

## Word, Deed and Missions

### Word or deed?

The Philippine economy has been growing at the rate of slightly over 6.5 percent during the past six years. This is quite respectable in the light of the economic problems that have confronted developing nations in the seventies. The GNP is moving towards \$550 U.S. from a low \$450. In 1978 there was a record rice harvest. A surplus made it possible to export 13,000 tons of rice to Indonesia. The 1979 exportable surplus was about 500,000 tons, despite unhelpful weather and a three-fold increase in fertilizer prices.

Though the harvests have been bountiful, there is still a growing feeling that government planners should exert more vigorous efforts to redress income inequality. Only 5 percent of the nation's population enjoyed almost a third of its wealth while 40 percent had just a tenth. The rich are still getting richer and the poor poorer. Yet the Philippines is still in better economic and social shape than many other Third World countries.

While many economies are faltering, the aspirations for greater material prosperity have never been as high and as world-wide as today. The criterion for prosperity is now in the process of shifting from the individual to the whole of humanity. These questions are asked: Why should an individual, a society or a few nations benefit from the world's resources and wealth? Hasn't all of humanity the right to live without any form of want? Hopes are high. Materialism abounds. There is a universal desire for prosperity in a time of declining natural resources and faltering economies.

The Church of Jesus Christ is surrounded by a sea of needs and faced with challenges presented to her by the spirits of the Age. The task of the Church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus has never been as difficult as in our time. The obstacles to the spread of the Gospel are multiplying. Yet the opportunities are plentiful. The growth of the Church around the world is still astounding.

Scripture gives the Church a clear mandate to go to the ends of the world with the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. But how does the Church see her missionary task? The definition of mission has often come to depend on the current situation and need in the light of our particular judgment as Christians. This has led to confusion of mission purpose and methodology. I find current missiologies swinging the pendulum from one extreme to another. There is an increasing polarization between Word and Deed ministries. Word proclamation alone. Service alone. No verbal communication, but only the Christians' silent presence.

How do we bring the Gospel? Is it wrong to limit mission to the bringing of the Good News with only the salvation of lost souls in mind? In the past, Word proclamation seemed to have received undue emphasis. The motivation for mission work was often only the rescue of the individual souls from hell. Today the deed ministry is so much

stressed that the impression is given that the Word of God as Gospel of the Kingdom has become a message of world and life reconstruction.

I see the Church moving into the direction of activism. This can take the form of involvement in education, agriculture, cottage industries and feeding programs divorced from the direction of the Word of the Gospel. Such activism may be commendable as humanitarian care, but it falls short of fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). The Church is not "in the business" of changing the world and to usher in utopia. A Christian who knows the Biblical message cannot share the optimism that the Kingdom of God will inevitably come through one's own persistent efforts, good will and devotion.

Dr. H.N. Ridderbos aptly remarked:

"However much the Kingdom invades world history with its blessings and deliverance, however much it presents itself as a saving power against the tyranny of gods and forces inimical to mankind, it is only through a final and universal crisis that the Kingdom, as a visible and all-conquering reign of peace and salvation, will bring to fruition the new heaven and earth."

What is the purpose of mission work? It is calling men to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, the conversion of the world and the incorporation of believers into the new people of God (Acts 26:17,18). Mission does more than speak to the emotional vacuum in the lives of men. It goes beyond warning men to flee from the wrath to come (Matthew 3:7). This is a part of the Gospel proclamation, but not all of it. The Gospel message must help shape the intellectual mood of today, deal with cultural idolatries, injustice and poverty, and confront the powers that erode men's sense of worth and dignity. In other words, the Word cannot be divorced from the Deed and vice versa.

### **Development and Evangelism**

What is the role of the Church in our days of violent confrontation between rich and poor? Should the Church concentrate only on the completion of the Great Commission through verbal proclamation? Should only individual Christians be at liberty to be involved in contemporary and important vital issues of life? These are difficult questions which defy simple solutions.

How do we respond to God's call to aid the poor? There has grown a strong urge to participate in the whole process of economic and social development. Bong Rin Ro of Korea says:

"Evangelical churches and missions ought to do more in terms of assisting various kinds of long term development such as medical work, orphanages, irrigation and drinking water, rehabilitation of uprooted slum dwellers, agricultural development, and educational facilities for rural children."

