an equal partner with the gospel, but as the gospel itself. For example, Brian McLaren’s vision of being missional “. . . eliminates old dichotomies like ‘evangelism’ and ‘social action.’ Both are integrated in expressing saving love for the world.”¹⁵

Summary

It’s a dicey line that authors like Stott and Keller have drawn for the church to walk: “We’re going to keep the gospel the main thing *and* focus the church on social action; in fact, in a sense, social action is the gospel too.” In theory, it’s a noble blend of word and deed, of transformational truth and dynamic love. Naturally, however, the further one pushes, the closer one gets to the place where social involvement ceases to be distinctly Christian and even starts to supplant that which is distinctly Christian. It’s no small wonder that David Bosch calls this issue “one of the thorniest areas in the theology and practice of mission today.”¹⁶

In the 1990s, Stott acknowledged the danger of the dual emphasis on proclamation and social action that he campaigned for: “The main fear of my critics seems to be that missionaries will be sidetracked.”¹⁷ We believe that the results of the survey cited above indicate that being sidetracked is not merely a theoretical danger. Stott’s critics are correct: sending churches and missionaries *are* becoming sidetracked, and in many cases, pastors and missions committees barely seem aware of the distinction between missionaries who focus on social action and missionaries who focus on Bible translation, theological training, church planting, and gospel proclamation.

The Concerns

It would be unjust to represent the current shift toward social action by evangelicals as a wholesale abandonment of the gospel. In fact, in our experience most of

¹³ *Generous Justice* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2010); *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

¹⁴ Peter Naylor, “The Church’s Mission: Sent to ‘Do Justice’ in the World?” in *Engaging With Keller: Thinking Through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical*, eds. Iain D. Campbell and William M. Schweitzer, (Darlington, England: EP Books, 2013), 137. Naylor provides a helpful critique of Keller’s social justice views.

¹⁵ *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 108.

¹⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 401.

¹⁷ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 342.

the new evangelical missionaries coming to Africa genuinely love the gospel. Although Emergents like Brian McLaren are clearly trying to resurrect the wormy corpse of the Social Gospel, in conservative circles the problem is more subtle. Our concerns fall into three categories: history, theory, and practice.

Concern 1: Is History Repeating Itself?

As we survey what is happening in missions in our era, we wonder if enough attention is being given to the history of social activism in the North American church. We have been down this road before, and we should be aware of the lessons learned by previous generations.¹⁸

In the late 1800s conservative evangelicals in the United States enthusiastically threw themselves into social reform projects in response to the pressures created by the rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration that typified the 1880s and 1890s. Church projects included everything from employment bureaus to day care, summer homes for tenement children, and food kitchens. These efforts were sponsored by churches and Christian groups ranging the spectrum from Calvinistic to pietistic, premillennial to postmillennial.¹⁹

However, evangelicals' enthusiasm for social justice evaporated in the opening three decades of the 1900s. By 1930, in what has been called "the Great Reversal," conservative evangelicals abandoned or severely curtailed their social action projects, primarily due to their fears of distortion and distraction.²⁰ Doctrinally speaking, evangelicals were keen to avoid the theological distortion of the Social Gospel promoted by theological liberals. The Social Gospel placed exclusive emphasis on social intervention, offering what was essentially an alternative, social salvation. In other cases, evangelicals' concern was distraction. Over time, keen-eyed observers began to see that while, in theory, social action did not necessarily lead to replacing the cross with a soup kitchen, in practice, it often did lead to an unintentional displacement of the gospel.²¹ Having experimented with social action for a generation, and having become acquainted with its dangers, evangelicals consciously turned away from the dual-track (proclamation and social action) philosophy of the church and missions.

¹⁸ As David Wells notes, many of today's younger evangelicals seem to believe that history started with the Beatles, and thus they "have no historical categories" (*The Courage to be Protestant* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008], 20). This lack of awareness of the lessons of history can lead to unnecessarily repeating the errors of a previous generation.

¹⁹ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2006), 83. For a survey of the history of Christian social action in this era, see Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York, 1957, 1965, Wipf and Stock Pub., 2004); K. Deddens and M. K. Drost, *Balance of Ecumenism* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1989); David Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972); Richard V. Pierard, *The Unequal Yoke* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970).

²⁰ Marsden, 86, 92.

²¹ The evangelist, D. L. Moody, had warned of this all along, saying that Christians should not go to the world with a loaf of bread in one hand and a Bible in the other, lest sinners take the loaf and ignore the Bible (Ibid., 81; see also John 6:26).

However, the lessons of the last century go further than that. Looking back, we can see that not only did social reform pose a threat to the gospel, it also had a deadly effect on missions. A case in point is the Student Volunteer Movement.

The Student Volunteer Movement was a missionary movement that began in the United States in 1888, founded by university students who had a desire for world evangelism.²² The movement hosted large conferences at which Christian young people were challenged to become missionaries or missionary supporters; and in fact, through this movement, more than 20,000 college students became missionaries and 80,000 more dedicated themselves to support those who had sailed. Never before had there been such a large missions movement among young Americans (nor since, tragically).

