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Ministries of Mercy, Moral Distance and the Good Samaritan – the Challenge to Evangelical Social Action

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Introduction

The parable of the Good Samaritan is probably one of the best known of Jesus' stories and has proved to be a source of inspiration and challenge throughout the centuries. In recent years it has formed the basis of a seminal book arguing for Christian social action within an evangelical framework, Tim Keller's *Ministries of Mercy*.[1] Since it was first published nearly twenty years ago, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, of which Dr. Keller is senior pastor, has implemented to an impressive degree many of the ideas presented in the book for 'mercy ministries'. What Keller says of the Bible's concern for the poor constitutes a real challenge to many evangelicals living in the West today. Simply as a matter of demonstrating love of neighbour, churches could and should devise ministries of mercy appropriate to their situation. The chapters on the character of mercy, motivation, giving and keeping, and the church and world are profoundly insightful, containing much which evangelicals need to hear, consider and practice.

However, where Keller appears to be weak is in the theological justification given for such ministries and the way in which he attempts to co-ordinate evangelism and social action. Central to his argument is the parable of the Good Samaritan which forms the basis for the book's subtitle and main thrust of his thesis—'The Call of the Jericho Road'. Put simply it is our contention that theologically the story of the Good Samaritan cannot sustain the theological weight Keller tried to place upon it. However, we shall see that it does have a significant role to play, but one which is much simpler, but no less penetrating, as that suggested by Dr. Keller.

This paper has a twofold focus. First, to offer a constructive critique of the way Keller uses this parable as a basis for social action and how he attempts to co-ordinate this with the task of evangelism. The danger in doing this, of course,

is finding ourselves falling into the trap of the lawyer in Luke's narrative who seeks to 'justify himself' and so excuse himself from acts of mercy. And so secondly, we shall re-examine the parable afresh using rhetorical and cultural analysis in order to see what, if any, are some of the implications for social action by churches today.

Ministries of Mercy and the Jericho Road

Keller claims that *whoever* is in need is our neighbour. 'Someone once said that a "World Christian" needs to read the newspaper along with the Bible. In a sense, this parable of Jesus *directs* us to do so. Though the law expert sought to limit the concept of "neighbour," Jesus expands the concept by showing that *anyone* in need is our neighbour.'[3] Both the story in Luke 10 and the references made to Deuteronomy 15:7ff[4] would indicate that it is not as simple as that, any more than is the claim that we are 'all living on the Jericho Road'.[5] It is probably morally significant that the Samaritan was a neighbour to someone who was in need which *he came across*. This brings into play the principle of 'moral distance'. Was the Samaritan to take responsibility for caring for all those who were mugged on the Jericho road and so setting up a ministry of mercy on a permanent basis? That would be the *reductio ad absurdum* of what Dr. Keller is arguing. Rather, the Samaritan was responsible for the person in need who lay in his path. The fault of the Levite and Priest was that in seeing the need they passed by on the other side. Keller seems to treat the whole world as our 'Jericho Road'. This is where moral distance comes into play.

No individual or group of individuals can take on responsibility for all needs in a 'Jericho Road' world (or city)—a moral distance exists which reduces personal and corporate responsibility. Following the principle of Deuteronomy 15:7 ff, if we are *faced* with people in need (whoever they are) then we are under a moral obligation to respond to their need according to the resources we have at our disposal. (The Samaritan used his wine, oil, mule and money—he could not have been held to account for using what he did not have—for example, ointment which was not in his pack). Thus, 'our neighbour' is not, as Keller claims, 'anyone in need'; it is anyone in need with *whom we have to do*. The Samaritan's neighbours were not everyone else who happened to travel that road at that time or any other, but the person lying *before* him in need. Because of their position and influence, others might have other moral responsibilities to carry out—for example, a Jericho police chief would have

responsibility to make the Road a safer place on which to travel. The point remains, there are limits to moral responsibility, but because of the wickedness of the human heart and our innate desire to 'justify ourselves' we need to be careful in examining our motives before claiming what these might be. The other side of the coin is because of a sensitive conscience and desire to please God we are made to feel guilty about not helping people, a guilt which is sometimes unwarranted.

