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			Preventive health care	Preventive health care not sufficient in itself (curative also needed)
Phase IV Onwards	1992	Integration of above into holistic model of health care and mission	Community health focus	Approach used in health care dependent on stated needs of community
			Integration of spiritual and physical	Timing of approach also important
			Clinics with partial payments for medicines	
			Cooperative drug stores that are community based and initiated	
			Networking with other agencies	

Dr. Dorothy Harris is Australian Director for Servants in Asia. **p. 128**

Christ as Saviour from Sin and Death and as Liberator from Socio-Economic and Political Oppression

Chris Sugden

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How do Christian evangelism and social concern help rather than hinder the poor in overcoming their poverty? The author of this perceptive article argues that both freedom from sin, death and evil and liberation from poverty and oppression have their source in a

biblical theology of the Cross. He sees divine forgiveness in the atonement as the antidote to the bondage of fate and the basis of a new and transformed community in which the poor find their identity. This brings a release of creativity in self-respect, family relationships and in overcoming economic oppression. In a penetrating analysis of ecumenical theology of the poor, Sugden shows that it only reaffirms the sense of victimization and powerlessness and deepens the gulf between the private and public spheres of living.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

A recent survey funded by a Christian philanthropist suggests that religious belief and evangelistic activity hinder the process of development among poor communities. An earlier survey in India suggested that if a community has a good people's organization built around issues concerning the community, and then a Christian organization comes to take up the concern, the people's organization eventually withers.

There is therefore an important challenge to address—that Christian evangelism and social concern actually hinder the development of poor people. Of course this begs the question of what sort of evangelism and social concern we are talking about. We must address the issue of the form of evangelism and social concern that really does promote the all-round best interests of poor people in their relation to God, each other and the material world. [p. 129](#)

In bald terms the question is, 'How does belief in a transcendent reality and a new identity in relation to reality help the poor in combating poverty?' In addressing this question this paper will assume the existence of the coherent evangelical theology of Christian involvement with poor people that was developed in international discussion, especially in the years from Lausanne 1974-Wheaton 1983, in which the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission played a significant role.¹

The paper will ask the question 'How does a good evangelical theology help the poor?'

'The poor refers to the manual worker who struggles to survive on a day to day basis, the destitute cowering as a beggar; the one reduced to meekness, the one brought low ... those weak and tired from carrying heavy burdens, the leper and very often "the common people".² Poor people should within their own terms and expectations discover the news to be good, not just within the terms defined by systematic theologians. For Jesus set good news to the poor alongside the blind seeing, the lame walking, and the deaf hearing ([Luke 7:22](#)). For a deaf person to regain their hearing was in their terms good. Theologically evangelical theology has sought to be an experiential theology, drawing from the pietist and latterly the pentecostal traditions. Faith must issue in new life and in good works. Faith is not separate from life here and now, or from Christian practice here and now.

The paper will answer the question also by comparing evangelical theology with the theology generated in the World Council of Churches' networks. Enough material and experience has been generated over the last 20 years of involvement by Christians across

¹ See for example *Evangelicals and Development* edited by Ronald Sider (Paternoster 1981); *In Word and Deed* edited by Bruce Nicholls (Paternoster 1985); *The Church in Response to Human Need* edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Eerdmans 1987); *How evangelicals endorsed social responsibility* Rene Padilla (Grove Books 1986).

² *Christian Witness to the Urban Poor* (LCWE) quoted in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, *Evangelism and the Poor—a Third World Study Guide* (Paternoster, Third Impression 1987), p. 2.

the theological spectrum with poor people to be able to generate an adequate comparative study.

It is recognized that there has been an overlap between some evangelicals and some ecumenicals on issues of evangelism, but this has not applied to all aspects of theology of mission in the last twenty years.³ p. 130 This article will consist of theological reflection which arises out of reflection in the light of scripture on the experience of many involved in ministry among poor people. It is not a theoretical reflection.

