

Evangelicals and Social Action: YWAM's Adoption of Kingdom Mission

by *Debra Buenting*

We often pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, but what does this prayer mean exactly? For many evangelicals this is a new question and the current discussion is a different one than we would have had in most circles 25 years ago. When I joined Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in the mid-1970s, the evangelical Church was still promoting a narrow view of salvation focused almost entirely on winning individual souls. The specter of the dreaded liberal "social gospel" loomed over those evangelical ministries that did attempt to get involved in social issues or even work with the poor. Western evangelical Christianity and mission by and large were firmly locked into an individualistic worldview that left little room for ideas as basic as the need for community.

I would like to explore how Evangelicals have come to adopt a dualistic mindset, separating the need for individual salvation and the imperative to bring about positive social change. I will then describe how we are currently in the process of recovering a view of life, salvation and the Kingdom of God that is more in line with the teachings of Scripture.

The Biblical Vision and God's Plan

Long time community-organizer and author Dr. Robert Linthicum gave an articulate definition of *shalom* as it is understood throughout Jewish history:

God's plan for humankind is captured by the Hebrew word "shalom," which is more than just "peace." It is alternatively translated as peace, prosperity, welfare, well being, wholeness, harmony. It is used to describe bodily health (Ps. 38:3), security and strength (Dan. 10:19; Judges 6:23), a long life ending in a natural death (Gen. 15:15), abundance (Lam. 3:17; Ps. 37:11; Zech. 8:12; Job 5:18-26), successful completion of an enterprise (Judges 18:5; 1 Sam. 1:17), and even victory in war (Judges 8:9).¹

The Hebrew concept of salvation includes similar meanings such as aid, victory, prosperity, health, help and welfare. In the New Testament, the Greek words for salvation encompass notions of healing, preservation, making whole, keeping safe and restoration.²

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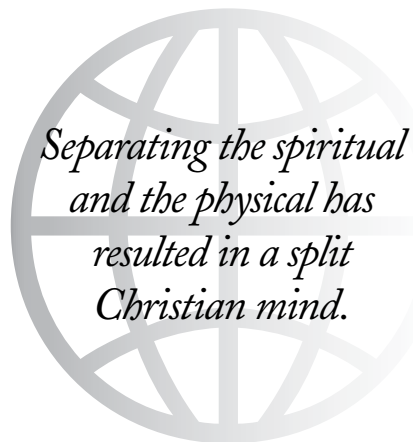
This holistic vision sharply contrasts with the situation in which we find the world today. In this world, many little girls endure the painful molesting advances of those who are charged with their nurture and care. Others, without anesthesia, have their unique femininity stolen through female genital mutilation and suffer the devastating consequences the rest of their lives. Around the world, there are families and communities who are terrorized by those who use their power to grab more and more land. Diseases like AIDS and cancer destroy systems in the human body that were designed to propagate cell reproduction and produce life. Climate change, political corruption, oppressive economic systems, and other forms of societal darkness all demonstrate that this world has ventured far from God's original design.

Although human free will has not conformed to God's wishes and human self-determination has alienated us from God's blessings, God has enacted a plan of salvation. God chose the descendants of a nomadic herder, Abraham, to bring a message of redemption to the nations. God took a dysfunctional and spiritually poor people group and tried to make them into a loving and consistent model of His Kingdom through which all the peoples on earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Miller, Moffit and Allen describe God's objective in choosing an example nation as this: "The watching nations would understand that God's laws are beneficial for creating free, just and compassionate societies."³

