



Social Action & Evangelism

Don't Compete, They Complement

By Steve Saint

“**T**he threats are growing. For now they just throw stones and tell us to leave them alone, but soon they may decide to actually kill us!” The young pastor was explaining the reaction of zealous followers of a major ‘eastern’ religion to the evangelical efforts of a group of young Christian pastors attempting to introduce Christ’s teachings in their communities.

I was in that particular country with a group of North American Christians trying to find ways to help people devastated by the terrible “Christmas Tsunami” that had killed thousands of people and left tens of thousands homeless and disoriented.

With the young pastor’s words in mind, the obvious question that came to my mind was, “aren’t there other communities that you could visit; after all, even Jesus told His disciples to shake the dust off their feet if the people were not receptive, right?” (Mt. 10:14) “We are sometimes fearful of going to these communities” the young pastors’ group leader told me, but we are compelled to go because they do not have the Gospel. We may die but we must obey.”

I soon discovered that the pastor was not just updating me about the circumstances in which he and his colleagues found themselves. He wanted something from me. He had heard about a group of pastors in West Africa who had learned to do

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dental work as a ‘door opener’ to Christ’s Gospel in areas dominated by another radical and militant religion. The African pastors had, in turn, heard about the possibility of laymen learning to provide dental services from a story they had heard about several Waodani in the Amazon jungle learning to provide those services to their own people.

They had heard my name associated with the effort to teach jungle nomads to offer dental services to hurting people in the jungles and figured, “If they can do it why can’t we?” The pastors wanted to know if I would teach them how to give anesthesia, to extract teeth too far gone to save and to fix those that could be saved. They were confident that if they showed compassion for the felt needs of the people, it would open the door to their hearts and they would be able to offer these same people Christ’s cure for the spiritual epidemic that was sure to kill them all – for ever.

Before going any further, I have a confession to make. If I was running for office this confession of flip-flopping on a major ‘Evangelical concept’ might cost me the election. I was, not so very long ago, what Ralph Winter would term a “Second Inheritance Evangelical”. I subscribed to the Biblical mandate of Christ to take His offer of salvation to everyone everywhere. I also subscribed stoically to the idea of expendability; “We must go out, we don’t necessarily have to come back.”

I whole-heartedly believed that it was useless in the spiritual emergency room to suture a shallow wound or set a bone while the patient was bleeding to death spiritually. Evangelism was the ‘End’,

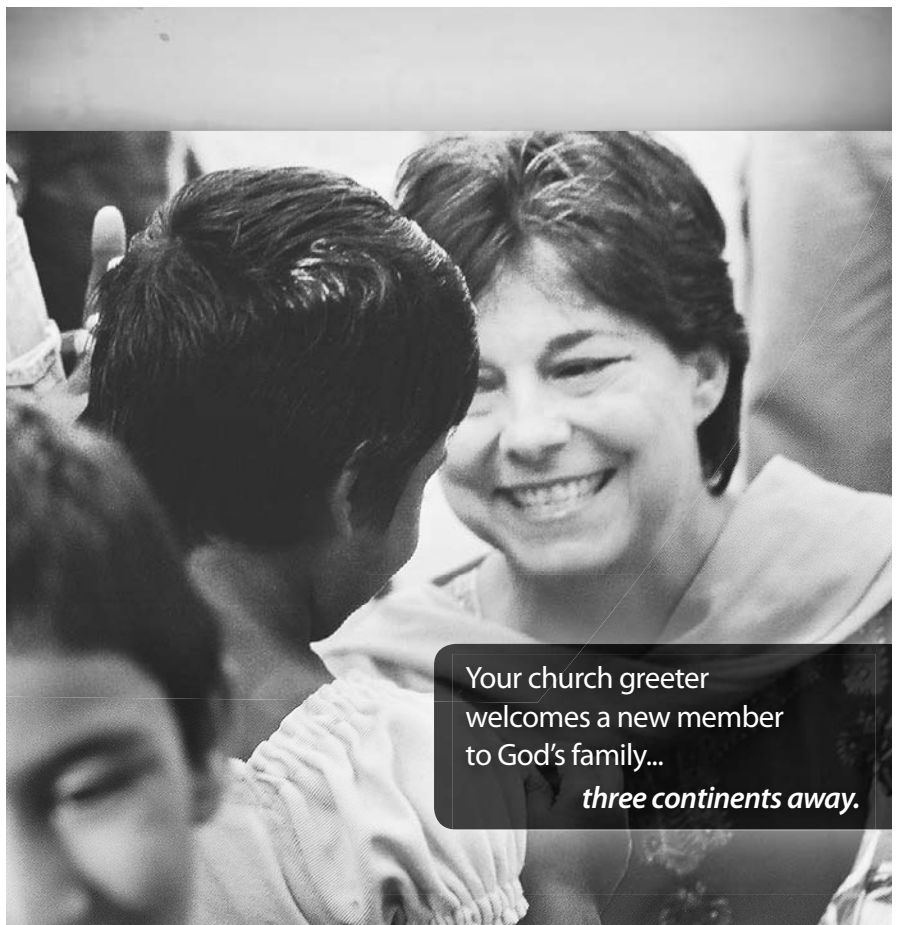
everything else was merely a means.

