

CHILDREN IN CRISIS

Bob Houlihan

INTRODUCTION

As we start the 21st Century, the challenge of “children at risk” is great. Today, it is estimated that 1.3 billion children live in inhumane situations of poverty, war, child labor, prostitution and other problems. In the next 25 years, approximately five billion children will be born, around 95 percent of them in the less developed world and millions of them as “children at risk”. Evangelical organizations and churches are making a difference but there is still much that needs to be done to increase the effectiveness of ministries to reach these children who are living at the edge of life. At the “Children at Risk” Conference in 1999, it was suggested that there are somewhere around 20,000 Christian projects reaching two million children in full-time care and tens of million children in partial care. These are operated by no less than 100,000 full-time Christian workers supported by more than a thousand mission and parachurch groups working in more than 200 countries.

CONDITIONS IN THE WORLD

One of the realities of the globe at the beginning of the twenty-first century is rapidity of change. Even though the world is going through a time of unprecedented expansion, capital and the increase of the funds of the “have” nations, there are still many parts of our world where poverty, disease, violence and war are taking their impact on society.

Futurists refer to three waves that have touched mankind. The first is that which is often called the Agricultural Age. This was a time when better crops were produced and there was means to transport food over long distances. The Agricultural Age changed the nature of life in general.

The second wave that superseded the Agricultural Age is often called the Industrial Revolution. It didn't supplant the first wave but rather started an increase of certain aspects of life. This wave co-existed with the Agricultural Age. The power of the second wave became much stronger than that of the first wave.

In recent history, the second wave has now been superseded by the third wave, which is called the Information or Knowledge Age. This fast-paced wave which is breaking across societies touches narrow segments of society rather than being broadcast to all peoples. For example, today's niche marketing seeks out certain kinds of buyers but not everyone. In the same way, many people who have great needs and who are the poor of the world have no opportunity to become part of this great Information Age.

The sad reality is that this unprecedented economic growth in the developed world has left the developing world far in the past to the extent that the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” has increase significantly in the last several decades. The *Harvard International Review* recently published an article that articulated this significant problem.

A torrent of international capital, unprecedented in world history, has been unleashed in the past decade. Yet this capital has had little impact on the day-to-day lives of most of the world's population. In the past ten years, US stock market capitalization has grown by over US\$10 trillion, while 20 percent of the world's households survive on less than one dollar per day. Between 50 to 70 percent of these impoverished families are self-employed, scraping out a living selling goods on the street, running cottage industries or small-scale agricultural operations with the simplest of tools. When the recent, rapid flow of capital out of Indonesia led to massive bankruptcies throughout the country, Indonesian banks and development organizations that lend to these poor farmers and

market traders saw their arrears rates increase by only a few percentage points . . .

The majority of the world's poor live in the 48 least developed countries. Although these countries constitute 30 percent of the world's population, they earn only 0.1 percent of the world's income.

The Church cannot overlook the reality of the problems of the world. Jesus Christ came to not only redeem people but also to place people in a redemptive society where they could have hope. Here are just a few of the facts that confront a worker of the gospel who targets children in crisis:

- Half of the world's six billion people are mired in poverty, trying to eke out a living on \$3 a day or less.
- Over 1.5 billion people live on less than the equivalent of \$1 a day.
- The fortune of the world's three richest people exceeds the gross national product of the poorest countries and their 600 million inhabitants. The three have total assets of \$156 billion.
- The assets of the world's richest 200 people exceed the combined income of 41 percent of the world's population.
- A Bangladeshi would have to save all of his wages for eight years to buy a computer; an American would need to save just one month's salary.
- Organized crime is estimated to make 1,500 billion dollars a year and sexual exploitation of women and girls makes seven billion.
- Tanzania spends nine times its health budget and four times its education budget on repaying its debts.
- Six young people are infected with the AIDS virus every minute.
- Nearly 600,000 children under 15 and 2.5 million people age 15-24 got the Human Immunodeficiency Virus last year.
- During 1998 more than 8,500 children and young people were infected with the AIDS virus each day.
- Nearly eight million African children have been orphaned by the immune-stripping disease and at least one million are infected.
- Nearly 1,000 AIDS orphans are living or dying miserably on Nairobi's filthy streets.
- By the year 2000, half of the global population will be children. Two billion of them will live in extreme poverty or be at risk.
- There are 100 million street children in the world and by the year 2020, the number will have reached 800 million.
- The United Nations estimates that one million children enter the trade of child prostitution every year.
- Worldwide, 10 million children will become orphans as a result of AIDS in the next five years.¹
- 200 million children who are under the age of five suffer from chronic hunger. Every day 35,000 of them died because they do not have enough to eat.
- More than 25 million children don't have even a hovel to call home.
- Millions of children are working up to 16 hours every day of the week in deplorable conditions and paid almost nothing.
- In the United States alone, more than three children die each day as a result of child abuse.²

War still takes its toll on humanity, especially on those who are the weakest—children and older people.

