

# **SOCIAL ACTION AND EVANGELISM: ENVISIONING A NEW RELATIONAL PARADIGM FOR 21ST CENTURY AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

A long-day’s southbound journey on Interstate Highway 35 can try the sanity of the most experienced traveler. Starting the day in southern Iowa, one can find himself having driven in three states before his first cup of coffee grows cold. If the voyager, in the proliferation of signage encountered in the Kansas City area, misses those pointing to the I-35 exit, he will quickly find himself traveling on the Kansas Turnpike and recognizing markers identifying the missed exit in the rear-view mirror. Choosing to remain on the turnpike that is now identified as I-70, the frustrated explorer notices some time later that the signs now read I-335. Recalling that most three-digit Interstate Highways he has encountered were loops around a major city, his mental state disintegrates to the fringe of paranoia. Fortunately, less than an hour into this chaotic section of the trip, I-35 merges into the turnpike from the east and the traveler can now breathe a sigh of relief.

Sometime after lunch, approaching Oklahoma City, the perplexity begins anew. Within a stretch of twelve miles, the voyager is now afforded no less than ten highway choices,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at The Southeastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina, March 15, 2012

not including the glut of local street exits constantly diverting his attention. After a barrage of decisions between multiple manifestations of signage pointing to the flood of highway choices, sanity once again triumphs as several hours of relative solace lie ahead in uninterrupted Interstate travel. As dusk draws near, signs identifying the Oklahoma-Texas state line can be seen. Less than forty miles later, signage that could make the most committed teetotaler question the contents of the fountain drink he recently purchased appears. Approaching mile marker 468, the traveler is instructed to merge to the left lanes to continue on I-35E and the right lanes to follow I-35W. Rushing through the traveler's mind is a panicked cry, "What are these? What do these signs mean? I only want I-35!"

Unaware of the eventual merger of the two highways into a single expression of that major thoroughfare, our explorer remains in his present lane in the grips of an undeniable panic and continues in a fragile hope for the best. Our frustrated voyager bears a striking resemblance to American Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the division in the highway he is traversing offers a distinctive symbolism of the present-day separation of social action and evangelism in the faith and practice of the Church. American Christianity is in a state of panic over indicators pointing to present-day and future declines and in most cases responds with little more than a fragile hope for the best. The relationship between social action and evangelism is as divided as the distinctive forks of that highway with little hope of reunion under present conditions and in the foreseeable future.

With appreciation of the confusion our traveler has experienced and the uncertainty of the voyage that lies ahead of him, let us begin a journey of discovery. On our way, let us look for signs where American Christianity has gone astray of the appointed path and guideposts that will enable us to return to the single focus that Jesus intended in the words of the Great

Commission.

### **The Present-Day Spectrum**

In every dimension of personal and corporate expressions of faith within Christianity, there exists an evolving relationship between social action and evangelism as a recognized and accepted norm of practice. From individuals to denominations, from local churches to the universal Church, a quest for an understanding of an appropriate balance between them in the practice of one's faith is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, at the core of one's identity as a Christian. In Christianity today, two extremes of expression tend to minimize the significance of the other. Meanwhile, their inherent dichotomy of presentation dilutes, if not threatens, the effectiveness of the Christian witness and appeal to believers and unbelievers alike in today's world. It can be argued that the resulting spectrum of faith and practice has precipitated the numerical and spiritual decline that is ravaging American Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>2</sup>

A world inundated with social problems is a reality as timeless as creation itself. In his counsel to the people of Israel, Moses spoke of the uncertainty of life and the ever-present reality of poverty, "There will always be poor people in the land . . ." (Deut 15:11a, NIV).<sup>3</sup> When the disciples rebuked the woman who anointed Jesus with oil, He spoke of the same reality, saying, "The poor you will always have with you . . ." (Mark 14:7a). For those, whose everyday experience includes poverty and dependence,

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<sup>2</sup> This argument is alluded to through the words of several authors in the section entitled "Reasons for Decline," pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> The NIV translation will be used throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted.

their life is shrouded by worry and anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

Equally timeless are questions concerning the proper response of the Church to poverty and dependence as well as myriad social problems with which our culture struggles. Throughout the history of American Christianity, viewpoints on the best way to deal with poverty and countless other social maladies have effectively divided the Christian community into two camps, each embracing their respective practice as the primary means of remedying social concerns. According to David Moberg, in *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern*, their distinctiveness can be characterized as “one of them builds a strong case for evangelism as a basic solution, while the other emphasizes direct social involvement.”<sup>5</sup>

