

The Church Is a Success

An excerpt from Smalling's book, THE NEW EVANGELICAL SOCIAL GOSPEL: A CRITIQUE

Let's peek inside the average Bible-preaching church. We find transformed sinners of all stamps: ex-drunks, ex-addicts, families restored, formerly wayward youth and the worst sinners of all, former arrogant rebels who thought they did not need Jesus.

This makes the church the most outstanding social success the world has ever seen. Is there any other institution that can boast such achievements with people? The church is God's social justice program and it accomplishes its job when it does what God tells it to do...preach the word.

The church is far from being a failure. One pastor put it well.

How much stronger are the people of God now than at any point in the history of Israel or the early church! The church should respect herself for her wondrous past, present, and future, realizing that she bestrides history and our narrow world like a colossus.

She is at much greater risk from her power than from her weakness. It is a failure of faith of the first order to lash out on her behalf, as if she needed defending; it only reflects the narrowness of our own experience.¹

Is the church a failure?

Rauschenbusch² thought so, for he referred to *...the failure of Christianity to undertake its reconstructive social mission.*³ To him, it is a given that reconstructing society is the mission of the church.

This new brand of social gospel also takes it for granted that Christianity in the western world has failed by neglecting to meet the material needs of impoverished humanity.

The problem is a failure to see the church itself as a society. It is the *ekklesia*, as the Greek puts it, those "called out" from the surrounding community to form a new kind of humanity, representing God's kingdom. If we want to know if the church is successful, the place to look is inside, not judging from the outside as to how many poor it is feeding.

The bridge between spiritual and material

It was testimony time during Sunday service in a peasant village in Latin America where we were helping to plant a church. Dirt floor. Thatched roof. The smells and sounds of farm life. We had just finished singing.

José, about three years old in the Lord, stood to speak. "I have been singing that song for a long time, wondering if it was really true. I found out it is. Since I've been doing what it says, our

family has lacked for nothing. I don't know exactly how it is has worked out, but it has." His eyes got misty. "It really does work."

He was referring to a song in Spanish based on Matthew 6:33, *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

On the basis of this promise, along with a few others from scripture, we had taught them biblical priorities. The principles of giving the first fruits to God's work and the pursuit of righteousness will result in God meeting our needs. No, he does not promise riches. He promises enough. The seed of the righteous do not beg for bread.

In another church in the capital among upper middle class businessmen, a man stood and shared how his business had been in trouble. He remembered Matthew 6:33 because we sang the same chorus in that church also. He had been a faithful giver and was involved in the leadership-training program as a candidate for elder.

His testimony? Exactly the same as the villager's. Different culture, different society. He was unclear on exactly how it worked but his business was out of the hole. He was learning to stand on the promises of God.

Both of those churches, the village and the city, are successes if that is how they are teaching people to live.

What is the bridge for bringing the spiritual into the material? Answer: The promises of God. This is exactly what the word of God has said all along.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Mt. 6:33

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Phil. 4:19

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Luke 6:38

They really work. Really, really.

Village enterprise

We were sitting around the dinner table in another village about to enjoy a very fresh chicken stew. The chicken had been alive an hour before. My missionary partner was conversing with the host, Enrique, about eighteen months old in the Lord.

"You know," Enrique said, "earning a living here is hard. The only work in our village is in the cane fields, cutting sugar cane for the whiskey business. It doesn't pay well either. I wish God would provide some other kind of work to do."

My missionary friend replied, "Let's pray about it."

A few minutes later, the missionary said, "Enrique, who made this table we are sitting around?"

"I did," he replied.

"I thought so. You said earlier you made all the furniture in your house. Why not make furniture for the village?"

Enrique thought for moment and said, "If I give up my job in the fields and it does not work out, we'll starve. Besides, my tools are old and worn out."

The missionary said, "I'll tell you what. I'll loan you my tools. You can make one piece of furniture and see if you sell it. If it starts to work out, you can go into business until you have money for your own tools."

Result: Enrique no longer works in the cane fields. He is the village carpenter and doing well financially. Another man in the church, inspired by Enrique's success, also went into the carpentry business.

