



# The Great Danger

*The Social Gospel Avoided*



What's the problem? Isn't caring for people and their needs a good work? But that is what creates the problem – caring without sharing. One reason evangelicals are hesitant to engage in *ministry evangelism* is the result of the “social gospel.” With good reason, God's people fear falling into the trap that believers followed one hundred years ago. By understanding the social gospel movement, we can press toward what God has called us to do: care for people's needs while sharing the gospel with them.

## **The Social Gospel Avoided**

Understandably, evangelicals look on social action without evangelism with suspicion. Social action alone does not meet a person's deepest needs. Christians should support and participate in community efforts to meet needs and confront problems like hunger and homelessness. But the church's business goes deeper. As Christians, we are to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and protect the innocent. This expression of God's love draws people to the gospel such that they will come to

know Him as Savior and Lord. Our caring ministry must be unconditional, but it must always carry the gospel message.<sup>6</sup>

The apostle Paul addressed our ministry responsibility in these words: *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation* (2 Corinthians 5:18). Those of us who have been reconciled to God (saved) have been given a ministry. This ministry is the ministry of reconciliation. The question is, “What does it mean to be a minister of reconciliation?”

Findley B. Edge points out that many Christians have related reconciliation only to saving souls; therefore, the one focus of the Christian’s ministry is evangelism or soul winning. This view, according to Edge, adopts the Greek dualistic view of human life that sees a person as a body and a soul. It tends to emphasize the importance of the spiritual but gives little attention to the physical.

A more biblical view sees a person as a unit and is concerned with the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of life. God is concerned with the totality of a person’s life; therefore, reconciliation involves the total person and all of his relationships and circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

William Pinson speaks about the need to include the whole person in our ministry efforts. “Not only are we to minister to all people, but we are to minister to all needs. Jesus fixed His ministry on whole people, not on bodies as some medical technicians might, nor on minds as some educators do, nor on emotions as some counselors and psychiatrists do, nor on

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6 This paragraph, along with the following seven paragraphs, is reproduced from Donald A. Atkinson and Charles Roesel, *Meeting Needs Sharing Christ: Ministry Evangelism in Today’s New Testament Church* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1995), 107-109.

7 Findley B. Edge, “The Meaning of Ministry,” in *LAOS: All the People of God*, eds. Fisher Humphreys and Thomas A. Kinchen (New Orleans: New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984), 70.

souls as some religionists do. He was concerned about whole people.”<sup>8</sup> Reconciliation brings people into relationship with God by ministering to every area of their lives.

Part of our role in bringing God’s redemptive love to others is influencing the structures of society that are detrimental to humanity’s well-being. Christians must work to make conditions better for others, especially the downtrodden and powerless. We can accomplish this by becoming involved in both Christian social action and Christian social ministry. Christian social ministry refers to deeds of love and kindness that meet individual needs, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the ragged, and ministering to the sick and imprisoned. On the other hand, Christian social action refers to the efforts of God’s people to make needed changes in society to alleviate conditions that hurt others, especially the poor and underclass.<sup>9</sup> Christians must not only minister to people’s hurts and brokenness but also seek to eliminate the evils in society that create pain, poverty, and suffering.

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Delos Miles uses the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 to illustrate the difference between Christian social ministry and Christian social action. The Samaritan engaged in social ministry by binding the beaten man’s wounds and spending time and money to save his life. “If he had sought to change the conditions which led to the Jericho road robbery and mugging, that would have been social action.”<sup>10</sup>

Many believers and churches were involved in social action

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8 William Pinson, “Ministry Now,” in *LAOS: All the People of God*, 111.

9 Delos Miles, “Church Social Work and Evangelism as Partners,” in *Evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Thom S. Rainer (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989), 55.

10Ibid.

in the 1960s and 1970s to bring racial justice to a segregated nation. In this current decade, Christians have taken stands on societal issues such as abortion, legalized gambling, crime, and drug trafficking. More attention needs to be given to social justice in areas such as housing, nutrition, and medical care.

Christians should be passionate about the causes they believe in, but the church's witness is negated when Christians become shrill, hateful, and violent. Christians must not let themselves be led to extremism, hatred, and violence. As we attack society's injustices that damage people, we must do so in the spirit of our Lord – the spirit of redemptive love. Our agenda, like that of Jesus, is to do God's work in the world. This means involvement in caring for people's needs and hurts in order to introduce them to Jesus, the Great Physician.

### **An Ever-Present Danger**

The reason people like the term *ministry evangelism* is simple: it avoids being confused with the old "social gospel." That program was a failure because it was all social and no gospel. The greatest danger of *ministry evangelism* is that it is so satisfying when we feel blessed by helping the hurting with their physical needs that we fail to meet their deepest need – a saving encounter with Jesus Christ. We must be intentional in evangelism. We must remember a key fact: the social gospel remains an ever-present danger.