He further explains that their division is not limited to their diverse responses to social issues, but that “each accuses the other of being untrue to the essential nature of Christianity. Each feels the other is hypocritical. Each charges the other with being a detriment to the Kingdom of God and the cause of Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> This schism of perception and practice cripples the witness and appeal of Christianity, especially to the unchurched, and is all too prevalent in the modern-day Church. Even on the mission field, these distinctions challenge the

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<sup>4</sup> Numerous passages in the Old and New Testament suggest the prevalence of worry and anxiety in regards to the availability of basic daily needs. The best known passage, which challenges God's people to place their trust in Him for such needs, describes the provisions for "the birds of the air" and "the lilies of the field" (Matt 6:26-30). The fallacy of worry and anxiety is addressed in Phil 4:6 and 1 Pet 5:7. The necessity of placing one's trust in God is proposed in Ps 22:4-5; Prov 3:5-6, 16:20; Jer 17:7-8; and John 14:1. A summary statement of God's provision of food and "desires" is found in Ps 145:15-16.

<sup>5</sup> David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Publishing, 1972), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

church's witness. David Bosch, in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, explains, ". . . although evangelism may never simply be equated with labor for justice, it may also never be divorced from it. The relationship between the evangelistic and the societal dimensions of the Christian mission constitute one of the thorniest areas in the theology and practice of missions."<sup>7</sup>

The problematic perpetuation of such misperceptions creates a serious divide in modern-day Christianity. As Ronald Sider, in *One-Sided Christianity: Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World*, states, "most churches today are one-sided disasters . . . . One group saves souls. The other reforms structures. That's what I call *one-sided Christianity*."<sup>8</sup> The fullness of the Church's mission, as modeled by the life and ministry of Jesus, involves social action and evangelism as a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" resolution of the perceived segregation. To fully embrace the broader concept would allow modern-day Christianity, states John R. W. Stott in *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now!*, to ". . . make a far greater impact on society, an impact commensurate with our numerical strength and with the radical demands of the commission of Christ."<sup>9</sup> While we appreciate the fact that our witness impacts society as a whole, we must also come to grips with the reality that it touches the lives of church and unchurched individuals as well.

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<sup>7</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 401.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *One-Sided Christianity: Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 25.

<sup>9</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now!* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 34.

## Review of Literature

Only a few books specifically address the relationship between social action and evangelism in the daily life of individuals, local churches, or denominations who profess the Christian faith. Even more striking is the relatively small number of authors whose books specifically address the relationship. A seminal work that confronts the undeniable separation in the relationship in present-day Christianity is John R.W. Stott's *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing No!*<sup>10</sup> He contends that "the crucial form in which the Great Commission has been handed down to us (though it is the most neglected because it is the most costly) is the Johannine . . . Deliberately and precisely he made his mission the *model* of ours. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

In *Evangelism and Social Involvement*, Delos Miles recognizes the separateness of the two areas of ministry, lamenting the division and challenging those engaged in social ministry and/or evangelism to model what they believe, be realistic about the pace with which change occurs, and affirm one another. He concludes, "The body of Christ is incomplete without us all. Apart from evangelism, the church will die. Without social involvement, the love of God does not abide in her. Without both, we have a truncated gospel out of balance and out of tune."<sup>12</sup> While advocating for the partnership of social action and evangelism, the pivotal works of Stott and Miles do not delineate the practical application of their constructs to our daily witness.

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<sup>10</sup> The publication of this book followed the convening of Lausanne I: The International Congress on World Evangelization in the fall of 1974. Stott's influence permeated that meeting of evangelical Christian leaders, especially in his role as the chairman of the drafting committee for the Lausanne Covenant.

<sup>11</sup> Stott, 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Delos Miles, *Evangelism and Social Involvement* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), 166.

The works of Ronald J. Sider, and those written in collaboration with others, comprise a considerable amount of contemporary books that specifically address the social action/evangelism relationship in American Christianity. Solo works such as *One-Sided Christianity: Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* and *Genuine Christianity* comprise two of his earliest analyses of the subject. Partnering with Philip N. Olson and Heidi Rolland Unruh resulted in *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* and a subsequent collaboration with Unruh alone produced *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry*. Sider and his co-authors challenge the Church to be more holistic in the practice of faith without addressing the crisis of relevancy and authenticity that has contributed to the Church's decline in recent years.

