GOOD NEWS AND GOOD WORKS:
A THEOLOGY FOR THE WHOLE GOSPEL

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A Book Review
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by
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As the world is becoming smaller due to advances in communication
technology, the average person is becoming increasingly aware of humanitarian problems
throughout the world. This rise in awareness has caused much debate over the importance
of social action in comparison to evangelism. Are they equally important or should
emphasis be given to one or the other? Dr. Ronald J. Sider, who obtained his M.Div. and
a Ph.D. in history from Yale University and served as a professor of theology and culture
at Palmer Theological Seminary, concludes that evangelism and social action should be
combined.¹

Summary

After a brief chapter on his personal history, Sider develops his thesis by first
presenting four different views on the relationship between evangelism and social action:
“Individualistic Evangelical, Radical Anabaptist, Dominant Ecumenical, and Secular
Christian” (27). He criticizes the Individualistic Evangelical view because, he argues, it
emphasizes conversion with little attention given to discipleship. Without discipleship,
the author concludes that the individual will never become socially active (35-6). For
those who hold the Radical Anabaptist view, Sider acknowledges that they hold the
community of the faithful above the individual, but he is concerned that their focus may

¹Douglass B. Miller, “A Short Biography of Ronald J. Sider,” Direction 35
be too inward (38). In regard to the Dominant Ecumenical view, the author notes the adherents to this view desire to evangelize both people and social structures (43). He wonders whether or not the call to evangelism should be kept distinct from the quest for social justice (43). Sider presents the final view, Secular Christian, as a view that focuses solely on social action at the expense of evangelism (44).

After presenting four divergent views on the relationship of social action and evangelism, the author develops a theology to support his view on the relationship. He argues that the Kingdom of God is a “new messianic society” that desires “justice for the poor” (53). He portrays the Kingdom of God as both a present and future reality by appealing to Scripture (55-6). After discussing the Kingdom of God and all of its inherent goodness, Sider argues that Jesus confronted the Kingdom of darkness by helping the poor and disenfranchised, advocating and modeling peace, and rebuking the religious leaders (61-70). Based on his examination of the example of Jesus, the author redefines “the gospel as the Good News of the kingdom rather than merely the Good News of forgiveness” (75). With this definition, Sider combines evangelism and social action by calling on God’s people to model their faith through social action (75-9).

In Chapter 5, the author differentiates between salvation and social justice. While Sider advocates both as being necessary, he argues that the term salvation should never be applied to social action (95). Instead, he links salvation to social action through authentic conversion which includes, he states, true “biblical repentance” and leads not only to a relationship with God but also to social action (104-5). The author expresses concern for the Western Church which he believes has deemphasized discipleship in favor of “cheap grace” (113).
After proving the importance of evangelism from Scripture, Sider argues that social action is also necessary because “evil social systems” inhibit the salvation of souls (143). He advocates social action not only for basic human needs but also for “structural change via politics” (145). While maintaining that evangelism and social action are distinct, the author says that both should be given “approximately equal amounts” of the available resources (159, 170). He boldly proclaims, “We dare never suppose that the only way to change the world is to convert individuals” (199). Through social action, Sider believes that Christians can change unjust structures that are displeasing to God (199).

**Critical Evaluation**

Sider’s appeal for Christians to act out their faith is refreshing. His determination to appeal for social action while remaining true to the Bible and mission provides the necessary balance between word and deed. The author posits an evangelistic model that is an incarnational solution where both conversion and social action are preached and exemplified (180-3).

His synopsis of the average evangelical church is noteworthy. Among his observations, he noted that evangelical churches tend to focus solely on “the salvation of individual souls” and neglect to call for social responsibility (33). Sider’s point is well taken, but the solution to this problem lies first in daily discipleship and small group accountability. The author makes a timely appeal for “costly discipleship and biblical teaching” (36).

The author argument for viewing the gospel as “Good News of the kingdom” instead of simply “Good News of forgiveness” is perhaps the best insight within this
book (75-9). The Western Christian often views the gospel from an individualistic perspective that focuses solely on those parts that relate to the individual such as forgiveness of personal sin. By viewing the gospel with the kingdom in mind, Sider successfully incorporates the communal component, namely the church, back into the Christian’s understanding of God’s plan of salvation.

Sider’s understanding of the Kingdom and the Christian’s role within the Kingdom unfortunately leads him to charge the Christian with a responsibility to give equal amounts of energy to reforming unjust social structures and evangelism (170). In an attempt to call Christians to overcome social sin, Sider argues for the creation of structural change via involvement in politics (145). His comments cause one to consider how society’s structures support some social sins and their continued presence insures the continuation of those social sins. Unfortunately, he does not outline the application of political action leading to the removal of social sin, but the concept is certainly worth pursuing. Perhaps evangelicals should give fresh consideration to their role in the political arena.

