



Transcriptions

Facing the Crisis of Human Need

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Annotation: *National Association of Evangelicals, National Conference, Orlando, FL, March 1983.* Ted Ward observes that evangelicals are moving out of the age of anxiety (wars over matters of denominational and theological difference) into a broader understanding of the meaning of the gospel—what the gospel means for the here and now of the human condition. Evangelicals, he says, are becoming more aware of their social responsibility.



The World Relief Corporation invited me to present this luncheon speech as part of the program today with its focus on “Change your World” and the hope, I suspect, was that I would add something of a Third World perspective, a whole world view of the gospel, at least from American perspective as we are involved, in many ways, in relief and development in that world. But, you know, in this particular part of the world you really can’t talk about the Third World without a great deal of semantic difficulty because in this State the first world is Disney World, the second world is Sea World, and the third world is Circus World.

When invited, my first inclination was to develop a sort of global tour of conditions and situations in which we find ourselves, as Christians today—to provide a kind of a updating of our world perspective. We would probably start with Central America and refer to Guatemala and Costa Rica where ambiguity and confusion reign; move to Nicaragua and El Salvador and Panama where the old and simplistic models of “good guys” and “bad guys” no longer work; move to the horn of Africa, then much in the attention of relief and development activities among Christians lately where

Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea are caught up in desperate circumstances and where we find that even Christian efforts, valiant as they are, are sometimes themselves victimized and become political tools against justice and human dignity. And we could move to Southeast Asia where the now long-lasting aftermath of a tragic war persists with destabilization and human suffering which is unmeasureable.

But after reflecting on that I thought, no, that may contribute to the problem because it is quite possible that one of our greatest difficulties today is we know too much about too much and, because of that, we may seem impotent and useless. So I decided to deal in what I see as a Christian layman a very, very, exciting moment in the development of evangelical Christianity in the twentieth century; because as I see it, after decades of anxiety and resistance out of a well-known thoroughly argued suspicion of anything that smacks of social action, evangelical Christians find themselves today in the forefront of a concern for worldwide relief and development. What does it mean? Does it mean that God has changed the rules by which the gospel is represented to the world? Hardly. Does it mean that there are new problems in the world that require a Christian perspective of a new dimension? In some ways this is true but it's not adequate to explain all that's happening. Maybe evangelical Christianity is beginning to forget the centrality of God's redemptive actions toward humankind. Indeed, no! As I see it, just the opposite.

After more than a half century of hair-splitting, the evangelical community is coming together around the substance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The wholeness of the gospel was never well represented by any of the common slogans. Indeed, Jesus saves, but the word saves is loaded. It is a huge word embracing in its understated simplicity a range of redemptive processes and activities in which God, through his people, extends himself continuously in Creation to the very fulfillments in heaven. For evangelicals, the question has been what will you do with Jesus. The centerpiece of the redemptive acts of God has been the person and the work of Jesus Christ. Thus, the prime focus has been on the cross and the resurrection "for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." For evangelicals, the answer has been salvation by faith in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank God, none of this has changed.

But what has changed is the breadth of our consciousness of what the gospel means for the here and now of human condition. Evangelicals are moving out of their age of anxiety into a fulfillment of a broader meaning of the gospel. It is becoming clear that a stubborn defense of a skimpy definition of the gospel is less effectual than a joyous embrace of the ever-enlarging realities of the gracious God who cares about people.

In the recent polls, some of you likely read in *Evangelical Newsletter* in January '57 that evangelical letters were polled and the largest single trend noted was in the increasing positive response to the matter of the social responsibility of evangelical Christians. Brothers and sisters, bedrock of the Word of God underlies this new awareness. It is no less committed to the revealed truth than was John the Baptist. When he sought words to express what God was doing through Christ, the Redeemer, he reached his arms wide and embraced both judgment and transformation. He identified the Messiah with the fulfillment of the long-term promises of the Old Testament as well as with a then-there social reform theme. In no way was John's practicality set aside by Jesus, himself.