FORGIVENESS AND FATE

Fundamental to evangelical theology is the atonement. How does that impact poor people? First, in many contexts, the fact of divine forgiveness is an effective antidote to the concept of fate. Part of the culture of poverty, which enables poor people to cope psychologically with the harshness of their existence, is that it is their fate, that they are paying a price for somebody's action somewhere. In religious terms it may be a price for the past sins of their family; or in anticipation of future blessedness. In secular terms it may be the price for past structural oppression, or in anticipation of national economic recovery. Whatever the source, the impact is to reinforce in the poor a sense of victimization at the hands of forces they cannot control. They attribute to these forces enormous power before which they are helpless. Thus fate also stifles creativity and responsibility. This false consciousness is an expression of sin and death that destroys God's purpose of life.

The atonement announces that the price is already paid for the past, and that the price of the future is secured. This releases in people a new sense of identity. They are somebody. By grace they are not damned or damnable and useless people. They are called to be sons and daughters of God. As his creation they are called to have dominion over the earth and are accountable to him. As his children they are forgiven and restored to this position despite their supposed and real demerits, because of the cross. Indwelt by God's Spirit, they have access to the power of God through prayer, to the armoury of God against evil, and to the resources of God which are far more than economic.

Much evidence from the history of the Church in India indicates that for decades the contribution of the mission of the Church has been to bring poor people a sense of their identity and worth. Let M. M. Thomas speak for all in saying: 'Considering the fact that the Christian Missions were the first in many parts of India to treat the untouchables as human beings, and to bring them the gospel of their dignity in Christ as well as education, Christianity has played a part in arousing and strengthening Anti-Brahminism. Further, the climate created by Anti-Brahminism about the necessity of the depressed classes to leave the Hindu fold for the sake of their human dignity, paved the path of Christian

³ The 'overlap' between some evangelical and some ecumenical involvement in issues of the church and its mission can be seen in for example Vinay Samuel and Albrecht Hauser, *Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way* (Regnum 1989) which reports the Consultation on Evangelism sponsored by the W.C.C. in 1987. At the Canberra Assembly in 1991 Evangelicals produced a letter in response to the Assembly, published in Bruce Nicholls and Bong Rin Ro, *Beyond Canberra* (Oxford, Regnum/Lynx, 1993). There was also a warm welcome at the Wodd Evangelical Fellowship Consultations on The Church in 1983 for the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism Report on Mission and Evangelism which was commended to the Consultation by Arthur Glasser. [*Mission and Evangelism—an Ecumenical Affirmation* (W.C.C. Geneva 1962)]. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism does not represent all the activities of the W.C.C., and a considerably divergent theology emanated from the Unit on Urban and Industrial Mission, the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation process and other groups primarily related to issues of mission in the context of poverty.

evangelism and mass conversion among them.⁴ In other words, the gospel has been the source of a new consciousness among poor people.

This new identity is in sharp contrast to the identity shaped by ecumenical p. 131 theology of the poor. This latter identity is primarily shaped by an analysis of the role of the poor in the global community defined in economic terms. Ecumenical theology stresses that the poor in and of themselves experience salvation, will be saved, and bear salvation to others. This affirms the poor in their poverty and reinforces their sense of victimization. It is a secular version of fate.

It also creates a sense of conflict with those who are the non-poor. The non-poor are those possessed of this enormous power to which the poor have no access. The only relation the poor can have with them is therefore one of conflict, whereby the rich are demonized.

A particular example of the strategy which this view generates is that of Christian Aid UK 'To strengthen the poor'. The only way forward is for the poor to become as strong as the rich. But the poor have already tried and failed to do this. That is why they are poor. They probably know better than others that such a struggle is hopeless.

Evangelical theology based on the atonement frees people from the destructive power of sin and death on their own perception of who they are; it gives assurance of a new identity and creative responsibility in contrast to the identity of economic powerless victimization which can be resolved only by victory in conflict with the powerful. Those who were no people become God's people, children of God, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. While the atonement itself may not be the point of entry into a community, it is the presupposition for the new identity which often is the point of entry.