What is this development we are urged to participate in? The definition of development largely depends on one's view of the Scripture and the Christian faith itself. Ronald J.

Sider says that it is a movement toward that freedom and wholeness in a just community which persons will enjoy when our risen Lord Jesus returns at His Second Coming to bring the kingdom in its fullness. John F. Robinson claims that the term is used to designate what might also be called "development assistance." It refers to the action performed by a person or group for the benefit of another.

Ed Dayton, the Divisional Director of Evangelism and Research for World Vision International, defines development as "the process of forging new values and enabling a community to have a part in determining its own destiny. He says that Christian development "sees value in two dimensions: the horizontal relationship of people interacting with people and the additional dimension of people finding ultimate meaning and ultimate value in the person of Jesus Christ." He states that it is the most Biblical form of evangelism "because it offers the only true basis of effective human relationships without which development cannot be achieved."

He views, therefore, development as a vital force in church planting. He advocates verbal communication of the gospel, but he also remarks that proclamation of the Word may have to be set aside for deeds of mercy. He realizes that needs may overwhelm the Christian. Not all the needs of hunger and safety can be met. Yet we cannot refuse what we are able to give. We must do what we can. The scope of the work is limited by its very nature. Who has the resources available to aid the world's millions of poor?

In the circles of the World Council of Churches there has been a growing feeling that more ought to be done than merely participating in world missions and world diaconate. At an ecumenical consultation in Montreux in 1970, the delegates provided the incentive which led to the founding of the Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD). The chief aim of CCPD is to render aid to churches which are in the process of development and liberation. CCPD's attention focuses on justice, independence and economic growth, with the first goal being primary. Dr. J. Verkuyl wrote that CCPD "seeks to call the attention of the officials within newly formed governments to the plight of the poor and neglected within their borders and to encourage and help them in the struggle for human dignity, independence, and social and economic welfare. It strives to achieve its goals by issuing detailed studies on trade relations, ecclesiastical investments, applied elementary technology, the organized efforts of emancipation movements, etc., which enable the authorities to analyze the situation and begin tackling the problems."

CCPD makes available experts to aid regional planning. It also proposed that the churches in the rich countries set aside two percent of their total yearly income to fund projects of CCPD.

As God's people we have a responsibility for the poor and suffering. We must do justice, love, mercy, and walk humbly before our God (Micah 6:8). We are to follow all of God's commandments (Matthew 28:19-20). We are saved to responsible and caring service. We live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Yet the

Church is not a development agency. The church can call for development through prophetic preaching and realize something of it through its deeds.

Missions today are engaged in an incredible amount of service. Will this type of ministry in deed automatically lead to church growth? For some, the ministry in deed seems more important than the increase of baptized believers. Can service be substituted for church planting evangelism? Are we even allowed to raise questions? I believe so. The proclamation of the Word still builds the church (Romans 10:8-18). Incidents on the mission field provide ample illustrations that adequate church growth has not always occurred when the deed was emphasized. Already in the 1950's Donald McGavran, who has done so much to revive the church's vision for church growth, wrote that despite the tremendous amount of life poured out by missions on rural reconstruction, literacy, public health, and relief work, the evidence clearly shows that these have little to do with the multiplication of churches.

"Where such multiplication would have taken place anyhow, there, to be sure growth has occurred," McGavran wrote. "But this drive to improve social conditions has not generally caused increase or even been conducted in places where in gathering was possible." McGavran cites the Church of Christ of the Chingrai province in Thailand as an example. Congregations had been multiplying. Communicants had doubled in the previous decade.

McGavran searched for reasons for his massive growth. He writes: "A missionary administrator believed that the great growth (the most notable in Thailand) was due to the establishment in the province of an agricultural centre, to which \$50,000 worth of tractors had been given and which was asking for a further \$50,000 to shift from wheeled tractors to caterpillars. The Thai moderator of the Church in that province, however, giving many illustrations, assured me that the basic reason for the growth of the churches was that Christians in those rural congregations, because of their faith in Jesus Christ, did not fear the evil spirits. This one factor, he declared, brought man after man and family after family out of animistic Buddhism to Christian faith." And McGavran comments; "I do not know whether the local moderator or the missionary was right; but might it not have paid the mission to find out? And to multiply whatever was giving the Church in that province to double in ten years? It might also, possibly, have saved it \$50,000."

