

WHAT DOES GOD WANT THE CHURCH TO DO?



RICK WOOD
/ EDITOR, MISSION
FRONTIERS

A tall, rugged man stands at the bedside of his 11 year-old-son. The boy had been sick with a fever for days but now it is over. Lifting the bed-sheet and gazing down at his son's now lifeless body, he chokes as he speaks through sobs of grief, "My poor boy, he was too good for this earth. God has called him home. I know he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!" He buries his head in his hands, his tall frame convulses with emotion.¹ His son was such a good boy who had endeared himself to everyone who knew him. Just recently he had told his Sunday School teacher he wanted to become a teacher or preacher of the gospel.² Now that dream was gone. This man's other son, just 8 years old, is now also very ill with the same dreadful fever. Would he die as well? How could he bear the grief of losing two children at the same time? He is physically strong from years of hard labor having grown up in great poverty, but his great strength is no match for this struggle. He had now risen to become an important man in his country but this disease is no respecter of person or position. Scriptures had been read and prayers offered but his son had died in spite of the best efforts of all the doctors and pastors.

There is nothing that can be done because this is February 20, 1862, and there is no cure for the typhoid fever that has just taken the life of "Willie" Lincoln, son of President Abraham Lincoln. The most powerful man in the United States and one of the greatest men in history could not keep his son from dying from a preventable disease because he did not understand that you cannot take your drinking water from the same river, the Potomac, that was also the city's sewer.

Tragically, this scene is repeated every minute of every day all around the world. Mothers and fathers likewise grieve over the loss of their children and all the dreams they had for them. Today, almost 2,000 children will die from dirty, disease-filled water.³ In the time it takes you to read these two pages, five more children will die from preventable

waterborne diseases. Every year sixty million children are born into households that do not have clean water and sanitation.⁴

The question for us as the Church is whether Jesus wants us to stop such tragedies or is the God of heaven only concerned with getting the message of the gospel to every person, tribe and tongue?

GOD HAS CALLED US TO DO BOTH

In past decades the "liberals" who have endorsed the "social gospel" of good works have also abandoned

the gospel of salvation by grace. There are also good Bible-believing Jesus followers who argue that we must focus on proclaiming the gospel. Starting on page 24, Ralph Winter makes a very cogent case that Jesus has asked us to do both—that *by caring for the needs of people and doing good works we actually empower the proclamation of the gospel and glorify God in the process*. In effect, without good works, our message of the love of God through Christ becomes empty and hollow, contradicting the very message we seek to proclaim. As the apostle John says in 1 John 3:17-18, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

When Jesus sent out His disciples, did He tell them to just proclaim the gospel? In Luke 9:1-2, we see the answer.

"When Jesus had called the Twelve together, He gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases and He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

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Jesus told His disciples to both heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God. In Matthew 5:14, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” Jesus goes on to tell us not to hide our light but to let the whole world see it. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus says,

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Clearly, Jesus is saying that our good deeds bring glory to God and encourage those around us to acknowledge God and glorify Him. Our life goal as believers should be to glorify God in all we do and to become more like Jesus. As we do, we should follow the model that Jesus gave us of caring for the needs of suffering people as well as proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus did both. So should we. Demonstration and proclamation of the gospel go together.

MISSIONARIES LEAD THE WAY

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries missionaries intuitively followed the model of Jesus in caring for the needs of those they sought to bring to faith. In many parts of the world missionaries started the first hospitals, schools and universities. Was this a distraction from sharing the gospel or did it actually empower the spread of the gospel?

William Carey is a good example of one of these missionaries who did both demonstration and proclamation of the gospel. He translated Scripture into 40 different languages, protested social evils, stood against the murder and oppression of women, started schools and a college, campaigned for agricultural reform, introduced the idea of a savings bank and established the first newspaper

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in an Oriental language. On and on it goes. His impact was so profound that many Indians, including Hindus, honor his work to this day. If an uneducated shoemaker from England can do all that, what can God do through us to change the world if we have the will to do so?


LET'S DO AWAY WITH THE EXCUSES

The common argument is that we cannot meet all the needs out there so we must make proclaiming the gospel the highest priority. First, this is a pragmatic argument rather than a biblical one. It is a proposed remedy for the lack of giving and involvement of the Church in the mission of God. The great majority of funds collected in the Church stays within the church to bless the people of the church. Bigger buildings and programs to attract people to the church has been the priority rather than equipping believers to bring the demonstration and proclamation of the gospel to every people and every person.

Secondly, God has blessed the Evangelical community of believers world-wide with the resources to

tackle some of the toughest problems in the world, like providing clean water to the millions who desperately need it. But because the majority of believers are not living on mission with God, the needed resources are not being released to meet these needs and to disciple all peoples. So in reality the choice is not whether to care for people or proclaim the gospel. It is really a choice of whether the Church will decide to fully participate in the mission of God.

THE RIGHT WAY TO DO IT

The task of providing clean water to those who need it is a doable task, but this is not about collecting a lot of money to send overseas to attack a problem. As we make clear in nearly every article, this mission of God is about coming alongside people in need as servants and advisors. It is not about doing things *for* people but rather helping them to provide this vital resource for themselves so that they consider it their water resource to develop and maintain. Done in this way, it will be there for them for many years to come. When we bring the demonstration and proclamation of the gospel together, it is then that people will most clearly see the character of God and praise our Father in heaven. 

- ¹ Keckley, Elizabeth. (1868) *Behind the Scenes*, London, England: Partridge and Oakey, Chapter 6, Willie Lincoln's Death-Bed.
- ² *The Death of Willie Lincoln*, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/education/williedeath.htm>
- ³ Child Health Epidemiology Reference Group (CHERG), 2012 and UNICEF Child Mortality Report, 2012
- ⁴ UNICEF, 2006 http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_for_Children_No._5_-_English.pdf page 3)