

Promise and the Gospel of Well-being

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Contours of Poverty

Jesus' striking statement that the poor will always be with us (1) is borne out by the facts. At present, 3 billion people live on less than \$2 per day while 1.3 billion get by on less than \$1 per day. Seventy percent of those living on less than \$1 per day are women. In sub-Saharan Africa, twenty nations remain below their per capita incomes of two decades ago while among Latin American and Caribbean countries, eighteen are below their per capita incomes of ten years ago(2).

Figures from the United Nations and the World Bank in 2006 show that: A billion people struggle to survive on less than \$1 a day. 77 million primary school age children are out of school. The sub-Saharan region has made significant progress since 1990/1991, but overall only 64% are enrolled, and in Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali and Niger, fewer than half the children of primary-school age are enrolled in school. Globally, more than one in five girls of primary-school age are not in school, compared to about one in six boys. 10.5 million children died before their fifth birthday in 2004 - mostly from preventable causes. Sub-Saharan Africa, with only 20 per cent of the world's young children, accounted for half of the total deaths, a situation that has shown only modest improvement. More than 500,000 women die each year in childbirth, most of them in developing countries. Only 46 per cent of deliveries in sub-Saharan Africa, where almost half the world's maternal deaths occur, are assisted by skilled attendants. Worldwide, 39.5 million adults and children are living with HIV/AIDS and almost 4.3 million new infections have occurred in 2006. Twelve million sub-Saharan African children are orphans. Around 59 per cent of HIV-positive adults in sub-Saharan Africa - a total of 13.2 million people - are women. 1.1 billion people still don't have access to safe drinking water.

The persistence of poverty can have a debilitating effect which can all too easily lead to inertia. But this has not been the posture of Christian history. For 200 years Christian faith has been at the forefront of the struggle against poverty. According to Rodney Starke it was Christian love in action which largely accounted for its rapid growth from its inception. (3) And what is even more interesting for our study was the fact that this early response to the poor was regarded not merely as acts of Christian benevolence but more fundamentally as rooted in the concept of divine justice. (4)

Given the scope of the church's historic response to poverty there is little wonder that the World Health Organisation estimates that a significant percentage of healthcare is provided by faith communities with the Christian church playing a substantial role in that effort.

Returning to our roots

It's common knowledge that between the late 19th century and the mid 20th century evangelicalism lost faith in the efficacy of social action as an integral part of the Gospel, in the context of a liberal theology which substituted an orthodox view of the Atonement with social activism as a salvation supplement. Evangelical piety, which became nervous about the 'social gospel' and feared mistaken identity, developed an aversion to involvement with social or political action. The idea that the Gospel had any relationship with social activism became an evangelical contradiction. But as Alistair McGrath put it, 'The social gospel got one thing right and everything else wrong: what God

has joined together let no man put asunder!?' (5)

Many evangelical voices emerged to challenge and redefine evangelicalism in relationship to Biblical justice. Not least was the powerful pronouncement of Lausanne 1974:

Christian Social Responsibility

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. (Acts 17:26,31; Gen. 18:25; Isa. 1:17; Psa. 45:7; Gen. 1:26,27; Jas. 3:9; Lev. 19:18; Luke 6:27,35; Jas. 2:14-26; John 3:3,5; Matt. 5:20; 6:33; II Cor 3:18; Jas. 2:20).

The 1970s and 80s witnessed a slow-burning passion for a return to a more holistic Gospel. As evangelicalism rediscovered its heritage of social transformation it also gave way to increasing levels of socio-political engagement. In South Africa, the Kairos Document published in September 1985 followed by Evangelical Witness in South Africa in 1986 inspired the birth of Evangelical Concern for Northern Ireland during the same period. More recent publications such as For the Health of the Nation ? an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility 2004 (which reflected the ethos of a pre-Lausanne publication Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility) provided clear indication of the mood among American evangelicals to recover the social elements of the Gospel for evangelicals in the States.

In the 21st century the return from our social concussion has found its most formal and global expressions in two global evangelical movements. The Micah Network launched in Oxford in 2001 laid out its convictions in its founding statement:

Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.

In that same year the World Evangelical Fellowship's General Assembly reached the following resolution:

As a global Christian community seeking to live in obedience to Scripture, we recognise the challenge of poverty across God's world. We welcome the international initiative to halve world poverty by 2015, and pledge ourselves to do all we can, through our organisations and churches, to back this with prayerful, practical action in our nations and communities...

Emerging from these two movements Micah Challenge was birthed as a global Christian response to the Millennium Development Goals. (6)

The Gospel wells of well-being

Frankly we have a right to be concerned where there are clear signs that the church imbibes its values and political influences from the world. A gospel which ignores the stigma of the Cross as the price of acceptability or political pragmatism is always one generation away from apostasy. This was true of the church in Laodicea whose blindness and nakedness was due largely to the moral indulgence which came with an affluent society. (7)

But it has been far too easy for the church to adopt a theological posture of contextual abstinence as a result. Social and political indifference is not a biblical virtue. In fact we argue that the symbiotic relationship between the spiritual and cultural demands of our world is often God's calling card to the church.