The key chapter to Keller's theological understanding of the relationship between evangelism and social action is chapter 7. He states in his overview—'The ministry of mercy is not just a means to the end of evangelism. Word and deed are *equally necessary, mutually interdependent and inseparable ministries, each carried out with the single purpose of the spread of the kingdom of God*.'[6] Keller evades the question of precedent—'evangelism or mercy ministries?'—by using an illustration of 'repentance and baptism'. He writes—

> Which is more important—word or deed? Let's propose the possibility that differences arise on this issue because the very question of 'importance' is misguided. For example, which commandment is more important: 'repent' or 'be baptised'? From one perspective we could say that the consequences of disobedience to the first command would be more disastrous than to the second. But would we be comfortable determining which of God's commands were more important to obey? Doesn't the very question create an unbiblical distinction within God's Word? So, too, it is an inappropriate to ask whether evangelism or social concern is more important. They constitute a whole that should not be divided.[7]

However, if we take baptism as a visible sign of faith, Keller could have spoken of 'repentance and faith' in the same way. If this is what he means then the parallel is only apparent and not real. Repentance and faith are two aspects of the same event—the appropriation of God's offer of salvation. The two are internally related in that one is linked to the other in such a way that one does not become a possibility without the other. If repentance is a 'turning from' and faith a 'turning to', repentance is a necessary condition for faith, for in order to turn to face one direction logically necessitates a turning from the previous direction. On the other hand, if faith is also a perceiving that something is true

(*assentus*), then faith logically precedes repentance as a necessary condition, a turning from that which is false, for unless one sees the truth one will not be aware that one has been following a lie.

But evangelism and social concern are not related in this way. They are two distinct activities not two aspects of the same event. In which case it is legitimate to ask, which is more important? Clearly the Bible itself does distinguish between things of first importance and secondary importance, even if they are both divine commands. In Hosea 6:6 we read: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.' This would indicate that in terms of priority it is mercy that God is looking for rather than ritual sacrifice, although he did command the latter. It could be argued that the ideal is both (*cf* Luke 11:42), but that does not detract from the point that priorities do exist and that to ask such a question is not to 'create an unbiblical distinction in God's Word.' The questions are whether evangelism has priority over social action or vice versa or whether the two are of equal importance? Keller speaks of them being 'equally necessary ministries' which still allows for one being more important than the other.[8] This raises the question: by what criteria does one determine primacy even in a situation of double necessity?

Keller refers to three cases where, he claims, it is argued that evangelism has primacy over mercy: first, where mercy is a means to the end of evangelism; second, where mercy is only to be done in some circumstances; and thirdly, the biblically ordained time sequence of word and deed. All three, he maintains, cannot be substantiated biblically. But the most obvious argument for the primacy of evangelism is not considered, which is in terms of what is ultimately at stake—people's eternal destiny. When this is placed into the equation, evangelism's primacy becomes self-evident. The test which can be applied is a simple theoretical one: given no alternative but a straightforward choice between sharing the Gospel with someone who is dying and alleviating their physical condition which should we do? The answer must be to share the Gospel if we take eternal realities seriously. Mark 1:38 is still a crucial text which has to be reckoned with. In response to Peter's implied demand that Jesus should heal the sick which were queuing up in Capernaum he replied, 'Let us go somewhere else-to the nearby villages-so that I might preach there also.' What is more, unless one is going to take signs and wonders as being evidence of mercy ministries (which Keller seems to do) the apostle Paul did

