

For the Sake of His Name, Chapter 5 **“The Task of the Great Commission II” pp. 97-100**

Mission or Missions?

When considering the decline of the Student Volunteer Movement for Missions, one major factor of that must be recognized is the shift from proclamation evangelism to the so-called larger or holistic evangelism.¹ In spite of this, evangelicalism has retraced these downward steps in the years since the Congress for World Evangelization held Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. Prior to the conference, there was considerable debate about the relationship between evangelism and social action. Some considered that to be the “unfinished business” of the last major evangelical conference on evangelism which met in Berlin during 1966.² In the eight years between these conferences, there was considerable movement in the direction of social action among the evangelicals. Consider the positive assessment of Edward Dayton,

In the eight years between Berlin and Lausanne, there was tremendous movement in the evangelical part of Christ’s church.... Lausanne was intended to be a congress of those involved in trying to reach the world; but the Holy Spirit was also enlivening the minds of men and women to expand our understanding of what it meant to evangelize. The Lausanne Covenant greatly broadened our worldviews. We were called to see that the task of evangelization was not confined to the sharing of information about Jesus. There was a life to be lived. We saw the need for the broad redemption of the world in all its aspects.... The year of Lausanne—1974—might also be described as a watershed year in Western evangelicals’ interest in social concerns.³

What Dayton considers to be progress, I contend was regress—a return to the flawed thinking of the ecumenical movement that had embraced a social agenda which displaced evangelism.

Perhaps the chief architect and proponent of this shift in thinking is John Stott, a prolific writer and leader for the Lausanne Movement. From his work on the publication of the Lausanne Covenant and its attending exposition and commentary to his own books on this issue, Stott has set the agenda for inclusion of a social action agenda among evangelicals. He has set out to do this to counter the past failure of evangelicalism. In his words,

One of the most notable features of the worldwide evangelical movement during the last ten to fifteen years [c. 1970-1985] has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid social conscience. For approximately fifty years (c. 1920-70) evangelical Christians were preoccupied with the task of defending the historic biblical faith against the attacks of theological liberalism, and reacting against its “social gospel.” But now we are convinced that God has given us social as well as evangelistic responsibilities in his world.⁴

¹ See chapter two of this book. Cf. also Arthur Johnston, *The Battle of World Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1978).

² Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, p. 221.

³ Edward R. Dayton, “Social Transformation: The Mission of God” in *The Church in Response to Human Need*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Christopher Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 53.

⁴ John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1990), p. xi.

Stott, confirming Dayton's assessment, pinpoints Lausanne as the "turning-point for the worldwide evangelical constituency" because it set forth the principle that both evangelism and socio-political involvement are part of the Christian duty.⁵

How did the "worldwide evangelical constituency" come to see that socio-political involvement was part of the Christian duty? The pivotal shift in thinking was demonstrated and advanced by the redefinition of the Christian mission. Historically, the terms mission and missionary focused our attention on the evangelistic/discipleship mandate given to us by the Lord. Stott, and others, called for a redefinition of that term so that mission summarized all "that Christ sends His people into the world to do" and that this "cannot be limited to proclamation evangelism."⁶ More directly, he argues,

Instead of seeking to evade our social responsibility, we need to open our ears and listen to the voice of him who calls his people in every age to go out into the lost and lonely world (as he did), in order to live and love, to witness and serve, like him and for him. For that is "mission." Mission is our human response to the divine commission. It is the whole Christian lifestyle, including both evangelism and social responsibility, dominated by the conviction that Christ sends us out into the world as the Father sent him into the world, and that into the world we must therefore go—to live and work for him.⁷

For Stott, the Christian mission is dual: evangelism and social action. This subtle shift in terminology, missions to mission, represented an enormous shift in theology and philosophy.

Though Lausanne articulated a logical priority for evangelism, it clearly argued that *both* evangelism and social action are parts of the Christian mission. The Lausanne Covenant went so far as to "express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive."⁸ The exposition and commentary on these words go even further:

We express penitence both for our neglect or our Christian social responsibility and for our naïve polarization in having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. This confession is mildly worded. A large group at Lausanne, concerned to develop a radical Christian discipleship, expressed themselves more strongly, "We must repudiate as demonic the attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action."⁹

So, what actually surfaces is less two distinct parts of one mission, and more two activities that cannot be separated from each other, that is, as we do one, we do the other. Further work by the Lausanne Movement fleshed out the details of the relationship between evangelism and social action. In 1982, *The Grand Rapids Report on Evangelism and Social Responsibility* elaborated a three-fold relationship:

First, social activity is a *consequence* of evangelism. That is, evangelism is the means by which God brings people to new birth, and their new life manifests itself in service to others....We can go further than this, however. Social responsibility is more than the consequence of evangelism; it is also one of its principal aims.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁶ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 342.

⁷ Stott, *Decisive Issues*, p. 15.

⁸ John Stott, ed., *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

Secondly, social activity can be a *bridge* to evangelism. It can break down prejudice and suspicion, open closed doors, and gain a hearing for the Gospel. Jesus himself sometimes performed works of mercy before proclaiming the good news of the kingdom...

Thirdly, social activity not follows evangelism as its consequence and aim, and precedes it as its bridge, but also accompanies it as its *partner*. They are like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird. 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....

Thus, evangelism and social responsibility, while distinct from one another, are integrally related in our proclamation of and obedience to the Gospel. The partnership is, in reality, a marriage.¹⁰

Given this frame of reference, it is not surprising, then, to find one of the members of this consultation draw the following conclusion: "And what is social transformation for the Christian? Is it not the entire business that God is about, namely, the redemption of the world? And is not the mission of the church social transformation is every dimension?"¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 181-182.

¹¹ Dayton, "Social Transformation: The Mission of God," p. 54.