The most astonishing fact about this movement is not that thousands of missionaries were sent out, but that less than forty years after the organization began to blossom, it died. In fact, very few Christians today have heard of the Student Volunteer Movement. According to David Doran, a key reason for its expiration was that it became distracted by social activism.²³ Concerns over poverty, race relations, war, and imperialism were raised side by side with the preaching of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ: gradually the organization lost its spiritual purpose and died.

Sadly, the demise of the Student Volunteer Movement represented a broader trend. In 1900, mainline Protestant churches in the United States supplied eighty percent of North America's missionaries. Over time, as those churches became more and more focused on social action, the number of missionaries they sent out actually became less and less. In 2000, those same (now fully liberal) Protestant denominations supplied only six percent of North America's missionary force.²⁴ Historically it appears that making social reform an equal partner with evangelism and theological training doesn't enliven missions; it kills it.²⁵

Naturally, historical observations of this nature do not have the authority that biblical instruction does; however, before evangelicals run another lap on the track of social action missions, it would be wise to reflect on historical lessons like these.

Concern 2: Is the Underlying Theory Flawed?

While Jesus commanded believers to love their neighbors and to care for the poor, we don't see that the New Testament church (either by dictate or example) fulfilled that command by organizing itself to carry out social action projects directed at the general betterment of Roman society. In other words, we believe that the theory

²² David M. Doran, with Pearson Johnson and Benjamin Eckman, *For The Sake of His Name: Challenging a New Generation for World Missions* (Allen Park, MI: Student Global Impact, 2002), 26. Doran's chapters would make helpful reading for missions committees wrestling with these issues.

²³ *Ibid.*, 37–39, 43.

²⁴ David J. Hesselgrave, "Will We Correct the Edinburgh Error? Future Mission in Historical Perspective" in *SWJT*, 49, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 126.

²⁵ Only the Word of God has the intrinsic spiritual vigor necessary to sustain the church's long-term commitment to missions (1 Pet 1:23–25).

of social action missions is suspect from the start. If anything, the apostles seemed to avoid social reform projects directed at the world in favor of preaching the gospel to the world.

We ardently believe that Christians can and should be involved in meaningful demonstrations of compassion—everything from giving a sandwich to a homeless person to working at an orphanage. In this article we are dealing with a different issue: the idea that social reform and the gospel are equal partners in Christian mission. We will develop our reasons for rejecting this dual-track view of the church's mission in a moment.

Concern 3: Is the Mission of the Church Being Unintentionally Neglected?

All true evangelicals are committed to keeping the gospel, expository preaching, and the church the main things; however, this becomes difficult to do in the social action model of the church and missions. Social action projects are like black holes—they have a habit of sucking in all the ecclesiastical resources within reach of their gravitational pull. While the theory states that the gospel, preaching, and the church are the main things, in regard to budgets, planning, staff, and effort, what's actually first is all too clear.²⁶

Even the proponents of social action acknowledge this problem. For example, Keller admits, “Churches that . . . try to take on all the levels of doing justice often find that the work of community renewal and social justice overwhelms the work of preaching, teaching and nurturing the congregation.”²⁷ In response to Keller's admission, Naylor writes,

Keller speaks as if there is a certain point at which this becomes problematic, but he does not demonstrate how this effect is not already in operation the moment the church becomes involved in this kind of work at all.²⁸

As resources are fed into the gaping maw of social justice projects, by default, essential ministries are left undernourished. The West can finance, train, and send only so many missionaries to Africa. And since so many of the new missionaries being sent are focusing on relief projects, what suffers by default are the essential ministries of Christian missions: the things that *only* the church can do.

²⁶ Theoretically, the concept of holistic missions is enticing: planting maize alongside an African and discipling him at the same time sounds ideal. The problem is that it so rarely works. Experience shows that the social justice missionary ends up spending the majority of his time sorting out problems and issues that arise on the social side. I (Brian) spent a year working on a holistic project in Malawi in 1997–98. I was responsible for the oversight of twenty-six Bible college students, fifty goats, four hundred chickens, and a large agricultural garden. When I woke up in the morning, the first thing on my mind was that I had to get the eggs to market. All through the day I was consumed with making sure that water was being pumped, animals were being fed, and in the middle of the night I was awake, chasing away chicken thieves and wild dogs. Illustrations of this nature could be multiplied endlessly: in social action missions, distraction is the norm, not the exception.

²⁷ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 145–46.

²⁸ In *Engaging With Keller*, 156.

Stated in mathematical terms, for evangelicals the problem is not *subtraction* of the gospel (as is the case of the liberals and the Social Gospel). Instead, it is one of *addition*—addition that results in competition, distraction, and eventually, an unintentional displacement of the gospel. Social projects undercut the core ministries of the church by what they add to the church’s agenda: resource-devouring ventures of dubious Great Commission value. D. A. Carson’s warning comes to mind: “I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy.”²⁹

We again want to make it clear that we believe that there is room for legitimate, non-dominating mercy efforts in Christian missions. However, what we are seeing today is a focus on social action that, at best, is *disproportional* to the New Testament’s emphasis, and at times is something worse.