The works of Steve Sjogren represent a unique interaction with the topic of the relationship between social action and evangelism in the ministry of the Church. In *Conspiracy of Kindness*, he offers a how-to guide that describes Servant Evangelism as a methodology that incorporates deeds of love with words of love. While offering interesting insights into the variables of risk and grace in efforts which incorporate service/social action as a precursor to evangelism, his presentation falls short of describing the variables of interplay between such service/social action and evangelism in present-day American Christianity. In *101 Ways to Reach Your Community*, Sjogren makes a passing reference to the relationship between social action (which he describes as "serving") and evangelism. While acknowledging that a diversity of approaches exists, he fails to recognize the fullness of the spectrum of faith and practice present in the modern-day Church. The significance of his solution points to two methodologies which either ignore the need for social action altogether or view it only as a means to the desired

outcome of evangelism.

Well-known books that peripherally address the social action/evangelism relationship include Donald A. Atkinson and Charles L. Roesel's *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ: Ministry Evangelism in Today's New Testament Church*, Alvin L. Reid and David A. Wheeler's *Servanthood Evangelism*, and David J. Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Atkinson and Roesel describe Ministry Evangelism as "meeting person's needs in order to share God's love and forgiveness with them."<sup>13</sup> Servanthood Evangelism, according to Reid and Wheeler, "involves intentionally sharing Christ by modeling biblical servanthood . . . a combination of simple acts of kindness and intentional personal evangelism."<sup>14</sup>

Thomas P. Johnston, in *Understanding Evangelizology: A Biblical-Historical Perspective on Evangelism*, suggests that both Sjogren and the collaborative works of Reid and Wheeler as well as Atkinson and Roesel, offer models that can be perceived as distinctive variants of Servant Evangelism, with Sjogren and Reid and Wheeler focusing on individual service and Atkinson and Roesel on social service.<sup>15</sup> All three works propose evangelism methodologies that are applicable to specific circumstances and locales. Meanwhile, David J. Bosch outlines and analyzes the dialogue in America concerning the relationship between social action and evangelism. From Jonathan Edwards in the mid-eighteenth century to documents

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<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Atkinson and Charles L. Roesel, *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ: Ministry Evangelism in Today's New Testament Church* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Alvin L. Reid and David A. Wheeler, *Servanthood Evangelism* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1999), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas P. Johnston, *Understanding Evangelizology: A Biblical-Historical Perspective on Evangelism* (Liberty, MO: Evangelism Unlimited, Inc, 2009), 740.



produced by various evangelical and ecumenical entities in the mid 1980s, efforts have been ongoing through the history of American Christianity to reconcile differences between two different *mandates*, the one spiritual, the one social. While much remains to be done in that effort, Bosch offers an assuring word, stating that “. . . churches—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—are learning afresh to overcome the old dichotomies between evangelism and social action.”<sup>16</sup>

While a significant number of journal articles address the issue, the works of several authors are representative of the limited scope of inquiry. Walter Brueggemann, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia University, describes the chasm between social action and evangelism in "Together in the Spirit, Beyond Seductive Quarrels." In his view, “Evangelism taken by itself becomes *self-indulgent narcissism* [author’s italics] that imagines our embrace of the gospel to be an end in itself rather than enlistment in an alternative world. Social action by itself becomes *hard-nosed ideology* [author’s italics] that is authoritarian and graceless.”<sup>17</sup>

The inseparable nature of evangelism and social ministry is clarified by William J. Carl, President of Pittsburg Theological Seminary. In “Psalm 146,” he states, “They are two inextricable parts of God's action in the world, action most clearly realized in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. A church lacking either one of these parts is half a church; a church lacking both is not a church.”<sup>18</sup> Gabriel J. Fackre, Professor of Christian Theology Emeritus at Andover Newton Theological School, encourages a partnership in "Liberation and Evangelization: Some

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<sup>16</sup> Bosch, 408.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Together in the Spirit, Beyond Seductive Quarrels," *Theology Today* 56, no. 2 (July 1999): 157.

<sup>18</sup> William J. Carl, "Psalm 146," *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1994): 169.

Historical and Theological Footnotes." He explains, "Witness to the wholeness and depth of the vision requires that the integrity of liberation and evangelization be maintained and defended. It is possible to give formal allegiance to each, but so to define or redefine them that their particularities are denied."<sup>19</sup> Each of these articles recognizes the segregation of evangelism and social action in the life of the Church without offering a means to unite them.