A Holistic View throughout Church History

When we look at history, we see the church originally had a sense that God cared about and was involved in every aspect of life. Christians were leaders in science, the arts, education and many other fields. Catholic monks carried their missionary message throughout Europe, encouraging converts to develop every aspect of their lives, from private devotion to academic scholarship.⁴ Martin Luther believed that the work of monks and priests was no

more holy in the sight of God than the efforts of "the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone."⁵ He fought vigorously for the education of poor children and low-interest loans for workers. William Carey brought the gospel to India, translating the Bible into several languages and dialects. He also founded a university, an Agricultural and Horticultural Society, and a savings bank; published dictionaries and books on grammar and botany; fought for the conservation of



forests; and openly resisted the cultural tradition of widow burning.⁶ William Wilberforce worked with the British Parliament to abolish slavery and helped found the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Puritans, Pietists, Moravians and Methodists fed and clothed the poor, established schools, and fought for social issues such as the rights of women and slaves.⁷ William and Catherine Booth, who started The Salvation Army, met both physical and spiritual needs of the poor, addicted and otherwise "undesirable" populations. And Martin Luther King, Jr. "led a social movement that confronted systemic evil—the evil of racism—and made national policy makers end legal segregation and the denial of black peoples' right to vote."⁸ His efforts moved a nation towards racial equality.

The Roots of Dualism

However, the Church has not engaged in holistic mission during every period

of history. A key theological influence came from Augustine (354–430 AD). After living a life of debauchery and briefly following the philosophical and cultish ideas of Neo-platonism and Manichæism, Augustine brought some of these ideas into the Christian faith and popularized the idea that Jesus' earthly purpose was to "release souls of light from the prison of their bodies."⁹ He established a tendency for the church to promote a dualistic theology that divided life into the sacred (spiritual) and the secular (physical).

The implications of this dualism are profound. Separating the spiritual and the physical (or what is often called the "secular") has resulted in a split Christian mind. Praying, reading the Bible and going to church came to be considered sacred activities while working, eating, and other such aspects of life were seen as secular. Likewise, there developed false distinctions in vocations. The offices of the pastor or priest, missionary, monk, nun, or deacon were considered spiritual vocations and given much more value and authority than the secular vocations of bricklayer, farmer, teacher, lawyer, storyteller, artist or businessperson.

"The Great Reversal": The Sacred vs. Secular Split in Evangelicalism

The secular/sacred dichotomy became particularly divisive in North America between 1910 and 1930. The split brought about a fierce debate that was to affect how Christian mission was carried out in the 20th century. This period later came to be called "The Great Reversal", a term coined by Timothy L. Smith,¹⁰ and was explained in detail in a profound book published in 1972 by David O. Moberg titled, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern: An Evangelical Perspective*.¹¹

In the early twentieth century, several issues challenged the American church. Some Christians had begun to question the reality of God and the authority of the Bible. At the same time, American

society was faced with a variety of new problems including massive immigration, urbanization, and industrialization. Great economic disparity and social ills burdened American cities such as New York and Chicago. How to solve these urban problems became the focus of fierce theological debate.

One side engaged in social reform, working to relieve crime, pollution, injustice, and cultural tensions. They fed the homeless, fought for workers' rights, championed minorities and women, and sought to change the unjust structures of society that relegated people to chronic wretchedness. But their message often neglected important Christian themes of personal responsibility, repentance and a relationship with God. Individual change, they thought, would result from corporate change. They called their work "*restoring the Kingdom of God*."

On the other side of the divide, some Christians incorporated the hyper-individualism of American culture with the theology and mission of the Church. This brand of Christianity became preoccupied with *saving souls* and focused on individual religious experience as the end-all of Christian work. According to N.T. Wright, Christianity "became what the enlightenment wanted it to be—a private system of piety which doesn't impinge on the public world."¹²

These Christians began isolating themselves from almost any sense of social responsibility, resulting in a "holy huddle" sub-culture. They focused on growing a church culture that became preoccupied with reproducing itself rather than being an agent of transformation. They believed that if individuals experienced personal redemption, society as a whole would eventually change.

Those who were concerned solely with personal evangelism, apologetics and the inerrancy of scripture became known as *fundamentalists* (for defending what they called the fundamentals of Christianity).¹³ These *conservative* Christians belittled those who worked

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to solve social problems, viewing them as being driven by *works*. Fundamentalists derisively called those driven to reform society "*social gospelers*" and despised them for missing the "true" message of the Bible.