Specific Critiques

Having surveyed our concerns, we want to highlight eight biblical problems with the social action model of the church and missions. It is unlikely that any single author or ministry embodies all these problems, but for simplicity’s sake we paint with a broad brush.

1. A Redefinition of the Gospel

Social justice advocates are fond of describing the gospel in terms of *human flourishing*.³⁰ The incarnation, they say, was about Christ bringing *shalom* or general well-being to the human race. Many evangelicals (without turning away from substitutionary atonement) have adopted this notion enthusiastically: if the gospel is about human flourishing, then *any* Christian effort that increases that flourishing is gospel ministry. On that basis, building a hospital or an orphanage is just as much a fulfillment of the Great Commission as church planting.

D. A. Carson notes that this redefinition of the gospel is categorically wrong, since the gospel is “the good news of what *God has done*, not a description of what [Christians] ought to do in consequence. . . . One cannot too forcefully insist on the distinction between the gospel and its entailments.”³¹ Furthermore, to represent the gospel of Jesus Christ as being about the general betterment of unbelieving society is to *misrepresent* the gospel. John MacArthur writes,

²⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 26.

³⁰ For an example, see <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2014/01/09/its-not-enough-to-care-about-the-poor>. accessed January 9, 2014.

³¹ “The Hole in the Gospel” (http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelos/article/the_hole_in_the_gospel). Accessed January 31, 2014, emphasis in original.

Is social reconstruction even an appropriate way for Christians to spend their energies? I recently mentioned to a friend that I was working on a book dealing with sin and our culture's declining moral climate. He immediately said, "Be sure you urge Christians to get actively involved in reclaiming society. The main problem is that Christians haven't acquired enough influence in politics, art, and the entertainment industry to turn things around for good." That, I acknowledge, is a common view held by many Christians. But I'm afraid I don't agree.

. . . . God's purpose in this world—and the church's only legitimate commission—is the proclamation of the message of sin and salvation to individuals, whom God sovereignly redeems and calls out of the world.³²

2. An Overly Realized Eschatology

An idealistic desire to bring the kingdom *now* often plays a role in the social action vision of the church. Advocates of social justice argue that Christ came to banish the results of the Fall; therefore, "kingdom work" includes anything in the current age that diminishes or reverses those results and promotes the good of individuals and society. In other words, Christ's kingdom is brought into existence through the general reduction of evil and injustice in society just as much as through gospel proclamation: "The kingdom comes wherever Jesus overcomes the Evil One. This happens (or ought to happen) in the fullest measure in the church. But it also happens in society."³³

To orient the gospel toward human flourishing and general societal improvement is to step into the trap of an overly realized eschatology. It's a version of post-millennialism. Ultimately, it attempts societal transformation that only Christ's return can bring. Furthermore, its common-grace approach to the Great Commission ignores the fact that, biblically speaking, one participates in the blessings of Christ's kingdom only by believing in the King (John 3:3).

Making social action an equal partner with the gospel, in effect, subordinates the need for repentance and forgiveness to temporal needs. The sad truth is that Africa has always had poverty, orphans, political corruption, sexually transmitted diseases, and other health and social crises. No amount of money and social reform will change what is essentially a heart problem that only repenting, believing in Jesus Christ, and embracing a biblical worldview can solve.³⁴

³² John MacArthur, Jr., *The Vanishing Conscience: Drawing the Line in a No-Fault, Guilt-Free World* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 12.

³³ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), 209.

³⁴ It is estimated that one trillion dollars of Western aid has been poured into Africa in the last five decades (Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert's *What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011], 188). More money is not the solution to Africa's problems; Christ clearly proclaimed is.

Paul would have defined Africa's problem this way: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . ." (Rom 1:18). Likewise, Africa's solution is: "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). By focusing on social justice, evangelicals might be trying to help Africa in an unhelpful way—or at least not in the *most* helpful way.

3. A Preference for Indirect Gospel Ministry over Direct Gospel Ministry

In most social justice efforts, the actual direct gospel ministry is very limited—more of a hoped-for byproduct than the overt goal. For example, the thirty-eight percent of missionaries in Malawi who are school teachers must, by necessity, spend most of their days teaching mathematics, handwriting, art, and other basic educational skills. Those are good things, but actual gospel ministry is minimal when compared, for example, with what a church planter does.

An indirect approach might be appropriate and even necessary in some situations, such as in Islamic countries where missionaries need legitimate, secular employment in order to get into the country to proclaim Christ. However, there is no need to adopt indirect-gospel-ministry strategies when reaching open countries.

