When the communists took over Russia in 1917, they did not make Christianity illegal. Their constitution, in fact, did guarantee freedom of religion. But what they did make illegal was for the church to do any ‘good works.’ No longer could the church fulfill its historic role in feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, housing the orphan, educating children or caring for the sick. What was the result? Seventy years later, the church was totally irrelevant to the communities in which it dwelt. What Lenin did by diabolic design, most churches have done by default. But the result is identical. Church is irrelevant to most people. Take away service and you take away the church’s power, influence, and evangelistic effectiveness. The power of the gospel is combining the life-changing message with selfless service.

Eric Swanson, Ten Paradigm Shifts Toward Community Transformation

In the past century, evangelical leaders focused predominantly on the gospel as something which was to be proclaimed. The central issue was the accurate content of the gospel. Preaching clearly and relevantly the gospel of Jesus Christ is no small matter, and with the tendency to move off the target and drift into heresy or complacency, it is vital to stay fully engaged in the historical truth of Scripture, to defend the faith, and to hold up the word of God as the sole reliable, divinely inspired, accurate document of truth pertaining to our relationship with God.

Evangelicals have done this, and spearheaded some of the greatest mass proclamations in history across the globe. Millions upon millions have come to know the Lord through the bold and simple proclamation of the truth of the gospel, in stadiums around the word, by campaigns on television, and literature distribution and film. The gospel itself is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. If it is not “spoken” clearly it is hard to know what it is and what decision I need to make.

It is important to keep preaching the gospel to all who will hear, by all sorts of means and methods. Often times Christians get into silly arguments about the best and worst ways of presenting the gospel. Their arguments are usually supported by making a straw man of one side and then knocking it apart ruthlessly to prove that their way of presenting the gospel is better, more relevant, clearer, and for all I know, vitamin fortified.

At the same time, what has been largely missing in the last 100 years, but is now surging into the foreground at most every level, is the renewed concern and involvement in acts of compassion, mercy, and justice in the culture at large, often through the existing government, education, and non profit organizations.

Globally, there are 2 scenarios that have brought this to the forefront in the last decade. One is the ongoing pandemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa. The other was the Asian Tsunami of December 2004. Both of these in different ways have brought on a global level the attention of Christians. Perhaps no one has represented the needs in Africa as much as Bono, lead singer for the rock group U2. His relentless activism has caused Christians to pay attention to this crisis. Rick Warren’s PEACE Plan is another example of activating Christians around the world to get involved in the humanitarian needs and crises that exist in Africa. It appears that our best
work in this is still ahead of us on this and other humanitarian crises existing in Africa, from the need to get good drinking water to the huge humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

But students can make a difference there as they go, partnered with African leaders who will show the rest of us the best ways to help. We must not go only with big hearts, but also in ways that support leaders in Africa who live each day with the results of our actions after we are gone. It is important that we connect and serve them as partners who have much to learn about this continent and its needs.

The Tsunami as a crisis drew great attention and instantaneous involvement from Christians around the world. Students went to help in immediate clean up efforts that bore great fruit. Teams of Americans and Thai students combined their resources to help rebuild homes and establish churches within the first year after the tsunami.

From rebuilding a school in Turkey to visiting orphanages in Brazil, it seems students are on the leading edge of the desire to get involved in “hands on” work.

This should be no surprise. Jesus speaks very clearly about the connection of spirituality with connecting to the poor, disadvantaged, and marginalized of society. When ways are made available for students to get involved in these efforts, they barely need to be publicized. In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, over 15,000 students showed up over the next 8 months to pitch in and help, just through Campus Crusade for Christ efforts. There was literally no national or regional advertising or marketing to attract attention to this, except for a website where you could get more information. Yet this was the largest outreach in terms of participation that we ever had “sponsored” that wasn’t attached to a conference. Volunteers spent from a weekend, to a week, to a whole summer doing some of the dirtiest labor, living in rough conditions, all to help in the name of Christ, and to share His love in a personal way.

Combining the presentation of the gospel with the demonstration of the gospel is clearly in the crosshairs of this generation. The challenge will be to continue to be bold and courageous (which is not the equivalent of obnoxious or irritating) while immersing yourselves in helping to meet the needs of the world around you.

There are so many options where ever you live. You do not have to cross borders to make this happen. The first is within the community you live in, including the university community itself. Obviously the university community typically has the resources to care for its own, but sometimes the university has programming designed to help those right nearby. If it does, plug into it. If it doesn’t, start one yourself.

