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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**THE CHRISTIAN'S RAZOR EDGE: SOCIAL ACTION IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2009
October, 2009
Indianapolis, IN**

The Christian's Razor Edge: Social Action in the Context of the Great Commission

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Recently a Midwestern church was struggling about whether or not their missions department would fund our urban ministry. Their decision hinged upon a critical deciding factor: "Was Trinity Christian Community really a mission organization?" To them the bottom line was evangelistic outreach. Their litmus test for true missional thinking was the Great Commission.

Found in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus says: "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.""

The church's concern was the amount of social action we performed versus the number of souls we were winning to Christ. "Unless a mission is evangelistic," they reasoned, "it is not truly missional." But is this really true?

Just a few chapters earlier Matthew quotes Jesus as saying:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Clearly Jesus placed strong emphasis on social action. In this passage alone he stresses the importance of feeding the poor, embracing the alienated, clothing the destitute, healing the sick and visiting the prisoner. The theme of caring for those in need resonates throughout all of scripture and reflects God's heart.

One church told us that they loved our heart for the poor but thought we were a little heavy on the "Jesus" stuff. Observing our youth group, Sunday service and community

outreach, they found us to be too evangelistic. Unlike the Midwestern church, their view of good missions was social action.

Thus a dichotomy exists within modern missional thinking, something to which I refer as the Christian's Razor Edge. On one side lies a desire to see souls won for Christ, a personal Christianity that is based upon the individual and healthy spiritual growth. On the other lies a desire to better the lives of those in bondage to poverty, addiction, abuse and other social ills, a more corporate focus upon those teachings of Jesus about people in need. Between them lies a very fine line for the helping professional, one we walk carefully if we desire to stay true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

My personal journey on this Razor Edge happened in three stages.

I grew up in the deep south, in the City of New Orleans, during the 1960's and 70's. It was a time of civil unrest and racial strife. My father, a Presbyterian Minister, was a social activist as well as an evangelist. At the time this was an unlikely combination.

Rather than understand a new paradigm was developing, many questioned my father's sanity. What kind of pastor would reject a safe, comfortable pastorate in the suburbs to work with the poor and disenfranchised in the inner city? After seeing the tremendous injustices, however, my father felt God's calling clearly and sacrificed much in order to radically serve Jesus in a very difficult time and place.

As a result of his work, and that of others like him, the concepts of Christian Community Development were developed and the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) became the standard bearer for a movement that has since swept the country. What was once innovative, visionary and even disturbing, has subsequently become a set of established principles followed by practitioners of faith-based community development throughout the world.

In my late teens, having sneaked backstage at a U2 concert, I had the opportunity to speak to a hero of mine, Bono. Proudly I told him that I attended a Christian college and asked him for life advice. He suggested that I stop being so typically American, separating the secular and the sacred into two distinct arenas and start recognizing that it all belongs to God and is all His concern. Once the shame of being chastised by my idol dissipated I began to consider his words carefully.

Somehow, during the 20th century, we divided the world into two camps, that which is sacred and that which is secular. The sacred world belongs to the faith-based institutions and has become increasingly personal. We talk in terms of a "personal walk with Christ", "a personal savior", "personal quiet time", etc. and eschew the corporate aspects of our faith, i.e. caring for the poor, the prisoner, the alien, the widow and the orphans. Meanwhile the corporate or social aspects of our faith have become professionalized and relegated to social service agencies. We avoid the "social gospel" because we equate it with liberation theology and the secular world.

The orphanages, colleges and social movements birthed and rooted in the church are now seen as part of the secular world. Meanwhile, one's walk with Christ and the process of sanctification are highly personal and internal. Certainly, as Bono would have me understand, scripture does not bolster this argument.

Finally, in my mid 30's, now a successful psychotherapist, author and radio talk show host, I was invited to join Campus Crusade for Christ at an event for potential donors. My success had drawn the attention of a nationwide Christian ministry and I found myself in the midst of some very wealthy and influential evangelical Christians. With the exception of the company, among whom I felt quite privileged to be counted, I remember little about the weekend until Bill Bright stood to speak. He challenged us to join him in a 40 day fast. I took that challenge.

In the midst of my 40 days, I began to hear God calling my family and I back to the inner city. The board of directors for the ministry founded by my father was looking for a director and called me to consider the job. Fortunately my wife heard the call as well.

We packed our home and young children, leaving the trappings of success and moved to New Orleans where we now live. Our current neighborhood is a far cry from the successful, mostly white, upper middle class suburb in the second wealthiest county of the United States where we previously lived. All the things that defined us as successful are now memories as we work to better the lives of those with little hope and few resources. And I recognize God's hand at work, helping me understand those who are successful and wealthy, only to bring me back to my roots here in Hollygrove, the neighborhood where I grew up and now serve.

Success in America often means moving away from those in need. As the resources (money, ideas, vision, etc.) move from our city centers we relegate those left behind to recreate the paths to success with which we are familiar. As success breeds success, hopelessness tends to propagate hopelessness. Our walk with Christ should never cause us to avoid those in the greatest need, in fact it should compel us to seek them and nurture them to success. I had forgotten this reality in my quest for success and upward mobility.

The brother of Jesus wrote: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). The modern, American church has worked diligently to help Christians keep themselves from being polluted by the world. In the process, however, we have drifted from the other half of the mission, looking after those who need help. According to James and Jesus, there are two parts to the work we must do as Believers, one internal and the other external.

I have suggested to countless short-term mission students and interns that our souls are like cups. As we grow more like Jesus, He fills our cups with the fruits of the spirit, the process of sanctification. The overflow "drips" on those around us. If we are walking with the poor and

disenfranchised, we share our abundance with them. However, if we insulate ourselves in a desire to keep from being polluted by the world, we withhold the wonderful blessings intended by our Heavenly Father to flow from us to a hurting world.

Walking with Christ requires that we balance between personal piety and corporate concern. It is precarious, perched between our personal need for Christ and our call to care for others. If we do not grow in our faith, taking time to nurture our inner spiritual life, we will become dry, burned out husks. If our faith, however, does not express itself in activity on behalf of the vulnerable we are hoarding valuable gifts and the Kingdom does not grow.

Both foci, inward and outward, are interdependent. As helping professionals, it is especially to carefully balance between the two. One fills us and the other empties us. This is what God our Father desires from us, walking carefully the Christian's Razor Edge.

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