The twenty-first century calls Christians to remake the Christian hope by basing it anew in the new acts that God is doing in the world today. (8)

Arguably, the Reformation would have been inconceivable without the philosophical and political upheavals of the Renaissance. And for two millennia the church has demonstrated that the gospel is most effective when it speaks with the cultural vocabulary of its particular social setting. (9)

Political expedience should never be the impulse for transformational ministry. And neither should cultural relevance. As the saying goes, "He who is married to the culture today will wake up tomorrow to find himself a widower." But there is a challenge for Christian ministry to develop what a colleague once helpfully described as "new competencies for the 21st century."

Our competencies have little to do with contriving new gospels with which to pacify our culture. Rather we are to find the points of confluence between our message and the hunger of the human condition. And today that hunger is amply expressed in the desire for well-being. And this is timely because our gospel of well-being is not a modern invention to catch the prevailing mood. It sits at the centre of the good news about Jesus Christ.

Well-being has nothing to do with "touchy-feely" sentiments. It has become a key element in measuring whole-life experiences from poverty reduction to Human Rights.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." It was previously stated that there was no one "official" definition of mental health. Cultural differences, subjective assessments, and competing professional theories all affect how "mental health" is defined. (10)

Evangelism which has nothing to do with well-being has nothing to do with the ministry of Jesus who was prepared to heal ten lepers and have only one return to worship;(11) to prescribe eternal life for a rich young ruler and still love him when he failed the test; (12) or to heal and feed the believing and unbelieving multitudes equally, (13) touch the lepers and have compassion on the vulnerable crowds who lacked effective leadership. (14)

Well-being frees us from the constraints of a narrow gospel which is only interested in counting private disciples on Sunday mornings. A gospel of well-being tells everyone that there is no other name under heaven by which we might be saved; but it will also offer an inclusive "act of kindness" in the exclusive name of Jesus. (15)

All four gospels are concerned with well-being: repentance, forgiveness, healing, liberty and freedom from oppression and poverty. And all of these articles on radical morality were present in the disturbing words of the Old Testament prophets. Luke the historian-physician summarised the gospel manifesto better than any other: good news for the poor, freedom to prisoners, sight to the blind, liberty from oppression and jubilee for the entire community. (16) And his record of Mary's Song is perhaps the most sublime expression of a re-ordered society recorded anywhere in the New Testament. (17)

The righteousness of the gospel as understood by the prophets, Jesus and the apostles was inseparable from ideas about justice. Rightness and righteousness walk hand in hand. Consequently, as Ronald Sider is keen to tell us, Biblical justice is not just anti-poverty, it is pro-well-being and concerns itself with economic and redistributive justice. (18)

Care of the elderly, the dispossessed, the orphan and the poor were anticipated in the good news. Immigration and asylum were addressed. Even the controversial issues of women, bond labour and employment are addressed within their socio-political contexts.

Because the gospel begins with the idea that every person shares God's image and is identifiable by the Spirit of God, human rights with responsibility was already endemic in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A gospel of well-being is counter-cultural in that it puts up a bulwark of moral resistance to the cultural ego-centricity which sits at the centre of a secular humanism and which was articulated by some of its earlier apologists. 'The only freedom which deserves the name,' said JS Mill, 'is that of pursuing our own good in our own way so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs,' (19) which always sounds like a sophisticated way of saying, 'Mind your own business and leave me alone!' Tom Paine's powerful treatise Rights of Man is of course premised on the very same idea. 'Every age and generation must be free to act for itself in all cases as the age and generation which preceded it,' he insists.

As Paul demonstrated, our rights properly exercised find their very highest expression in a desire to use our freedom to spread the good news. (20)

Jesus truly understood well-being. This was best demonstrated in one of John's most celebrated texts: (21)

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' (John 7:37,38)

This is an audacious offer made not to Jerusalem's down and outs but to a male-only national worship event where Jewish men met to reassert their identity and spiritual sovereignty under the shadow of Rome's oppression. It was an event awash with energy, excitement and national affirmation. And if that was not enough, after seven days of merriment it is possible that some of these men struggled to walk in a straight line! This is an insight into the mood Jesus walked in on:

On each day of the feast there was a procession of priests to the pool of Siloam to draw water (m. Sukka 4:9). The priests returned to the temple, where the water was taken in procession once around the altar with the choir chanting Psalms 113-118, and then the water was poured out as a libation at the morning sacrifice. All-night revelry led up to this morning libation. This was a time of joy so great that it was said, 'He that never has seen the joy of the Beth he-She'ubah [water-drawing] has never in his life seen joy.' (22)

Jesus' gospel of well-being was not directed simply to the lowest of the outcasts. It was a message of Shalom to which the poor flocked and from which the wealthy sometimes fled. But well-being does not begin with the lowest common denominator; it is a call to God's highest ideals for everyone who has been made in his likeness. And it still has universal appeal because it elevates our humanity without diminishing the priority of the human soul.

