

SOCIAL CONCERN AND EVANGELISM III

Reaching the Oppressed

Caesar Molebatsi

In discussing reaching the oppressed, I will center on those who are outside the church. Therefore, the terms *oppressed* and *suffering* are not referring to the suffering church in areas such as the Eastern bloc countries. Nor is *suffering* used to refer to the alleviation of human suffering as done by social workers. I will focus on those who are oppressed and suffering as a result of injustice perpetrated against them—where people have been rendered powerless by the powerful, poor by the wealthy, and without dignity by those who have not discovered the source of their own humanity.

These situations are generally contexts in which the church already exists. All too frequently, they are contexts in which the church is collaborating with the same powers which are responsible for the oppression.

We will look at what it means for evangelicals to engage in evangelism and mission among the oppressed. In order to do this, we need to define *oppression* and identify some of the major issues at hand. In the light of this, we need to ask the question: *What is the challenge to us as evangelists?*

Oppression and the Gospel

Oppression is the denial of rights, movement, self-expression, and self-fulfillment by those who have the power to do so. Oppression involves subjection and persecution by the unjust, or tyrannical use of force or authority.

From such a description, it is evident that the twentieth century is extremely oppressive! And when oppression has its moorings in religious traditions, evangelism and mission is even more difficult. We have seen this in church histories around the world, and we continue to see it today. South Africa is a case in point. A careful reading of the critiques which have come out of South Africa—such as the “Kairos Document” and the “Evangelical Witness in South Africa” (EWISA) document—clearly demonstrate the church is not only supportive of oppressive systems, but at times is an instigator and perpetrator of such evil. As a result, the credibility of these churches is severely undermined and mission and evangelism becomes impotent—a gospel empty of Good News. The gospel becomes an “oppressed gospel,” instead of being a gospel *for* the oppressed.

Oppression is found on all levels: political, economic, and social. It is manifested

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in relationships between the establishment and the people; the rich and the poor; the management and the union; the older generation and the youth; between male and female; the disabled and the physically fit; the acceptable and the outcasts; the church leadership and the laity.

There are two familiar faces of oppression. The one is helpless, hopeless, powerless, and shelterless. We see this in the Vietnamese “boat people” and the Mozambican refugees. These people have little strength to champion their cause.

The other face of oppression is militant, angry, and often bitter. These people say, “You have pushed us too far, and you will push us no further!” We see this face among the South African blacks and trade unionists, as well as in the Philippines. They have decided to take their destiny into their own hands.

These people have been sinned against on the basis of factors in which they had no choice (e.g., education, sex, color, ethnic or religious background). They become victims, suffering the consequences of the oppressors’ designs.

One of the consequences of oppression is poverty. Though not all poverty is a result of oppression, there is an undeniable link between abject poverty and economic oppression. There is no doubt that the poverty in South Africa is planned poverty—it is no accident. Abject poverty refers to the approximately one billion people who live on less than \$100 a year. Evangelicals need to be aware of this startling fact if they are to participate in the bringing of “Good News to the poor.” Evangelists, whether they are from the First World or the Two-Thirds World, need to recognize they may well be perceived by the poor as being part of the oppressive and exploitative forces.

Evangelicals and the Gospel

There are two central factors which lie at the heart of the evangelicals’ struggle with evangelism and mission among the oppressed:

1. When the evangelical church *supports oppressive structures*, they are seen as ambassadors of the oppressor, rather than as ambassadors of Christ. The evangelist or missionary represents the very problem that the oppressed would like to eradicate. Therefore, the message the evangelist brings cannot be seen as coming out of love.
2. We have not clearly understood that *concern for the oppressed* was always a critical dimension of God’s dealing with his creation.

The biblical concept of *shalom* is “wholeness, which includes the ideas of uninjuredness, totality or completeness, well-being, prosperity, harmony, and having a common will and a mutual responsibility” (Metzler), and “harmony with neighbors, justice, economic equality, and spiritual integrity” (Kraybill). Jesus’ understanding of his own mission was, “He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). The church and its mission needs to be seen clearly as having its source in such a God, as working out the same agenda, and as proclaiming the same message. Then the gospel will truly be seen as Good News for the oppressed.

When we choose to be faithful to such a call, it becomes clear that the focus of the

Lord's concern is *people*. All of our systems and structures should serve God's concern for humankind, not suppress it. It is the job of the evangelist and the missionary to address all forms of oppression—spiritual and structural—which hinder the wholeness which the Lord offers. We cannot be silent about evil structures if our message is Good News to the poor.

