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EDITORIAL

— D. A. Carson —

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In many parts of the evangelical world, one hears a new debate—or, more precisely, new chapters in an old debate—regarding the precise place that “deeds of mercy” ought to have in Christian witness. I am not talking about the perennial debate between left-wing and right-wing economic solutions, that is, between those who think there will be more social justice and less poverty if the government takes a greater share of the nationally produced wealth and distributes it more equitably, and those who think there will be more social justice and less poverty where government legislation offers carrot-and-stick incentives to help people get off welfare rolls and become less dependent on initiative-killing generosity, while providing a safety net for those truly incapable of helping themselves. I am talking, rather, about the debate between those Christians who say that we should primarily be about the business of heralding the gospel and planting churches, and those who say that our responsibility as Christians extends to the relief of oppression, suffering, and poverty in all their forms.

Both sides cite impressive historical precedents. Under the ministry of Howell Harris, George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, and those associated with them, the gospel, faithfully preached, transformed the *social* face of England. What receives the most press is the work of Wilberforce in driving through parliament legislation that shut down the slave trade and eventually abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. But movements led by Methodist converts also formed and directed trade unions that tamed the ugliest aspects of the Industrial Revolution, passed legislation that reformed prisons (not least the notorious debtors prisons), drove up the minimum age at which children could work (which took five-year-olds out of the mines), and took the first steps toward universal literacy. For about sixty years, the movement accomplished an astounding amount of social good, *while preserving the primacy of preaching the gospel and winning converts.*

On the other hand, the experience of many churches in the West from about 1880 to 1925 provides another trajectory that many thoughtful Christians today fear. The gospel came increasingly to be identified with progress; the gospel itself was progressively diluted. At least until the outbreak of WWI, the optimism was contagious, intoxicating, and naive. Christian mission, increasingly understood in an expansive fashion, eventually started *replacing* the preaching of the gospel with deeds of mercy (or, from the perspective of those adopting this stance, the gospel was increasingly redefined). To preserve a show of unity, the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 simply didn't bother with tough-minded and biblically-framed notions of the gospel. Unity was preserved; substance was lost. Once the confessional evangelicals picked themselves up and reorganized, many of them vowed not to make the same mistake again. They tended to underline the proclamation of the Word and downplay or, in some instances, disown the responsibility to engage in deeds of mercy in Christ's name.

That, at least, is the way the story is regularly told. Recent studies both in the UK and the US modify the account somewhat. Apparently, a disproportionate number of conservative evangelicals give their time to organizations such as UNICEF, World Relief, and Save the Children, so when it comes to actual boots on the ground, the polarity between conservatives and liberals is not, in practice, what is often portrayed.

Recently these and related matters were discussed over three days by a group of about fifty pastors. These pastors approached the subject out of the conviction that gospel proclamation must occupy pride of place in our priorities, but they represented quite different positions on what follows from this, some of them hoping for a new Evangelical Awakening and others fearful of a new round of gospel-destroying liberalism. A fair bit of time was then devoted to scanning relevant biblical passages: the parable of the good Samaritan, serving as salt and light in a world that is both corrupt and dark, doing good to all people (especially those of the household of faith), and so forth. And finally, there was, I think a broad consensus that Christians who understand the priority of preparing people for eternity must also help people here and now, and that gospel proclamation must not be set antithetically against deeds of mercy. Far from it: many of the pastors and the Christians they served were heavily involved in an array of strategic ministries. It was, of course, immediately recognized that *how* one discharges such responsibilities will vary enormously from community to community, from country to country, for the needs vary hugely, almost beyond comprehension. Still, we returned again and again to this pointed question: *Granted that we ought to be engaged in acts of mercy, what safeguards can be set in place so as to minimize the risk that the deeds of mercy will finally swamp the proclamation of the gospel and the passionate desire to see men and women reconciled to God by faith in Christ Jesus and his atoning death and resurrection?*

Two stood out.

First, it is helpful to distinguish between the responsibilities of the church *qua* church and the responsibilities of Christians. Some writers flip back and forth between references to “Christians” and references to “church” as if there is no difference whatsoever. But many Christian thinkers, from Kuyperians to Baptists, have argued that if the church *qua* church is responsible for some of these substantial works of mercy, such works of mercy ought to come under the leaders of the church. It is very difficult to find any warrant for that step in the New Testament. Even before there were pastors/elders/overseers, the apostles themselves, according to Acts, recognized that they should not be diverted from the ministry of the Word and prayer, even by the inequities of food distribution among the faithful, so they saw to it that others were appointed to tackle the problem. Ministers of the gospel ought so to be teaching the Bible in all its comprehensiveness that they will be raising up believers with many different avenues of service, but they themselves must not become so embroiled in such multiplying ministries that their ministries of evangelism, Bible teaching, making disciples, instructing, baptizing, and the like, somehow get squeezed to the periphery and take on a purely formal veneer.

Second, one pastor astutely urged, “Preach hell.” Two things follow from this. (1) By adopting this priority we remind ourselves that as Christians we desire to relieve *all* suffering, from the temporal to the eternal. If we do not maintain such a panoramic vision, the relief of immediate suffering, as important as it is, may so command our focus that we fail to remind ourselves of Jesus’ rhetorical question, “What good will it be for you to gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul?” Read the closing lines of Revelation 14 and Revelation 20 when your vision becomes myopic. (2) As long as you are prepared to plead with

men and women to be reconciled to God and to flee the coming wrath, you are preserving something that is central in the Bible, something that is intimately and irrefragably tied to the gospel itself—and those who want to shunt such themes aside and focus *only* on the relief of present suffering will not want to have much to do with you. Thus you will be free to preach and teach the *whole* counsel of God and to relieve *all* suffering, temporal and eternal, without being drawn into endless alliances in which people never focus on anything beyond threescore years and ten.