In Luke's 4th chapter, an experience is reported which must surely rate as one of a half-dozen most dramatic moments in Scripture. Jesus revealed his true identity in his hometown by reading

from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” Then with a curious attention of that whole community upon him He closed the scroll, handed it to the synagogue attendant, deliberately sat down back among them, no longer standing above, and said, today, today, not some day, now; not just in heaven; me, here with you in this place from here outward and onward. Today this Scripture is fulfilled. Evangelicals are becoming highly conscious that our Lord said, today, today is fulfilled. We are in the fulfillment. It is ongoing. Not some day, somehow, but us, with him, now—here, us, now.

So in 1983 in Orlando, the theme is Change your World. Not long ago, such an expansive and demanding challenge might have fallen on deaf ears among many evangelicals. Evangelicals have never lacked respect for the Old Testament, but we have spent a whole lot of energy on the technology questions of Creation and the technology questions of the end times as if these sorts of mechanical questions were somehow central to our faith. Just how did he do it? Just how will he do it? What techniques? What timetable? These questions are not central to our faith. The central question is that God did it and God will fulfill it. But because of our internal schisms and debates over technology, we’ve put so much scholarly effort and writing-time into eschatology that crucial elements of the Word have been neglected.

When did you hear last a sermon on Isaiah 58 where even today the evangelical church that preaches this “favorable year of the Lord” mentioned by our Lord, from Isaiah 61, with the same sort of fervor that it preaches the Second coming? The “favorable year of the Lord” is a here and now matter and it has never meant anything other than the requirement for periodic social reform including, indeed centering on, the just God’s insistence that unfair balances in property, economic matters, and in social justice be redressed. The 25th chapter of Leviticus is still in your Bible and our Lord insists that it be included in our definitions of righteousness. God is not honored when equity is crowded out by greed and pride. No, evangelical Christianity, as a whole, seems still not quite ready to take seriously the whole of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But now, in 1983, we can at least talk about these matters without breaking fellowship. Thank God his gospel is still unfolding and we are part of the action. It’s a great time to be alive. We celebrate the Lordship of Christ and, thus, have less inclination to fight with each other.

So we begin to see some additional meaning in some of the standard texts. Take the three stories of the end times in Matthew 25, for example. I think it’s finally getting through. Our Lord said that some people of faith are foolish. In his story of the ten women who awaited the bridegroom he symbolized the whole of the believing Christendom. There they were, all ten alike in that they had faith. Every one of them agreed that the bridegroom was on his way and that they should be there to greet him. No argument among them on these matters. But five had convinced themselves that their days of preparation and concern for sustaining a viable contact with the darkened world around them were over. Their faith in the soon return might seem to be commendable. Our Lord called it foolish, not commendable, not of great faith, just plain foolish. Wisdom was in the five who took the longer view. With no less faith in the ultimate fulfillment, they took a firm hold on the here and now. They burdened themselves, as it were, with an oil supply for the long haul. Has there ever been a moment of history when this symbolism has had greater meaning? Wise, our Lord said. Wise, our Lord called them. They took a longer view; engaged themselves in the world of immediate realities.

In the second story in this chapter of the three servants who were entrusted with the master's eight talents, yet another truth is emerging for our times. The parable has always been read sequentially from the top to bottom, not unreasonable in itself, but it does tend to overemphasize that first servant, the one who received the five talents. Indeed, he had invested wisely and he doubled the amount. But the second servant had doubled his two talents and, as a matter of fact, received exactly the same words of commendation, exactly the same words, no difference. The standards of performance and expectation were the same and the consequence was the same. Comparing these two with the incompetent third servant, we see the major distinction that the story attempts to make. Even though the master had recognized that this fellow was not too likely to be productive, he hadn't ruled him out. He, too, got a chance to invest for the master, but he blew it, or rather he sat on it. Silver eggs don't hatch. All three were entrusted with a portion of the riches of the master. All had comparable opportunities to do well. The identical reward awaited all three regardless of the amount with which they started. Even so it is today among churches in this country, much blessed by God, but some of us are trying to hatch silver eggs.