Often lurking behind the indirect approach is the notion that the church must first *portray* the gospel by means of social justice before it can *preach* the gospel. This belief has no basis in Acts or the Epistles. The apostle Paul did not say that God was well pleased to save sinners through the foolishness of the gospel *merced*, but rather through the foolishness of the message *preached* (1 Cor 1:21). After noting that studies have shown that Christians spend about five times more money on poverty relief projects than on evangelism and church planting, D. A. Carson warns that the gospel is too often the missing component in "holistic" or indirect gospel ministry:

At one time, "holistic ministry" was an expression intended to move Christians beyond proclamation to include deeds of mercy. Increasingly, however, "holistic ministry" refers to deeds of mercy *without* any proclamation of the gospel—and that is not holistic. It is not even halfistic, since the deeds of mercy are not the gospel. . . . Judging by the distribution of American mission dollars, the biggest hole in our gospel is the gospel itself.³⁵

As we point out the distinction between indirect and direct gospel ministries, we again want to affirm that we are not categorically opposed to the idea of believers coming to Africa to express Christian love in a tangible way. For example, Malawi has a population of 15 million people and yet there are fewer than 300 doctors in the whole country.³⁶ If a Christian doctor wanted to move to Malawi to minister to the

³⁵ Carson, "The Hole in the Gospel."

³⁶ Charlotte McDonald, "Malawian Doctors—Are There More in Manchester than in Malawi?" Online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16545526>. (accessed January 15, 2014).

physical needs of others, would we discourage him? Certainly not! Our concern, however, is that the Western church is confusing the sending of medical missionaries (for example) with its greater priority of sending missionaries who focus directly on carrying out the Great Commission. Direct gospel ministry must always take both theoretical and actual priority over social relief missions.

4. The New Pragmatism

One of the defining problems of the evangelical church in our era is “a spiraling loss of confidence in the power of Scripture.”³⁷ Tragically, evangelicals often openly doubt the attracting and saving power of the gospel, and various forms of pragmatism are the result. For example, for decades the church growth gurus have been telling us that in order to get unbelievers to listen to the gospel we need to attract them first with snazzy entertainment and cultural coolness. Build a bowling alley in your church to attract the unsaved, and *then* you’ll be able to preach the gospel.

Today, another pressure has been added. After centuries of general acceptance in American and Western European culture, evangelicals today are reeling due to the public scorn being heaped on them by an increasingly hostile world. The radicals of the 1960s have grown up and are now running the culture, and as a result, the Bible’s exclusive and authoritative message is openly detested. Shocked that their fellow citizens are labeling them unloving and intolerant, and naively hoping to regain the cultural acceptance of a generation past, many evangelicals are hitching their wagon to the rising star of social involvement.³⁸ Social action is safe. It avoids the scandal of the gospel. It allows churches to be active *and* to be accepted by the world.

Unfortunately, a spirit of pragmatism (and a corresponding spirit of doubt about the power of the gospel) appears to lie behind much of the social justice movement. Unchurched Harry no longer lusts after entertainment. The new Harry is socially conscious; he has embraced the cause of the disenfranchised. Therefore, Las Vegas-style stage shows are passé. Today’s socially conscious unbelievers will be wooed to Christianity by means of highly visible social relief projects—examples of human caring that they can applaud and endorse even as unregenerate people. Once the social justice agenda has made them fond of the church, then they can be nudged toward Christ. It’s the new pragmatism: the gospel needs a lead-in because it will never succeed by itself.

While we gladly admit that most social relief projects are infinitely more noble lead-ins than the entertainment of the seeker movement, the dangers of pragmatism remain unchanged: (1) the gospel is moved into second place, and (2) the medium becomes the message. And when the church puts the gospel second, the gospel has

³⁷ John MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993, 2010), 23.

³⁸ For example, Tom Krattenmaker speaks of the evangelical social justice movement’s desire “. . . to right seemingly every global wrong you can name while restoring the credibility of publicly expressed Christianity in the process” (http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2011-06-26-can-social-justice-effort-tame-culture-wars_n.htm). (accessed January 25, 2014).

a way of staying second: eventually it disappears altogether. The following description of a social-justice church plant in Sandtown (a neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland) provides a rather bare-faced example of doubting the efficacy of the gospel and of the medium becoming the message:

Without a holistic faith, there is no gospel in Sandtown. Living out the gospel in this context has meant building a collaborative network of church- and community-based institutions that focus on housing, job development, education and health care. In 2001, the full-time staff numbered over eighty. . . . Seeking the *shalom* of Sandtown means a concentrated effort to eliminate vacant and substandard housing, a K-8 school that has high standards and an excellent record of achievement, a job placement center that links over one hundred residents a year to employment, and a family health center that serves all residents regardless of the ability to pay. . . .

. . . . Simply “preaching the gospel” would have failed.³⁹

The gospel in Sandtown includes housing reform, job development, quality education, and health care. In fact, it appears that about the only thing that the gospel in Sandtown does not include is Jesus Christ crucified for sinners. Jesus as Savior from substandard housing and unemployment is highly visible. Jesus as Savior from sin and hell is nowhere to be found, and frankly, isn’t even necessary to most of what is being done. The medium—social justice—has become the message.⁴⁰

5. Adopting the Agendas of Political Correctness

Political correctness is today’s secular piety. But the piety of political correctness does not include things like honesty, sexual purity, and humility. Instead, it val-

³⁹ Mark R. Gornik, “Doing the Word: Biblical Holism and Urban Ministry,” in *The Urban Face of Missions*, eds. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 194. This book is a Festschrift for the late Harvey Conn, Professor of Missions at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1972–1998. Conn was the mentor of many of today’s social action advocates.

