



Development: *How Large is the Gospel?*¹

Ted Ward

Without meaning to be an alarmist or overly dramatic, I believe that we are in a time when continued upheaval at the national level is a predictable probability within virtually every nation. For Americans, it is difficult to believe that the upheaval would affect us in any direct way—except as those who “interfere” in someone else’s situation. And, in my experience with people from Kenya, I have discovered that, like Americans, Kenyans quite often believe that disruptions could not happen here. I submit that Kenya and the United States face high probability in the next twenty years of significant political upheaval. This disruption will affect the church; it will affect each of us because of our identification with the world citizenship of God’s people.

We know people in other nations who are experiencing multiple levels of difficulty—of hurt. If we accept these sorts of hurts because they involve our brothers and sisters in Christ, then every one of us here is already hurting. Therefore, the issue of development is an issue we cannot evade.

John Howard Yoder, in his remarkable book, *The Politics of Jesus*, deals with the fact of Jesus’ own political nature. Sometimes we emphasize too much that aspect of Jesus that was aloof, apart from politics and the human condition. But if we look more carefully at the context in which he operated and consider the sorts of things he said and did at various times, we know that he was a very political person. Indeed the crucifixion of Christ should not be explained short of its political meaning. It was indeed the atonement from the theological perspective, but from a sociological and practical perspective, it was a political act. If we come to grips with the whole of the gospel, we must begin with the political meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is that ease with which we divide the spiritual from other aspects of human life that leads us to misunderstand development. To my mind it’s very simple: If you create compartments in your thinking that allow you to put spiritual matters here and social or physical matters over there, and assume that there is no real connection between them, you have no basis from which to comprehend development. The concept of the role of the church in development becomes a foreign concept that has no possibility of entering your consciousness.

I would assert that development is an issue of Christian ethics and that even when development is carried forward in the secular sector, it is a reflection of the ethics of the kingdom of God—albeit sometimes a counterfeit. Note that sometimes the counterfeits keep God’s people from dealing with the real phenomenon. In other words, once there is a counterfeit seeking for justice, a humanistic striving for justice that denies the power of Jesus Christ, Christians quite often move away from that area for fear of being contaminated by the counterfeit. It’s as if at the national level once a counterfeit had developed a way to produce a convincing counterfeit 100 shilling note, the whole country got together and burned all its money. I do believe that as Satan has counterfeited parts of the role and function of the kingdom of God, the more conservative of God’s people tend to build bonfires and burn the good along with the bad.

¹ Ted Ward. *How Large is the Gospel?* Presentations on Development and Development Assistance. Transcription of address. Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya, 1978

The biblical teachings center on love, and that love is not a free-floating, soft, fuzzy, warm puppy-shaped love. It is a hard, firmly rooted, clear proposition that there is one who loves and there are those who are loved, and that love exists within a framework of righteousness and justice.

Ethicists down through the years have pointed out that love cannot be defined apart from justice. In a relationship of love there must be a framework of truth and respect or it is not real. God defines himself as love, and exercises himself in justice. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament it is important to note that the same word comes over into our modern languages either as righteousness or justice, and it is virtually the same word in Hebrew.

The biblical teachings not only represent God as the source of love and the definer of justice, but they define a particular ethic that is not humanistic, it is radical. The biblical teachings on love, for example, have to do with loving the unlovely. There is nothing humanly natural about loving your enemies and doing good to those who are mistreating you. Yet that is the biblical teaching, clarified and emphasized by Christ.

I know of no better place to start seeing the revolutionary aspect of the ethics of Christianity than in the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, who was the mother of our Lord. The Magnificat is a revolutionary echo of biblical teaching. Listen closely: "He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones."

What sort of a young, Hebrew woman talks like that? In its political context, it is absolutely radical. Anyone who wants to take Jesus and wash him out to some kind of a pale, weak, insipid character somehow has less insight than this young Hebrew woman who was probably somewhere between 14-16 years of age.

Read the first four chapters of Luke and ask yourself, "What was the meaning of Christ's coming to the people who experienced him as an infant? And what does that suggest in contrast with those of us who know him to be, in fact, the risen Lord of the universe?" Here we claim to know the Lord of the universe, the infant grown, and sometimes that same excitement about the political meaning of Jesus Christ is just a little beneath us.

When Jesus Christ inaugurated his earthly ministry, John the Baptist explained it in these terms: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ready the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every ravine shall be filled; every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall become straight; and the rough roads made smooth." Radical words indeed, to make the high low and the low high and to bring everything into a new form that makes sense in the kingdom. When Jesus himself first stands in public in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), he opened the book of the prophet Isaiah as it was handed to him and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind." Our Lord defined his mission in that passage, and when the eyes of all in the synagogue were on him he said, "*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The radical Jesus.

There is absolutely nothing in Christianity that can be reduced to intellectual propositions without losing the essence of gospel. The gospel is not a series of propositions intellectually comprehended and accepted about who Jesus Christ was and what Jesus Christ is ready to do for you. There is no way to reduce the gospel to four spiritual laws, five, or sixteen hundred spiritual laws that could be seen as intellectual propositions.

Don't misunderstand me; the matter of the defending of the fundamentals of the faith is obviously a worthy cause, but the dividing of creed from deed suggests that form of intellectual Christianity in which deeds rarely occur, and much effort is given to the refining of creed as an intellectual exercise.

Particularly in the traditions of American evangelism and, to some extent, American missions there has been an increasing tendency from the middle portion of the twentieth century, to reconcile

social action, to rehabilitate social action on the basis that it has strategic value. For example, social action may be justified if it allows one to get through the door to preach the gospel.

I judge this posture to fall short of the biblical teachings about the nature of the transformed person, and suggest that it is fundamentally manipulative—we do good things for needy people in order to get them under the sound of the gospel. I submit that social action, or development work that is conducted simply as a basis from which to make a verbal point for Christ, is going to be poor social action. Compare Matthew 10:42, “and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”; and Mark 9:41: “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” The issue isn’t doing good deeds in the name of Christ, the issue is doing good deeds *because we are Christ’s disciples*! It is a subtle point but a crucial point. The issue in social action is not that we can say we’re doing it *because of* Christ, but that we do these things *because we are* Christ’s. We don’t stop and ask the question, “Well now if I do that good act, will people know that it was done in the name of Christ?” That is the sort of deliberative, manipulative plan that is totally unbiblical. We do it because of the nature of Christ in us that has transformed us so that it is within our ethical framework to be people of concern, compassion, and involvement. My name is Christ’s one. And therefore as the Scriptures say, I do these things in my name as Christian.