And now a thought for our time. God is entrusting some of the larger organizations, even parachurch organizations, some of them supersized, to invest that which is being taken away from the inactive silver-sitters. It isn't necessary to name names, but the people of God have been engaged for some time in acting out this very scene. And some large but ineffectual affiliations are finding that their people are putting support in the more productive hands. But watch out! These shifted resources, represented by the one talent that was given to the man who then had ten, this one talent is not a pay-off from a grateful master. Such a reallocation is simply a transfer from less to more productive handlers. The first servant in the parable is not becoming the richest; he simply is being given increased responsibility. His task is becoming more demanding. He, too, will be in trouble if he should become self-satisfied, a wastrel, or a mishandler of resources. People in organizations should read this parable soberly, not only from top to bottom, but also from bottom to top and be especially aware of the danger of self-congratulation. Especially in the relief and development field, there are profound hazards both in pride and in finding oneself commanding the use of more money than is justified.

The third of the illustrations in Matthew 25 is not identified as a parable or an analogy; it reads more like a declaration of what will, in fact, take place. The righteous judge will bring the nations before him in a time of crisp judgment. The analogy of dividing sheep from goats is used to illustrate the precision of the criterion used by the judge. Now not everyone can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat; city folks have a little extra difficulty. We are not all farmers. But a sheep can tell and a goat can tell and an experienced shepherd can tell. That's the point. The judge is an experienced shepherd. The judgment is on the basis of an intrinsic characteristic: he knows you either is or you ain't a sheep. The judge doesn't have to interrogate each one in turn to see if they've been faithful, or if they've been productive, or if they've been clean, or sanctified, or whatever. They either are or aren't sheep.

The sense of profound curiosity even ignorance that pervades this story centers on two urgent lessons: first, the sheep were not preoccupied about having done the things that sheep do. They were simply sheep. And second, the goats claimed to be willing to behave like sheep. They would have done the things of the sheep nature, but they wouldn't want to do them unless they were sure that such deeds would count in the presumed record books of the judge.

Regardless of where this prophecy fits in your eschatological timetable, its profound moral message cannot be stilled. The justice of God ultimately centers on the nature of the creature. Untransformed nature, goat nature, is at enmity with God, no matter how willing to be counted as the doer of a good deed. The crucial issue is not the deed, but the new nature, the transformation here from goat to sheep as in Ephesians 2.

But no sermon on [Matthew 25] dare stop here. The complacency and self-satisfied status before God that plagues evangelicalism simply must be challenged. The sad fact is inescapable that many Christians today, though they claim the status of sheep, sound and act a lot more like goats. They should thank the merciful God that the ultimate judgment was on the basis of being reborn as a sheep, not on the basis of whether or not they adopt sheep behavior. You see, in this story, after the sheep were lined up on one side because of their sheep-ness, then the logic of this criterion is announced by the judge: “For I was hungry, you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, you invited me in; naked, you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; and I was in prison and you came to me.”

Now it’s hard to imagine today’s self-congratulating Christians responding the way these sheep responded: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” Now you would think that they’d be smart enough to keep their mouths shut. Maybe they don’t get the point. Why would they ask? It’s clear they have been judged to be the good guys; why don’t they leave it at that? No, it’s in the sheep nature to be incredibly open and honest. The sheep are on the good side, not because of what they were doing deliberately, but because of what they were doing naturally, not cleverly or manipulatively, not in order to gain a hearing in order to do something else. They were doing these things out of their transformed nature in spiritual application—the behaviors of their transformed nature, thus, the fruit of the Spirit.

Now, on the other hand, it’s the goats who had the technical criterion of doing it for Jesus. Sure, they said, we would have done those things if we’d been aware that we were doing them for you. Notice the reasoning that the goats use in their own defense, “Lord, when did we see you hungry?” The clear implication is that if they are concerned, that they are concerned about being noticed. They’re anxious to do good when it counts. Just who do you think that sounds like?

Do not blunt this moral truth with eschatological debates about who the nations in this story represent or to whom “the brothers of mine,” the judge refers to, may refer. The moral message is there and it’s clear enough. Start there. At the heart of it Matthew 25, just as surely as Matthew 5 through 7, tells us of the value system of the kingdom, and this is the kingdom of the redeemed and it must become our value system. We simply must be about the business of fulfilling the transformed nature in Christ, the sheep-ness of our new nature, which causes us to do the works of compassion and concern without first looking over our shoulder to see if Jesus is taking notes.