⁴⁰ Another contributor to *The Urban Face of Missions* writes, “What churches do best is to build community. Already existing in churches are social networks and connections with organizations and other constituencies in the neighborhood. Churches provide a place for residents to meet, and provide the symbolic language necessary so that the meeting has meaning. Churches provide a place and a mechanism for building relationships, while common problems and common dreams emerge” (Clinton E. Stockwell, “The Church and Justice in Crisis,” 166). Frankly, this sounds like the way an unsaved politician would describe the church—a tool for social upliftment in his ward, nothing more. It’s disappointing that a book on Christian missions describes the church in such an insipid manner, and it reveals the dismal swamp into which the river of a social action too often drains.

ues multi-culturalism, economic socialism, a false civility toward philosophical opponents, uplifting the oppressed, enfranchising the disenfranchised, and so on. In postmodern piety, personal sin is acceptable; social injustice is definitely taboo.⁴¹

It appears that many Christians in the social justice movement have avidly adopted the piety of postmodernism. The result is that, in a subtle way, the world begins to set the agenda for the church. For example, we recently read a church planting plan for a major African city in which the author (a thoroughgoing evangelical) laid out his primary goals. At the same level of importance as preaching and evangelism, the following were included: to help the city change for the better socially, to increase the overall level of civility among its citizens, to encourage better race relations in the city, and to actively advantage the disadvantaged. The author made it clear that if the constituency of the church did not come from racially and economically diverse backgrounds, he would consider the church plant a failure.

While all those things are good to one degree or another, we would contend that on the whole they are not New Testament-identified goals for a church. In fact, they appear primarily to be a rehashing of the agendas of a politically correct, postmodern culture. And when the world sets the agenda, it is no surprise that the gospel, expositional preaching, and serious theological training sometimes slip into second place.⁴²

6. Defective Hermeneutics

The arguments used to promote a social justice philosophy of the church and missions are often based on transparently deficient hermeneutics. The result is arguments that are rhetorically compelling, but biblically suspect. Peter Naylor critiques Tim Keller's handling of key passages by saying, "He approaches the text with a predetermined agenda that distorts his interpretation."⁴³ This error seems endemic to the social justice movement. It is not possible to list and respond to every hermeneutical misstep made by the advocates of social action; however, typical mistakes include the following:

- Passages about mercy within the church are often interpreted as if they were about social action projects outside the church.
- The biblical word *justice* is wrongly defined and its meaning is confusingly intermingled with the word *generosity*.
- The words *oppression* and *poverty* are equated.

⁴¹ For this reason, David Wells calls political correctness "fake piety," (*Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 8).

⁴² We would argue that the things listed in that church planting plan are primarily the *results* of the gospel, not the *goals* of the gospel, and turning results into goals can lead to employing theologically suspect methods.

⁴³ *Engaging With Keller*, 162. As Richard Holst points out, Keller's occasionally defective hermeneutics—especially his habit of overworking metaphors and of sliding into allegory—are the source of many of his questionable views (Richard Holst, "Timothy Keller's Hermeneutic: an Example for the Church to Follow?", chapter 5 in *Engaging With Keller*).

- When interpreting Old Testament passages about social justice, an appropriate distinction between Israel and the church is not maintained.
- God’s promise to Abraham (“in you all the families of the earth will be blessed,” Gen 12:3) is interpreted as a commission to the church to work for the social betterment of the world.
- The fact that Solomon and Job were *civil* leaders in their societies (with corresponding social responsibilities and powers) is not given proper weight when interpreting and applying passages about their social justice activities.
- Biblical references to poverty are interpreted as if they all referred to material poverty, and not, on occasion, to spiritual poverty.
- Passages that show Jesus ministered to all social classes are ignored.
- Passages such as Gal 6:10 (“Let us do good to all people”) are emphasized as if by position and wording they were intended to play the same defining role in the church as Jesus’ commission in Matthew 28:18-20.
- Biblical instructions about generosity are interpreted to mean that Christians must strive to create financial equality between all individuals and groups.^{44,45}

7. A Misunderstanding of Jesus’ Ministry and Miracles

Those who hope to make social action and gospel proclamation two wings of the same bird claim that they are imitating the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus, they contend, not only preached repentance, He also focused on relieving the physical needs and the oppression of the economically downtrodden in Palestine. He healed their sicknesses, filled their stomachs, and dropped a coin in the outstretched hands of the poor.

While the Scripture implies that Jesus did express mercy to the poor on a personal level (Matt 26:9; John 13:29), it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus started no orphanages, established no poverty relief funds, no low-cost housing schemes, no well-digging programs, and set no prisoners free (not even John the Baptist). Neither did Jesus instruct or train His disciples to do so. That doesn’t mean that it’s intrinsically wrong for Christians to be involved in such work. But it certainly makes suspect the argument that, based on Jesus’ example, the church should make social action central to her mission. Personal expressions of mercy and church-organized social action programs are not the same thing: Jesus exemplified one, not the other. In fact,

⁴⁴ For thorough responses to most of these errors see DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* and Naylor, in *Engaging With Keller*, chapter 4.

