**SOCIAL ACTION VS EVANGELISM = SPLIT THINKING**

Ron Sider, Professor of History and Culture, has probably done more thinking around this topic than most. In his excellent book Evangelism and Social Action he writes the following:

Most churches today are **one-sided disasters**. In some suburban churches hundreds of people come to Jesus and praise God in **brand-new buildings**, but they seldom learn that their new faith has anything to do with wrenching, **inner-city poverty** just a few miles away. In other churches, the members write their senators **and lobby the mayor's office**, but they understand little about the daily **presence of the Holy Spirit**. And they would be stunned if someone asked them personally to invite their neighbours to accept Christ.

**One group saves souls. The other reforms structures**. That's what I call one-sided Christianity.

I remember a troubling conversation with a leading Euro­pean ecumenical activist in Seoul, Korea, in March 1990. One day, while working together on a committee at an international conference of the WCC, I expressed concern over the sweeping loss of faith in Western Europe. Only about five percent of the population goes to church on a typical Sunday in Luther's Germany and many other countries of Europe where the Reformation once shaped society. In spite of widespread church membership, the vast majority of Europeans are no longer confessing Christians.

When I asked my friend how he thought pagan Europe could be won to Christ again, he seemed unconcerned. Things will probably get worse, he shrugged, before they get better. **Social action, not evangelizing secularized Europeans, seemed to be his passion.**

Similarly, I have discussed with my evangelical colleagues the horrible gaps between, for example, blacks and whites­ even within the body of Christ. When topics such as this are brought up, the response is still too often either indifference or outright anger. **"Our job is to try to change man's heart, not the structures of society," has been a dominant attitude among evangelicals.**

**How typical are these attitudes? What are the central themes today in the relationship between evangelism and social concern? And what exactly is the proper biblical relationship between evangelism and social concern?**

Twentieth-century Christians have fought ferocious battles over this last question. In fact, in Transforming Mission, one of the best books on missiology in decades, David Bosch claims that this question is "one of the thorniest areas in the theology and practice of mission" today![[1]](#footnote-1)

Sider believes that behind this tension are the following issues:

##### 1. How should we understand sin?

Is **sin primarily rebellion against God** that requires divine forgiveness? Or is it primarily **offense against neighbor** that demands transformed social relationships? Does sin manifest itself primarily in the form of **personal sins** (such as lying or adultery) directed largely against individuals? Or do we encounter sin primarily in **unjust social structures** and oppres­sive societal systems like apartheid, economic injustice, and dictatorships?

How should we understand people?

Is the essence of a person her immortal soul which lives for a time in the body and then is released to live in an immaterial heaven? Or is the person a body-soul unity destined to live on a transformed earth? If the soul is the most important aspect of persons, then presumably, "spiritual" things are vastly more important than "physical" or "secular" concerns. Is that distinction biblically inadequate?

Are persons primarily individuals or primarily persons-in­community? Do individual ideas and inner values shape history, or does our environment mold us in powerful ways? In other words, is it only by inner conversion that society is changed, or does societal change create new persons?

##### 3. What is the Gospel?

Is it more biblical to summarize the Gospel as the **Good News of salvation** or as the **Good News of the kingdom** of God? Is the core of the Good News that God forgives and **regenerates individuals** through the cross of Christ? Or is it that the messianic kingdom foreseen by the prophets broke into history in the ministry and person of Jesus, creating a new **redeemed community** in which all the evils of the world are being corrected? And if the Gospel is properly understood as the Good News of the kingdom, does the kingdom come only when people confess Christ, or does it also emerge wherever peace, liberty, and justice develop in society?

##### 4. What is salvation?

Is salvation something that happens only to **individuals**?

Or should we speak of salvation as a social reality in the **redeemed community** of believers? Or even more widely, should we think of salvation occurring when social structures and **societal systems** become more just and free whether or not the people in those societies know or confess Jesus Christ? And is there a cosmic character to salvation so that even the "groaning **creation**" participates in salvation, at least at the end?

When persons experience salvation, will they continue sinful patterns? Or does salvation include a turning away from the distorted, oppressive ways of sinful habits and evil status quos?

Is salvation largely **escape** **from wrath to come** or personal and social **wholeness** **now**? Is it escape from the world's evil or escape out of the world?

Are people lost without Jesus Christ? Is he the only way to salvation? Will everyone eventually be saved or will some be separated eternally from the Living God?

What is the connection between our work now for justice and freedom and the perfection of the coming kingdom that comes only at Christ's return?

In more technical theological language, what is the connec­tion between history and eschatology? Is the world a sinking ocean liner from which we must rescue as many souls as possible? Or does God intend to conquer the evil that has invaded the good creation and transform the world? Is "heaven" more like sailing with one's grandchildren in an unpolluted Delaware River in a transformed world that is free of all evil? Or is heaven the spiritual bliss of immortal souls in an immaterial world of ideas?

Is the only continuity between life now and life eternal the fact that our response of faith to God's offer of salvation now determines our future destiny? If so, are words and deeds intended to encourage people to accept Christ our only actions that have eternal significance? Or is there some sense in which

God cleanses the best of human cultures and incorporates it into the coming kingdom in such a way that our work for peace and justice now has continuity with God's eternal reign?

##### 6. What is the ultimate source and authority for answering such tough questions?

Is it God's revelation in the **Bible**? Tradition? Reason? Or is it found in the historical context of being poor, black, female, or oppressed?

Twentieth-century Christians have debated these perennial questions in the context of their search to understand the proper relationship between evangelism and social concern. In the process, they have struggled with four other questions.

##### 7. Who or what is the object of evangelism?

Do we only evangelize **persons**, or can we also ,evangelize social **systems** like multinational corporations and govern­ments?

If we only invite persons to repent and believe, do we only address the Gospel to individuals, or can whole villages or communities accept Christ together?

##### 8. How is the Gospel shared?

Is it only by **words** or also by **actions**? Are deeds of mercy, acts of justice, worship, and fellowship in the church all means of sharing the Gospel?

##### 9. How is society changed?

Only as **individuals are converted**? Only as **social systems are changed**? What about the alternative lifestyle of Jesus' new community?[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)