As John Guest just reminded us, our business is evangelizing and that requires several kinds of action: involvement with people in their real context even as our Lord was. Being more faithful to our transformed nature would help answer some of our bickering and fretting about whether or not Christians can work alongside the unredeemed in humanitarian projects, about whether Christian agencies can co-operate in national- and government-funded development activities, and whether individual Christians are somehow out of the will of God when they are, quote, “unequally yoked to unbelievers.” We should be very careful how we use these texts. It is an intensively interdependent

world. It makes no sense for Christians to remain aloof and suspicious. Christians can act freely and securely as long as they do so with purity of motive and sensitive awareness of the needs and the ultimate welfare of others. This is in the nature of the sheep.

Nehemiah, that great leader of rehabilitation and development of the Old Testament, provides some startling clues that God's way is not limited to the restrictive conservatism that has mired response to a needy world in the past. For one thing, we note that Nehemiah's vision for a restored Jerusalem caused him to lay claims on secular resources right from the beginning. Using his God-given involvement with the foreign king, he boldly asked for building materials, international documents, and authorization for his own leave of absence. And that king, by no means a man of God, gave him even more than Nehemiah had asked for. In Nehemiah's reflection, ". . . because the good hand of God was on me."

Nehemiah's steps of relief and rehabilitation were carried out with sensitive concern for the emergence of leadership within that pitiful community of Jerusalem. He was careful not to embarrass. He even inspected the desolation after dark, careful to identify himself within the perspective of the people of Jerusalem rather than as an outsider. Ultimately, he enunciated his position by saying, "You can see the bad situation that we are in." Consider those pronouns; not *I* can see *your* problem, or surely, *you* can see that if I'm going to help you, *I've* got a problem. But, no, a very, very Christian, *you* can see; I *know* you can see. I have *confidence* in your capacity to see. *You* can see the bad situation that *we* are in. Would that our ministries of helps could be couched in such a frame of reference. And then the action began in Jerusalem when the people of God together said, "Let us arise and build." So much is made of Nehemiah as if he were some kind of a clever manager. He was a responsive servant. Leader, yes, but first and foremost and through it all persistently, a servant faithful to God and responsive to people.

Even more startling to the evangelical is the careful analysis that lies ahead for you if you draw out the sequence in the book of Nehemiah: the apparent willingness to overlook spiritual blindness and deadness until some physical needs have been tended to may startle you. The sequence of events in the book and in Nehemiah's Jerusalem project does not constitute a holy formula and I would not suggest that that sequence is an invariable sequence; nor do I believe that the save 'em first logic that we find so often today is, itself, a sacred sequence. God's redemption knows no magic rituals. His involvement is with the whole of human need. Who can see anything less in the incarnation of Jesus Christ? As he encountered people of need, he allowed them to define their need and he went to work on it.

The clearest specific example of relief rehabilitation and development in the entire Bible is in the first nine chapters of Nehemiah. Nehemiah's own repentance and confession were, from the beginning, a crucial part of it (chapter 1). But for the people, as a whole, many other problems stood in the way of their spiritual aliveness until chapter 9. Read it carefully. "Prior even to their willingness to hear the Word of God," in chapter 8, they had safety and security needs, hunger and injustice. Nehemiah, in fact, invoked the first recorded revolution of the dispossessed and insisted upon land reform according to the principles of Jubilee; and you'll find that in chapter 5. Here, again, is that phrase "the favored year of the Lord" which our Lord identified with in Luke 4.

In the faith of what God has revealed to us in his Word, who is to say that Christians have no business being involved in such things as relief, rehabilitation, and development on large-scale or

small? Indeed, it is precisely because Christians have made such mealy-mouthed statements on matters of social justice and basic needs, that we have, in fact, confused the watching world as to the relevancy of the gospel.

Praise God, we have come to Orlando under the banner of Amos 5:24, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.” But, folks, be aware that Amos spoke this as a woe to those who were complacent in Zion. Are we too much at ease in Zion? American evangelicalism still is centered in the white middle class of an affluent society. Despite the economic depression of our day, evangelicals, as a whole, are still relatively well off. Look about you to note who and what we are here at the edge of Disney’s fantasy. We note the pain and terror of a troubled world, but do we feel it? With whom do we identify, with the oppressed or the oppressor—or worse, with nobody in particular? With whom did our Lord identify? The poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame.