⁴⁵ Conservative evangelicals occasionally employ bad hermeneutics in order to arrive at their preferred view of the church’s mission. Equally problematic are influential missiologists who categorically embrace postmodern hermeneutics. For example, David Bosch writes, “The text of the New Testament generates various valid interpretations in different readers. . . . Thus the meaning of a text cannot be reduced to a single, univocal sense, to what it ‘originally’ meant.” (*Transforming Mission*, 23). Clearly this is an invalid way of approaching the text of Scripture when determining the mission of the church, or anything else.

the purpose statements of Jesus' earthly ministry always focused on proclamation and on His substitutionary death for sinners:

“Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for” (Mark 1:38).

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

“I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43).

In hopes of proving that Jesus' mission was equally proclamation *and* social action, social justice advocates draw attention to Luke 4:18-19. In that passage, Jesus read Isa 61:1-2 and announced to the people of Nazareth that His mission was to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. What social justice advocates fail to give due weight to is the fact that the Isaiah passage focuses on preaching and proclaiming (mentioned 3x), and that the preaching to be done was clearly to the *spiritually* poor, captive, blind, and oppressed.⁴⁶

But what about Jesus' miracles? Jesus' miracles of healing and of feeding the multitudes were genuine acts of compassion, revealing His power over sickness, nature, and even death. In short, they were a sneak preview of the power Jesus will exercise when He comes in the fullness of His kingdom. In light of Jesus' compassion, we believe that it is perfectly appropriate for medical doctors to make mission trips to Ethiopia or for churches to send hurricane relief to Haiti. Those are good things and have a legitimate and valuable place in the body of Christ.

Interestingly, however, Jesus' miracles are never held up as motivation for the church to focus on social action—as if the church were to continue Jesus' program of miraculous social relief by non-miraculous means. In fact, Jesus repeatedly said that the purpose of His miracles was something else: to declare that He was the unique God-sent Messiah:

“The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36).

The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me” (John 10:24–25).

⁴⁶ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 36–40. These authors also deal helpfully with other key passages in the Gospels, such as the sheep and goat judgment, the parable of the good Samaritan, and the account of the rich man and Lazarus (162–67).

The miracles done by the apostles shared that same primary purpose: they were “the signs of a true apostle” given by God to prove that the men who performed them were Jesus’ authoritative and trustworthy representatives (2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4; Acts 3:6–7; 4:10).

To construe the miracles of Jesus as grounds for making social action central to the church’s mission is to turn a blind eye to Jesus’ stated purpose for His miracles. In fact, Jesus frequently found that His priority ministry of preaching was hindered by the relentless demands of the mercy-seekers, leading Him at times to instruct those whom He healed not to spread the word about His power (Mark 1:42–45; Matt 9:30). Jesus understood all too well that social relief can swallow up time and effort that should be dedicated to preaching, evangelism, and discipleship.

8. A Willful Blindness to How the Early Church Fulfilled Jesus’ Commission(s)

Jesus’ various commissions to the disciples leave no room for making social action an equal partner with gospel proclamation, church planting, and theological training. In fact, Jesus’ instructions to His followers after His resurrection focused exclusively on making disciples through evangelism and teaching.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .” (Matt 28:19–20).

“Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46–48).

Realizing that social action is conspicuously absent from the commissions recorded in Matthew and Luke, John Stott draws attention to Jesus’ commission to the disciples in John 20:21, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”⁴⁷ Stott interprets this statement to mean, “The Father sent Me to evangelize *and* to heal the sick and help the poor; therefore, I am sending you to do both as well.” Clearly Stott tries too hard to find social action in this text. The Father’s authoritative sending of Jesus (the co-eternal, co-equal Son) into the world is a dominant theme in John’s Gospel (John 3:16–17; 5:24, 30, 36–37; 6:44, 57; 7:28–29; 8:42). In light of this, no complicated explanation of John 20:21 need be sought: as the Father authoritatively sent the Son (and as the Son submissively obeyed), so Jesus now authoritatively sends His disciples. The issue is authority and obedience, not the content of the mission. (In fact, much of Jesus’ mission—such as His substitutionary death—was irreproducible.) Additionally, Stott’s view of John 20:21 fails to give proper regard to the fact that, in

⁴⁷ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975, 2008), 30.

the context, forgiveness of sin is the only thing mentioned, not social action (20:23). Köstenberger concludes:

The Fourth Gospel does not therefore appear to teach the kind of “incarnational model” advocated by Stott and others. Not the way in which Jesus came into the world (i.e. the incarnation), but the nature of Jesus’ *relationship with his sender* (i.e. one of obedience and utter dependence), is presented in the Fourth Gospel as the model for the disciples’ mission.⁴⁸

In fact, if Jesus’ commission in John 20:21 was a veiled encouragement to carry out a dual-track mission in the world (evangelism *and* social justice), then the apostles clearly failed to understand Jesus. Peter summed up his interpretation of Jesus’ commissions this way: “He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). As one untimely born, the apostle Paul received his commission from Christ years later; nonetheless, Jesus’ words to Paul on the road to Damascus (and Paul’s subsequent obedience) are strikingly familiar:

“But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness. . . . to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.” “So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:16–20).