¹*Children At Risk* (Oxford, England: Viva Network) [database on-line].

²Jennie Woods and Sandra Levinson, "It's Time for Children Everywhere" in *Children in Crisis: A New Commitment*, Phyllis Kilbourn, ed. (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1996), 89-90.

Take as an example of the last four centuries, in the microcosm of Europe alone. In the 17th century, 3.3 million people died in warfare. In the 18th century, 5.2 million. In the 19th century, 5.5 million. In the 20th century, over 28 million people have been killed in Europe alone. The 20th century has clearly become the bloodiest century in history. In fact, according to some estimates, we have possibly killed more people in this century than in the previous 19 centuries put together. These numbers do not even include the millions who have died in Russia, or the more than 60 million in China, or the 2 million in Cambodia.³

In view of such incredible lists of problems in our world, what should be our response? What should Christians do in a world that seems to be moving toward chaos? Without a doubt we should do what Jesus did. Obviously, we should not do less. Jesus preached and healed, He taught and He acted. He modeled what He taught. He not only announced the arrival of the Messianic time of justice and help for the poor and oppressed; He also fed the hungry and welcomed those who are ostracized by society into His fellowship. His diverse circle of men and women, rich and poor, crippled and well, was a visible demonstration of the Kingdom that He announced.

The core of Jesus' ethical thrust, however, is precisely his summons to begin living now in this fallen world according to the values and demands of the dawning kingdom. In the power of the Holy Spirit who works signs and wonders, it is now possible to live out Jesus' new challenge to the status quo. Jesus' gospel of the kingdom does indeed produce a disturbing community. But it is a community that lovingly challenges the evils of the status quo precisely because it shares the Creator's love for the good creation and dares to strive now toward that wholesomeness in personal, socioeconomic and political life that Christ will bring in its fullness at his return.⁴

There is an extreme within the Pentecostal-Charismatic community that tends to place all demonic powers in the heavenlies and to spiritualize the evil that is upon the earth. Without a doubt, we fight not against flesh and blood but the Church must be redemptive in the world today and not be "other worldly" only. Jesus ministered to whole persons. He healed sick bodies. He touched broken spirits. He restored those who were out of relationship with God. All peoples, regardless of their place in society, received His healing touch. He forgave the sins of those who were outcast. He touched lepers and to the amazement of the religious community, He talked with women. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, it is recorded that He spoke with women 63 times. The miraculous healings of the blind and the lame were not overshadowed by His confrontation with the powerful economic and religious leaders. He demanded that all, whether rich or poor, powerful or not powerful, to repent and change. He brought a comprehensive healing to the body and the soul, both of the individuals of society as well as communities. He even began a new community in a covenant relationship, which we call the Church.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The central truth of Christianity to which all Christians must be committed is that the God of history, out of sheer love for mankind, intervened into man's fallen state. He came into this violent, diseased and fractured world through His Son, Jesus Christ, and is

³Ravi Zacharias, "God and the Problem of Violence" in *Children and Violence* (Federal Way, WA: World Vision, 1995), 8.

⁴Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 71.

now redeeming sinners unto Himself that they may be reconciled into the household of faith. It is by His Holy Spirit that He is establishing a new community or a new order of these redeemed ones in the world. Jesus, from the very beginning of His ministry, called this new order “the Kingdom of God.” In this Kingdom, Jesus Christ is king and the Kingdom workers are His disciples who go about the work of the Kingdom. The work of the Kingdom has to do with several things:

- First, it is the proclamation of the Word of God calling people unto repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.
- It is a call for these redeemed ones to be part of the community of the King and live out their new lives in relationship with other Christians in acts of mercy.
- It is also a demonstration of God’s love with compassion to the poor and righteousness and justice to be given to society.
- It is this responsible work of stewardship and care of God’s creation and His precious resources.
- It is also spiritual warfare against the kingdom of darkness and its leader Satan which has a plan to destroy people everywhere and establish a power structure that is controlled from Satan’s world.

