

Keeping Good News and Good Works Together¹

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We believe Christ our Lord longs for his community of disciples to weave together a seamless garment of active peacemaking, authentic compassion, and pursuit of justice together with winsome, passionate evangelism. And we believe Anabaptists ought to be the leaders in that kind of holistic mission.

Anabaptists Should be Leaders in Holistic Mission

The first reason for this is how holistic mission is rooted in Anabaptist history. When our movement began in the sixteenth century, early Anabaptists combined evangelism, peacemaking, and a concern for economic justice. Our spiritual forebears lived and preached peace, rejecting the sword and modeling economic sharing. They also sent passionate evangelists all over Europe, inviting people to a vibrant personal faith in Christ and baptizing those who embraced their message. Early Anabaptists were so eager to proclaim the good news about Jesus that their persecutors would forcibly prevent them from speaking.

Second, understanding Jesus' gospel as the good news of the kingdom—beyond solely the forgiveness of individual sins—is a central theological foundation for holistic mission. Jesus' in-breaking kingdom brings not only a new forgiven relationship with God but also transformed socioeconomic relationships in Jesus' new messianic community—and this transformation spills over and improves surrounding society. Mennonites have had this understanding of the gospel for many decades in a way that has been deeper and more widespread than in many other parts of the Christian church.

Third, there is a deep longing in our world for an end to the pervasive vio-

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lence and injustice that devastates so many lives. Our Anabaptist understanding of Christ as the Prince of Peace who calls everyone to peace and justice speaks to that longing. That message is intertwined with the good news that when persons place their faith in Christ, his Spirit lives in them and empowers them to become self-sacrificial agents of change. Thus holistic mission offers a transformative and appealing hope in a violent, unjust world.

Finally, we Anabaptists say we want to imitate the biblical Christ. We look to the stories of what Jesus did and taught as a model for what it means to live as a follower of Jesus. And the Gospels show Jesus loving the whole person, body and soul. He healed sick bodies, called people to compassion, challenged prevailing ideas about violence, confronted the unjust acquisition of wealth, and offered forgiveness of sins. He sent out his disciples to share in his work: “Cure the sick who are there, *and* say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:9, emphasis ours).

Why Are So Many Mennonites Hesitant about Evangelism?

Why then are so many Mennonites today—particularly in white, middle-class churches—so hesitant to practice evangelism?³ Why do only half of Mennonites speak regularly about their faith to people outside their church and family? Why are only 2 percent of Mennonites new believers, versus those born to Mennonite families or denominational transfers?⁴ Again, there are many reasons.

Centuries of persecution have certainly helped to make us the “quiet in the land”—people who just want to be left alone to follow Jesus. The stream of Mennonites who immigrated to Russia made a pact with Catherine the Great to abstain from proselytizing in return for land and security. While Mennonites living in the West today rarely face persecution or overt restrictions on evangelism, hesitancy to verbally share our faith has become embedded in our identity.

Secondly, Mennonites react against the imperialist, destructive way evangelism has sometimes been practiced. Historically, Christian mission too often went hand in hand with colonization and suppression of indigenous cultures.

3 We note that Mennonites in predominantly non-Anglo churches are more likely to practice vibrant evangelism. For example, in a national survey of Mennonites, respondents in the “racial/ethnic” category were three times more likely to regularly invite non-Christians to church activities than other Mennonites. See Conrad Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007), 72–73.

4 *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

Evangelism was used as an instrument of coercion rather than liberation. Today, we observe some Christians engaging in aggressive techniques to “win souls” while ignoring the rest of people’s lives, tangling up gospel proclamation with a political agenda, or manipulating converts for financial gain. Because we value peace and justice, Mennonites tend to toss out the evangelism baby with the dirty bathwater that has too often accompanied it.

A third factor is cultural assimilation. Many Mennonites living in the West like to think of themselves as distinct, but research shows that our worldview and lifestyle largely mirror the secular culture around us.⁵ Our culture tells us that religion is a private matter and that sharing personal faith is inherently offensive. Social justice is trendy; talking about Jesus is not.