### **Delineation of Terms**

As evidenced in the writings previously cited, a variety of terms are common in current vernacular to describe diverse expressions of social action. The manifold implications of the words employed can be confusing to the reader and deserve clarification as to meaning and usage. While others offer a wide range of terms and definitions, Delos Miles' *Evangelism and Social Involvement* offers the simplest distinction between social ministry and social action. He describes social ministry as deeds of love and mercy to individuals while social action involves attempts to bring about change in social structures. He utilizes the well-known story of the Good Samaritan of Luke 10:25-37 to differentiate between the two, stating "What the Good Samaritan did was social ministry. If he had sought to change the conditions which led to the Jericho road robbery and mugging, that would have been social action."<sup>20</sup> Throughout this paper, the term *social action* will be used as an overarching term to encompass the totality of social involvement of individuals, local churches, and denominations in addressing the needs of individuals and the world in which we live.

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<sup>19</sup> Gabriel J. Fackre, "Liberation and Evangelization: Some Historical and Theological Footnotes," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3, no. 2 (April 1979): 59.

<sup>20</sup> Miles, 16.

## The Current Challenge

The segregation of social action and evangelism in the practice of our faith can result in the proclamation of a gospel without commitment or a gospel without compassion. As such, it can significantly impact the witness of the Church among the churched and the unchurched in a post-modern society. Bob Roberts, in *Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and the World*, states, “Local churches are intended to be God’s expression of his kingdom in given communities . . . . We have church buildings all across North America, yet the church is viewed as irrelevant and out of touch—not making a difference.”<sup>21</sup> The paradox of the church’s silence in response to those searching for meaning and purpose to their lives is the presence of the answer to their search in the words of a national civic organization’s creed. The opening line of the creed of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce (the Jaycees) states, “We believe that faith in God gives meaning and purpose to human life.”<sup>22</sup>

The irony of the modern-day segregation between the seemingly opposing camps of evangelism and social action is that such was not the reality in generations past. Consider the example of John Wesley (1703-1791), an Anglican priest whose life and ministry gave birth to the modern-day Methodist movement. More than two-hundred years of church history separates Wesley from today’s Christianity and the man-made schism that is significantly impacting the denomination to which his work gave birth, and countless other denominations which claim a Wesleyan heritage. Sondra Wheeler, a

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<sup>21</sup> Bob Roberts, Jr, *Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 29.

<sup>22</sup> *U.S. Junior Chamber Of Commerce (Jaycees)*, "The Jaycee Creed," [http://www.usjaycees.org/index.php/library/doc\\_download/100-creed/](http://www.usjaycees.org/index.php/library/doc_download/100-creed/) (accessed October 26, 2010).

Professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, in “John Wesley and ‘Social Ethics’,” explains:

Wesley knew nothing of our modern distinction between evangelism and social action because the only gospel he had to preach was the good news that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has come near to us . . . . The gospel of that kingdom by its nature is both declared and enacted; better yet, it is preached in action and brought to birth in proclamation, and all authentic Christian evangelism in this tradition marries liberating word to witnessing deed.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of an inseparable union of evangelism and social action, Wesley ministered to the spiritual needs of the poor and the outcasts while involving himself in the controversies and social issues of the day. His example points to the fallacy of the modern-day practice, evidenced by local churches and denominations alike, of dividing social action and evangelism into divergent camps. The challenge for the church, as it seeks to regain relevance in the gospel it proclaims, is to move beyond the modern-day segregation of evangelism and social action by looking to the examples of the past, the path from which it has obviously strayed.

However significant and appropriate the example of Wesley and others may be, the past upon which the church must ultimately focus is nothing less than the example of Christ. Throughout the Gospels are numerous examples of Jesus reaching out to address the felt needs and the spiritual needs of individuals He met and to whom He ministered. His ministry represented the fullness of an integration of social action and evangelism—as Wheeler previously stated, “(a gospel that) is preached in action and brought to birth in proclamation.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sondra Wheeler, "John Wesley and 'Social Ethics'," in *The Lived Theology and Power Workgroup held in Charlottesville, VA, February 14-16, 2003*, The Project on Lived Theology (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 2003), 3, [www.livedtheology.org/pdfs/wesleyt.pdf](http://www.livedtheology.org/pdfs/wesleyt.pdf) (accessed March 1, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