Promise and the poor

A Christian gospel of well-being has no confidence in political agendas ? even though it takes them seriously. God is the guarantor of our well-being which is bound up in his unassailable promises to humankind.

His Word is the promise of the constant between the past and the future, our hopelessness and redemption. A promise was what God made in the presence of Adam's failure.(23) It was what he did after the great flood (24) and when he rewarded Abraham for his faith. (25)These were universal promises of well-being and there was no notion that this universality would in any way avoid the specific work of the Cross of Jesus. (26)

To quote Jurgen Moltmann:

No corner of this world should remain without God's promise of a new creation through the power of the resurrection. This has nothing whatever to do with an extension of the claim to sovereignty on the part of the Church and its officials, or with an attempt to regain the old privileges accruing from the cult of the Absolute. (27)

If God is nothing else he is profoundly a God of promise. The sacredness of promise is one of the last remaining tokens of our likeness to God. Moltmann again:

Through the promises I give, I make myself in all my ambiguity unambiguous for others and for myself. In promising we commit ourselves and become dependable. We acquire a firm configuration or Gestalt, and make ourselves people who can be addressed. In faithfulness to our promise we acquire identity in time ... those who forget their promises forget themselves. (28)

It is so inherent that children are devastated by broken promises.

The sacred transaction of promise is the realm in which people meet each other and potentially meet with God. Promise is the confluence between truth and falsehood; light and darkness. And it is the place where the gospel of well-being makes sense to people who are trying to make sense of God.

At the dawn of the Millennium something of a political miracle happened. For the first time a meeting of world leaders took place in New York for what was described as an "unprecedented gathering" convened by the United Nations. The United Millennium Summit gave birth to a dream in which nations promised to slash extreme poverty by half by the year 2015. These promises contained eight wide but measurable goals by which the preventable indignity endured by over a billion people would be brought to an end.

This covenant with our extreme poor came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were more than fiscal promises to the poor. This was an historic and moral contract to "spare no effort"freeing the entire human race from want.?

The MDGsGoal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women Goal 4: Reduce child mortality Goal 5: Improve maternal health Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Christians who were already fully committed to the alleviation of poverty and who had stepped up to the plate as full partners in global movements such as Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History felt that these promises resonated with the spirit of the Old Testament prophets and the teachings of Jesus. And the growing impulse to respond to the poor which was growing steadily across many sections of the evangelical church felt a call to respond to the MDGs.

Micah Challenge is such a response.

Micah Challenge is a global coalition of Christians holding governments to account for their promise to halve extreme poverty by 2015. We are establishing a global movement to encourage deeper Christian commitment to the poor, and to speak out to leaders to act with justice.

And in our prayers and personal actions, our letters and lobbying we are governed by the penetrating question from the prophet Micah: "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

But nothing else gives us as comprehensive a yardstick by which to hold ourselves accountable, or provides the universal language with which to talk about maternal deaths or a global response to reducing and reversing HIV/AIDS. What we seek to bring to the global response to the MDGs is a prophetic perspective on these political promises. It is a matter of mission and as Vinay Samuel reminded us, the object of missions is to "enable God's vision of society to be actualised in all relationships - social, economic, and spiritual." (29)

Not everyone believes that Christians have a responsibility to lobby governments or hold them to account beyond our responsibility to vote. There are a number of reasons for this.

I have met activists and missionaries who believe that it is our responsibility to provide care and support rather than expect anything from government. Our task, they insist, is to do our bit and pray that God - and our activism - will prompt the political will. Others are driven to political apathy through cynicism and a total mistrust of politicians. Advocacy, they contend, is for the idealist. And perhaps others are reticent because any type of political action is likely to lead to political partisanship which distorts our prophetic role. This is probably particularly true of Christians in the USA who fear that political activism does nothing to avoid the political fault lines between Republicans and Democrats within the church. And others within the Latin American context are terribly nervous because the distinction between church and state has been confused by Christian leaders whose party political activities blurred the lines between their roles.

Others are concerned that the burden of poverty is so overwhelming that there is little hope of making a substantial difference. And in any case, Jesus has already warned us that we will always have the poor. Better to do our quiet service as we serve the poor and avoid political involvement. With all its demands on our time and resources biblical action rather than biblical advocacy turns out to be the easier option.

