

What is the Relationship between Evangelism and Physical Needs-Meeting in Mission Work? **By Bob Young**

The question: Whether in a local church ministry or in mission work, why are Christians involved in benevolent or service work? What is the purpose of physical needs-meeting ministries? Are such activities done (1) simply for the value of the caring work—because we are called to caring, (2) to exhibit the spirit of Jesus, (3) to provide for and meet human needs, (4) to care for the needy and sick (as in Matthew 25), (5) to provide education and care, (6) with no obvious connection to evangelism? Or should such benevolent and ministry work always have as its goal to touch people spiritually with the ultimate purpose of bringing them to Jesus? These could be described according to motivations. Are benevolent works motivated by our Christian calling, the desire to show Jesus to others, basic human needs, duty, and the desire to help others improve? Are our motivations disconnected from evangelism, or is the desire to bring people to Jesus always to be at the heart of such activities?

BIBLE/NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus' example of ministry combines evangelism (teaching and preaching) and physical needs-meeting (healing). Jesus came teaching, preaching and healing, Matt 4:23, 9:35-38.

Before his ascension, Jesus sent forth his disciples to make disciples, to teach, baptize, and continue to teach, Matt 28:18-20. His concern in the Great Commission seems to be primarily on salvation, Mark 16:15-16. Benevolent involvement is not overtly commissioned in Jesus' charge to the church.

In the book of Acts, the early church was involved in evangelism, teaching, and preaching. It was also involved in service and caring for one another. The service and caring work of the early church seems to be focused primarily inward. (Five activities often identified as a summary of the life of the early church are service, fellowship, worship, proclamation, and teaching.)

The purpose of God is to bring together all things in Christ, a goal which seems to be focused primarily on evangelism, Eph. 1:9-10. Jesus said the poor would always be present in the world.

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

In Established Churches

The church has traditionally recognized that it has a three-pronged ministry: evangelism (reaching out to the lost, saving the lost), edification (teaching the saved, keeping the saved), and benevolence. Benevolence has generally been mentioned last in the list, perhaps indicating less emphasis.

Local benevolence may occur internally (as in the early chapters of the book of Acts, mentioned above), or externally. Many churches have found that external local benevolence provides a weak link to establishing evangelistic contacts and identifying potential prospects for salvation and church membership.

Benevolence may also occur at a distance. This would include sending money to children's homes and involvement in disaster relief both in the U.S. and also internationally.

Many established churches include children's homes in their budgets because of the felt need to be involved in benevolence, and perhaps because of the lack of local benevolent work.

In Domestic Mission Work

Historically, missionaries to US locations where the church was weak or non-existent went forth to accomplish the mission of God by planting, establishing, and strengthening local churches. These efforts primarily focused on telling people about Jesus, planting and establishing churches, and bringing people to Christ. Overall, there was a minimal amount of focused benevolent or service activity.

More recently, mission churches have employed benevolence or service projects to reach out to communities and establish contacts and bridges across which the gospel can travel to bring people to Jesus.

In Foreign Mission Work

As missionaries went forth to accomplish the mission of God, this was primarily focused on telling people about Jesus, bringing people to Christ, and planting and establishing churches.

More recently, churches have sent forth "missionaries" with a primary or total focus on benevolent work, working in child care, orphan's homes, secular education, etc. Best considered as a separate category is what has come to be known as "medical missions." More recently, benevolent or service work has involved short-term mission groups working in construction projects or medical missions activities.

As God's people go forth, it is hard to imagine that there would be no involvement in needs-meeting as opportunities arise.

CONSIDERING THE POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS

What is mission work? What should those who go forth as "missionaries" do? What are appropriate activities? What is the role of benevolent or service work? What is the role of the church in social action projects? What is the relationship between evangelistic efforts and service or ministry projects? (Service and benevolent activities such as secular education, child care, and orphan care are summed up as "social action" in the descriptions below.)

At least nine options are possible. I have tried to list them on a continuum, beginning with all evangelism and no social action. Probably few churches or Christians today hold the extreme position of all evangelism and no social action, but more and more churches and Christians are near the other extreme of all social action and little if any evangelism.