In El Salvador, Campus Crusade’s director Layo Leiva has a vision for seeing his country changed by the gospel. He has shared how the statistics of crime, divorce, and unwed pregnancy outside of marriage are not much different between the Christian and non Christian population. His heart breaks as he shares the need to see the country transformed by the power of Jesus. And Layo is doing something about it.

He is creating ways for Christian university students to be exposed to opportunities to serve Christ in the community before they graduate. He wants them to experience the ills of the society around them, and develop a heart for those in need. Then, as they graduate, those same opportunities become possible areas of service as a volunteer or as a full time employee. His goal is to see the body of Christ help lead change. He is building on the principle of partnership as well, in having spiritual, governmental, and other charitable organizations band together to focus on the key problems confronting this city and country.

Your generation is bridging the gap that should never have been, the gap between gospel proclamation and social transformation. This is a part of the changing landscape that has been at work in the last 20 years. Like the tsunami, only with constructive impact, the wave is building of student leaders with a vision and passion to be involved directly in helping to meet the needs of others, locally, nationally, and globally. Don’t turn away from that wave. Ride that wave as far and long as possible.

One of my best friends over the past decade is Chip Scivicque. Chip has been in student ministry for over 30 years. While in Thailand visiting an orphanage, Chip and his wife Vicky found themselves falling for a cute little Thai baby. This little baby had a cleft palate that left her almost no ability to suck. It was so severe that she would have starved to death right
there in the orphanage, had not Chip and Vicky chosen to act. They adopted this little baby, Amber, and she is now a healthy 16 year old girl.

Chip has been on the forefront of helping to lead our ministry to be more personally involved in the world around us as. He spearheaded efforts with the Tsunami relief in Thailand, and also with Katrina relief in the Gulf coast. He now gives leadership to the US campus ministry efforts to combine “good deeds” with the “good news.” Here is what he says about the motivation we would have as followers of Christ:

“Because the Father and Son are rich with mercy and compassion, God’s people have always been called to mercy and compassion toward the needy of society. There are over 2000 references in the Scripture where God is calling his people to divide their bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into their homes, to cover the naked, preach good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, comfort those who mourn, to help the helpless, be a father to the fatherless, bring relief to widows, free captives, bring justice to the oppressed – to be people who “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with [our] God.”

I think we all need to keep in mind that as we get more involved in these efforts, there is a temptation to become very practical, and overly strategic. We will see the incredible position that being involved in good works brings the gospel, and we can fall off on one of two sides. One is to begin to do things just out of this practical side, kind of like building a platform for the sake of what comes afterward, and not for its own sake.

Chip puts it like this, “We engage in community service/humanitarian aid primarily as an expression of genuine concern and never as simply a means to the end of access and credibility.” God is concerned about motives, means, and ends.

The other side of the fence to fall off of is that we fail to keep proclaiming Christ. This is where we can easily move away from eternal solutions to only providing practical help. This error is easy to make, because like always, we tend to be afraid of alienating people with the gospel. Why ruin the “feel good” experience by trying to help someone discover the central importance of Jesus and the even better news He brings than the warm house and a bag of groceries. However, the people that have watched you help them, how you have given selflessly to them and for them, are eager, they are the MOST curious of all to know what motivates you.

I read recently that Pastor Cho, in South Korea, pastor of the world’s largest church, instructs the members of his church in what to say when asked about the intentional acts of kindness they perform... When asked by those who are blessed by them why they do their kind acts, they are told to say: “I am a disciple of Jesus. I am serving him by serving you, because that’s what he came to do.” That works for me. What an easy way to explain why you do what you do. This is a very short bridge to cross to help someone understand the gospel then.

Steve Douglass has said that this is personal ministry of winning, building, and sending, in the context of love. How simply profound is that! Loving people as Jesus would makes it very easy to share the truth about who Jesus is.

When we enter in to identification with those who are hungry, or homeless, or fatherless, or some other emotional, physical, relational need, we actually are living out what Jesus did for us. One who had all the riches of heaven leaves his home, and takes on the form of a man, and eventually dies for us (Phil. 2). It is an act of great humility just to take on the limitations and weaknesses of human flesh. But Jesus did that and far more.

When He lives fully in and through us, we will be provoked to do the same for others to identify with them. And they’ll see Jesus there. So attention will be brought to him. And He will bring His sheep to himself.

This is going on all over the world, and the time is ripe for the Christian students of this generation to lead the way in acts of mercy and kindness.

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