

BOOK REVIEW
GOOD NEWS AND GOOD WORKS
by Ron Sider
(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993)

Back in the forties the American church landscape experienced a great division, indeed a “terrible” division. When the dust settled there was the mainline Protestant denominations with their Social Gospel Good Works and there was the alienated fundamentalists with their Gospel Good News. The mainline churches have continued to decline in membership and influence because of their increasing distance from a true Gospel of redemption. At the same time, the fundamentalists have become increasingly marginalized from culture due to their isolationistic tendencies and their bias toward Gospel as primarily or exclusively proclamation. Sider’s passion is to see the Good News and Good Works once again harmoniously integrated in Christian expression. The author believes that God has called him to be an evangelical social activist. He has lived out this calling with more than words: for years he has walked his talk living and ministering in inner city North Philadelphia. Refreshingly, he admits his chagrin at winning few people to Jesus as Savior. He wishes he had won more and is seeking to win more in a new personal mission statement. He desires his own life to be a more compelling embodiment of the wedding of Good News and Good Works.

He claims that most churches today are “one-sided disasters,” either winning souls or reforming structures.¹ Underneath this great division are disparate views of what constitutes sin and salvation, and, thus, what constitutes the Gospel. He sorts this division into four primary models: 1) Individualistic Evangelical, 2) Radical Anabaptist, 3) Dominant Ecumenical, and 4) Secular Christian. Number One is focused on saving the sinner, and “after all, isn’t the world just heading for final judgment?” Number Two is about these saved individuals coagulating in the Church (Christian community) and demonstrating to the onlooking unchurched public the attractive beauty of the authentic Christian beauty. The theory is that this will draw people to the community and its Lord like moths to a light bulb. Number Three welds the personal and societal dimensions of salvation together, but in practice, the accent is on the societal. Number Four devotes energy exclusively to social change in efforts to restructure society. Sider finds weaknesses in all of these options and elects to choose none. He objects to the lopsidedness of all four of these models. So he proposes a fifth model: Incarnational Kingdom Christianity.

Sider’s Number Five dispenses with all the nonsense about “repentance and conversion in the case of nations and corporations.”² People get saved; structures do not, nor do forests and rivers. However, it is not enough to only proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. People also need to *see* the Good News lived out in Christianly Good Works. When God truly saves a person, He calls that person to embrace the first and greatest commandment (love God) and the second commandment (love your neighbor as yourself). *Together*, these two commands encapsulate the entire Old Testament Law

¹ Page 26.

² Page 159.

code, a code which was not discarded by Jesus, but rather elevated and baptized in the grace of God. Witness the deep and frequent calls to social mercy and justice in the Old Testament prophets and the severity of judgment that fell on the Israelites for their violations. Witness as well the example of the new church of Acts (there were no poor among them) and the indictment of James against all believers who fail the test of true and undefiled religion: *to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.* (James 1:27)

Jesus admits to no such divorce of personal salvation from good works. Jesus shows that 1) reconciliation with God is inseparable from reconciliation with fellow saints, 2) salvation must bring with it economic sharing (cf. Zacchaeus) and racial reconciliation, 3) ministering to spiritual *and* physical needs is essential to the Gospel, 4) authentic Christianity always challenges what is wrong with the cultural status quo, 5) we frame an unbiblical Gospel if it does not include significant concern for the poor, 6) Christians must be and look distinct from the world, and 7) the Gospel must be more than preached; it must be lived.

Sider further believes that Christians must be politically active, unless prevented by oppressive regimes. To the objection that Jesus was not politically active so why should we be, Sider argues that Jesus was under one of those repressive regimes and there was no available righteous option of political reform, and that he was sent to Jews alone, not the Gentiles (and he points out that Jesus did call them to social change regarding economic sharing and righteousness for the poor).³ He starts with the agreeable metaphor that it's better to teach a man to fish than just give him a fish. He then moves the metaphor toward societal structures that prevent a man from fishing. Wouldn't it be wise and more effective to fix the structure rather than indefinitely pass out fish?

Sider, in this book, has defused the anticipated resistance of those evangelicals hardened against the liberal agenda "Social Gospel" agenda. He effectively disarms that hostility by a straightforward and refreshing defense of the centrality of the proclamation of the saving Gospel and the restriction of the word "salvation" to God's redemptive work in people getting saved. In so doing he has built a solid bridge to the fundamentalists and rightist evangelicals. This clears the deck for him, in my opinion, to persuasively lead the reader to embrace the value of wedding Good Work to Good News and dismantle the artificial division we have sustained too long. The reader feels the sting of the searching question, "How are we expressing the heart of Jesus for the poor and victimized? Are we doing anything? Are we totally absorbed with our cloistered church agenda? Like Robert Lewis points out, the church *has* the Good News, but how can the church *be* the Good News in the perception of its community."⁴

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³ Pages 152-153.

⁴ *The Church of Irresistible Influence*