While fundamentalists looked down on *social gospelers*, the more socially conscious "*liberal*" Christians began to despise fundamentalists for their narrow-mindedness and apathy in the face of the hardships of those around them. This "Great Reversal" had a profound effect on how Christians viewed themselves and the Scriptures. David O. Moberg described how each side read different parts of the Bible and "became either evangelistic or socially involved, not both."¹⁴ Protestants, said Moberg, "identified with the prosperous, moved their residences and churches away from the inner city... and thus remained blind to many evils of their society."¹⁵ These suburbanite fundamentalists would take their *gospel of salvation* to the ends of the earth, leaving, in a sense, the rest of their Bibles (which dealt with corporate and social concerns) at home.

Waking Up from the Great Reversal to Kingdom Mission? YWAM's Story

Despite the conservative theological position of many mission agencies, evangelical missionaries on the field have often been involved in relief and development work. Such involvement arose naturally because the needs on the field were so obvious. This was certainly the case in Youth With A Mission, the movement with which I have spent most of my career.¹⁶ In the early days of our mission (YWAM was founded in 1960), we focused heavily on personal evangelism. And to an extent we were involved in meeting physical human need by serving in disaster relief, helping drug addicts restore their lives, and starting orphanages. However, it was during the

Southeast Asian refugee crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s that YWAM began to work extensively with the poor and needy. We slowly began to embrace a more holistic theology, realizing we could both discuss Jesus' message of personal redemption and hand out food and blankets. Like other parts of the Body of Christ, YWAM dismissed the fear of being labeled "*social gospelers*" for becoming involved in social concerns.

While our work with refugees met real needs and opened individuals to the message of personal salvation, these efforts focused solely on the short-term. The difficulty of developing long-term strategy was seen in other YWAM ministries as well. One of the most visible social ministries started within YWAM was Mercy Ships, ocean-going vessels outfitted to perform life-changing surgeries, transport goods, host discipleship courses and deliver evangelism teams. Ultimately, the efforts of the Mercy Ships were also limited to the short term. However, because ships move around, we were not able to develop strategies for long-term development.

Some evangelical groups were involved in relief and development during the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, these years saw the blossoming of an entire development industry. In the 1990s, the term *community development* was used to describe the work YWAM and others were doing in specific locations. YWAM started primary schools in West Africa and other regions to provide solid education founded on a Christian worldview. Medical teams worked to improve living conditions, helping a handful of communities identify their problems and find collaborative solutions. Ministries to street kids, like our work in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, forced our workers to not only meet physical needs, but also offer counseling and adoption services. These YWAM missionaries ministered to children

who huddled like animals at night for warmth and affection, were forced to prostitute themselves to survive, and suffered violence from gangs and police alike. YWAMers found that handing out food and sharing the gospel were not enough; YWAM had to get involved in human rights issues. They had to fight for the basic rights of those considered of no value by the wider society.¹⁷

As YWAM continued into the new millennium to pioneer work in some 200 countries, we were faced with several problems and challenges that demanded long-term strategies. Ministry to marginalized populations led the mission to get involved in systemic problems of social injustice.¹⁸ However, the process of fully integrating a holistic view of ministry with standard evangelical missiology is one that has not yet been completed.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As YWAM nears its 50th anniversary, we—like many mission agencies, socially minded individuals, and some churches—struggle with what the Christian expression might look like in the coming years. Many are increasingly dissatisfied with an institutional religion that is often disconnected from social problems, overly concerned with replicating itself and constructing buildings, and often blind to (or ignorant of) profound injustices throughout the world that break the heart of God. In YWAM, we have realized that a highly individualized evangelistic message does not come close to God's desire, which is to redeem all that has gone wrong on the earth.

As far back as the mid-1970s, YWAM founder Loren Cunningham preached about influencing nations (not just individuals), a strategy God had simultaneously given him and Bill Bright of Campus Crusade. They named seven spheres of influence: Economics, Government, Communication, Arts, Education, Family and the Church.

