

Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III

EVANGELISM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Seldom do we conceive of evangelism as a concern for social justice. Traditional models of evangelism focus on developing strategies, principles, methodologies and programs designed to make disciples by winning them to Christ. Evangelism as a form of outreach to the unchurched and unsaved presupposes the willingness of church members to extend themselves beyond their comfort zones. They must be willing to go beyond the walls of the church to give witness to the continuing revelation of Jesus Christ so as to empower individuals to accept Christ as Lord, Savior and liberator.

This continuing revelation leads to radical awareness of Christ, self, and community.

An underlying assumption of all evangelism models is the need to engage in positive witness that leads to genuine conversion. Genuine conversion ultimately means divine intervention and positive life giving and sustaining transformation of those individuals who have accepted Christ. The more people who are converted and saved thus go out to witness and evangelize others, the more others will come to Christ. The ultimate concern in most models of evangelism is conversion, positive transformation, empowerment, witness, and discipleship for the purpose of bringing people into the church's life-changing fellowship.

The problem is that traditional models of evangelism teach people to go out to win others to Christ in order to increase the church's numbers, but often overlook the importance of transforming the church's inner culture and ethos in

order to enable strategies of evangelism to have optimum impact. A church can develop all kinds of evangelism strategies, but if the church is sick and afflicted, or the organizational ethos of the church does not lend itself to positive change or sustaining happy and healthy relationships within the body of Christ, those evangelism strategies can be all for nought. We can evangelize all we want, but if we have not considered what makes a church vital and healthy, we can win people in one door only to have them leave out of another door of the church.

We

often overlook the importance of transforming the church's inner culture and ethos in order to enable strategies of evangelism to have optimum impact.

Furthermore, traditional models of evangelism often stress the importance of individual conversion by discipling individuals to Christ, but often stop short of collective evangelism for social justice. It is not sufficient simply to experience conversion to Christ personally and to witness to others individually so that they too may come to know Christ and join the fellowship of believers only to keep it all to themselves. **The radical awareness of Christ, self and community that comes from being converted individually should also translate into a concern for social justice communally.**

Just as people have been personally empowered and translated through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, those individuals should also be compelled to disseminate their radical awareness into a concern for social justice and global peace in the community and world in which they are called to serve.

The concern of evangelism should be for the total person; each person should find health,

healing, wholeness and peace individually and communally. This was a hallmark of Christ's ministry. He ministered to the mind, body, spirit and soul of the people of God. He was equally concerned about distributive and retributive justice, that individuals could find a sense of wholeness through the administration of justice through the social order. Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us that societies cannot administer love to the individuals they are called to serve and protect, but they can only attempt to administer justice, which is the closest approximation to love in the individual realm.

What, then, does evangelism for social justice ultimately mean? The following are three basic precepts for such evangelism ministries.

Evangelism for social justice addresses the total needs of the individuals and communities. What occurs in the collective social realm is just as important as what happens in the individual personal realm. The social, economic, educational and political needs are just as important as how we minister to the personal, spiritual needs of the people we are called to serve. The church should develop models of outreach that embrace both realms of concern, particularly in communities where poverty and the absence of social and environmental justice destroys a people's sense of wholeness, well being and vitality and thwarts their meaningful conversion and connection with Christ through the church.

Evangelism for social justice organizes around congregations and campaigns. "Congregations are where the people are gathered and where religious faith is engaged for justice. . . . Campaigns are mechanisms to move issues into visibility."¹

Every church has within its immediate community a major social issue that can be taken up as part of a congregation's campaign for social justice. Every church can equally adopt a global issue as part of its campaign for social justice. Evangelism for social justice can address concerns on a communal, national or international level.²

Evangelism for social justice should be an indispensable element of every church's evangelism ministry and should be the crowning claim of our discipleship for Christ. To expend enormous energies preparing the church to evangelize individuals without addressing the major social issues that ultimately impact their

lives each day is equivalent to putting a band aid on a canker sore. We want people to find wholeness in Christ, but does such wholeness simply mean going to church, feeling good on Sunday, proclaiming boldly that Jesus is Lord without ever witnessing to the larger social order or calling the powers that be into account? Without ever calling attention to the social, political, environmental, educational, economic, racial and other justice that should be a prominent focus of the church's ministry in and to the world?

Clearly the relationship between evangelism and social justice is complex. However, a biblical understanding of both must compel us to:

- translate our spiritual awareness of Christ into transformative actions for social justice;
- view evangelism for social justice as a means of sharing the Good News of Christ in a dying and hopeless world;
- understand that by witnessing to people and society in this manner we can eradicate social problems as well as convince people of the efficacy of the Gospel of Christ in a different way; and
- build a church that will claim evangelism strategies that meet the needs of the whole person by addressing not only the spiritual but social and other needs of the people and communities the church is called to serve in these times. □

¹Nile Harper, *Urban Churches, Vital Signs: Beyond Charity Toward Justice*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 47)

²Ibid, pp 19-54. See Nile Harper's commentary on Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church who campaigned against sweat shops and took on numerous major corporations as part of its outreach ministry.

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