Finally, some Mennonites have embraced a theological stance that undermines the call and commitment to evangelism. This group is relatively small when compared to the whole Mennonite body, and our official theological statements are still those of historic Christianity. But there is an influential minority of Mennonites who question traditional claims about the deity of Christ, his bodily resurrection, and his uniqueness as the way to salvation. Their focus is on peace and justice. They advocate choosing a nonviolent lifestyle and working toward ending war and injustice in the name of Christ. But this group is disconnected from the calling of Christ to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Their sense of mission is vital, but incomplete.

The following story illuminates the problem. I (Ron) spoke a few years ago to the seniors at Taylor University, an evangelical school in Indiana. One senior introduced herself to me as a Mennonite, the daughter of missionary parents. She told me that as a junior, she had done a semester in Israel. She was thrilled to visit all the places where Jesus walked, but slowly became aware that her class was meeting almost exclusively with Israelis. They were not engaging with the Palestinians. Then she met the Christian Peacemaker Teams in Hebron. She was delighted with what they were doing. In fact, she said, she believed she had found her calling for life. The next fall, she had attended Christian Peacemaker Teams’ national conference. Sadly, she told me how terribly disappointed she was because the conference had very little about Jesus and nothing about inviting others to follow him.

Let us be clear. CPT is a very important movement. We want it to multiply exponentially in size and impact. We have respect and gratitude for the teams who courageously embody their faith by demonstrating the power of nonviolent action. But we also believe it is a loss when Christian activists who seek peace

⁵ Ibid.

and justice do not also embrace publicly the power of personal transformation through Christ. What might have happened if top Mennonite leaders had dared to wholeheartedly endorse CPT while helping CPT to integrate word and deed in their witness to Christ?⁶

Keeping Evangelism, Peacemaking, and the Work for Justice Together

The central tenets of historic Christianity are an essential foundation for evangelism. We believe they also provide crucial grounding for peacemaking and work for justice.

In Jesus' day, messianic pretenders got crucified. The only conceivable conclusion on the day after Jesus' crucifixion was that the Nazarene prophet of peace and justice was a fraudulent failure. Yet when Thomas met the risen Jesus, he said, "My Lord and my God!" The early church, comprised overwhelmingly of strict Jewish monotheists, dared to call a backwater carpenter not just Messiah but Lord—*kurios*, the Greek word used in the translation of the Hebrew word *Yahweh*. It was only because they met the risen Jesus that they dared to believe again that his kingdom of peace and justice was actually breaking into history.

If Jesus is only another great prophet, then there is little compelling reason to go around the block and the world inviting others to believe in him. But if the carpenter from Nazareth is both true God and true man, then we have an urgent incentive to tell others. If his resurrection on the third day was a powerful demonstration of his claim to be the Son of God, then believing that he is the only way to salvation is not presumptuous.

In fact, the deity and resurrection of Jesus is central to peacemaking. Loving one's enemies, daring to forgive and confront rather than kill even the worst tyrants, laying down one's life to overcome evil with good, is a very difficult path to walk. While Christians are not the only ones who choose this path, knowing that the God-man Jesus modeled this by suffering for our sake offers a powerful motive and guide. The one who calls us to sacrificial love for enemies is the Creator-of-the-universe-made-flesh who offered forgiveness even to his murderers.

⁶ We realize that verbal witness to Christ is not possible or appropriate in every context where CPT and other Christian groups are involved. What we yearn for is more intentional grounding of the work of peacemaking in God's unique work of reconciliation through Christ, and the passionate desire to plant seeds of this reconciliation throughout the world.

Furthermore, it is Jesus' resurrection as the guarantee of our resurrection at his second coming that gives us the courage to risk death to love enemies. Death does not mark the end for those who believe in Christ. Knowing that we will be raised with him to live forever powerfully emboldens us to stand up for peace and justice in this violent world.

As noted earlier, Jesus' gospel of the kingdom leads inevitably to combining word and deed. The prophets had predicted that the future Messiah would bring forgiveness of sins as well as peace and justice. Jesus claimed to be that long-expected Messiah. Central to his ministry was the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17). Jesus described God as a father who longs to forgive prodigal daughters and sons. Equally central was the claim that the messianic time of peace and justice was actually breaking into the present in Jesus and his new community. He validated his messianic claim by pointing to both his restorative deeds and his transformative preaching (Matt 11:2–6). And he sent out his disciples to do the same as they preached and lived the gospel of the kingdom.⁷ As followers of Jesus, we cannot pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matt 6:10) and then do only evangelism—or only social action.