If we are to take seriously the challenge of the Great Commission to disciple others, leading them to the saving grace of Jesus Christ and on a journey to become learners, adherents, and imitators of the life and example of Jesus, we must first ask ourselves to what extent we are His disciples. Only when we are genuine disciples can the church ever hope to realize the training and upbringing of true disciples that Jesus intended. Dallas Willard, in *The Great Omission*, describes the crux of the challenge:

So the greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heart-breaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as “Christians” will become *disciples*—students, apprentices, practitioners—of *Jesus Christ*, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Modern-Day Crisis**

The clarion call has been sounded and its message resonates throughout today’s American Christianity. In the words of David T. Olson, in *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of Over 200,000 Churches*, “The American church is in crisis.”<sup>26</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries who echo the alarm, Olson offers an important clarification: “At first glance this may not be apparent, but while many signs of its evident success and growth abound, in reality the American church is losing ground as the population continues to surge.”<sup>27</sup> In virtually every metropolitan area, as well as cities and towns that dot the length and breadth of the American landscape, the planting of new churches and the construction of massive mega churches is emblematic of a season of growth.

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<sup>25</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2006), xv.

<sup>26</sup> David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of Over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, the percentage of population attending a Christian church on any given weekend declined from 20.4% in 1990 to 17.5% in 2005.<sup>28</sup> William Hendricks adds emphasis to the alarm, citing that each week, more than 53,000 people elect to never return to the Church; that compares to about 57,500 Americans who died during the more than eight years of the Vietnam War.<sup>29</sup>

John Drane, in *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future*, echoes the concern, “. . . Christianity has fallen on hard times. . . .” In regards to the struggle of historic mainline denominations, he proposes that “some Protestant groups in particular appear to have no future at all.”<sup>30</sup> A major factor in the decline that the church is realizing in attendance on any given Sunday is the competition, during those hours historically reserved for worship, which comes from nonreligious leisure activities. Drane further explains that much of what is perceived as church growth “. . . amounts to little more than moving bodies around from one congregation to another, while for every person who comes to faith there must be quite a few more who are giving up on faith altogether, and leaving the church for good.”<sup>31</sup>

A continuation of the current trajectory of decline could eventually impact the propagation of North American Christianity as it threatens both the physical and fiscal survival of denominations and local congregations. In the words of David Olson, “A chill wind is blowing in America, affecting the future of Christianity. Most of the basic indicators point

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>29</sup> William Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People Are Leaving the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 252.

<sup>30</sup> John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Macon, GA.: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 5.

downward. . . . Will the future become a dark night of winter for the church, or will spring break forth and create new life?”<sup>32</sup> An impending, if not a realized, crisis confronts American Christianity today. However, such was not always the case.

### **Reasons for Decline**

The world in which we live is ever-changing; such has always been a fact of life. What was once science-fiction only a few generations before is commonplace if not obsolete by today’s standards. The world is changing to the extent that realities of the past are but lost memories today. Stories of a thriving American Christianity in previous generations abound. In the span of but a few generations, involvement in the life of the church has waned, signaling a progressive decline of a nation’s commitment to Christian faith and practice. In its present state of decline, the Church should be asking why the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of its prosperous past are now foreign. An over-arching reason is the current relationship between Christianity and culture. In generations past, culture reflected the values of the Church. Today, culture is at odds with the values of the Church and at times appears to negatively influence them.

David Olson characterizes the transitions in his contention that “Our world used to be Christian, but it is now becoming post-Christian. Our world used to be modern, but it is now becoming postmodern. Our world used to be monoethnic, but it is now becoming multiethnic.”<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, additional reasons contribute to the decline. These include the reality of those who perceive hypocrisy in the Church, those who portray themselves as spiritual but not religious, those who are attracted to Jesus but not to the Church, misperceptions of Christians and their

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<sup>32</sup> Olson, 182.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 162.

faith which are reinforced by our words and attitudes, and distrust of the Church's teachings between denominations and its adherents. George Barna describes spiritual transitions that impact our present culture as well as our perceptions and interactions with Christianity: the changing of the guard from generation to generation, the understanding that there are no moral absolutes and that truth is self-determined, the dismissing of the irrelevant, the impact of technology, and the desire for genuine relationships, participation in reality, and finding true meaning.