VICTORY OVER EVIL

The atonement brings the good news that the victory over all opposing and evil powers has been won. Evil is located in the transcendent realm in the evil one, not in evil people as such. The victory over evil is declared in the Cross as Christ led the powers in his triumphant victory procession ([Col. 2:15](#)). Thus the poor person, in whom the risen Christ dwells by his Spirit, is encouraged to see himself also as seated with Christ in the place of victory over evil ([Eph. 1:20](#)). The poor person can know that the victory over all the forces that oppress him has already been won.

In contrast, where this victory is not experienced or expressed, an unresolved conflict remains between the poor and those they perceive as their oppressors, as the locus of evil, and even as those who are demonized. People cannot easily let go the sense of wrongs they have suffered or that they have been party to inflicting on others. Victims continuously present themselves as victims. They take on an heroic, even Messianic role. A competition emerges to demonstrate that one particular group is undergoing the worst suffering. Thus a division emerges among the poor. And on the other side the guilty have continually to express their guilt and atone for it by keeping silent or by a self-righteous posturing on behalf of the oppressed.

Self-assertion by poor people is p. 132 one of the fruits of the new identity, that people realize they do not deserve their fate. John Perkins writes: 'Victims need always to come to a place of such self-assertion in order to overcome powerlessness and fully experience their indignation. But once such self-affirmation occurs, forgiveness and healing

⁴ M. M. Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, (Madras, Christian Literature Service, 1976), p. 152. See further Chris Sugden, 'What is Good about Good News to the Poor?' in *AD 2000 and Beyond—a Mission Agenda* edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Regnum, Oxford, 1991).

reconciliation must take place in order for community to grow.’⁵ Reconciliation, often following repentance and restitution where appropriate, must follow because the purpose of justice is community.

The biblical view of justice is the correction of the situation in which the strong have exploitative power over the weak. In deliverance, the people are returned to the situation of life in community which God intends for them. Participation in community has multiple dimensions—its spheres include physical life, political protection and decision-making, social interchange and standing, economic production, education, culture and religion. Community membership means the ability to share fully within one’s capacity and potential in each essential aspect of community.

The cross made community between hostile groups possible. The cross broke down the barriers between hostile groups to create new humanity, according to Paul in Ephesians ([Eph. 2:13-22](#)). For this reason the evangelical’s first instinct is to partnership, convinced as he is of the unity of the body of Christ. Therefore Vinay Samuel points out, ‘Because the evangelical sees as the prime categories those saved by Christ and those as yet unsaved, he does not think of rich and poor as the primary divisions or categories. The understanding that the poor has of the rich is not of a powerful oppressor, but of a person. The evangelical never feels powerless against the rich. He still feels that he has the gospel to share with him. The slum dweller may lack much, but he has the priceless treasure of Christ in him, the hope of glory. Therefore the poor need never accept the rich as people who cannot change. They can confidently, not arrogantly, share something with the rich that the rich need.’⁶

In the process of this sharing, the rich also come to a new realization of the basis for their identity—the grace of God in Christ and not their riches. Jesus points out in his teaching in [Luke 12:31](#) that people are to seek first the kingdom of God, and everything else will be added to them. So changes are needed among the rich.

The evangelical believes in a personal force of evil and therefore does not need to demonize the powerful. The evangelical believes in the power of the cross to overcome evil, change the life of the oppressor and create the possibility of fruitful partnership.

RELEASING CREATIVITY

Evangelical theology also enabled poor people to develop creatively. **P. 133** First they could bring change into their own situation, into their personal and family lives. In the evangelical view, personal change has eternal worth. In a hierarchy of values where all the emphasis is put on social change, personal change with eternal consequences is regarded as at best a sop, at worst a dangerous diversion.

Second, with their primary identity thus shaped by their identity with relation to a transcendent God, evangelical theology saw the poor as those who were to develop their role as his creatures, called to exercise stewardly dominion over creation. There was no disincentive to engage in the entrepreneurial activities at which many discovered the poor to be so adept. This has led to an explosion of involvement by evangelicals in micro-enterprise business schemes. These appeal to business people in the West who perceive

⁵ ‘From Proclamation to Community—The Work of John Perkins’, Stephen Berk, *Transformation* Vol 6, No 4, October, 1989, p. 5.