Consider also the situation of Word and Deed ministry in China before, the communist take-over. The Chinese church growth was contemporary with the heyday of liberalism in the U.S. An enormous amount of American money was poured into China, largely through the YMCA. Why the failure of all this aid to make the church grow and feel at home in its own society? "To an outside observer," says missiologist Stephen Neill, "the following seemed to be the defects of the Chinese Churches as a whole:

1. Christianity presented much more as a program of social and political reform than as a religion of redemption. But the concepts of liberal Christianity proved in the end less dynamic than those of Marxist Communism.

2. A widespread lack of interest in theology, theology being regarded as no more than the perpetuation from the pulpit of old-world terms and phrases, which no longer had any relevance to present-day life.
3. A liberal interpretation of the Bible, from which both the prophetic and eschatological dimensions were almost wholly absent.
4. An almost total lack of the sense of worship. 'The Chinese are not mystical' said a great Chinese leader to a missionary friend of mine; this was his reason for lack of interest in attempts to improve the quality of worship in the University where both worked.
5. An almost total lack of understanding of the nature of the Church. To many leading Chinese Christians, who had come to Christ through a Christian college or through the YMCA, the Church was not so much the nurse and mother of their faith as an inconvenient though perhaps necessary appendage to it.
6. An almost total lack of understanding of the significance of the universal Church, transcended in the case of the great Chinese leaders through vigorous participation in the ecumenical movement."

The experiences of the past should constrain us not to swing the pendulum towards an overemphasis on the deed ministry. The church must not follow the trends of the times, but the teachings of the Word of God.

### **What constitutes poverty?**

What constitutes poverty? This is a difficult question to answer. Poverty cannot be measured solely in terms of the average annual wage. The condition of the poor in Canada is vastly superior to the poor in the Philippines. Yet the poor in the Philippines are better off than those in India. What the mass media define as poverty and the definition given by economists differ greatly. The mass media relentlessly accelerate universal aspirations for higher living standards. They create wants through undue stress on material needs to satisfy the soul of man.

My experience is that poverty cannot be measured by the annual wage standard. A farmer in a small village without hardly any cash income may have a higher standard of living than a man with a daily cash income in the slums of Manila. The poor are those who lack health facilities, potable water, development programs, and minimum education to combat their diseases, poverty, ignorance, and a very low standard of living.

Who are the dirt poor? In Africa, they are the people who are back to eating rats and mice. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization has this message for the starving millions in Black Africa - urging them to eat "bushmeat" - rats, mice, snails, worms, ants,

monkeys and other wild fare - to help them ease growing food shortages. "There is no danger in eating rats or monkeys anywhere as long as they are healthy," says Mr. Cungi y Lopez, chief of FAO's nutrition service. "Field rats, for instance, can be roasted, fried or boiled. Their protein value is like beef or poultry and they are low in fat content."

Some of Africa's famine causes are deserts that continuously move outwards, due to rapids and widespread deforestation, over-grazing and extension of cultivation of marginal lands. Wood remains the principal cooking and heating fuel for most of Africa. Indiscriminate wood cutting has resulted in the denuding of mountain slopes. The search for wood is growing increasingly more and more difficult, forcing people faced with wood shortages, to shift to dried animal dung for cooking fuels. This, in turn, deprives the soil of much needed organic fertilizer leading to increased soil poverty. Adding to the over-all crisis is the growing threat of locust swarms spreading across north, west and central east Africa. The World Food Council estimates that 42 million persons in Black Africa now suffer permanent, debilitating malnutrition.