Miller, Moffit and Allen summed up recent evangelical history in *The Worldview of the Kingdom of God*:

The past 150 years have witnessed an unprecedented missionary movement aimed at preaching the gospel and planting churches among the "least reached" of the world. Largely, this movement has been successful at what it set out to do—save souls and plant churches. Today there are more churches and more Christians in the world than at any time in history. But to what end? Poverty and corruption thrive in developing countries that have been evangelized. Moral and spiritual poverty reign in the "Christian" West. In many parts of the world where the church is growing, the growth is a mile wide and an inch deep. It has lost its characteristics of being salt and light in society (Matt 5:13-16).¹⁹

In an effort to regain a broader sense of the gospel, some Christ-followers are focusing their ministry on concepts that pre-date "the Great Reversal"—ideas such as transformation, discipling nations and the Kingdom of God. Dozens of books are being published on these subjects, including a recent release by YWAM titled *His Kingdom Come: An Integrated Approach to Discipling the Nations and Fulfilling the Great Commission*. The dialogue surrounding this broader worldview, as well as ideas coming from the emerging and postmodern church movements, have much to offer in helping us re-think our identity and mission. It would appear that YWAM and the tip of the church spear are generally moving towards a holistic model that views God, the world and ministry in ways that are consistent with the whole Bible, not just parts of it. This is a redemptive message that not only transforms individual lives, but entire communities, cities, cultures and nations. Hopefully "the Great Reversal" is being reversed.

What Might the Kingdom on Earth Look Like?

So where do we go next? It took most Evangelicals a few years to become re-sensitized to human suffering and re-engage in acts of charity. But caring about the suffering and marginalized seems like a mere baby step towards realizing a full understanding of mission. As some have said, charity can never be a substitute for justice—which is a

significant part of the equitable and peaceful world God intended—because charity condemns its recipients to passivity under the powers that control them. Charity alone fails to deal with the core systems that allow evil to flourish. It is one thing to feed people, rebuild their homes, or try to heal the emotional or physical wounds of war, sexual abuse or ethnic prejudice. It is another thing to fight the systems that contributed to these circumstances. Asking how to do that is where I think YWAM and other parts of the church find themselves today. Those with experience in community organizing and long-term development would remind us that our God-given responsibility is not to fight all the battles ourselves, but to empower individuals and communities to fight the battles they face uniquely. Should we not proclaim a message that frees all human beings to be all that God intended them to be—full participants in their destiny as co-creators in God's universe, nurturing a spirit of truth and love to flow everywhere and through everyone?

YWAM is currently working on a statement of what discipling the nations and realizing the Kingdom might look like. While this is very much in process, we think it is in large part about the transformation of individual lives, communities, cultures and the earth. It has to do with realizing God's intentions for people and the earth. It is God-centered. It is about realizing *shalom* and seeing redemption in every aspect of life. It is about justice for all people. It is about destroying the powers of darkness, wherever they are found.



Figure 1: YWAM's Journey to Kingdom Mission.

It is about the whole earth. It is about co-creating with God.

We are also thinking about what discipling the nations is not. It is not about using power to make the world into what the Church wants it to be. It is not about forcing conversion on the world's peoples. As theological thinker Gregory Boyd points out, God's power is demonstrated by being a servant.²⁰ God's way is to influence through "power under," not to dominate by "power over." For this reason, the current discussion has nothing to do with liberation or dominion theology.

Advancing the Kingdom is not about advancing Western culture and theologies. God loves all nations and cultures. It will take all nations and cultures to paint an accurate picture of who God is and what *God's Kingdom* will look like. It is not political. It does not equal all American "ideals" like the "American dream."

Convergence

Missiologist Ralph Winter claims that culture often influences faith more than faith influences culture. Certainly the world is becoming more flat. Travel, the media, immigration, the Internet, and many other factors help connect people from around the world. There is a greater social awareness among many today. Even a handful of celebrities (such as Bono, Bill and Melinda Gates and Oprah) are highlighting social ills, raising awareness and funds to fight world hunger, illiteracy, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS and other problems. A heightened global sense of need and injustice is certainly influencing the Church. Today's young adults, well acquainted with global culture, are much more socially aware and less encumbered by the baggage of "the Great Reversal." They see no conflict between their faith and a personal responsibility to engage in society and make a difference at every level.