Though some church members still work in the cane fields, the church is its own community and they help each other. They also take turns visiting outlying villages to reach them with the gospel. This is success in biblical terms.

We would like to say the village population reached a tipping point in its understanding and came into the church in droves as they saw the kingdom of God manifest in word and deed. That would be a lie.

The reality is that persecution continues. Some villagers feel the Christians have betrayed the local religion and rocks occasionally bounce off the building during services. That is the real world of gospel ministry.

The bridge

The promises of God are the bridge between the spiritual and the physical.

Mercy ministry is not that bridge. Some may not see this as "practical." But then, we don't see heaven working either.

The best that mercy ministry can do is show that Christians are sincere in their message. This may indeed gain a hearing among some for the gospel but is not the gospel itself nor the norm for gospel ministry.

So the issue is what it has always been; believing God. The problem of the world is not a failure of the church to supply the physical needs of humanity to prove the gospel. The problem is unbelief, plain and simple.

Dualism?

The social gospel has always criticized conservatives for falling into the old platonic dualism which separates the spiritual and material into distinct realms, ignoring the practical realities of suffering around them.

This may be true in some cases. Such is deplorable. What is even more deplorable is the new social gospel answer to the problem.

The solution is to do what Jesus said in the Great Commission, what the apostles modeled and proscribed. Go preach the gospel to the community. Teach those who want to hear. If you run into someone starving, give him food; NOT spend half the resources on creating social justice programs in the hopes the world will be impressed and take notice. It won't be and will do its best not to notice.

Enough hospitals, rescue missions, orphanages, counseling centers and social works of all kinds have been done by Christians so that if mercy ministry could convince people, the world would have been converted by now. The reality is that mercy ministries often supplement gospel work, yet do not produce the wonderfully powerful results the social gospel adherents envision. At times it becomes the tail that wags the dog.

John MacArthur has a realistic approach,

The church is not supposed to be some benevolent, nonthreatening agency whose primary goal is to achieve prestige, popularity, and intellectual acceptance. Contemporary Christians seem to think that if the world likes us, it will like our Savior. That is not the case (John 15:18).⁴

We have seen in practice how the world takes notice. It doesn't.

Yet the new social gospel followers are convinced it will be different in the future if the church will only buy into the "balance" philosophy.

Picture a different world. Imagine one in which two billion Christians embrace this gospel—the whole gospel— ..and completing God's stunning vision of a reclaimed and redeemed world—the kingdom of God among us..Might the world take notice? ...[they will say] Who is the God they serve? And most important, Can we serve Him too?⁵ (Stearns, World Vision)

This whole gospel is truly good news for the poor, and it is the foundation for a social revolution that has the power to change the world.⁶

A way to measure success

Did God leave the church with any criteria for measuring its own success?

Here's one: *Persecution.*

The world persecutes the church when it feels it can no longer ignore it. This proves the message is getting through. People cannot suppress what they do not perceive.

The maligning of evangelicals in the media, documentaries portraying Christians as intolerant because we insist there is one Savior, are clear proof the message has been heard and despised as always. Mercy ministries and transformed sinners have not changed this fact.

In Christ's communiqué in the book of Revelation to the seven churches of Asia Minor, it is interesting to see what he does not mention as criteria for his praises or rebukes. Church growth strategy is never an issue, nor is appearing useful to the world.

His criteria seem to be two things: Enduring persecution and faithfulness to His name. Social justice seems to be glaringly absent.

By these criteria, a church faithfully preaching the word of God, attempting to reach the community with the gospel and caring for its own, is success.

From this chapter we learn...

- The church itself is a community and insofar it is composed of saved sinners, it is an outstanding success.
- The bridge God has provided between the spiritual and material is his promises, which when applied, really work.
- Persecution is a good measure of the success of a church, for people persecute only what they perceive.

1 <http://www.Christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/february/follyansweringfools.html?start=2>

2 The founder of the liberal social gospel movement in the United States around 1900 with his book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. NY, NY: Harper, 2007.

3 Rauschenbusch, p.145

4 MacArthur, John **STANDING STRONG**, 2006 p.53

5 Stearns, p.279

6 Ibid, p.202