⁶ Personal conversation.

poor people making investment, developing skills, and creating wealth. They appeal to the natural entrepreneurial talents in many of the poor.⁷

By contrast 'ecumenical' theology came in the context of an ideology which strongly distrusted any involvement by poor people in what were perceived to be capitalist schemes. Their ideology led to a more politicized approach. In many cases 'people's movements' were encouraged. However these failed to produce the expected result in political influence at a local or national level, because at the critical moments the people placed their vote where they knew where power lay. Worse, these movements often defined themselves in opposition to the Church, which was seen to have compromised with the powerful. They criticized the local churches while drawing their funds from western partners of those churches. Worse, in many cases these political movements were infiltrated by specifically non-Christian forces and have been forced to follow their agenda.

These approaches nurtured different styles of leadership. The evangelical approach nurtured those who could develop skills which built up economic and business bases. People were able to give concrete expression to their sense of identity by expressing themselves and contributing to the wealth of their family and community. They were delivered from a self-image of being useless. By contrast ecumenical theology encouraged a political form of leadership.

PEOPLE-FOCUSED

Thirdly, evangelical theology was essentially people-focused. Thus new converts were encouraged to create new disciples and to create families. The work of Jorge Maldonado shows that Pentecostal Mission in Latin America has had a phenomenal success with its focus on the family and emphasis on the family model as the model of the Church. This has given expression to and met P. 134 popular aspirations more than sociopolitical activism.⁸

Maldonado writes: 'The new evangelical communities offer hope and a positive solution to some of these problems. Among believers the terms "brother" and "sister" are not empty words. A lifestyle "different from the world" as evidence of conversion and a new life is reinforced by a strong sense of communal belonging and networks of mutual support. In conservative evangelical and fundamentalist church communities, family life is the primary focus of sustained concern—the *raison d'être* of the church community itself. The "fundamentalist" message is one of family as defined by love, responsibility, commitment to the education of children, abstinence from alcohol, and marital fidelity. The community, most often represented by lay church members, is the living assurance to believers that they have someone on whom they can count when financial, personal or emotional needs plague the family.... This characteristic of the Pentecostal churches is one of the main keys for understanding the receptiveness that Pentecostalism has in popular sectors, constantly threatened by meaninglessness of life, [an existential condition] caused by a life of need and loss.'

He continues, 'There is considerable debate about the extent and influence of Catholic liberationists in their attempts to address these conditions and serve the masses, but

⁷ See a collection of articles published in *Transformation* on this topic gathered in *Christian Action Journal* Autumn 1993. 'Charity which gives nothing away—small business development amongst the poor' available from Opportunity Trust, 103 High Street, Oxford, U.K.

⁸ I. E. Maldonado, 'Building Fundamentalism from the Family in Latin America' in *Fundamentalism and Society* ed Marty and Appleby (University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 214–239.

there seems to be a growing consensus that the liberationists who emphasise socio-political activism and corporate solidarity against unjust institutions and structures have not been able to compete with Pentecostals who took a firm doctrinal line and construct social networks of support for born-again Christians.'

He concludes: 'Pentecostals built communities that feature strong leadership, encourage full participation of women and men in the higher calling of church, and inculcate a work ethic suitable to the economic system. The hope of personal salvation, the forgiveness of guilt, the affirmation of personal worth, the provision of an encompassing surrogate family to serve as a Christian model for the nuclear family ... are communicated in the common language of the people. "Transformation", "new life" and "power" over one's personal and familial life and destiny are the key words in the discourse of those who convey the message.'⁹

From India Colleen Samuel points out that in the ministry of Divya Shanti in Bangalore to over 10,000 families in a slum area 'focus on families has given us a framework of action ... the vision that seeks to reconcile families, to attempt to bring wholeness of relations to the whole community as the family of families. Class struggles, justice fights, liberation language are all subordinate to the vision of building community as a family and building p. 135 families in the community.' Colleen Samuel then points out most interestingly that 'The poor family also has resources to share in rebuilding families in community and does not participate resourceless.'¹⁰

Vinay Samuel holds that 'A mission emphasis of rebuilding families will be able to address the issues of authority: How is power gained and used for the benefit of all? ... the area of responsibility: what are my obligations as a member of the family ... Morality especially in the context of poverty will not be ethical ideals but obligations to care for children and spouse. Sexuality will be to show marital fidelity—and order sexual behaviour to build rather than break families. The challenge of responding to family needs adequately will reveal the helplessness of fallen humanity and open families to the Gospel of Grace in Jesus Christ.'