I think there is an encouraging convergence taking place between different streams of thought in the evangelical world that is leading us into unexplored

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paths of social awareness and responsibility. We have to keep revising our meta-story, to re-think what it is to be a Christian, to be the Church, to practice mission, to build the Kingdom of God, to realize God's dreams and intentions, to reverse "the Great Reversal" and recapture an earlier theology that works to bring the whole world under the Lordship of Christ. Let's keep thinking, talking and working. **UJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Dr. Robert Linthicum, Personal communication, July 8, 2004.

² From BibleSoft's *New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance* and *The Online Bible Thayer's Greek Lexicon* and *Brown Driver & Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*.

³ Miller, D.M., Moffit, B., & Allen, S.D. (2005) *God's Remarkable Plan for the Nations*. Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, p. 30. This is part of a 3-booklet series called *Kingdom Lifestyle Bible Studies*.

⁴ Pierson, P.E. "Missions and Community Development: A Historical Perspective," in Elliston, E.J. (Ed.). (1989). *Christian Relief and Development: Developing Workers for Effective Ministry*. Dallas, TX: Word, pp. 7–22.

⁵ Selected Writings of Martin Luther available online from books.google.com

⁶ See Mangalwadi, V. & Mangalwadi, R. (1999). *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

⁷ Pierson, P.E., pp. 7–22.

⁸ Mike Miller, Personal communication, January 27, 2009. Miller has extensive experience in confronting systemic social ills by helping organize communities into "people of power." He is the author of an upcoming book (September 2009) titled, *A Community Organizer's Tale: People of Power in San Francisco*. Heyday Books.

⁹ St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). Retrieved October 10, 2001, from <http://www.faithnet.freeseerve.co.uk/augustine.htm>. (no longer available online)

¹⁰ Timothy L. Smith was a pastor, historian and prolific writer. His first book was titled *Revivalism and Social Reform* and published in 1957. Many of his thought-provoking articles can be found on the Internet.

¹¹ Moberg, D. (1972). *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern: An Evangelical Perspective*. Philadelphia: Holmon. The book is out of print but can be found from used booksellers on the Internet.

¹² Wright, N.T. (1997). *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 154.

¹³ The distinction between "Evangelicals" and "Fundamentalists" was a later development related to many fundamentalist Christians who became disenchanted with the isolation and belligerent attitudes of their colleagues in ministry.

¹⁴ Moberg, p. 34.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶ For a fuller account of YWAM's history on this issue, see Buenting, D. (2008) "Youth With A Mission and the Great Reversal." In Stier, J., Poor, R., & Orvis, L. (Eds.) *His Kingdom Come: An Integrated Approach to Discipling the Nations and Fulfilling the Great Commission*. Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing.

¹⁷ For the story of YWAM Belo Horizonte's ministry to street kids, see Lukasse, J. (2002) *A Cry from the Streets: Rescuing Brazil's Forgotten Children*. Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing.

¹⁸ YWAM conferences, such as Connexity, focused on the need for clean water, on the plight of girls and women, children at risk, and other justice issues. More and more YWAM projects, publications, outreaches, training courses, and ministry initiatives started focusing on issues such as human trafficking, infanticide, the AIDS epidemic, malaria and other diseases, and other long-term evidence of brokenness at both the individual and societal level. (See also Lukasse J. (2002) *A Cry from the Streets: Rescuing Brazil's Forgotten Children*. Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing.) Also, find out more of YWAM's struggle to save children in Brazil by visiting the Hakani project at: <http://www.hakani.org/en/>

¹⁹ Miller, D.M., Moffit, B., & Allen, S.D. (2005) *The Worldview of the Kingdom of God*. Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, p. 30. This is part of a 3-booklet series called *Kingdom Lifestyle Bible Studies*.

²⁰ Boyd, G. A. (2007). *Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.