McDonaldization, a societal process which has impacted American culture and the life of the Church, is a final reason for the current state of American Christianity. Reflecting the constructs of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, McDonaldization is commonly defined as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world."<sup>34</sup> John Drane offers a more chilling version as he describes it as "the destructive and dehumanizing effects of social rationalization under the influence of modernist thinking."<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, Thomas White and John M. Yeats, in *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity*, suggest that the application of the process to the life of the Church "can lead to compromised discipleship, theology, and the loss of the prophetic role of the church. In the process, McDonaldized churches become prisoners to the shifting tides of consumer culture."<sup>36</sup>

It is undeniable that American Christianity is in decline. All of the previously stated

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<sup>34</sup> Drane, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession With Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 13.



reasons for the decline put forward significant challenges. However, the most difficult challenge posed to the church may be accepting John Drane's premise that to reach post-modern people "requires a more fundamental overhaul of our own current styles of church than most of us realize, or are ready for [sic]."<sup>37</sup> In ever-increasing numbers, church members are departing the Church while the unchurched are avoiding organized religion in search of a Jesus they like and with whom they choose to identify in private. They see little of the example of Jesus in the faith and practice of the Church. They perceive a style in which the equal concern of Jesus for the felt and eternal needs of others is lacking among those who profess His name. They observe a style of church that embodies either an evangelism or social action mindset, to the exclusion of the other.

### **The Journey From Whence They Came**

As individuals, local churches, and denominations, American Christianity can be characterized as a series of travelers who come to a fork in the road. Whichever path they take, they find themselves on a one-way journey, progressively losing sight of the separation of paths they left behind. Along the way, the first traveler is initially accepting of the choice he made as the one best suited for him, but now wonders if he made the right choice. A path that looked so familiar at first glance now offers unfamiliar scenery and bumps in the road he never expected. A second traveler never noticed the separate path, finds himself on a crowded thoroughfare with others who appear to be equally self-righteous and uninvolved, and has no desire to question the path or the direction it is taking him, as long as it arrives where he thinks he needs to go.

The third traveler is comfortable with the choice he knowingly made. He is fully

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<sup>37</sup> Drane, 8.

aware that the other path exists and is assured in his belief that the final destination on that path is different than his own. Confidence in his perception that he chose “the right way” while those who are journeying on the other path chose “the wrong way” is the least of his worries.

Meanwhile, the fourth traveler has tired of the journey or sees no need to travel at all. He wonders where everyone is going and why the rush to get there. He has found a nice, quiet rest stop along the way which has all he needs, and he has no desire to journey from the solitude and amenities it provides. Each of these traveler vignettes describes slices of 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Christianity, including those within and beyond the four walls of the Church. In tandem, they represent significant contemporary challenges to the present health and future viability of the Church.

The traveler who questions whether he has made the right choice is representative of disenchanting Christians of multiple generations. Typically among them are those who were reared in the church frequented by multiple generations of their family. With a spouse and children, they are willing to continue the family tradition and make the conscious decision to do so. However, the church has changed; the pastor and many of the congregants who were there to nurture them through childhood and adolescence are gone. The congregation is aging and dwindling; too few are willing to care or do anything about it. The vibrancy and joy of being a part of a growing congregation is gone, and so is the enthusiasm and depth of the Jesus it proclaims. There’s an obvious disconnect between the lessons of his childhood and the preaching he now must endure. The traveler and his family make the difficult choice to quietly walk away from their childhood church—but not from their faith— a church that has become little more than an institution.

Oblivious of the other path, the second traveler is representative of those who are

active members of a large variety of mainline denominations. The church offers them a great deal of what they expect, while expecting of them little or nothing. There is a pastor and staff, and even a few “Super-Christians” to do all the work of the church. There are multiple services so the whole family can attend at their convenience. There is a great choir, a rocking praise band, and best of all, no need to know the songs they are singing—there’s a vocalist who has that covered as well. The children’s and youth programs are also noteworthy. Children and teenagers alike come home loaded up on snacks and exhausted from the games they play. With all that fun and refreshment, it’s no wonder they can’t recall what they learned in Sunday School, Children’s Church, or youth group. What more could a family ask for? They already have their tickets to heaven; after all, like everyone else, they are only along for the ride!