To bring a more holistic approach to the gospel of Christ and to continue to emphasize the need for radical conversions, the Church needs to repent of some of its misuse of the word of God and its lack of living by a full understanding of God’s meaning in conversion. Roger Greenway has suggested that this repentance needs to take the form of five important areas:

1. We need to repent of our dichotomizing between “word” and “deed” in evangelical missiology and return to the holism of the Kingdom that is plainly biblical.
2. We must repent of the truncated vision and the narrow goal-setting which many of our organizations have invested in during the past forty years, and come to an agreement on what the Lord has called us to do together.
3. We all need to take a closer look at ourselves and to admit to the middle-class “captivity” of evangelical thinking about ministry among the poor, and repent.
4. We must repent of a number of attitudinal evils that has driven a wedge between Kingdom workers and their ministries for several decades. The only cure for these evils begin with repentance and a profound change of attitude.
 - We must repent from the evil of our “priestly” tradition that is the tradition of a clergy class controlling the church and its ministries.
 - The evil of elitism is among missionaries that places one class of Kingdom workers on a pedestal above others.
 - The evil of avoiding or muting the verbal presentation of the gospel and sometimes even arguing that “deed” ministries are enough by themselves.
 - The evil of avoiding the organized church overseas, or merely using the church when it serves our purpose, but not really taking the church seriously or seeking its best interest.
 - The evil of private “empire building,” which has been a driving force behind many of the separate agencies begun in the past four decades.
5. We need to repent from practices and procedures that treat people as “clients” and which replace honest and durable relationships with a string of numerical goals, glowing reports and short-term solutions.¹

¹Roger S. Greenway, *Together Again Kinship of Word and Deed* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1998), 22-28.

MISSIONS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In chapters 24 and 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, four parables are given about an absent lord or master. The first is in Matthew 24:42 and speaks of keeping watch because you do not know the day of the Lord's return.

The second parable has a similar emphasis when it speaks of the master who puts his servant in charge over his household and what will happen if the master returns and finds out that servant has been lazy. The Scriptures goes on to state that when the master stayed away a long time, the servant began to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. Of course, when the master returned unexpectedly, he began to punish that servant.

In chapter 25, the first parable is of the ten virgins. The bridegroom was gone a long time and they all began to be drowsy and fell asleep. But five were foolish in that they did not have enough oil because they did not know when the bridegroom was going to return. The emphasis is upon the last verse of the parable; "Therefore keep watch because you do not know the day or hour."

The fourth parable has to do with a man going on a journey and as he goes, he entrusts everything to his servants. After a long time, he returned to settle accounts and then he gave to some a double reward but to the one slothful servant, he took away his one talent and gave it to the one who had ten.

The emphasis of these four parables has to do with an absent master or lord of the house. In the conclusion of chapter 25, the Scripture states that there is going to be a judgement time when the Son of Man will separate the sheep and the goats. To some, He will give eternal reward, to the others eternal punishment. The amazing thing is that neither the good servants nor the slothful servants knew when they had really served God. In this context we have this Scripture:

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you have me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:35-40, NIV)

The emphasis of these parables and this conclusion is that God has disguised Himself. To us, it seems like the Lord is not here, He is on a long journey and we do not know the day or the hour when He is returning. The truth of the matter is that God has disguised Himself as the poor, as the hungry, as the thirsty, as the stranger, as the sick and as prisoners. And when we minister unto these, we in effect, minister unto the Lord. The work of the Church is to minister as unto the Lord to the least of these until the King returns.

In a day when there is much tension in missions and missionary strategies are becoming more complex, God still calls us to simple acts of mercy.

Global appeals of cyberspace escapism, economic gluttony, violent outbursts, and unlimited indulgences mesmerize people deeply hungry for a sense of personal significance and particular value in today's world. Our missionary response to these peoples must emerge from three strong commitments. First, we must understand the

significance of past and currently emerging societal and global trends as the contexts in which Christ's redemptive love is learned. Second, we must retire all paradigms, programs, and individuals whose insightful light and salty significance no longer relate to the world's changing life contexts. And, finally, we must return to the Lord in honest humility, prepared with knowledge of the signs of the times but peacefully awaiting the anointing of his Spirit for the adventures ahead. He calls us his friends. He yearns to take us into the best life of all, a walk of total integrity with Christ in a world hungry for such integrity.²

²Lynn Joesting Day, "Considering the Contexts of Twenty-First Century Missions" in *With an Eye on the Future*, Duane Elmer and Lois McKinney, eds. (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1996), 119-120.