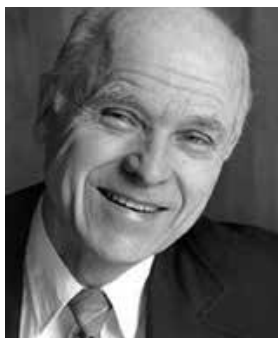


GOOD WORKS EMPOWER THE GOSPEL



RALPH D. WINTER

(1924-2009) was the founder of the Frontier Mission Fellowship and the U.S. Center for World Mission. He was also the first editor of *Mission Frontiers*. You may go online to www.missionfrontiers.org to post your comments on this article.

This article is excerpted from the article, "The Future of Evangelicals in Mission" published in the Sept.-Oct. 2007 edition of Mission Frontiers.

It was understood back in the 19th Century and within the major missions that there was no rift whatsoever between learning and gospel, or good works and gospel, or schools, hospitals, vocational schools, and the planting of churches. Nevertheless, today, as far as donors are concerned, the enormous impact of social transformation arising (intuitively) in the work of standard church planting mission agencies is widely underestimated or even opposed. Indeed, the scope of this societal influence is virtually unknown in certain spheres, in part due to an intentional downplaying of this effort in reports to donors who want to hear only of spiritual conversions. This is incorrectly rationalized as a tension between the so-called liberal and conservative perspectives, when in fact it is largely due to the inherently different influence of some and the new era of social impotence among most Evangelicals in the 20th century. Rising exceptions like Charles Colson, an influential civil leader, have no trouble envisioning sweeping changes in the whole world's prison systems, nor any hesitance in helping to resurrect the powerful social/political example of William Wilberforce.

EMPOWERED EVANGELISM

Obviously there is a theological problem here. We, of course, need to take seriously the fact that Jesus was concerned with handicapped people, sick people, children, women, Greeks, etc. and that His ministry embraced and encompassed those things. When He responded to John the Baptist, who wondered if He was the one to come, He sent back descriptions, not the text of His message, but simply a report of the good works He was doing. This He did, not only as an authentication of His divinity, but as a demonstration of God's character. His ministry was congruent with His own statement, "Let your light shine among men in this way—that they will glorify God when they see your good works (Matt 5:16)." In the Synagogue in Nazareth Jesus quoted Isa. 61:1,2:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

Does that apply to 27 million men, women and children held as slaves in the world today? This is more than twice the number who were bartered during four centuries before slavery was (supposedly) "abolished" by Wilberforce. Does that apply to the lifting of the burden of 45 million man-years of labor annually destroyed in Africa alone due to the malarial parasite?

It has been said that because the gospel is a message of hope, the poorest must see some concrete reason for hope before they can understand the gospel. Words themselves have no power if they do not refer to reality. Jesus' words were constantly accompanied and informed by the actions to which His words referred. Thus, just as faith without works is

dead, so evangelism without works is dead. Unless words refer to works, to reality, they are worth nothing. Just as it is a Reformation myth that faith can be separated from works, so it is meaningless if words are separated from the reality to which they were meant to refer.

It would seem, then, that just as we believe that works ought to follow faith in the sequence of salvation in the life of believing individuals, it is equally true that in our outreach to unbelievers those very works displaying God's glory better precede. We see this clearly when we recognize that the usual way in which individuals come to faith is primarily by viewing the good works of those who already have faith—that is, by seeing good works that reflect the power and character of God. Immediately after speaking of His followers being salt and light in the world Jesus spoke this very key verse we have already quoted, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 5:16).” That is how people can see God's glory and be drawn to Him. Those who may be drawn by mere desires to be blessed personally will have trouble with Jesus' plain statement that “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:35) Evangelicals today often ignore this.

Thus, in order for people to hear and respond to an offer of personal salvation or a ticket to heaven, it is paramount for them to witness the glory of God in believers' lives—seeing the love and goodness in their lives and deeds, and their changed motives and new intentions. That is the reality which gives them reason to turn away from all evil and against all evil as they seek to be closer to that kind of God and His will in this world.

It is of course perfectly true that personal salvation alone can still be a glorious transformation of people who may

never arise from a sickbed or from poverty, knowing that God loves them and wants them to love Him. At the same time, many believers are not poor, and have time and energy to do things other than simply talk to people about the next world. For them, a concept that is very hard to avoid (because it is happening throughout the whole Bible) is the concept that works are necessary to authenticate and demonstrate the true character of God.

...JUST AS WE BELIEVE
THAT WORKS OUGHT TO
FOLLOW FAITH IN THE
SEQUENCE OF SALVATION
IN THE LIFE OF BELIEVING
INDIVIDUALS, IT IS
EQUALLY TRUE THAT
IN OUR OUTREACH TO
UNBELIEVERS THOSE VERY
WORKS DISPLAYING GOD'S
GLORY BETTER PRECEDE.