not follow this pattern—in Athens or Thessalonica or indeed, in Corinth. Of course, depending upon the circumstances this did not prevent Paul from engaging in acts of mercy—e.g. Acts 28:7 with the inhabitants of Malta. But this hardly constitutes evidence that Paul views Gospel proclamation and mercy ministries as being equally necessary like the two wings of a plane, to use Keller's illustration.[9] In I Corinthians 9 Paul exclaims, 'Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel.' Paul never says, 'Woe to me if I do not engage in acts of mercy.' Certainly if faced with a need in which he did not respond to them he would be guilty of lack of love, as well as cutting the throat of his gospel proclamation by undermining his integrity. In this Keller is quite right, 'You tend to your friend because you love him' and not as a means to some other end. But given that Paul shared his life with the Thessalonians and treated them like a nurse with her children (1 Thess. 2:7), this indicates this was not the case. This simply means that in terms of integrity, deeds go with words. Keller carries his readers along by assuming that 'deeds' equals 'mercy ministries' which they do not.

How we are to conceive evangelism as being primary along with social action being necessary is well put by Michael Hill, 'While social action is necessary there is a sense in which evangelism is primary. God's rule and kingdom is not brought about by social action. People enter the kingdom and come under God's rule by hearing and responding to the Gospel. Evangelism is primary in a temporal sense. One has to be brought under the explicit rule of God and transformed by the gospel before one becomes a member of the people of God. But once people are brought into the community of believers where God rules they are transformed by the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit will manifest themselves. The logic of God's domain requires its members to be committed to the good of all people. The relationship of evangelism to social action is analogous to the relationship between the entry point to a structure and the environment within the structure. Entry to God's domain is logically tied up with the shape of God's domain. A commitment to love and social action follows from coming under God's rule.'[10] However, Hill goes on to sound a note of caution—

> Even conceding that evangelism is primary in a very limited sense has its dangers. Such thinking might deny the logical link between evangelism and social action. It might suggest that there could be a choice between the two. Furthermore it could recommend that evangelism is the only

> legitimate preference. To suggest this option would be like suggesting that one can enter the house and not be subject to the boundaries of the house. The reality is that evangelism will lead to conversion and conversion will lead to a new creation and that new creation will oblige people to be involved in social action.[11]

This logical link is illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan, but not quite in the way Keller proposes. A less ambitious understanding can still secure the same demands in practice for ministries of mercy.

Rhetoric and the Parable of the Good Samaritan

It is tempting to go straight to the parable for a lesson in ethics. But the context in which the parable is told is crucial for its theological understanding which is the issue of salvation. This is apparent in the lawyer's question as well as the parable itself which has some key Christological implications.

The occasion is the deceitful testing of Jesus by an expert in the law—v. 25: 'On one occasion an expert in the law stood to test him (Jesus), saying, 'Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?' The normal teaching position of a rabbi was to sit and the pupil to stand as a sign of respect and recite the teaching. Here the position of standing is feigned for the true motive we are told was to examine the teacher. The natural question for the rabbi would have been, 'How can I obey God?' But here the question is 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Presumably the questioner hoped that Jesus would say something injudicious against the Law of Moses. The fact that Jesus refuses to give a straight answer, but adopts a more Socratic method to elicit an answer from the lawyer himself, suggests that Jesus was wise to what the lawyer was attempting to do. However, the original question as it stands is misplaced. One does nothing to inherit, an inheritance is simply received. By its very nature it is a gift. So, therefore, is eternal life. However, in response the lawyer does relate back to Jesus his summary of the law in verse 27 (cf Matt. 7:12), to which Jesus replies, 'Do this and you shall live.' Here Jesus raises the bar to an impossible level—unqualified love of God and neighbour, and so again underscoring the need for grace for anyone to qualify for the inheritance. This is not appreciated by the lawyer who seeks some definitions in order to fulfil the law, specifically 'who is this neighbour I am to love?' For, we are told, the lawyer sought to 'justify himself.' Justification means to be saved, to inherit

eternal life. He seeks a meritorial basis for his salvation. The lawyer would have his own views of what constitutes a neighbour based upon Leviticus 19:18 from which the summary is taken, 'You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.' In the wider context this could be extended beyond 'the sons of your own people' given verse 34, 'The stranger who sojourners with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.' Either way the neighbour could be carefully construed as being limited in scope. Jesus response is to tell the classic parable by using what K. E. Bailey calls 'the prophetic rhetorical template'[12] with seven scenes in all (the perfect number) with the climax being denoted at the centre with the last three scenes parallelling and inverting the first three scenes. This is shown below:[13]

1. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho And he fell among robbers And they stripped him and beat him And departed, leaving him half dead	ROBBERS Steal and injure
2. By coincidence a certain priest Was going down that road, And when he saw him, He passed by on the other side.	PRIEST See Do nothing
3. Likewise also a certain Levite came to that place And when he saw him, He passed by on the other side.	LEVITE See Do nothing
4. A certain Samaritan, travelling, came to him, And when he saw him he had compassion on him	SAMARITAN See Shows compassion
5. He went to him, And bound up his wounds, Pouring on oil and wine.	TREATS WOUNDS (The Levite's failure)

6. Then he put him on his own animal
   And led him to the inn,
   And took care of him.

TRANSPORTING THE MAN
The Priet's failure)

7. The next day he took out and gave
   two denarii to the Manager and said,
   'Take care of him, and whatever more
   you spend I, on my return, will repay you.'

SPEND MONEY ON HIM
(Compensating for the thieves)

'Which of the three do you think proved a neighbour to the man who fell
Among the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed mercy on him.'
And Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

The parallels are evident and the structure of the story is classically chiastic with the climax in the centre which is the compassion of the Samaritan. Bailey skillfully presents the cultural background to the parable. There are certain expectations regarding the travellers. The Jerusalem temple was served by three groups: the Priest, who would have travelled by horse (thus being able to provide transport for the wounded man); the Levite, who would have had oil and wine in his pack normally used for cultic purposes; and the Jewish layman. So after the appearance and failure of the first two, the next person the hearers would have expected to appear was a Jewish layman. This is similar to the expectations involved in someone telling a joke concerning four men, an Englishman, Irishman, Welshman—and the fourth person would be expected to be a Scotsman. The shock comes in fact that it is not a Jewish layman at all but a hated Samaritan! (The wounded man in the story is assumed to be Jewish layman coming down from Jerusalem and therefore certainly comes under the Leviticus 19 rubric). Mitigating circumstances might have been pleaded for the lack of responsiveness by the Priest and the Levite, not least in becoming ceremonially defiled by touching what may have been a dead body, a risk, they thought, not worth taking. The Levite would have been aware that the Priest would have passed this way before him and not taken action. The Levite could hardly consider himself to be more conversant with the requirements of the law than the Priest and so decided not to upstage him, that would have be an act of insult to the priest. The safest course of action is to pass by.

The saving agent in the story is an outsider, a Samaritan whose primary motivating force was not obedience to the law but compassion towards a person in need (and in so doing he obeyed the law). What he did was costly and involved risk. It was costly in that he used all the available resources he had to meet the man's needs (oil, wine, cloth wrapping, riding animal, energy and money). It was risky on two counts. First, by stopping to help he exposed himself to the risk of being attacked himself. There was no reason to suppose that bandits were still not in the area. Secondly, he risked his life transporting the man to an inn within Jewish territory. This would have been equivalent to a black man walking into whites-only hotel in southern USA at the height of segregation when the Klu Klux Clan were still active. He may have been expected to take the man in the direction of Jericho and unload him on the edge of the town. But to walk into the town and then further into an inn was an unthinkable and dangerous thing to do. What is more, the Samaritan ensured that the wounded man was not placed at risk by taking on a further risk himself—v. 35, for he covered all his needs and agreed to *return* to a hostile situation to cover any further expenses. The risk that the wounded man was potentially open to was being sold into slavery by the inn keeper if he were not able to pay his bills.[14] The Samaritan spared him from this danger. To say that the Samaritan displayed costly love would be a major understatement. Thus Jesus does not answer the Lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour?', but indicates what it means to be a neighbour (costly sacrifice) and to whom we become a neighbour (those in need with whom we have to do).

