



The gospel and the poor

A trend in missions

The above title appears over the leading editorial of the Feb. 2, 1981 issue of *Getrouw*, the Dutch monthly publication of the International Council of Christian Churches of which Rev. J. C. Maris is secretary. The article begins by comparing two unusually important missionary conferences, both of which were concerned with the subject "the gospel and the poor." The first was the World Mission and Evangelism Conference (a division of the World Council of Churches) held last May at Melbourne, Australia; the second was a consultation for world evangelization of "new evangelicals" (associated with Billy Graham) held a month later at Pattaya, Thailand. The *Getrouw* article observes that the second ("evangelical") conference, as also other recent international conferences such as that of the World alliance of Baptists and the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, all clearly show by their reports that they are influenced by the World Council of Churches and are more or less moving in the same direction. Is this direction right or wrong? That question urgently demands our attention.

The social gospel

What is the course charted at Melbourne? It is, in short, that of the "Social Gospel." As men neglect the spiritual content of the Bible, the Kingdom of God is regarded as a social order to be realized by people, an ideal human society. Accordingly, a great deal of attention is focused on the position of the poor, the oppressed, the "third world," etc.

It has long been more or less common to charge the church or Christendom with responsibility for the faults of society. "The church has failed," and that is the reason for the rise of socialism and communism. This popular charge, repeated on all sides for many years has lately been accepted by many church leaders, especially those in the ecumenical movement. The World Council of Churches which is unable to give a clear, united testimony about the Bible and its content, does assume the right to speak with pretended Biblical authority regarding social and political matters (although it must refrain from criticizing international communism). There must be no obedient submission to what the Bible says about man's relationship to God; but there must be admonitions about the relationships of man to man, or, more correctly, of one group or class to another.

"Evangelicals" follow

In opposition to this "horizontalist" movement it must be maintained that anyone who does not take the first table of the law — love to God — seriously, cannot observe the second table — love to his neighbor. Although this principle is theoretically accepted by orthodox believers, one gets the impression that many have let themselves be intimidated by this constantly reiterated criticism of the Church and therefore hasten to do something about the social needs. Presumably such efforts will again make the Church a little more "credible" with the world. There is something halfhearted in this attitude. The misery of the world is so encompassing that our whole existence as church and the whole of our lives might have to be exhausted in social action if this were indeed the divinely assigned calling of the church. If, however, the church of Christ has a completely different kind of calling in the middle of the world, it will, especially now, earnestly have to respond to that.

A different calling

In order to exclude all misunderstanding, let it be immediately added that this calling does not exclude, but includes the neighbor, the fellow-man. But it involves the totality of God's demands

and promises and of man's material and spiritual needs, temporal and eternal. No right-thinking Christian will assert that we according to our ability have fulfilled this calling. There is, indeed, all along the line a frightful deficiency. The question, however, is whether this deficiency is supplied by Melbourne, — in other words, whether this and similar movements are in accord with the Word of God. By choosing the prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come" as its theme this conference obliged itself to do justice to the Biblical content of the Kingdom of God. This entails listening to what the Bible says about it. An international conference long prepared and divided into study groups to discuss the meaning of this subject, ought to have come with Biblically authoritative conclusions. Regrettably, there was simply no hint of such sound Biblical study. A text might occasionally be cited, but its context was scarcely noticed. This is a serious business. If the ecumenical movement were moving in a true course it would have given a clear Biblical testimony. How that would have appealed to orthodox churches and confessors! That it was not able, in a well-prepared international conference of capable theologians, to do this, suggests that it tried to draw from the Bible certain social views which it first attributed to it. And even in this there was no unanimity. And the worst of the whole business is that the "social gospel," so constructed, is not the genuine gospel. It is no gospel at all.

A false gospel

If it is no "gospel," what is it? I met a student who, during a World Council meeting, attended an ecumenical church service led by one of the leaders of the World Council. I asked her whether it had been an edifying service, but she answered, *"It only made me tired and fearful. As young people we're loaded down with the burdens and needs of the whole world with the charge to do something about them quickly and effectively as possible. But — what can we really do?"*

It is to be feared that this characterizes the whole social perversion of the gospel. A new yoke is placed upon people which inevitably resembles that of the scribes and Pharisees of whom Jesus said that they lay upon people unbearable burdens, while they themselves do not stick out a finger to help them carry them (Matthew. 23:4).