That is the true basis for empowering evangelism. This potent continuity of word and deed is, furthermore, the mainstream of mission history. It may not have been so large a factor among up-and-out people in, say, Japan, but in much of the world, the stunning achievements of medicine and healing have demonstrated to potential converts not only the love of God for them, but also the power of God that is on their side against the forces of darkness.

Paul the apostle spoke of delivering people from the dominion of Satan (Acts 26:18). Peter summed up Jesus' ministry by speaking of “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.” (Acts 10:38) This kind of demonstration of the person and the power of God certainly should not be considered antagonistic to evangelism. In most cases it is, again, the very basis of an empowerment of evangelism.

THE FUTURE OF EVANGELICAL MISSIONS

“Teaching them to OBEY everything that I commanded you...”

So what is the future of the Evangelical mission movement? I believe that the mission movement—more so than the church movement and considerably

more so than the secular world—holds the key to a great new burst of credibility which could win new millions. An unexpected trend of current philanthropy clearly indicates the potential assistance of people in high places who grow up in a highly Christianized society, even if they haven't regularly gone to church. But what

is crucially true is that they need to understand that their efforts will ultimately be dismayingly ineffective without a certain minimum of transformed individuals whose character is essential to their major efforts. They need to realize that missions have a virtual monopoly on transformed individuals who can be trusted.

I yearn to see Evangelical missions be able to give more direct, credible credit to Jesus Christ for the impetus behind the social transformation that they have been doing, are doing and should be doing. Practically none of the major religions, by comparison, has any similar contribution to good works, small or large. Islam has the giving of alms as one of its five pillars, but there is absolutely nothing in the entire mammoth global Islamic movement that compares even remotely to the hundreds of major Christian mission agencies, or the thousands of ways in which the Christian movement has reached out with love and tenderness to those who are suffering. Islam also has a near vacuum of “non-government agencies,” although both in Pakistan and Bangladesh are some outstanding exceptions. But in general the West has thousands of NGOs which are not explicitly Christian. Islam has only a few. The work of Christ in the gospels, Christ’s references to the coming of the kingdom of heaven, and the present outworking in this world of the “Thy will be done” phrase of the Lord’s Prayer are actually echoed by the Great Commission itself. Looking closely at Matt. 28:20, it isn’t just the teachings that Jesus commissions His disciples to pass on. It is the actual enforcing, so to speak, of obedience to those teachings, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This implies the conquest of evil when the Lord’s Prayer is read in this light: “Thy will be done on earth.”

We hear later in the New Testament about people who do not “obey” the gospel. Obviously the gospel is not just mere information in the way of good advice. We see both authority and commands from God in the real biblical gospel. This is the clear meaning of the Great Commission of Matthew 28. There, Jesus sends his disciples out to bring about “obedience to the things I have taught you.”

As I have suggested, the older missions with roots in the 19th Century have in actual fact been doing exactly what Jesus did, both demonstrating the love of God and inviting into eternal life all who yield to that love and that authority. The trouble is that the fact of this breadth of mission has not been as clearly theologized to the point where we would plan to tackle some of the bigger problems such as the wiping out of Guinea worm or malaria, problems

which have existed under the very nose of missionaries for over a century. Nevertheless such extra breadth must not be seen to be a divergence from the preaching of eternal life, but rather an empowerment of the message of a gospel of a kingdom, which is both here and hereafter. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel of the kingdom. It is the announcement of a “rule and reign of God” which must be extended to the whole world and all of creation. We must stand up and be counted as active Christian foes of the world’s worst evils. This is the biblical way, the way more than any other, in which missions have in the past and now even more so in the future can more powerfully and extensively than ever demonstrate who God is and what His purposes are. This is what the superb Transform World movement is leaning into.

This more extensive influence will come if agencies will simply take the practical conclusions of their missionaries’ magnificent local intuition up into national levels and into international campaigns to drive out those things that not only cut their own lives short but also cause hundreds of millions of people to go to bed at night with severe suffering and pain. Otherwise all such unaddressed evil is blamed on God and His “mysterious purposes.” This new, expanded influence may thus measurably help us re-win the West to “a faith that works,” and to a God Who is not doing bad things for mysterious reasons but a God Who opposes the Evil One and all his works—and asks us to assist Him in that campaign.

Evangelicals are increasingly again in the position of social influence, yet, are still mainly in the business of giving people a personal faith, a faith that does not include much of a mission beyond the idea of converts converting still others. However, a return to a full-spectrum gospel could mean an enormous change. Doors will open. Attitudes about missionaries will change. It will no longer be the case of missionaries thinking that they have to use adroit language to cover up the “real purpose” of their work. Their real purpose will be to identify and destroy all forms of evil, both human and microbiological and will thus be explainable in plain English without religious jargon. This will provide very solid common ground in almost any country. In that event there is no doubt in my mind that the future of the Evangelical mission movement will be very bright indeed. As Adoniram Judson said, “The future is as bright as the promises of God.” We must not forget that God is the one who asked us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” 