Other significant theological themes also provide a foundation for holistic mission. Since God created persons with both a physical and a spiritual dimension, God values both social action that secures material necessities and evangelism that leads to spiritual renewal. Since Scripture condemns sin that is both personal (e.g., lying and adultery) and social (e.g., political corruption and economic oppression), righteousness demands both discipleship that transforms personal character and advocacy that creates more just, peaceful social structures. Since biblical eschatology indicates that at the end of history this broken world will not be destroyed but renewed, Christians anticipate that Christ's return will herald a restored creation where the best of human civilization will be taken up into the New Jerusalem. We trust that both evangelism and social action have eternal consequences. Thus by leading people to Christ and improving society, we work toward that partial transformation that Christ will complete at his return.⁸

7 See Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), especially chapters 3 and 4.

8 For a fuller statement of these points, see Sider, *Good News and Good Works*; see also Ronald J. Sider, Philip Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002) for descriptions of how this theology looks in practice.

Evangelism and Social Action Are Inseparably Connected, but Not Identical

Our Anabaptist faith leads us to see evangelism and social action as essential and intertwined—but not identical. Social action is that set of activities whose primary purpose is improving the physical, socioeconomic, and political well-being of people through relief, development, structural change, and the reduction of violence. Evangelism is that set of activities whose primary intention is to invite non-Christians to embrace Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, undergo baptism, join Jesus' new redeemed community, and experience daily personal fellowship with the Holy Spirit, with the joyful anticipation of eternal life with God.

We can and must look beyond an individualistic approach to mission that only values counting souls. But in a similar way we should not neglect the spiritual needs of individuals. Persons can be regenerated only through the saving work of Christ. We cannot evangelize social structures—e.g., corporations, governments, and economic systems—though we ought to work to change them. In addition to advocating for reform, we can pray against evil spiritual forces that twist social structures away from the good that God intends. We can prophetically envision their transformation when Christ reigns victorious over all injustice. We can also seek opportunities to share Christ with people in positions of influence in these structures, as well as the people negatively affected by them.

Defining evangelism and social action as distinct though overlapping areas of focus is important if we are to fulfill the full scope of our mission. Though evangelism has socially beneficial consequences, we cannot claim that just telling people about Christ constitutes social action. This gives Christians an excuse to neglect the deliberate, costly acts of service, organizing, advocacy, and peacemaking required to truly love our neighbor. Conversely, if everything Christians are sent into the world to do is called evangelism, then people may focus exclusively on social action and peacemaking while claiming to be sharing the gospel—though they never invite a single person to accept Christ. The special task of communicating the gospel with the prayer that others will accept Christ and become his followers tends to get lost.

Can our good deeds attract people to Christ? Is the Holy Spirit active in drawing hearts to God even before we say a word? Certainly. But at some point, to be faithful to the Lord of the harvest, Christians must explicitly speak the good news. We must give attention to telling our faith story, inviting people into our church or spiritual community, offering to study the Bible together, to pray intercessory prayer, and to do other activity intended to encourage individ-

uals to accept and follow Christ. This doesn't mean pushing the gospel message on people who don't want to hear it or pressuring people before they are ready to accept it. We must listen before we speak, look for appropriate times and ways to share, respect people's right to reject our message, and depend on the Holy Spirit to do the convicting and converting. We can admit to not having all the answers. But we need to recognize that our love for our neighbor is incomplete unless we share Christ in word as well as in deed.⁹

While good news and good works are not identical, they are inseparably connected and mutually reinforcing.¹⁰ In practice, evangelism has a social action dimension and social action has an evangelistic dimension. Biblical evangelism calls on people to embrace Christ, not just as a Savior who forgives sins, but also as Lord of every area of life including one's politics and economics. That means helping converts to repent of perpetuating systems of injustice and violence, as well as individual moral failings. Holy Spirit-transformed persons begin to live differently, and their transformed lives slowly make whole societies more just and peaceful. We see this in the example of the corrupt official Zacchaeus, who was so overjoyed by his encounter with Jesus that he made restitution to those he had defrauded and pledged generous support to the poor (Luke 19:2–10).