By contrast Samuel notes 'Other Christians stressed the priority of community action and action groups. Action to transform communities by addressing political and economic structures dominated the scene. Focus on family was viewed as palliative action, a relief mode and not liberating and transforming action.... It is my contention that evangelicals were principally motivated by the needs of the poor. They did not impose an ideology of community transformation of the poor. In their exposure to the poor they saw family as the basic unit among the urban poor ... Mission inevitably responds to the needs of women and children. It also seeks to enable men to learn responsibility. It stresses economic support and marital fidelity, seeks to restore the breadwinner to the home, and protects women and children from the ravages of male desertion and violence.'¹¹

Thus evangelical theology by focusing on the ability, power and value of personal change through the atonement and the gift of the Spirit has enabled the reconstruction of families as viable economic units as the basis for rebuilding communities. By contrast ecumenical theology perceived a focus on the cross, personal change and the family as necessarily belonging to the private sphere. Where they adduced these theological themes they were interpreted in primarily political terms. These evangelical foci were therefore

⁹ Maldonado, *op. cit.*, p. 222–223.

¹⁰ Vinay and Colleen Samuel, 'Rebuilding Families—A Priority for Wholistic Mission' in *Transformation* Vol. 9, No. 3, July 1993, p. 6–7.

¹¹ Samuel, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

regarded as irrelevant to and of considerably less significance to changing the situation of the poor than public action. This assumption they derived from the western liberal enlightenment intellectual separation of the private from the public sphere.

FROM THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Evangelical theology which makes the atonement itself central has an impact on the poor from the very heart and sources of the Christian faith. It is important that the whole of the message of that faith impacts the poor. For example the nature of **P. 136** much involvement with the poor is determined by an analysis of their condition. Samuel noted above that some people imposed ideologies of community on the poor. Some theologies identify the poor as poor because of their sin, other theologies identify the poor as powerless and therefore needing to gain power. May I suggest an analysis prompted by the fact that Jesus' death inaugurated a new covenant. Covenant means commitment, grace (unmerited favour) empowering and intimacy. The concept of covenant may help analyze the situation of the poor and a Christian response. For the poor are disempowered, unable to develop their potential; they are denied grace and evaluated by the law of works and status to have failed and to deserve failure. Jesus' grace and forgiveness empowered people to live without fear or stigma. Regardless of their social origins or the stigma that society attached to them, Jesus' actions gave them new beginnings and by grace a new identity as the people of God.'

In contrast, there are views, espoused both by ecumenicals and also some evangelicals that Christian faith can only provide a religious motivation for Christian good works. In this case the outcome is that the practical action to assist the poor has often been the same whatever the source of the motivation, biblical or secular. The Christian contribution will not inform the actual practice which may well be determined by secular agendas for society.

A clear example of this is the ideology discussed in this paper of creating 'political awareness' which became the overwhelming agenda of development for Christian and non-Christian groups in the last two decades. This exposes a dualism in Christian faith and thought that confines the Christian contribution to the private world of inner motivation. This is the classic expression of western liberal thinking that divides the public and the private into two separate spheres. If Christian action is reduced to conscientisation and Christian spirituality is omitted, then the contribution of the Christian faith is only to bring the ideology that has informed its adherents in the public sphere—either of welfare or political involvement.

Evangelical theology that has refused this separation of private and public spheres, and has sought to apply the atonement, personal change and development of people as disciplinarians, and wealth and family creators, has arguably brought news to the poor that they have received as good.

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