“It’s the right way or the highway!” That’s an oftentimes unspoken but unmistakably understood reality for a large contingency represented by the third traveler. They are unabashedly dogmatic in their theology, beliefs, and practices. The distinctiveness of this grouping is the two diametrically opposite sub-groups of which it is comprised—the evangelicals and the liberals. Both are likely to expend far more energy defending their stance on a favorite theological issue than lifting a finger in response to any issue or need of importance to their counterpart. The great abyss that divides them precludes any meaningful dialogue or interaction. Being judgmental of those who do not share their understanding of orthodoxy or orthopraxis is far more comfortable than any attempt to broach common ground. Why should either group take any responsibility for problems facing the Church when it’s obviously the fault of the other guys, those traveling the wrong way?

Unfortunately, the largest grouping of today’s Americana is represented by the fourth traveler, the one relaxing beside the road at the full-service rest area. On any given Sunday, they

are the easiest group to locate. They are the ones outside their homes, doing everything but preparing to go to church. Whether it's family brunch at a nearby restaurant, shopping at the nearest "box store" or mall, catching a few waves or a few fish at the nearest body of water, or a short trip to Grandma's (who probably went to church before they arose), Sunday has become the day in which all these activities are far more pressing and attractive than giving an hour back to God in worship at a nearby church. Most in this grouping are confident of their spirituality, but have no desire to be religious, especially if doing so involves affiliating with an institutional Church. An ever-growing number admit a great respect for the historical Jesus, especially His life and His teachings. However, they admit they see little or no semblance of that Jesus or His teachings in their perception of the Church.

These vignettes portray and characterize several of the challenges that confront post-modern American Christianity. While each offers unique challenges to the life and future of the Church, the answer to each challenge may be found in the previously cited premise of John Drane that to reach post-modern people "requires a more fundamental overhaul of our own current styles of church than most of us realize, or are ready for [sic]."<sup>38</sup> Such an overhaul need only look to the example of Christ for direction. It was Jesus whose concern for the felt and eternal needs of those to whom He ministered went hand-in-hand. It was Jesus whose life and ministry, as a unified whole, was the sole model for ministry embraced by those who called upon His name for centuries. It is Jesus, the fullness of whose teachings and example is all we need to know in answering the call to follow Him.

In the context of the historical whole of Christianity, the separateness of social action and evangelism in the life and ministry of the Church is a relatively recent phenomenon. For the

Church to reclaim its authority and relevance in a post-modern world, it must be willing to set aside the phenomenon and embrace a new paradigm—a new paradigm that is old as Christianity itself, a new paradigm whose authenticity and relevance is as ageless as the faith it expresses, a new paradigm that reflects the fullness of the Great Commission in its challenge to incorporate the distinctiveness of social action and evangelism into a unified whole that mirrors the example of Christ, and prospers His Church exponentially.

### **A New Paradigm for Ministry**

The thought of creating a new paradigm, using an example as timeless as that of the life and ministry of Christ, can be somewhat unnerving. To consider doing so causes one to ponder how His example could possibly be refined or improved upon; after all, for centuries it served the Church quite well. The logic and need for a new paradigm for 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Christianity is quite simple. While the example of Christ is timeless, abuses of it brought about in recent history necessitates a reframing that captures its original intent, refocusing one's attention on the fullness of the whole instead of the distinctiveness of its parts. While it appears to be nothing new, the challenge is to incorporate a freshness that illuminates and a clarity that elucidates the ageless example for the edification and challenge of the post-modern reader.

### **Concentric Circles of Love**

A little girl was asked, “What is the most important word in the world?” Without hesitation, she answered, “love!” When asked why, after a little more thought, she quickly replied with an ear-to-ear smile, “That’s simple—I love Jesus, I love mommy and daddy, I love

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Mrs. Smith (the next-door neighbor)!” While she threw an additional recipient into her list of those she loves, over and above the two loves commandment of Matthew 22:37-40, and edited the list to be more kid-friendly, she captured the essence of the starting point of a new paradigm for the life and ministry of the Church. If we take the liberty to allow her answer to be a little less kid-friendly, we could restate it as love of God, love of family, and love of neighbors. She understood that our love begins with God (Jesus), extends to our family (mommy and daddy), and extends further to neighbors

(Mrs. Smith). An appreciation of that gives rise to what can be called “Concentric Circles of Love.”

Imagine two concentric circles on the same plane, surrounding a single dot. The innermost circle is labeled “God,” the dot inside that circle is labeled “self,” the circle beyond God is labeled “family,” and the expanse surrounding the circles is labeled “neighbors.” Logically, there can be no circle to confine the representation of neighbors, for such is an all-inclusive term which, for the Christian, should know no boundaries. God is the source of the love we express (1 John 4:7), enveloping self and resulting in our healthy self-love (we should excuse our pre-school theologian for her omission of this step). Our response to His love can be nothing less than reciprocate (1 John 4:19). Our love of God spills over to those closest to us, our family, and then to all outside our family, those referred to as neighbors. Because of the limitless expanse that neighbors occupy, our love for them should be equally limitless, without restrictions or qualifications (1 John 4:11, 21).

