Evangelism and Social Justice: Why the Church Needs Both

It was near the end of a semester in Christian ethics, and one of the students had never quite accepted the church’s obligation to the poor and the oppressed.

He summarized his frustration this way: “Give a hungry man a meal, and you keep him alive for a day. Share the gospel, and you offer him eternity.” The student exemplified the uneasy relationship between evangelism and social justice.

It hasn’t always been like this. For most of the church’s history, no significant rivalry has existed between the mission to evangelize and ministries of compassion. Both were seen as rooted in divine commands. You might say the church invested itself both in the Great Commission (to make disciples) and the second Greatest Commandment (to love one’s neighbor), in an effort to fulfill the Greatest Commandment, to love God with all one’s being.

Tensions between these two key aspects of the church’s mission began to emerge in the late 19th century. In North America, debate over the “social gospel” and fundamentalism-modernism transformed the tension into a full-blown sibling rivalry. Christians were asked to choose: Either the church should devote itself to the conversion of the heart or to the transformation of society.

Since the 1920s, however, the lines of separation have become fuzzy and the arguments more complex. One still hears the occasional voice calling for one mission or the other. But more and more we hear that both missions are the same.

The identification of evangelism with social action takes one of two forms.

On one hand are those who contend that evangelism is social action. The best approach to such problems as hunger, poverty or homelessness is to preach the
gospel. The Spirit will empower people and communities to transform their environments and cast off the debilitating effects of social plagues like alcoholism, drug abuse, crime and prostitution.

On the other hand are those who say social action is evangelism. When the church promotes educational, agricultural or economic development, the love of God is given concrete form. The gospel message of accepting human beings in all their brokenness is manifest. The crucified Christ is proclaimed.

But social development is not evangelism. And the distinction is worth preserving.

Evangelism is communication of the gospel in such a way that a person comes to know Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord. Social action aims at correcting or improving situations of systemic injustice. The two overlap in complex and often complementary ways. But only by maintaining the distinction can the church fulfill both missions.

In his foundational work, Biblical Ethics and Social Change, Stephen Charles Mott offers three compelling reasons why the healthy church must hold together both evangelism and social action. First, the absence of social action hurts the evangelistic witness of the church. It is easier for a cynical world to dismiss the evangelistic efforts of the church when the same church fails to deal with challenging social problems. The message of God’s love makes little sense when the church appears disinterested in human suffering.

Second, the converse is also true. Social action ministries strengthen the mission of the church. In a skeptical world, the willingness of the church to take on social problems lends credibility to its evangelistic message.

Mott also points to the enormous practical advantage that social action gives evangelism. Organized social action puts Christians in ongoing contact with non-Christians. Seminary students, for example, who participate in a prison ministry providing companionship to inmates typically discover natural and appropriate ways to share the gospel.
And third, social action preserves the fruits of evangelism. Many social contexts inhibit the spread and growth of the gospel. The church has long recognized, for example, that circumstances encouraging alcoholism also hinder evangelism. The church often works on two fronts, but for a common end.

Mott’s reasons support what should already be clear from Scripture. Healthy churches don’t need to choose between evangelism and social action.

Ben Leslie is academic vice president and dean of the faculty at the North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, S.D.

Buy *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* from Amazon!