In the main these are credible concerns. But I also fear that for far too many of us they are helpful deterrents from doing what we know instinctively to be our biblical responsibility: to speak up for those who have no voice and to defend the oppressed and needy. (30)

But there is no other way of speaking up for the poor without speaking up to the powerful. And the Bible leaves us in no doubt that prophetic advocacy is central to our gospel of well-being. It is the very essence of knowing God (31) and ruling well. (32) Moses' commitment and activism was in no doubt when he became so impassioned that he killed an Egyptian. (33) But it was quite another thing for him to appear before Pharaoh with God's demand to let the people go free. (34) David Beckmann has summarised this well for us:

God did not send Moses to Pharaoh's courts to take up a collection of canned goods, but rather to insist on political and economic change - the liberation of the slaves. (35)

Certainly, as with Moses our message will not always be heard, but biblical advocacy which calls us to our promises to the poor is at the heart of the mission of God in the world. As Rowan Williams says, the prophetic role of the church is "obstinately asking the state about its accountability and the justifications of its priorities." (36)

The call to well-being should be our divine compulsion. For not only does it energise us to act and speak up in the face of adversity but it allows us to bring an eternal perspective and an element of angry hope to the intractable problems of our age. It urges that:

As long as there is one man who should be free, as long as slums and ghettos exist, as long as the color of a man's skin is his prison, there must be divine discontent. (37)

Or in Walter Brueggemann's words,

We are not summoned to be an echo of culture, either to administer its economics, to embrace its psychology or to certify its morality. To us is gifted an alternative way. (38)

In any event, prophetic persistence has its own reward. There are clear signs that our promise-keeping is bearing modest fruit. Those living in extreme poverty in the developing regions accounted for slightly more than a quarter of the developing world's population in 2005, compared to almost half in 1990. Major accomplishments were also made in education. In the developing world as a whole, enrolment in primary education reached 88 per cent in 2007, up from 83 per cent in 2000. And most of the progress was in regions lagging the furthest behind. Deaths of children under five declined steadily worldwide ?; to around 9 million in 2007, down from 12.6 million in 1990. (39)

But we have many miles to go and many promises to keep.

Our task is not to assume a unilateral responsibility for the world's poor or indeed for the fulfilment of the MDGs. But our task is to strip away the negotiated excuses and rediscover a gospel of well-being which is totally consistent with the mission of God in the world and which cares and speak up for the poor without muzzling our faith in Christ.

© The Lausanne Movement 2010 Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8World Policy Forum, Jeff Gates, May 2000Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.Dr Marijke Hoek & Joel Edwards, *Retracing our Steps Micah Challenge Poverty and Biblical Justice Course*. Course Module for Regents College 2010J. Edwards, *An Agenda for Change*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008Micah Challenge was launched at the United Nations New York 15 October 2004. For a brief history see Marijke Hoek & Justin Thacker, *Micah's Challenge*. London: Paternoster Press, 2008.Rev 3:14-22H. Russel Botman, *Hope as the Coming Reign of God*. In Brueggemann, Walter, ed. *Hope for the World*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001. p. 74David Smith *Mission After Christendom* (Darton Longman and Todd 2003); Martin Robinson and Dwight Smith *Invading Secular Spaces* (Monarch Books 2003) demonstrates this very helpfully.WHO websiteLuke 17:11-19Matt 19:16-22John 6:10-42Luke 5:12-14Acts 4:9-12Luke 4:18,19Luke 1:46-55Ronald J. Sider, *Justice, Human Rights and Government*. In Ronald Sider and Diana Knippers, eds. *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005.J.S. Mill *On Liberty* (Penguin Classic 1974) p. 72.Acts 22:25-29; 23:11; 25:9-12John 7:37-39Bloch 1980:200. Cited in IVP *New Testament Commentary on Gospel of John*.Gen 3:15Gen 8:15-22Gen 12:1-32 Cor 5:19Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*. London: SCM Classics, 2002. p.311fJurgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*. London: SCM Press, 2000. p. 87Cited in Chris Sugden, *Gospel, Culture and Transformation*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 2000. p. vii. Sugden's work is a helpful review of Vinay Samuel's work on transformation.Proverbs 31:8.9Jeremiah 22:16Ps 82:1-4; Dan 4:27Exod 2:11-14Exod 2:1,2David Beckmann, *What Christian Development Practitioners Need from Christian Researchers*. In Dean, Schaffner and Smith, eds. *Attacking Poverty in the Developing World*. Authentic/World Vision, 2005. p. 25?Religion culture diversity and tolerance - shaping the new Europe?: address at the European Policy Centre, Brussels. November 7, 2005. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/967>Billy Graham, cited by J Edwards, *The Cradle, the Cross and the Empty Tomb*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000. p. 92In a North American article as cited by John Rackley in *The Baptist Times*. Thursday, November 23, 2006. <http://www.exacteditions.com/exact/browse/354/377/1776/3/10>UNMC statistics released Sept 2009