The poor I know are people struggling to escape from their poverty - preferring a home instead of a ramshackle hut, a real plough instead of a wooden stick, clear water instead of contaminated water, electric light instead of a kerosene lamp or a candle. Many poor are apathetic. Their attitude has been formed by "millennia of malnutrition." They lack energy. The tropical climate is harsh and unhealthy. Even the healthy cannot work as hard in the heat as in a colder climate. In the Philippines, nipa huts and palm trees look very romantic on a picture postcard, but they hide much misery and disease. Do we have a responsibility for the poor? God has an eye for the poor, and promises His blessing to those who are charitable toward them (Psalm 41:1), and advance justice in their behalf.

How can we help the poor and starving? Distribution of food alone is no solution. This may relieve the needs for a short while, but there will always be situations of acute need where quick and effective help is needed. But self-help programs and self-motivated activities can have far reaching and permanent results.

Money given for medicine can cure a sick man for awhile. The same money can be used for preventive health care, water-sealed toilets and safe drinking water to protect a whole community from disease.

What must missionaries do in the Third World? First, provide for the soul and then for the body, or vice-versa? Should missionaries have a Word ministry for the soul alone and leave the care for the body to a separate Christian relief agency?

Sin is often a neglected factor in the discussion on poverty and its proposed solutions. Yet man's problem is sin. He is not basically good.

Sin has a radical character. It is within the heart of every man (Rom. 3:23). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9;

cf. Eccl. 8:11). Because of his revolt against God and his sinful desires, man either rejects God or distorts God's moral laws. Man's spiritual rebellion disrupts human relationships, breaks the line of communication with God, defiles human personality, brings injustice and want.

The reality of the power of evil must not be forgotten in the economic disruptions we witness around us. Satan is very alive and active (John 8:44; Eph. 2:2).

Much is written about social and structural sins. However, we need to begin with the individual. The individual's sin becomes a reality in the structures of society and culture. One example of deeply rooted sin in so many developing countries is corruption in public and commercial life. It is a menace to society and arrests its economic development.

A little more than two centuries ago, Sir Robert Walpole maintained that in Britain every man has his price. Stephen Neill correctly remarks, "In a single generation France and the United States have been shaken by scandals of the largest dimensions. Serious as these things are in States with well established governments, they are even more serious in the newly independent countries, where the hold of the governments on situations is still somewhat precarious and sound traditions have yet to be established."

In Indonesia there is a crack-down on corruption. The anti-corruption campaign is in full swing. Many Indonesians were not surprised. "To put it bluntly," declared Dr. Yuwono Sudarsono, a social science lecturer at the University of Indonesia, "in today's political arena, people are easily bought because idealism has a commercial quality." A provincial governor, Maj. Gen. Suparjo, of Central Java, dropped in unannounced on government offices in the regent of Klaten, only to be confronted by unoccupied desks of subordinates who plainly weren't expecting the governor. Heartened by the sight of children playing in a local schoolyard, Gov. Suparjo went over to the school office - only to find it empty.

The world is going through one economic and political upheaval after another. So much is happening that we are almost becoming shock proof. Shouldn't we ask ourselves: Aren't we seeing God's judging hand going through the world today? The Lord is still the sovereign and holy Judge of all. If man refuses to repent and believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he remains under the wrath of God and receives judgment instead of salvation (John 3:36).

Man himself is the problem. That's why Jesus directs Himself to the heart of man (Mark 7:21f). Man's fatal disease can only be cured by one remedy - the Gospel. The Gospel of sin, salvation and service must be preached. It is foolish to expect the coming of the millenium through social revolution. I agree with Dr. Klaas Runia's remarks: "When Jesus himself announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, we do indeed find that this Kingdom has to do with the liberation of the oppressed and the prisoners (cf. Luke 4:19, 20), but this aspect, too, is never isolated from the spiritual redemption of man. The message about the Kingdom is always connected with the call to repentance (cf. Mark

1:15ff). The only way to enter the Kingdom is the way of regeneration, of being born again (John 3). Jesus knew too well that the transformation of social and political structures does not bring man one step closer to the Kingdom of God ... Man himself must change. If man wants to improve his world without a real change of his own heart and mentality, the only result will be that the end will be worse than the beginning. One is reminded here of the parable of Matthew 12:43ff. (cf. Luke 11: 24ff). The unclean spirit has left the house, but when the house remains empty he returns with seven other spirits and 'the last state of that man becomes worse than the first!'"