It is not allegorising the parable to see within it echoes of Jesus' own person and mission, as we see in the parables of Luke 15.[15] Israel's religious leaders fail and salvation is brought by someone breaking in from outside. What is more, the 'salvation' is costly and complete. Both aspects are fulfiled by Jesus in the overall narrative of Luke. He is the one who is the perfect neighbour coming in from the outside, not a member of the religious establishment which, as represented by the lawyer, have failed the 'people of the land', those who cannot help themselves. The cost is the cross and the rescue is total and guaranteed—the inheritance of eternal life.

Thus while the gospel is alluded to by the parable in the context of Luke, the person and work of Christ, social action can't be equated with the gospel. What we have is an indication of some of the gospel entailments in the way

suggested by Michael Hill above. Those who have been the recipients of the 'Good Samaritan' *par excellence*, the Lord Jesus Christ, cannot deny that by ignoring need in whatever form that might take—physical, spiritual, social or mental. It is not simply a matter of 'walking the walk' and commending the gospel by action (and avoid denying it by inaction) it is simply a matter of obedience. To walk on the other side is breaking God's command of loving one's neighbour as oneself. What is more, compassion is to be the motive using whatever resources are available to us, and in some cases, making resources available. Again to quote Hill—

> social action is not an option. The believer has been transformed into the image of Christ. Love is the essence of this new nature. Hence the Christian is commanded to do good to all people. And since all people's good is tied up with the cluster of relationships they share and the structures (patterns of relationship) shaping those relationships, Christians must be involved in social action, not only to express their new nature in Christ but to witness to the values of the Kingdom.[16]

Given that the church is the gathering of Christians which as a community will organise activities and structures in order to serve God and the world, then it is right that the church consider how they are to meet the needs of their neighbours. Keller's book is well placed to be a valuable aid to church leaders to make the practical steps necessary for this to happen. No doubt many ministries of mercy will be carried out on an individual level by members of a congregation. But this should not make the church leadership complacent in leaving matters there. The evangelical churches which emphasise evangelism in line with its Biblical priority would not be content to leave witness to the ad hoc day-to-day witness of its members but tend to invest vast amounts of time, money, energy and personnel in organised corporate evangelism, so why should social action be treated any differently?

At this point the question of resources is raised. Given that a church has only so many people, time and money, to divert resources from evangelism to social action might be considered untenable. In some cases this might be so, although it does not rule out making some modest attempt at meeting social need, to use the language of the parable, we may only have oil to clean a wound and not wine, but we can use what we have. The barrier is often not lack of resources

but motivation (the same can and often does apply to evangelism—it is not that a small church can't do any evangelism because of lack of resources, it opts to do no evangelism because of lack of motivation). This, one would suspect, is where the problem lies for those evangelical churches which do have plenty of resources but choose to place them almost entirely at the disposal of evangelism and edification. Maybe what is required here is a sacrificing of some things (do we really need a full time music leader?) in order to supply something which may be less 'in vogue' in evangelical circles but clearly in line with what the parable Jesus told demands (e. g. a full time social action worker)? Perhaps an excessive amount is spent on evangelism in terms of publicity, venues and arrangements which could be avoided and the money allocated elsewhere.

The fact that a church will have to reallocate its resources is no excuse for inactivity on the social action front. To fail to respond to this demand would be akin to the priest ensuring that he is not inconvenienced from carrying out his cultic duties by having to deal with the dying man. The pressure to play the priest in keeping the 'evangelical show on the road' is a strong one—that is, a 'show' characterised by acceptable activities—bible teaching, fellowship groups and prayer for example (important though they are). Furthermore, the pressure to play the Levite is also equally strong ('who am I to dare to question the wisdom of those better schooled than I?') so that matters of social concern are not raised in the church for fear of being thought to be 'going off'.

