

# Fundamentalists

## FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

### *Very Conservative Christians Serving the Poor*

BY TODD LAKE

“**Y**ou can’t preach to dead people,” they told me. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay in the mid ’80s; they were fundamentalist missionaries working with the Ache Indians near the village where I lived. And this was the pithy way with which they summarized the importance of their efforts to meet the economic, medical, and housing needs of the members of the tribe with whom they worked.

This statement would never pass muster with the enlightened, socially conscious evangelical crowd. But the New Tribes Missions (NTM) people were there actually serving the poor, while the enlightened evangelicals were nowhere to be found in that corner of the Third World. In fact, in Paraguay, NTM missionaries served each of the 18 linguistically distinct tribes in that country. They were there to engage in Bible translation, but it turned out that the vast majority of their work (one missionary estimated 95 percent) was in the area of agricultural improvement, school construction and management, literacy work among adults, home-building, well-digging, and the creation of medical clinics.

It was not that the missionaries had set out to help the poor. NTM makes Wycliffe Bible Translators look liberal; they even have hair length restrictions for the men and dress codes for the women. Their missionaries had gone to Paraguay to tell people about Jesus so that they would not burn in hell for eternity. As part of that mission, they engaged in Bible translation work. And as part of that mission, they lived among the people to learn their language. Suddenly, they were surrounded by people who would die if they did not get to

a hospital immediately. So they used the mission vehicle to get them there. After a few times of doing this for easily treatable maladies, the missionaries created a link with a doctor in a nearby town to provide preventive care. But some things that needed preventing—like parasites—require that one sleep in a bed and use a sanitary latrine. So teaching how to build cement latrine floors and construct houses and beds became the order of the day. And to finance these expenses, it became necessary to help the Ache Indians learn better ways to plant and protect and harvest and rotate crops.

But growing the crops is only half the equation. The other half is selling the crops, and here issues of systemic injustice came to the fore. The buyers of the crops are Spanish- and Guarani-speaking middlemen with vehicles and connections, while the sellers are in this case Ache- and Guarani-speaking subsistence farmers with no vehicles and no way to communicate directly with the Spanish-speaking world. It is a perfect setup for unjust treatment regarding payment, and no effort is spared to defraud the Indians of the fruit of their labors. Enter the missionaries, who speak Spanish, Guarani, and Ache. They are in a position to stand up for the Indian farmers and ensure that they get a fair price for their crops. In several cases, the missionaries have been threatened by those whose economic interests are affected by this “meddling.” But the missionaries knew that the credibility of their evangelistic mission hinged on their being known as pro-Ache, so they have stuck to their guns (in at least one case literally, when violence was threatened).

The NTM missionaries in Paraguay are not unique. Fundamentalist missionaries around the globe are quietly and (in the best and worst senses of the word) unreflectively engaging in significant ministry to the poor. In fact, it does not overstate the case to say that it is precisely very conservative American Christians who are most likely to serve the poor as overseas missionaries. Their motive is the verbal proclamation of the gospel. But once they are immersed in a sea of need, they take the lead in their community to help alleviate the suffering they see. Progressive evangelicals, moderate mainliners, and liberal Christians can all talk a good game, but they are underrepresented among those serving as missionaries.

In the United States, progressive evangelicals, moderate mainliners, and liberal Christians do outpace the fundamentalists when it comes to social justice causes. But even here, fundamentalist efforts are often discounted because their motives are evangelistic and not “humanitarian.” Look beyond the AWANA clubs in their churches, their all-male staffs and deacons, enthusiastic “soul-winning” projects, and their statements of faith regarding a wife’s requirement to “graciously submit” to her husband.

You will probably find in your city that those who are visiting the prisoners every week are fundamentalists. This is in accord with Matthew 25, a favorite progressive evangelical passage and decidedly not a fundamentalist memory verse. Indeed, fundamentalists would be just as surprised as the folks in Matthew 25 that their ministry to those in need had anything to do with Jesus himself. Likewise, your local rescue mission is probably led mostly by people who would be defined as fundamentalists. They are available to the down and out of our cities in ways that most Christians would not even consider. Yet somehow, the very name “fundamentalist” makes many of us think of “soul winning” disengaged from any concern with the earthly needs of those around us.

I know how easy it is to write off fundamentalists. I was talking with someone recently about organizing a series of mini-conferences on our campus that dealt with the issues of homelessness, at-risk women and girls, prisoners, and others on the margins of society but at the center of God’s concern. He offered to help fund the conferences as part of his personal engagement with the poor in Nashville. He and his wife are deeply involved in the lives of drug addicts, abused women, former prostitutes, prisoners, and the like. They volunteer countless hours and give very generously. As our conversation was just about over, he pulled out a page of small charts that showed how all these problems began in the early 1960s, when, as he put it, “God was kicked out of the schools. We didn’t have these problems when kids could read the Bible and pray in school. But now that they teach

evolution, these kids think they are just animals.” I was taken aback at his Focus-on-the-Family style analysis of public policy and legal decisions. Then the axe fell. “Before we fund the mini-conference, I’d like you to talk with a buddy of mine at First Baptist Church in Leesburg, Fla. His name is Ken Smith, and he’s on staff there as an evangelist.”