### **The full gospel – word and deed**

If all the world must hear the Gospel and fully learn about the abundant life in Christ, churches must multiply enormously. Planting of churches is still the business of the Church. However, verbal communication of the Gospel often takes secondary place in modern missions. The Church has become so worried about the material needs of the world – ecology, poverty and hunger – that it is in real danger of forgetting the verbal communication of the Gospel.

The emphasis in Scripture is on the preaching of the Word, the proclamation of God's grace in Christ to a fallen world. In both the Old and New Testament, the Word always has central place. God's revelation has primarily the character of divine speech. The Word is therefore, according to the Bible, the only instrument through which God works. The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16).

During His ministry, Christ, the great prophet, stressed the importance of verbal communication of the Good News. His most important task was the preaching of the Word (Luke 4:-18,19). Our Lord told His apostles to do the same (Matth. 10:7; Mark 16:15). Paul, the greatest missionary of all times, said: "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom.10:14).

Do I advocate only a verbal ministry? No! Some evangelicals promote the placing of phonographs and a set of records with the Gospel message in jungle villages, They believe that this is the most effective way to reach the people quickly and to get the message straight to their hearts. This is diluting character the gospel. The verbal character in God's revelation is stressed in Scripture. However, the deed is not forgotten.

God's speech is combined with action (Ps. 33:6, 9). The Gospel must not float like a cork on the waters. It must be the salt of the earth. It does not only address the spiritual and moral problems of a person, but his physical, cultural and social needs as well. In other words, one has not finished proclaiming the Gospel when a tract is handed out on the street or a phonograph is placed in a jungle village.

The Word cannot be divorced from service. Deeds of mercy have a definite missionary meaning (Phil.2:14-17; 1 Pet. 3:16). Relief work can never be separated from the missionary task. Does our denomination tend to make a separation between Word and



Deed by having two separate agencies - Board of Christian Reformed World Missions and a Christian Reformed World Relief Committee? Why not have one board - combining relief and world missions – so that a watching world can see the unity of Word and Deed ministry?

Service in the light of Scripture is neither humanitarianism nor will it make the church a development -agency. Service was despised by the Greeks and regarded by the Jew as deeds of merit before God, Jesus came to make all things new, including service. Christ made service a principle in His Kingdom through His Word, life and example (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:25-28). His ministry was an actual realization of liberation.

He healed the sick wherever He went (Mark 1:38-42). He fed thousands of hungry folk who had come to hear Him preach (Matt. 14:13-21; John 6:1-13). The apostle Paul encouraged the Church to follow the example of Christ (Rom. 12). The Church of Jesus Christ must help the needy in the name of Jesus (Matt. 25:31-46) We must teach and do all what the Lord has commanded (Matth. 28:20).

How do we proclaim the full Gospel of Word and Deed? We must begin by recognizing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When mission understands the meaning of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, she will not be satisfied with only leading individual souls to Christ and planting churches, but she will also seek to penetrate society with the message of Christ's kingship.

Reformed theology has always maintained that the Kingdom of God is not limited to the Church. It has also an important place in the world outside of the Church. H.N.

Ridderbos said:

"Christ's kingship is supreme above all. Where it prevails and is acknowledged, not only is the individual human being set free, but the whole pattern of life is changed: the curse of the demons and fear of hostile powers disappears. The change which Christianity brings about among peoples dominated by natural religions is a proof of the comprehensive, all-embracing significance of the Kingdom. It works not only outwardly as a mustard seed, but inwardly like leaven. It makes its way into the world with its redeeming power."

Our life is under the direction of Scripture and subject to Jesus Christ our Lord and King. We must not only be orthodox in our theology, but also in practice. When one has come in repentance and faith to Christ, a new lifestyle should be the result. This Christian lifestyle is characterized by hope, love, righteousness, holiness and justice. The world needs to see the redeemed life in action. God's elect cannot sit at ease, glad to know that they are in Christ and have the benefits of salvation, while the world all around is perishing and experiencing apocalyptic times.

*Note: This article was an eight part series published in Calvinist Contact between June and August, 1981. It was written by Reverend Johan D. Tangelder while he lived in the Philippines.*