Reducing the Moral Distance

In considering priorities in the church's ministry, strategy and allocation of resources, the matter of 'moral distance' can be raised. On the parable of the Good Samaritan we spoke of the obligation to meet the needs of those 'with whom we have to do'. Is this simply those we come into immediate contact with or is it a much wider circle? The ethicist Peter Singer questions whether the notion of moral distance is relevant to our global village. He writes—

> To challenge my students to think about the ethics of what we owe to people in need, I ask them to imagine that their route to the university takes them past a shallow pond. One morning, I say to them, you notice a child has fallen in and appears to be drowning. To wade in and pull the child out would be easy but it will mean that you get your clothes wet and muddy, and by the time you go home and change you will have missed

> your first class. I then ask the students: do you have any obligation to rescue the child? Unanimously, the students say they do. The importance of saving a child so far outweighs the cost of getting one's clothes muddy and missing a class, that they refuse to consider it any kind of excuse for not saving the child. Does it make a difference, I ask, that there are other people walking past the pond who would equally be able to rescue the child but are not doing so? No, the students reply, the fact that others are not doing what they ought to do is no reason why I should not do what I ought to do. Once we are all clear about our obligations to rescue the drowning child in front of us, I ask: would it make any difference if the child were far away, in another country perhaps, but similarly in danger of death, and equally within your means to save, at no great cost—and absolutely no danger—to yourself? Virtually all agree that distance and nationality make no moral difference to the situation. I then point out that we are all in that situation of the person passing the shallow pond: we can all save lives of people, both children and adults, who would otherwise die, and we can do so at a very small cost to us: the cost of a new CD, a shirt or a night out at a restaurant or concert, can mean the difference between life and death to more than one person somewhere in the world—and overseas aid agencies like Oxfam overcome the problem of acting at a distance.[17]

Singer makes a powerful point. It is not that Singer is denying that there is such a thing as 'moral distance'—one would be obligated to meet the need of someone who lies on your 'Jericho Road' but not someone who lies beyond your reach—rather, the argument is that our present situation is such that such 'distances' can be reduced to vanishing point. For instance a church may decide that the immediate social need in its area which it can attempt to meet is the alleviation of debt through counselling. Accordingly, resources are channelled into this worthy cause. The geographical distance is small and so is the moral distance—i. e. the obligation to offer assistance even to a stranger. But the church may also decide to assist in the relief of street children in Bogota through financing some intermediate agency. Here the geographical distance is great but the moral distance, by an act of volition, has been reduced. The decision is made to assist on a 'Jericho Road' on the other side of the world.

Conclusion

The parable of the Good Samaritan at one level reflects the nature of Christ's saving mission to the world; it comes from the outsider, costly, full and free. It also stands as a paradigm for the Christian and the Church to 'go and do likewise'. There is being the good neighbour in sharing the Gospel at whatever cost with whomever we can. The need for salvation is real and the message of the cross-work of Christ alone meets that need. But there are other needs also. Here there is the challenge for evangelical churches in particular to reassess their ministry in this regard. Risk is integral to such an enterprise as is cost, but neither will be considered without the deeper well spring of compassion. Perhaps it is lack of vitality in this affection which places some evangelical ministry in the position of the man who lies beaten on the road rather than the one who is able to offer assistance.

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ENDNOTES

1. *Op. cit*., p. 109.
2. *Op. cit*., p. 109.
3. *Op. cit*., p. 110.
4. Michael Hill, "An Evangelical Rationale for Social Action," produced by the Social Issues Committee for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, <http://www.anglicanmedia.com.au/old/socialissuespublications/evangelicalrational.pdf> p. 13.
5. *Ibid*., p. 13.
6. Bailey, op. cit., p. 290.
7. *Ibid*., p. 291.
8. *Ibid*., p. 292.
9. Kenneth Bailey, *Prodigal and the Cross*, (IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2005).
10. Hill, *Op. cit*., p. 12.
11. Peter Singer, "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle," *The New Internationalist*, Issue 289.