While Sider appeals to various passages of Scripture throughout the Bible, a careful study of Paul’s writings reveals that he never changed unjust social structures outside of the Church. Jesus himself never gave a direct command to Christians in regard to political action. Like Paul, Jesus’ purpose was “to seek and save what was lost” (Luke 19:10, NIV). History clearly shows that the actions of Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles did lead to various types of social action, but this action was a by-product of evangelism. One notable exception is social action that was geared toward the basic needs of people.

In another noteworthy section, the author indicts “modern evangelism”,
especially in the West, which focuses on repentance of personal sin and a restoration of a “vertical relationship with God” (104-5). Once again, the author highlights a weakness of the Western church with its individualistic culture that neglects the needs of the community and the need for community. Sider’s arguments show the importance of building relationships with church members and society through word and deed. Horizontal relationships would certainly allow Christians to impact not only other Christians but also non-believers. Perhaps each church should consider ways to develop a sense of community within its congregations as well as the individual member’s responsibility to the church community. Unfortunately, Sider does not outline the process for helping Christians with an individualistic culture develop a more communal approach to society. This would have been helpful for this reader.

While Sider would extend this communal responsibility to the secular society when he says that “evangelism is inseparable from social action,” he should have limited this statement to only those actions directed the meeting of basic human needs (173). Even in cases of human necessity and certainly for all other social needs, it may be advisable to allow the local church to decide what course of action is needed. On the other hand, Sider is right to charge all Christians with a responsibility to do what is in their power to help others meet their basic needs.

Sider’s disagreement with those in the church growth camp who support the use of the term “discipling” to refer to the initial conversion is appealing (110). He argues convincingly from Scripture that disciple refers to Christians who are actively following Christ (110). While Sider’s discussion on McGavran’s use of the term “discipling” to refer to a confession of faith does seem out of place within the larger discussion,
Christians must move beyond mere confession if they are to be called disciples of Christ who impact others through their faithful obedience (110).

Sider’s desire for a church where all are accepted equally is appreciated. Sider points to a church in New Zealand as an example of a church that bridged the gap between “white and black, rich and poor, [and] uneducated and educated” (49). He then lifts this example of a church that accepts the Kingdom gospel as an example for all churches to follow (49). While his presentation of Kingdom minded church that includes people from various backgrounds may be a most excellent example, it must be noted that each church has a unique mission and ministry to a unique people with a unique culture. For example, first generation immigrants from China worship differently (both in language and style) than white Americans. Sider’s theology that combines social action and evangelism must be tempered by the reality of the many divergent contexts where churches are seeking to fulfill the Great Commission. Certainly, good works by both the individual and the church should be encouraged and even expected, but one must not apply a rigid rule for all churches and all Christians to follow.

In his interpretation of Luke 6:20-1, Sider argues that the “poor” refers to those who are poor in terms of worldly wealth (62). Matthew 5:3, however, adds “in spirit” after the poor. The author should at least explain whether or not the poor also refers to those who are poor in a spiritual sense. Sider might also consider whether or not Jesus was calling the millions of unsaved poor people who have died the blessed ones. A careful reading of Luke 6:20-1 should lead one to understand that a blessed one is a saved person; therefore, any understanding of Luke’s meaning must be applicable to a blessed rich person such as Abraham.
The author uses Jesus as an example of becoming socially active (64). However, he should have mentioned Jesus’ lack on focus on the needs of the surrounding Gentile nations during his earthly ministry. While this point may not undermine his argument for evangelical social action, it does indicate that action must be in alignment with God’s mission. Sider’s argument that Jesus was engaged in political social action could be better supported (66-7). Ultimately, Jesus’ life and teachings did impact political structure, but Jesus himself did not focus his attention on changing political structures.

Sider’s synopsis of his discourse with C. Peter Wagner was very interesting in that it showed a weakness in his argument. The author would have the evangelist preach repentance in all areas of life including social sin, while Wagner would have the evangelist focus on “felt needs” (108). Sider’s approach seems to apply more to a Christian audience, whereas Wagner’s approach applies better to a seeker audience. Sider seems to be misuse the term evangelist in the same way that he had argued that McGavran misused the term discipling. Evangelism should be more narrowly focused on a person’s need for repentance and faith, while discipleship should include among other things the person’s role in the church and in society.

Conclusion

This book is an excellent resource for writing a paper on the integration of confession, conversion, and commitment of Christians. Sider’s work could be used for a book report in a class on discipleship, church growth, and evangelism. His discussion of the various views on how social action and evangelism relate provides an excellent starting for any student wishing to learn more about the subject. Even though students and scholars will continue to debate the exact relationship between evangelism and social
action, Sider’s call for discipleship that moves beyond simple conversion must be heard by churches that wish to fulfill the Great Commission.