The writer then called attention to the way in which the Liberal Tubingen Professor Kaseman reportedly castigated both orthodox and liberation theologians saying that the hour of the western way of living had struck and that the critics and rebels had rightly seen this. Thus the churches of the western world were all lumped together. That is not surprising if we remember that in these circles the church is here "for the world." Other speakers hammered on the same anvil. The church must identify itself with the poor. The Japanese Koyama spoke of the crucified Christ who is a challenge to the might of the world: *"The wounds of Jesus heal the wounds of the world."* But it was no biblical theology.

Raymond Fung (Hong Kong) stated:

*It is no wonder that the poor, who every day experience unjust and unworthy treatment care not a whit for our gospel preaching. A middle class church that is an island in a sea of factory workers and small farmers has no meaning, either theological or statistical. Let me finally — by way of recapitulation — state that preaching the gospel to the poor does not begin with bringing the poor to listen to God's Word. It does not begin with flooding whole states with Bible tracts and gospel songs. **It begins with God, or God's representatives, listening to the voice of the poor. This doesn't suggest much appreciation for the preaching of the gospel to the poor.***

(Matthew 11:5)

Focus on poverty

The pervasive line was that Melbourne made poverty a missionary issue. But — the poor of the world are for the most part outside of the reach of the church. And that, *"while the gospel emphatically announces itself as good news for the poor!"* Accordingly it was difficult, according to C. M. Boerma, in section I of the conference *"to come to an agreement about the real relation between poverty and the coming of the Kingdom. The Russians were absent from this section because according to their declaration, they know no poverty in their world."* There was much difference of opinion, even though people understood one another, in the accounts of the various

forms of poverty, poverty as hunger, as powerlessness, as cultural denigration, the poor as victims of racism, or of capitalistic exploitation, as refugees, as drug addicts, the poor as unemployed or without purpose. There was general agreement that all of these forms of poverty involved a process of slighting ("achterstelling," literally "putting behind"), poverty as a relational concept. The statement that followed was especially significant:

"Therefore there was little chance to discuss poverty as estrangement from God, which would have been appropriate in a missionary meeting, but in this framework would have introduced confusion."

One asks in amazement what we must think of a Christian missionary conference on the theme, "Thy Kingdom Come," in which the estrangement from God cannot even be brought up for discussion: This shows that neither the theme nor the poverty were discussed in a Biblically responsible manner.

In spite of this we were told that there was a *"clear agreement regarding God's preference for the poor."* The South African "black" theologian, Allan Boesak, stated that *"good news for the poor"* is by definition, bad news for the rich.¹

This was, stated in various ways, the tendency of Melbourne — God is on the side of the poor. Many "evangelicals" in the later conference at Pattaya (Thailand) were inclined to follow this track. But Professor Peter Beyerhaus (Tubingen) warned them and stated very clearly that the World Council propagated *"another gospel," "not that of Jesus Christ."*

Whose Kingdom?

We could drop the matter at this point if it were not for the fact that many orthodox confessors, despite objections of principle, are still obviously influenced by such discussions and plead that the Church busy itself more than it has done with social and political questions.

Psychologically, this is understandable. People feel themselves more or less guilty because the Church is ever and again criticized as having failed. It should have brought better conditions, a better world. Bodies such as the World Council of Churches and the whole new theology tell us that *this* is the Kingdom of God. We know that the Scripture teaches something quite different. But then we must also see clearly that a faulty rendition of God's Words cannot possibly lead in the proper course. One cannot with impunity pervert the salvation of Christ into a social improvement aiming at inter-human earthly relationships. The Kingdom of God is not established by us men. It is the kingship of God, coming near in Jesus Christ, and extending itself in the way of personal rebirth (John 3) and faith, by which men willingly and heartily submit to the Eternal King. A world that rejects this Kingdom will try in vain to achieve an ideal society on earth, even with the help of ostensibly Biblical catch-words. This is the tragedy of the World Council of Churches and of all social-political action which has this root-age. It is too superficial to make "the church" or "Christendom" responsible for all kinds of world-misery — unless one is referring to churches and Christians who have en masse turned away from the Word of God. But then there would have to be a repentant return to that Word, and of that there was no trace in Melbourne. The many charges against the church and Christendom assume that the church is called and proposes to bring about a better world — without "conversion." And it has no power to do that, even if it were only because "the world" refuses to submit to God's order, and continues on its way away from God.