Of all people, Christians don’t need to be told that helping other people makes you feel good. Helping and sharing fulfill one’s own human needs and this is good. God intends that we feel good about acts of kindness. In Nehemiah’s last chapter, we find him asking God three times to remember him for things he felt particularly good about. But when we do good deeds primarily because it makes us feel good, we become less than our Lord intended. Much of America’s largesse comes from wealth. Wealth brings obligations and allows for the privilege of sharing, but it encourages painless giving. Sacrificial giving, on the other hand, refers to the kindness that costs. The realities of human need are so great that to give in painless ways is actually dangerous.

Right under our noses, in our neighborhoods, in communities are hungry, jobless, cold, lonely, broken people and family problems all over the place. The old adage that “charity begins at home” reminds that the quality of giving relates, not only to the awareness of need, but to direct contact and the feeling one has for those who are in need.

A former Governor of this, my home State, Reubin Askew, not long ago challenged, “To claim to be a Christian or a Jew who loves God and neighbor and not take an active part in the formation of just social policies affecting those neighbors, would seem to deny the complete fulfillment of one’s faith”.

The responsibilities of stewardship weigh heavily upon us. Especially in a time of financial difficulty, unemployment, tightened belts, and curtailed budgets, the need to use money wisely is an urgent concern. We must be careful not to let stewardship become a false mask for a demeaning view of God. Any assertion that there just isn’t enough money or personnel to engage in the whole ministry of the gospel is a wide-open gap toward a debasing of the gospel into a set of verbal statements. Any conflict between the gospel and social action presupposes a distinction that is alien to the Bible. The apostle James made this clear in blunt terms, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well. Keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” Faith, if not accompanied by action, is dead. We must reject the small view of God that anxiously avoids response to human need because of fear that we might run out of funds for the more important matters of verbal proclamation. This is the moral equivalent to arguing that Jesus might have accomplished more had he not wasted so much time with lepers and blind people; or that if he had really understood the

importance of separation, he would have stayed away from those dinner parties among the wealthy sinners. God help us. How small can become our view of the Creator of the universe.

The first Prime Minister of modern India, Mr. Nehru, had his eye cocked toward evangelical Christianity when he chided, “I want nothing to do with any religion concerned with keeping the masses satisfied to live in hunger, filth, and ignorance.” Critics outside our fellowship have alleged that we are too much caught up in other worldliness to be of much use in this world. Is there any real answer to this challenge? In the name of the merciful God and his compassionate Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, there must be a clear and ringing answer, we are involved in this bleeding broken world.

Today’s crisis of human need confronts all right-thinking people. Are we really seeing and hearing with our hearts of the new nature? Surely we’re informed at the level of intellectual consciousness, but what about the level of spiritual conscience? Are we thrust into an overload of televised consciousness? Will we become the first generation of Christians in history to be numbed by too much knowing? How can we heighten feeling? The answer to our dilemma, the only answer, is in *doing*. Those who study the effects of mass media point out the dangers of buying out one’s conscience with requests for money for remote problems.

Problems are all around us, in our very neighborhoods, and in our churches. Response in Christian conscience to far-off problems is enhanced and made more real and more substantial if it is a proper extension of acted upon local concern and involvement. This is a matter of local churches, not just of relief and development organizations. The sequence of the Great Commission still provides wise guidance. Our Lord said, right around you, where you are—though you are people of Galilee, the north country—where you are now is in the environs of Jerusalem. Go to Jerusalem where you are now, and then outward to Judea on to Samaria, and beyond that to the uttermost parts of the earth.

“Do you love me? Do you love me?” our Lord asked Peter that morning. “Surely you know that I do,” answered Peter, doubtless from a grieving heart. “Feed my sheep.” Our Lord’s words, “Feed my sheep” commanded there at Peter’s seaside breakfast therapy session rings still today in our ears. The answer remains the same today. Our restless concern, like Peter’s, seems to float in an informed but numb consciousness. Do something about it, act on it. Even if what you do won’t change your world in one swift moment, you will add to the trickle which combines to flow, ultimately tumbling into the torrent of God’s gracious hand of justice, rolling like a river.

Amen.