

Worldly Charity

By: Keith Keyser

In yesterday's *New York Times*, columnist Nicholas D. Kristof wrote an Op-ed piece on the recent humanitarian efforts of various "faith-based" mission organizations. In the article, he focuses on World Vision, which he describes as "a Seattle-based Christian organization (with strong evangelical roots) whose budget has roughly tripled over the last decade."ⁱ He approvingly references the efforts of organizations such as this in assisting in disaster situations, combating diseases like malaria and AIDS, fighting poverty, etc. Although he is not mentioned in this article, Rick Warren is also urging the churches in his sphere of influence to devote themselves to solving these gargantuan problems.

Throughout the piece, Kristof repeatedly cites a book by Richard Stearns, World Vision's head in the United States. One of his allusions to this work is especially conspicuous: "In one striking passage, Mr. Stearns quotes the prophet Ezekiel as saying that the great sin of the people of Sodom wasn't so much that they were promiscuous or gay as that they were 'arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.' (Ezekiel 16:49.)" According to this revisionist understanding of Scripture the great sin of Sodom was apathy towards the underprivileged rather than gross moral sin. Kristof also comments on their lack of proselytizing in these words: "Some Americans assume that religious groups offer aid to entice converts. That's incorrect. Today, groups like World Vision ban the use of aid to lure anyone into a religious conversation." These ideas are sadly becoming more common in the professing evangelical church, revealing the worldliness that is rampant in modern Christendom.

Historic Christianity And Charity

Historically, Christian missionaries led the charge in ministering to the poor, the sick, the weak, the oppressed, and the vulnerable. The early church was noted for its care of the poor, as well as unprotected groups like widows and orphans (see Acts 2-6; 1 Tim. 5; James 1:27, etc.) In the centuries after the New Testament was completed, the church continued to extend its missionary efforts to the far reaches of the globe. Everywhere the true gospel went its hearers were bettered through hospitals, education, and development of science and technology. Whereas historic biblical Christianity used these philanthropic endeavors as a platform for preaching the good news of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, some prominent "evangelicals" downplay evangelism. They passionately argue that the church has a moral imperative to help the poor, eradicate disease – even save the planet from global warming! As laudable as these goals are, they actually reflect a worldly attitude.

In many Christian's minds worldliness is usually associated with gross immorality or perhaps even connected with certain types of music and styles of dress. It is true that these things are

often worldly; nevertheless, they do not exhaust the scope of the term. To be worldly is to focus on this world at the expense of God and His glory (2 Tim. 4:10; 1 Jn. 2:15-17.) If one's heart is set upon this world, rather than the one to come, they are held in the tyrannical grip of worldliness. If charitable deeds merely have the amelioration of present suffering in mind then they are worldly. What benefit would there be in someone being fed, healed, or educated in this life without their deepest need being touched? Far worse to humanity than AIDS, poverty, or natural disasters is the problem of sin, which separates mankind from their Creator. Any supposedly Christian organization that ignores the spiritual need and eternal destiny of their charges is worldly and inimical to the desires of the Lord Jesus Christ. He healed and did good deeds, but He did not stop there: He also saved souls by leading them to faith in His sacrificial work on the Cross and glorious resurrection (e.g. Jn. 9.)

Déjà vu All Over Again

This new “don't preach, just help the poor” idea is not really new. It is merely a contemporary evangelical repackaging of the early twentieth century social gospel, which had its origin in the liberal theology of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and others. That movement was adept at gutting historic Christianity of its biblical belief, leaving behind an insipid shell of Christianity with a false gospel and no lasting hope for its adherents. The modern resurgence of this error risks the destruction and marginalization of the professing church in the west. Christians should – and do – care for the poor and the weak. This philanthropy must not stop there. It must also be coupled with fearless preaching of the gospel of the crucified Christ. Our love for the weak and helpless will lead them to a hearing of the good news that can heal body, soul, and spirit for eternity.

ⁱ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Learning from the sin of Sodom,” published 2/28/10, posted on nytimes.com, accessed on March 1, 2010. Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/opinion/28kristof.html>