A separate aspect of our understanding of the circles of love considers God’s omnipresence in our lives and the world in which we live. While God is aware of the affairs of all of His children, our view and perspective is far more limited. Imagine the similarity of the

circles to a track surrounding a playing field at a nearby school. You are reminded of Jesus' promise to be with us "to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20). As you are walking around the circular track, the Circles of Love, Jesus is walking beside you, sharing His love, sharing His wisdom, sharing His guidance. At any given point along your walk, He brings to your attention the needs of others. Some may be material, some may be emotional, some physical, and still others spiritual. The needs are as diverse as those experiencing them, but all are equal in God's eyes and should be in ours.

As you walk alongside Jesus, He points out specific needs of some at various junctures along the circular path—not because of His plans to deal with them personally— but to deal with them through you. You are His disciple; it is through you that He touches the lives of those that are in need. At points along the way, you stop and address the needs presented to you, confident of His will for you in the given situation. Whether it is a prayer for healing, a cup of cool water, shelter from the cold, or offering the gift of God's saving grace, Jesus is watching and encouraging you to bless others in His name. What clearer image can one contrive of God's love for you and the neighbors whom He has entrusted to your care (Matt 22:39)?

### **Double Helix of Hope**

Several New Testament texts remind us of our hope in Christ. Paul reminds the church at Rome that hope is a gift of God's love, "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Rom 5:5). To Timothy and the Church at Ephesus, Paul offers similar words of encouragement, "This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe" (1 Tim 4:9-10). The significance of hope is uplifted in Paul's words to the Church in

Corinth, “And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). In this passage, the interrelatedness of hope and love is underscored. Our love of God spills over into our love of neighbors; the hope we share with others—both physical and spiritual—is but a manifestation of our hope in the living God.

Physical hope we offer to our neighbors in the form of social action, while the spiritual hope we share is the message of God’s salvation through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, in the name of evangelism. Jesus modeled an inseparable union of the two in His life and public ministry, a model that characterized the Christian gospel for hundreds of years. With the emergence of the Social Gospel, the unified whole was torn asunder into expressions of social action and evangelism that have persisted to the present-day, creating an unnecessary isolation. The challenge a new paradigm offers is to reunite these separate expressions of Christian faith and practice into a unified whole once more. To do so reclaims the example and model of Christ and the fullness of God’s love that the Circles of Love reflect. An understanding of such brings about what can be called the “Double Helix of Hope.”

Picture the image of a double helix, an image popularized by the discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Its interconnected and interwoven nature suggests stability and cohesiveness. Historically, a use of the structure of the double helix in manufacturing predates the important scientific discovery by several decades. Since the 1930s, Mrs. Baird’s Bread, a Texas-based bakery, has utilized a process that emulates the double helix structure in the baking of bread. The company’s website offers an explanation of the process: “In November 1936, Mrs. Baird's began hand-twisting bread. This procedure, in which two half-loaf pieces of dough were intertwined to form one dough piece, continues today at all



Mrs. Baird's plants. Twisting improves flavor, texture, and keeping qualities of the loaf."<sup>39</sup>

In applying this procedure to the social action/evangelism separation, consider each as the half-loaf pieces of American Christianity's current reality. To intertwine them into the form of a double helix minimizes their separateness, even before the "baking of the bread." As the twisted loaf of bread rises and is baked at a neighborhood bakery, the uniqueness of the two twisted half-loaves disappears into a finished product in which the original twisted halves become a unified whole. What began as two half-loaves of dough has become a single loaf of bread; what began as two half-loaf pieces of the diversity of faith and practice in American Christianity can become a single, unified reflection of the life and ministry of Christ. Hand-twisting of the dough reportedly improves the flavor, texture, and keeping quality of the loaf. Imagine the impact upon the Church today and its witness if something we do could improve the flavor, the texture, and the keeping qualities of the gospel we proclaim.

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<sup>39</sup> *Mrs. Baird's Home*, January 27, 2009, "The Mrs. Baird's Story," <http://mrsbairdshome.blogspot.com/> (accessed March 29, 2011).