It is vain to attempt healing where there is no proper diagnosis. Now the impression is given that "poverty" in social and political respect is the real illness, and that the Bible teaches this. And furthermore, that in one way or another, the social "structures" and institutions, in short, the whole organization of society, must radically change in order to get a healthy society. But this has often been proposed and attempted in the course of the centuries and the fact that it has never succeeded should move us to reflection.

The real illness and its remedy

The malady is much deeper. "Poverty" is only one of the symptoms. Why should what calls itself a world missions conference not deal with the whole complex of sins and abuses pointed out in the

Bible? Christ said that these *proceed from the heart* (Matthew 15:19). Man has become a sinner. That means, among other things, that he puts himself in the center instead of God — he is egocentric, egotistic. He seeks himself and his own (supposed) advantage, if necessary at the expense of others. Throughout history every attempt at world improvement has run aground on that.

Be a "structure" ever so perfect, its results will be disappointing if people are not renewed. On the other hand we will, even with very imperfect social institutions, see surprising results if the people have truly become "new." And this is the fruit only of the preaching of the gospel, through the power of Christ's Spirit — exactly what Melbourne overlooks. It is tragic that people thus neglect the one thing necessary, to spend much time and money on considerations that do not touch the heart of the problem and will do no good.

Are we then indifferent to the need and misery of the world? Far from it! But "poverty" is only a tip of the iceberg in the cold sea of human misery. One who knows his Bible and takes it seriously can hardly be optimistic about the future of mankind. And this is no fatalism, it is the obverse side and consequence of a steadily progressing falling away from God and His ordinances.

In the middle of this world the church of Christ stands with the summons to repentance and faith. And exactly for that reason it is hated. But there is no substitute for the one, God-given medicine. That the missionary labors of the church are accompanied with all possible material help is well-known. We may well recall that exactly Christian missions have first practiced that. And when it comes to offering help to the miserable, the followers of their Merciful High Priest Jesus Christ are certainly not backward. One who himself in the full spiritual meaning of the word has *experienced* mercy will be driven thereby to *show* mercy to others both near-by and far away. But a Christendom that ignores the only genuine salvation, and in its own strength tries to take on the problems of the world is like the legendary Baron Von Munchhausen who tried to lift himself out of the swamp by his own hair.

This remarkably perceptive analysis of much present "missionary" thinking which I rather freely translated, invites our attention, the more as we see increasing indications of the same humanistic and materialistic perversions of the gospel in our churches, schools and missions. The shift of attention from evangelism to world relief and world "hunger" programs, talk of "restructuring" societies, political pressures in favor of El Salvador guerillas, etc. worry many thoughtful church members. We may well ponder the warning and profit by the suggested correction of *Getrouw's* editorial.

Peter De Jong

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¹ In this connection Arend De Graaf writing in the Australian Reformed magazine, *Trowel and Sword* of August 1980 in one of a series of articles referring to this Melbourne meeting called attention to the pervasive, often strident, and at times malicious caricature of missions that prevailed at the conference. One "Aboriginal woman ... boldly stated that 'the only gospel the churches ever brought her people is a gospel (?) of murder, plunder and poverty' and Australia's churches were doing this still today." Among such strident speakers De Graaf mentions especially:

There was the angry voice of the Kampen graduate, Dr. Allan Boesak, Coloured South African, now student pastor in Cape Town. "The White Church conspires together with the white Caesar to oppress and to kill. Good News for the Oppressed can only be good if it is Bad News for the Oppressors! And the Day of reckoning is coming fast!" (i.e. the day of civil war). And this minister serves the Dutch Reformed Mission(!) Church!

It seems especially significant that Dr. Boesak, who took such a prominent role at Melbourne has in the past months been the "inaugural lecturer" for Calvin College's new Multi-Cultural Lectureship Program (See Agenda 1981 for the CRC synod, p. 32). The report of the synodical Race Committee (p. 230) also said of him, "The presence of Dr. Allan Boesak at Calvin during this school year is a rich resource for the CRC; SCORR has been delighted to learn from him, and to cooperate with the college in hosting a day of dialogue between Dr. Boesak and Black church leaders from across the country."