The Book of Acts reveals that the apostles and the early church fulfilled Jesus’ instruction with an astonishing single-mindedness of purpose, preaching the Word of God for the salvation of sinners and the edification of the saints.⁴⁹ Luke’s summary of Paul and Barnabas’ ministry in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, and Derbe shows that evangelism for the purpose of starting a church and subsequent leadership training were unequivocally the focus of the early church’s missionary labors:⁵⁰

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith. . . .When they had

⁴⁸ Andreas Köstenberger, *The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 217.

⁴⁹ If social action and gospel proclamation are “two wings of the same bird,” then in the book of Acts, proclamation is a condor wing and social action is (at best) a sparrow’s. See Acts 2:38; 3:19; 4:31, 33; 5:42; 6:7; 8:4; 10:42–43; 11:19; 12:24; 13:38, 46; 14:21; 17:1–3; 18:9–11; 19:9–10, 20; 28:30–31.

⁵⁰ In their case, Bible translation was unnecessary because, in the Septuagint, the Old Testament was already available to Greek speakers.

appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:21–23)

What about the apostles' social action endeavors? In fact, the only church-organized relief projects mentioned in Acts and the Epistles took place *within* the church, including the various financial gifts sent by the Greek churches to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29–30; Rom 15:25–26; Gal 2:10) and widow care (Acts 6:1–6; 1 Tim 5:3–16).^{51, 52} In short, the deacons of Acts 6 were ministers to the church, not missionaries to the world.

And even when it came to these valuable intra-church relief efforts, the apostles deliberately avoided becoming personally enmeshed in the demands and distractions of organizing them (e.g., Acts 6:2–4; 1 Cor 16:2). Their reason is obvious. As one social action advocate notes, “In the global urban context, doing justice requires an increasingly complex set of skills within the fields of community development and community organizing.”⁵³ Social action ministry is not something a pastor or a missionary does on the side for ten minutes a week.

This doesn't mean that the early Christians showed no concern for the needy outside the church. Far from it. For example, personal ministry to widows outside the church apparently did take place.⁵⁴ There can be no doubt that believers in the book of Acts met “pressing needs” (Titus 3:14) by caring for the orphans, widows, and poor who were part of their lives, thus fulfilling Paul's instruction: “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). Loving the hurting people around us is a normal part of daily Christian living, an expected fruit of gospel proclamation.⁵⁵ However, there is no evidence that the apostles tried to make social relief the face of the church or that social action projects were part of their Great Commission strategy.

⁵¹ The apostles' instructions in the Epistles were consistent with their practice: the bulk of their commands to believers focus on mercy within the body of Christ (e.g., James 2:15–16; 1 John 3:17; Titus 3:13–14; Philemon 5, 3 John 5–6; Heb 13:1–3; Rom 12:13). While this in no way excludes extending mercy to non-Christians, passages commending mercy *within* the body of Christ are a shaky foundation on which to erect a social action model of evangelism and missions.

⁵² In reference to 1 Timothy 5, Naylor writes, “The test of a widow's eligibility was strict: she had to be a member of the church, known for her good works and godliness. . . . There is no evidence that the church at Ephesus ran a social service for all the widows in the city; in fact, *the text of 1 Timothy 5 shows us that it did not do so*” (in *Engaging With Keller*, 151, emphasis in original).

⁵³ Gornik, in *The Urban Face of Missions*, 193.

⁵⁴ This is based on the distinction that Luke makes between “saints” and the “widows” in Acts 9:41. F. F. Bruce considers it unlikely that Luke meant that the widows were not Christians (*The Acts of the Apostles* [London: The Tyndale Press, 1951, 2nd ed., 1952], 213), but we acknowledge that the view is possible.

⁵⁵ We are eager for the reader to understand that we encourage such love in our own churches. For example, people in our congregations are employed at orphanages, teach Bible studies for orphans, volunteer at a hospice, run a school instructing underprivileged African farmers, minister in prisons, sponsor theological training for needy pastors, have created a food-for-trash program for street children, and a host of other mercy efforts. They do these things because they are Christians, fulfilling Gal 6:10, not because the church corporate is called to organize and run social action programs.

A Test Case: Rome

The apostle Paul's long-anticipated mission to the city of Rome provides an enlightening example of the apostles' systematic (and if the social justice proponents are right, *inexplicable*) disregard for making social action an equal or significant partner with gospel proclamation. In Paul's day, Rome was a sprawling metropolis with over a million residents, and its social woes were equivalent to or worse than those of any modern city. Poverty was rife and there was a massive gap between the elite rich and the desperate poor. Unemployment hovered at catastrophic levels, with up to two hundred thousand people in the city regularly (and all-too willingly) living off state-sponsored welfare.⁵⁶ The living conditions in Rome's disease-ridden slums were abysmal; crime, prostitution, and slavery were a normal part of life.