When Jesus said, *Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men* (Matthew 4:19 NKJV), He meant: *Follow me* – that is the command – *and I will make you fishers of men* – that is the promise. If we are following Jesus, we will be fishers of men. If we are not fishers of men, we are not following Jesus.

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gave a command: *Go and make disciples of all nations . . . and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* He also said we would have power: *But*

*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8). This statement shows that Christian witnessing is not voluntary or mandatory as much as it is inevitable. If Jesus is in my heart, He'll be in my talk. If He is not in my talk, He is not reigning in my heart.

The early Christians took Jesus at His word. They were not trained theologians, but men who still had the smell of fish on their sandals. The women's hands spoke more of goat hair and mutton than the silks of Damascus. But these uncouth folks caused the bystanders to marvel when they saw that they had been with Jesus. The Bible tells us they prayed for ten days. Peter preached for ten minutes, and three thousand souls were saved, and then five thousand. The Lord added daily to their number. The number of the disciples multiplied. Remember what happened from there: Jesus went up, the Holy Spirit came down, Christians went out, the lost came in, and the church continued to grow. What God did with the early Christians, He can do with us today. The power is no less, the purpose no different. It is obvious we have failed to do it His way, and we are not winning the world. We are losing the world.

We do not truly love people if we do not tell them about Jesus. The twentieth century's great atrocity was not Hitler murdering six million Jews, as horrendous as that was. It was not Stalin murdering twenty million of his own people, as shocking as that is. It was not Americans murdering untold millions of unborn babies, as staggering as that is and continues to be. The greatest atrocity of the twentieth century is that two billion people on the earth have never heard the gospel a single time because we have made the gospel the greatest story never told. The two most embarrassing questions you can ask a Southern Baptist congregation are: "How long has it been since

you brought someone to Jesus Christ?” and “How long has it been since you even tried?”

In general, we are in danger of not being evangelistic at all. This danger becomes worse when ministering to the poor and forgetting the Lord's command to share the gospel. It is at this point that Christians fall prey to the ever-present danger of the social gospel.

### **Illustration: The Wall**

We are now a denomination in which 25 percent of our churches are baptizing nobody. Another 25 percent are baptizing three or fewer per year. That means half the churches in the self-proclaimed most evangelistic denomination on the planet are reaching three or fewer. According to our best numbers, a church burns through thirty-four thousand dollars per convert saved. Is a soul worth it? Of course. But with the same thirty-four thousand dollars we should reach dozens of people for Christ.

Think about this for a moment: If a church of one hundred people were to disciple each member in such a way that each member was to reach one person who followed Christ in baptism in a calendar year, that church would be in the top one-tenth of 1 percent of Southern Baptist churches for the year. Why are we not all reaching at least one person for Christ every year?

Now I must give this warning: Winning people to Christ is not just a matter of following a formula. It is good to learn from the great men who have given us FAITH (Forgiveness, Available, Impossible, Turn, Heaven), EE (Evangelism Explosion), and CWT (Continuing Witness Training). I heartily recommend these tools. But at the same time, we must learn to be spontaneous with a witness born in a moment of opportunity. In my time of ministry, I have seen God use many different ways to draw people to Himself. In my own life, one instance often comes to mind.

In this particular event, I went to a Baptist Assembly ground to teach a conference on personal evangelism. As I pulled up to the building, I noticed there was a postal service worker delivering the day's collection of mail. I recognized the gentleman delivering the mail as one of the deacons from First Baptist, Leesburg whose name was Red. Red has always been an affable fellow, and he was teasing back and forth with a mountain of a man. This guy was probably six-foot six-inches tall, three hundred pounds, with not an ounce of fat.

“You ought not to tease Red; he’s a good man,” I said to the fellow.

*Why are we not all reaching at least one person for Christ every year?*

The man looked back at me with fire in his eyes. He was a black man and took umbrage at my calling Red a good man, but not him.

“Don’t you think I’m a good man?” he said slowly and forcefully.

At this point, the conversation could have gone any number of ways. But, thanks be to God, it turned to the only thing that really matters, Jesus Christ.

“I don’t know if you’re a good man or not,” I said. “The only good thing about Red is that Jesus is in him. Is Jesus in you?”

He looked at me puzzled and said with genuine interest, “No, Jesus is not in me.”

“Well, then there’s nothing good in you.”

Ten minutes later, that man kneeled down right where we were and accepted Jesus as his personal savior. A few weeks later, he was baptized and became a very active, productive member of the body of Christ. The great tragedy is that although he had worked on that property for several years, by his own admission, no one had ever shared Christ with him.

Like the priest and the Levite, we are sometimes so busy being religious that we don’t take time to be godly. The hardest



part of having a spiritual conversation with someone is bringing up the subject. Once we are willing to be obedient and talk to people about Jesus, we'll find that the conversation we dreaded becomes easier than we ever expected.