EVANGELISM IS EXCLUSIVELY PRIMARY. SOCIAL ACTION IS NOT PART OF THE MISSION; THEREFORE, IT IS NOT DESIRABLE AND SHOULD BE AVOIDED INsofar AS POSSIBLE. Social action is not part of the purpose of God and should be discarded and avoided in favor of spending more time in evangelistic efforts. Jesus said that the poor would also be a part of the world.

EVANGELISM IS EXCLUSIVELY PRIMARY. SOCIAL ACTION IS NOT PART OF THE MISSION; THEREFORE IT IS OPTIONAL AND IS NOT TO BE SOUGHT, BUT IT CAN BE DONE WHEN OPPORTUNITIES ARISE. One can hardly expect that there would be no involvement whatsoever in needs-meeting. To see a basic

need that can be met, and not meet it would hardly demonstrate the spirit of Jesus. Prov. 3:27; Matthew 25; Luke 10. It hardly seems that needs-meeting can be optional. The question is not whether there will be such involvement; the question is one of priority focus. What does one understand one is present to do? Is one present in the "mission field" to share the gospel of Jesus, or is one present to work in a physical needs-meeting ministry? If the latter, what is the awareness of spiritual needs?

EVANGELISM IS PRIMARY. SOCIAL ACTION IS DISTANTLY RELATED TO THE MISSION BECAUSE IT CANNOT BE AVOIDED BY GOD'S PERSON DESIRING TO EXHIBIT CHRIST. THEREFORE IT IS NOT OPTIONAL, BUT IT IS A DISTRACTION. If needs-meeting is not optional, does involvement in needs-meeting ministry distract from the real work to be done? If it is not a distraction, how do evangelism and needs-meeting work in tandem to fulfill God's purpose?

EVANGELISM IS PRIMARY, BUT SOCIAL ACTION IS A TOOL FOR THE EVANGELISTIC MISSION. Thus plans for the mission may involve some social action activities because they theoretically support the evangelism mission. Involvement in meeting needs or medical missions is a tool to draw people to Christ, to provide a context for the evangelistic mission. The purpose of social action is to provide opportunities to share the gospel. This fails to see benevolence and service as a positive good to be sought solely in imitation of Jesus.

SOCIAL ACTION IS A NATURAL RESULT OF THE MISSION; IT IS THE RESULT OF EVANGELISM, AND SHOULD BE DONE INDIGENOUSLY BUT SHOULD NOT BE PRIMARY FOR THE "INSERTED" MISSIONARY. Evangelism focuses on preaching and teaching for conversion and salvation. To become like Jesus implies compassion; thus needs-meeting ministries are a natural development, but only as a part of the work of the developing church. Social action should be indigenously driven, but not a primary description of the work of the one sent.

SOCIAL ACTION IS A PART OF THE MISSION BECAUSE IT IS PART OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. IT IS SECONDARY, BUT NONETHELESS IMPORTANT. The mission is more than evangelism. The mission includes bringing God's presence to a new region. Evangelism is the priority and ultimate goal, but social action is a logical part of being God's presence and sharing the gospel. That is, the presence of the missionary will reflect the compassion of Jesus as the missionary lives an integrated life balancing discipleship.

SOCIAL ACTION IS PART OF THE MISSION, BEING AN EQUAL PARTNER. Evangelism and social action are equally important. The church has both as its mission, and there should be no effort to establish a priority.

SOCIAL ACTION CAN BE PRIMARY IN THE MISSION, TAKING PRIORITY OVER EVANGELISM. Social action is just as important as evangelism, and is the primary thrust of the mission, although it is hoped that evangelism will result, and the hope and plan for resulting evangelism is part of the planning.

SOCIAL ACTION CAN BE THE ENTIRE MISSION, WITHOUT OVERT OR EXTENDED EVANGELISTIC EFFORTS. Social action can exist as a part of God's purpose in the world with no accompanying evangelistic effort. There is a value in sending forth those who serve compassionately to improve the world with very little, if any, impact evangelistically.

What other positions can be identified? What is a Biblical model?