What would the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans have looked like if it were written by one of today's evangelical social justice advocates? *I can't wait to come to Rome to lead the charge of Christ-centered social justice! Deed must precede word! We need to proclaim Christ's love for the city by working to improve the general civility, race relations, and social conditions of Rome. We need to eradicate slavery and poverty; we need to start orphanages. The cynical people of Rome won't listen to the gospel unless we first help them flourish socially and economically. But if the church organizes a series of community-based services to eradicate unemployment and to uplift the disadvantaged, then we'll see the city of Rome transformed.*

Of course, what Paul actually wrote was, "So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation . . ." (Rom 1:15–16; see also 10:14–17). The gospel that Paul went on to describe in Romans is a gospel of sin, wrath, the cross, repentance, faith, and forgiveness—not one of social improvement and human flourishing. Paul was not lacking in compassion. In Gal 2:10 he wrote, "They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do." However, although Paul was fully aware of the social conditions that prevailed in any large city of the Roman Empire, including Rome itself, he gave no attention to a social action missions strategy.

Summing Up

It is possible to view the evangelical church's renewed preoccupation with social action as merely a difference in *emphasis*. And that is undoubtedly true in some cases. Because of the varying gifts in the body of Christ, some churches and missionaries will focus on mercy more than others: that's to be expected. However, the social justice debate is not merely a squabble over whether the church should add one lump or two of mercy to its ecclesiastical tea. Ultimately, it is about making social

⁵⁶ M. Rostovtzeff, *Rome*, trans. J. D. Duff, ed., Elias J. Bickerman (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 251.

action and gospel proclamation co-equal partners in the church's mission. We believe that is not merely a difference in emphasis: it's a different ecclesiology altogether.

Results and Solutions

What has been the effect of all this in Africa? It's an oversimplification, but the result is *the wrong missionaries doing the wrong things*. The African church needs help. Good at celebration and community, the African church (with a few notable exceptions) needs all the help it can get when it comes to church planting, spiritual depth, and theological training. However, the West is currently sending primarily two kinds of missionaries to Africa: first, missionaries who are *unprepared* to truly help the African church—wonderful, compassionate, college-age girls who have come to do orphan care;⁵⁷ and second, missionaries who are *underprepared* to help the African church—enthusiastic men or couples who are eager to lead mercy projects, but whose lack of theological training and ministry experience means that they can offer little help of real significance to the African church.⁵⁸ The work they do is emotionally rewarding for the missionaries and for the churches that send them. However, fewer and fewer of the kinds of missionaries who will make a long-term difference in Africa—Bible translators, church planters, and leadership trainers—are being sent.

Pastors and church leaders in the West can do a lot to reverse the trend. First, missionaries on the field need to be encouraged to keep their eye on the ball: what a missionary *can* do and what a missionary *must* do are not always the same.⁵⁹ Sending churches can encourage their current missionaries by regularly letting them know that the boring, humdrum, *strategic* proclamation work that they are doing is of the highest significance. Secondly, preachers who are committed to proclamation-focused missions need to speak out, offering the church something better than they're getting from the social justice bloggers and the popular missional authors. It won't be easy. Who wants to be (unfairly) branded as being against orphans or clean water? We don't. But the price of silence is high: the church is poised to lose a generation

⁵⁷ We're not demeaning them or what they do; they just don't meet the church's primary need or contribute significantly to the church's primary mission.

⁵⁸ What some have called "amateurism" in missions is an ongoing problem. While not all missionaries need to be gifted and trained at the same level, it's worth noting that the church of Antioch sent out their best: Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3). We encourage churches to remember that long-term effectiveness in missions requires thorough theological training, not just enthusiasm.

⁵⁹ Old-guard missionaries who are doing book-of-Acts kind of missions often feel pressure to embrace the new social justice model. There are at least four reasons for this. First, missionaries are genuinely compassionate people. Second, missionaries are as susceptible to trends and peer pressure as anyone. Third, a hubbub of voices is promoting the social justice model of missions: Which respected, clear-speaking voices are enthusiastically promoting book-of-Acts kind of missions? Fourth, missionaries can see that if they want to keep their support levels up, in today's missional environment, they need to add a social justice component to their ministries. They know that, "We are in our fourteenth week of an exposition of Philippians in our church plant" is unlikely to receive the same response as "We cared for fourteen orphans this week."

of missionaries to secondary work such as building schools and digging wells. And if history has anything to say about the matter, we might lose the gospel too.

Whatever the immediate benefits (some very real, some only imagined) of poverty relief, clean water, and orphanages, what will be the long-term consequences of the fact that a generation of Christian missionaries in Africa is putting social relief first and church planting and leadership training—at best—second? Long after the AIDS orphans have grown up, the wells have been blocked with sand, and the medical clinics have closed due to a lack of Western funding, the people of Africa will need churches to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. But if the Western church continues to send missionaries focused on social action, who will plant and pastor those churches? The church in Africa and around the world can flourish, but it takes the right kind of national leaders, and from the West, it takes the right kind of missionaries doing what only Christians can do:

After all, people of good will of all religions and no religion can and do address the human need for food, clothing, shelter, health, education, justice and so on. But Christians—and Christians only—can be expected to preach the gospel, win men and women of all nations to Jesus Christ, and establish churches that will worship and witness until Christ returns.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Hesselgrave, "Will We Correct the Edinburgh Error?" 144.