First Kings 20:38-40 is a warning that is very applicable here, a passage that reveals one of the primary reasons we are not reaching the world: *Then the prophet went and stood by the road waiting for the king. He disguised himself with his headband down over his eyes. As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, "Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, 'Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.' While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared."*

*"That is your sentence," the king of Israel said. "You have pronounced it yourself." Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. He said to the king, "This is what the Lord says: 'You have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people.'"*

Here we have a story of a man who has one thing needful, one thing important, and one thing primary to do for the Lord. But while he is busy here and there, doing what pleased himself, the one thing needful, primary, and important is neglected. He neglected the important task and gave his first-class loyalties to third-class causes. He was defeated by secondary successes.

This is a temptation we all wrestle with. The temptation is to spend our lives doing good things to the exclusion of the best. But how do we know what is best? The answer is simple. What are we doing that will matter a million years from today? Most

of the stuff will not matter next month. But if we bring someone to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, we have accomplished something for all eternity.

Or to put it another way, what is the only thing I can do better here than in glory? It's not praise. Certainly praise is important. But in glory, I will have one of the greatest voices because the Bible says the last shall be first. It is not prayer. And to be sure, prayer is vital. We can do more than pray after we pray, but we cannot do more until we pray. But on the other side, I will be able to talk to Him face to face. It is not purity, because in glory we will all be perfect. The only thing I can do better here than on the other side is tell a lost person about Jesus Christ. The urgency makes it the priority. In this life, we have a very limited amount of time.

*I have only just a minute.  
Just sixty seconds in it.  
Forced upon me – can't refuse it.  
Didn't seek it, didn't choose it.  
I must suffer if I lose it,  
Give account if I abuse it.  
Just a tiny little minute,  
But eternity is in it.  
It needs to count for His glory.  
(Author unknown)*

Most of us will be busy doing something. But if we are not careful, and we stay busy doing a lot of good stuff, we will not have time for that which is best.

Remember that the king was not condemned because of iniquity. He was condemned because of what he failed to do, or the sin of omission. The man was not condemned because

of ignorance. He knew he was supposed to guard the prisoner and keep him from escaping.

Likewise, our problem is not that we lack the knowledge of what it is we are to do. There has never been a time when

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*You don't grow by what you know; you grow as you flesh out what you know.*

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people have had more information. You don't even need to go to the bookstore and pay money for training in how to lead people to Christ. You can get on the Internet and get it for free! But if we have learned anything in the last few years it is this: You don't grow by what you know; you grow as you flesh out what you know.

In this passage, we notice that the man was not condemned because of inability. He had the necessary tools and training. He had all that he needed, except availability. His priorities simply did not match up with his master's. Finally, the man was not condemned because of inactivity. He was not lazy. He was anything except lazy, going here and there.

How many times are we *busy here and there* rather than doing the one thing needful, one thing important, and thus ignoring what God has for us to do? We fail because we did the good to the exclusion of the best. One thing must be the passion of every Christian and considered the number-one task: bringing a lost world to Jesus Christ.

I've had people say, "Well, Pastor, you have the gift of evangelism, and I just don't have that gift." But we all have the responsibility of bringing the lost to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. I don't care how many good things we do. I don't care how much time we spend or how busy we may be. If we're not bringing the lost to Jesus, we are not giving first-class loyalty to first-class causes.

What if every Christian in a church took seriously the responsibility of bringing the lost to Jesus? Rather than being

a glorified country club that exists for itself while a lost and hurting world dies without Jesus, why don't we spend our time reaching the community for Jesus? I believe our communities would start looking like Jerusalem did not long after Pentecost.

I'll never forget a quote that I read once in a tract, purportedly the words of an atheist. Though it is long, I think it worthy of reprinting here:

*If I firmly believed – as millions say they do – that the knowledge and practice of religion in this life influences the destiny in another, then religion would mean absolutely everything to me.*

*I would cast away earthly enjoyments as dross, earthly cares as follies, and earthly thoughts and feelings as vanity.*

*Religion would be my first waking thought and my last image before sleep sank me into unconsciousness.*

*I should labor in its cause alone. I would take thought for the morrow of eternity alone. I would see one soul gained for heaven worth a life of suffering.*

*Earthly consequences would never stay my hand or seal my lips. Earth, its joy and its grief, would occupy no moment of my thoughts.*

*I would strive to look upon eternity alone and on immortal souls around me, soon to be everlastingly happy or everlastingly miserable.*

*I would go forth to the world and preach to it in season and out of season, and my text would be, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26 NASB)*

When British athlete C. T. Studd read those words, he knew he had to go beyond formal religion and commit his life to Jesus Christ in a new way. That new way meant giving everything he had to see people come to know Christ. What about us?

Certainly, we face an ever-present danger when ministering to the poor and needy in our cities. We can begin to care for the needs of people around us and never tell them about Jesus. But we should not let the failed social gospel movement keep us from doing what God wants. Christians must be faithful to the Bible's teaching by avoiding the social gospel and embracing *ministry evangelism*.

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