A thoroughly contextual gospel will give people a sense of dignity and a hope that their humanity will be redeemed. When context plays a key role in determining the things from which individuals must repent, then the evil in that society—including the oppressive structures or persons—will be identified. Faith in the Lord Jesus then leads to a realization of the ability of the Cross of Christ to bring change and redemption.

This is where hope lies. The Good News touches people in their individual situations of pain, suffering, and oppression. Redemption is transforming, because no area of a person's life is left untouched. When people have this hope, the gospel affirms them and gives them the ability and power to move forward, and the Holy Spirit gives the courage needed to do so.

If the gospel is contextual, it will be transforming; and, if it is transforming, then it will be empowering. It is not possible to impart an empowering gospel which is not contextual. We make transformation a mockery if we think it can occur apart from the context. When people recognize God's concern is holistic and that we are yoke-fellows with Jesus (Matthew 11:29), they are given a reason to believe in the things of the kingdom of God.

The Challenge to the Bearers of Good News

The kingdom of God is *his* kingdom, *his* rule, *his* authority. The kingdom deals with the future in that we will only experience the fullness of the kingdom when the King returns. But the kingdom also has a present dimension which we experience and participate in now. The kingdom's values are consistent with the character of the King, who cries, "For I, the Lord, love justice" (Isaiah 61:8).

"Of prime importance is Jesus' conviction that the kingdom is for the poor, and that the arrival of the kingdom is the beginning of a radical reversal in the world order, a restoration of justice." This does not mean those who are not poor are excluded from the kingdom. Rather, it tells us something of the *nature* of the kingdom. In the same way, the concept of the "preferential option for the poor," which came out of the Catholic Puebla Conference, does not mean there is no hope for the wealthy. On the contrary, it shows that our message in the mission and evangelism of the powerful is *determined by* what the Good News is for the poor.

There are six guiding principles for evangelicals as they take up the challenge of reaching the oppressed:

1. Our message must come out of a heart committed to the one thing most oppressed people desire: Justice.
2. We must never allow strategy to triumph over theology. The concern for growth, numbers, and results often leads to a lack of integrity to the gospel and unfaithfulness to the true biblical mandate.
3. We must never change our message during a crisis because when the crisis is over, we will have no message. One of the Chinese words for *crisis* is a combination of two words meaning "danger" and "opportunity."
4. Our evangelism and mission need to be incarnational if they are to be authentic. If God is on the side of justice, then our message and our lives need to reflect this.

5. We need to do a social analysis. This is essential if we are contextual (transforming and empowering) and it enables us to take a clear biblical stand when challenges arise.
6. It must be clear that we serve only one Master—the Lord. We have primary allegiance to only one King. In mission and evangelism, we proclaim freedom from tyranny and oppression on earth. Our cry is a political cry: the proclamation of a new King!

It is easy to bypass evangelizing the oppressed because of their resistance to the gospel. We need to remember that they are part of the whole world to which the whole gospel must be preached.

(VINAY SAMUEL, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 293)

Join me as we further explore the theme of seeing people through the eyes of Jesus. Our video presentation will share three stories of people who responded to human need around them, and describe what it means in practice to see people through the eyes of Jesus:

VIDEO PRESENTATION

Seeing People Through the Eyes of Jesus

Producers: Mary Fairbrother, Andrew Raynor,
Steve Bynon, Mark Townsend and
Duncan Murdoch

Vinay Samuel: To see people through the eyes of Jesus is to visualize how Jesus viewed people he ministered to, responding to their physical, social needs, and enabling them to enter into a personal relationship with God.

Jesus went up into the hills and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing him the blind, the lame, the crippled, and the dumb. They were laid at his feet and he healed them. The people were amazed, and praised the God of Israel. Seeing the crowd was hungry, Jesus was filled with compassion; and calling his disciples to him, he told them to feed the people.

Bishop Michael Lazario: Jesus' answer to the multitude was quite clear. He told his disciples to feed them. The preaching of the gospel goes hand in hand with the service of our fellow human beings.

Narrator: India! A rich country with many poor people. It has a deep religious awareness, and a great respect for family and community life. It has "Silicon valleys"; a larger film industry than Hollywood; and yet millions live in poverty, bonded labor, and illiteracy.

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