It was the people who killed my Dad, Nate, who taught me that acts of compassion can be an 'End' in themselves. When my Aunt Rachel died, those Waodani who had made me as much a part of their family as they could, considering the difference of skin color, culture and language barriers, insisted that I needed to teach them skills that only 'Outsiders' had, so that they could care for their own people. "Fixing the people's teeth," they said, "the people see the foreigners well – but all the foreigners can fix is their teeth." I wondered what that had to do with me. "But you teaching us how to fix teeth, the people will see us well, and then we will tell them how Waengongi (the Creator) can fix their hearts so they can live forever."

The Waodani God Followers' logic took me half the way to seeing the need for demonstrating Christ's compassion as well as His saving grace to hurting people. Mending hurting people's felt needs is a door opener for the Gospel.

The Waodani's strategy for using Christ-like compassion to plow the hard ground of dark hearts works. I was quickly won over to that point of view when I saw Waodani reaction to the simple medical helps that I learned to offer them. The second half of the journey toward seeing the value of combining works and faith came through simply seeing Christ's compassion toward the people around Him in the Scriptures.

I always just assumed that Jesus did His first recorded miracle because the people at a wedding were thirsty. But if thirst was the problem they could have just drunk the wa-



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ter that Jesus turned into wine. Not only did Jesus care about their 'felt needs' He did His first public miracle to meet their 'unrealized needs'. That is the kind of reaction we doting earthly parents have for our kids. We care about their hurts just because they hurt, and because we love them. (Jn. 2)



ITEC's back-packable, portable dental systems.

In another earthly demonstration of Jesus' heavenly power, He healed a paralytic. I don't think there is any doubt that what the boy and his four friends brought him to Jesus for was to have his body healed so he could walk like normal boys. But Jesus knew he had a much more fatal problem. Like any good emergency room doctor, Jesus healed the young

man's fatal spiritual disease, sin. But then, He healed his paralyzed legs too.

The reason the people believed that Jesus could heal the boy's sin disease was the healing of his paralyzed legs. The reason people will listen to our explanation

of Christ's Gospel is usually because we have met some other need that they can actually see.

Meeting people's felt needs is a means to an end, true. But Jesus makes it an end in itself too. I missed this for a long, long time. I listened to Christian culture more closely than to what the Bible says. Jesus said in Matthew, "The Son of Man will separate the nations like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. To one group He will say, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit

the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you invited Me in; naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'"

This would have been a good time for Jesus' audience to 'leave well enough alone'. But they were so

surprised that they had to ask, "Lord, when did ...we do all these things for you?" Jesus gave the King's answer, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even to the least of them, you did it to Me." And Jesus also pointed out that to the extent we won't do these things to 'the least of these', we deny that compassion to Him on His part.

Getting back to my original story; the pastors wanted to learn how to offer temporal care for the people with whom they wanted to share Christ's Gospel with in order to earn a hearing for the message that could save their lives. But they asked me an additional favor that I thought I could not grant. They wanted me to go with the dental training team from Itec (the Indigenous People's Technology and Education Center) so that I could take 'Grandfather' Mincaye (the Waodani warrior, become God Follower who helped kill my dad and then 'adopted' me into his family) to help train them. They were afraid that they would not be able to learn to be Lay Dental Technicians. But, they reasoned, if they saw Mincaye, who can't even read and write, do it; then they could do it too.

To make a long story short, Mincaye and I did go with the dental training team. We took ITEC's back-packable, portable dental systems (PDS's) with us and set out to make pastors on the other side of the world into Lay Dental Technicians.

Mincaye played exactly the role the pastors expected. Our primary training dentist asked Mincaye to pull an especially tricky tooth that was beyond the pastors' skill level. Mincaye not only pulled her tooth, but he showed that he understood that what we were doing was not primarily about pulling or fixing teeth. It was about showing hurting people Christ's compassion for their felt needs in the hope that they would consider His remedy for their sin-darkened hearts.

After Mincaye pulled the hurting woman's abscessed tooth, he gently held her head in his hands and prayed that God would heal her heart. I had been holding the woman's jaw in hopes that my added support would help Mincaye keep from breaking her jaw. When Mincaye held her face to pray, his hands were covering my own.

I looked at those gentle hands and realized that those were the same hands that once drove spears into my precious Dad's body. I love those hands transformed, like my own, by the touch of the Master Surgeon's hands.

Social services without the Gospel are like pain killers for cancer. But the Gospel without the offer of loving compassion will frequently meet only a rejection of God's love which they have not yet seen, and consequently locked doors. 🌐



Steve with Mincaye, the Waodani warrior who became a God-Follower after helping to kill Steve's father.