I figured the conferences were now going to be a shell of their former selves, a thin veneer of social concern that masked a seething sea of hard-sell evangelism. One look at FBC Leesburg’s website confirmed my worst fears: Ken Smith was indeed listed as a professional evangelist, and this in a state that takes its evangelism full-strength. The church he worked at had adopted the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, which has been used to go after anyone in the Southern Baptist denomination who believes in egalitarian marriage or women in ministry.

I had promised to call Mr. Smith, but when I dialed the phone I hoped to get his machine. The phone rang and he answered. He was very nice (a clever ruse, I thought), and directed me back to the website to find out more about the church. As we talked, I noticed that under “Our Ministries,” in addition to the usual listings for “children’s” and “music,” was the heading “Ministry Village.” This was not hyperbole. There really was a little village of houses on the church property. Here are the years the various ministries were begun and what the Ministry Village includes:

- 1982 **The Rescue Mission Men’s Residence**, which provides 30 beds and programs that include a 12-week substance abuse program
- 1985 **Children’s Shelter Home**, which serves 12 abused and neglected children ages 6 to 12 at any one time
- 1987 **Pregnancy Care Center**, which serves 1,200 women and girls each year with clothing, counseling on alternatives to abortion, prenatal classes, and post-abortion counseling
- 1989 **Women’s Care Center**, which provides a transitional home for displaced women and their young children who have suffered abuse, neglect, and homelessness
- 1991 **Benevolence Center**, which offers food, clothing, and financial assistance for utilities and rent, plus verbal presentation of the gospel, counseling, and budget training
- 1996 **Community Medical Center**, which serves thousands of patients each year
- 2000 **Teen Shelter Home**, which houses 12 teens ages 13 to 17

By scanning the ministries in the order of their founding, one can see a clear development from the most traditional type of rescue mission outreach sanctioned by fundamentalist churches, to services to children who because of their innocence are easy to sympathize with, to a ministry driven by the abortion issue. But FBC Leesburg did not stop there. They moved on to serve victimized women, poor families, the sick, and teens from broken homes—all this without taking a step away from their fundamentalist convictions. The latest efforts are to develop an advocacy center staffed with Christian attorneys and mental health counselors. This is fundamentalism that takes the Bible both literally and seriously. It is not social action instead of evangelism, as one might caricature the mainline approach. And it is not social action with a little bit of evangelism, as one might caricature the progressive evangelical approach. It is evangelism that endeavors to be “all things to all people that by all means some might be saved.” Neither social justice or *shalom* is the aim, but saving souls. But the correct understanding of “soul” leads this church, and others like it, to minister to the whole person.

FBC Leesburg has a staff that includes three African Americans, which helps the congregation avoid an us/them mentality when ministering to the poor in their community, who are largely people of color. The church is growing, but the pastor has refused to build a new sanctuary unless the building can be used 24/7 to meet the needs of others. But there is no doubt that each ministry has the verbal proclamation of the gospel as its centerpiece, just as traditional fundamentalist outreach to prisoners and the homeless does. Here is one testimony from a man who was in the Rescue Mission Men’s Residence: “As I grew older, I began seeking after worldly things in order to find fulfillment in my life. All that seemed to matter was that I become successful in business and have fun. The lifestyle in which I was involved was taking its toll on my family and me but I would not admit it. I became abusive to my lovely wife and family. One Saturday, as I sat in my jail cell, God sent an

old friend of the family who told me about a Savior who could take away my guilt and shame. He said that if I would trust Jesus Christ and turn my life over to him, he would provide the fulfillment I was so desperately seeking.” You know the rest of the story. And every time we hear such stories, they renew our awe at the power of the gospel to change lives.

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t like the fact that fundamentalists keep women out of the ministries God is calling them to. But the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox do the same, and few of us have a viscerally negative reaction to making common cause with them. There is still some cachet attached to the Catholic Church, what with all the great art

and architecture, not to mention all the smart people who are Catholics. So being friends with the local priest establishes one’s bona fides as a broadminded Protestant minister. But fundamentalists? They are considered beneath notice by many evangelicals, a throwback to an embarrassing past we would rather forget.

Yet the great women and men who preached in the early days of the Salvation Army are doctrinal kin to modern-day fundamentalists. The Army went into the slums to save sinners by the preaching of the gospel. Their motto was “Blood & Fire,” their publication was *The War Cry*, and the proof of their victory was not in the number of social services they provided but in the number of souls that were saved. That intense focus

on the salvation of individuals can be perverted to exclude concern for their earthly needs. But the focus on earthly needs can likewise lead us to neglect being bold to “tell the poor wanderer a Savior has died.” We need to seek out those fundamentalists in our communities who are engaged with the poor for Jesus’ sake and perhaps be reminded by them that showing the love of Jesus must include telling of that love to each person for whom Christ died. ■

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