Biblical evangelism also draws people into a community of faith that engages their gifts in social action. Furthermore, just being the church—if our communal life truly follows Jesus' way—develops models of mutual caring and sharing that the broader society frequently is inspired to imitate. One example among many is the manner in which Christians have led the way in starting hospitals for the sick and schools for poor children.

Social action and peacemaking can also foster evangelism. Good works point to the goodness of the kingdom that is fully realized only in Christ. When people see Christians working to end violence and overcome poverty, they become more open to the gospel. If we communicate that we do these things because of the love of Jesus, others may be more ready to hear about who this Jesus really is. Our actions make our words more credible and compelling.

Bernard Sejour's story demonstrates this powerful link. As a Haitian, Bernard wanted to make a difference for his country, so he became a human rights worker. He met Anna, a Mennonite Central Committee worker serving in his organization. He noticed something different about Anna and learned she

⁹ Sider, *Good News and Good Works*, chapter 9 and appendix.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter 10; see also Sider et al., *Churches That Make a Difference*, chapters 1–5.

was a Mennonite. Forced to flee to the United States because of his activism, Bernard tracked down other Mennonites, who explained the gospel more fully to him. He gained pastoral training at a Mennonite college and planted a church for Haitians in Philadelphia—right before the massive earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010. A grant from MCC helped Bernard to offer case management for newly arriving Haitians who had lost everything. His work helping immigrants access legal and social services has also given him opportunity to form relationships that lead to invitations to his church community, which is intentionally welcoming to “whoever wants to know who Jesus is.”

Let’s End the Scandal!

Our dream for the Mennonite church is that every congregation would continually be engaging non-Christians “to know who Jesus is,” inviting them to accept him as Savior and Lord, and throwing their arms around these new Christians, helping them to become the whole persons God desires. And every Mennonite congregation would also be actively engaged in ending poverty, correcting injustice, and reducing violence in our world. Think of the impact if this is what non-Christians experienced with their local Mennonite congregation. Think of the impact if everyone connected with agencies like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonite Economic Development Associates were daily praying for the right opportunity to gently, winsomely tell of their love for Christ and share the gospel. Think of the impact if everyone connected with agencies like Mennonite Mission Network and Eastern Mennonite Missions were regularly asking for divine guidance on how their church planting activities can promote peace and justice.

Let’s end the scandal where some of our churches primarily do evangelism, others primarily do peace and justice, and far too many do neither. Let’s love whole persons the way Jesus did.

Principles for keeping word and deed together

Love

Both evangelism and social action should be motivated and guided by love, which always seeks what is best for the other person, even at a cost. We do not engage in evangelism or social action to enlarge our own, or our congregation's, "empires" (Mark 12:29–31; 1 Cor 13:1–3; John 3:16–18).

Holism

We minister to whole persons, recognizing that people are more than just souls or bodies. People need both spiritual salvation and tangible acts of mercy and justice. We also are all called to repent of both personal sins and participation in systemic evils (Ps 107:5–9; Matt 9:35; 3 John 1:2).

Relationships

Making the good news real requires incarnational involvement. Both good news and good works are most effective, and have the most integrity, in the context of authentic, bridge-building relationships that reflect the reconciling work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:18; Col 1:15–22; Eph 2:13–19).

Respect

We affirm the dignity and worth of each individual regardless of religious or economic status, grounded in the imago Dei (image of God). This includes respecting each person's God-given right to religious freedom, so our ministry methods are never coercive or manipulative (Gen 1:27; Prov 14:31; James 2:1–5).

Special concern for those who are poor and marginalized

In both evangelism and social action, we can emulate God's attentive care for those who are poor and vulnerable throughout Scripture, and Jesus' intentional ministry of reaching out to those on the margins of society (Deut 15:4–11; Luke 4:18–19; 7:18–22; 1 Cor 1:26).