

White-Man's Burden Revisited: The Oppressiveness of Certain Forms of Christian Benevolence Ministry

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Derived from the title of an 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling,¹ the phrase “white-man’s burden” is used pejoratively to refer to the often misguided and subtly imperialistic efforts by wealthy western nations to assist poorer nations through the provision of financial and other aid. Although the provision of aid may appear well-intentioned, the cost to recipient nations can be the loss of national and cultural identity, as well as the loss of the right to self-determination. To a large extent, “benevolence ministries” practiced by many evangelical Christian churches in the United States resemble on a small scale the efforts of wealthy western nations. Specifically, when divorced from genuine personal engagement, efforts by Christians to provide one-time or short-term financial assistance to those of lower socio-economic status—though well-intentioned—can rob the recipients of their dignity and can become little more than a form of religious imperialism, embodying all that is wrong with the white-man’s-burden approach to international aid. Moreover, precisely because these benevolence efforts *are* typically divorced from genuine personal engagement, they fail to capture the true nature of what Gary Deddo calls “covenantal love” for neighbor,² which derives from the eternal relationship of love within the Trinity between and among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this paper I will discuss the insidious nature of these benevolence ministries using a personal example, followed by a discussion of how a relational Trinitarian perspective should shape our ministry efforts. Finally, I will offer a brief example of an approach to ministry that seeks to incorporate the theological perspective I espouse in this paper.

When Did Serving Others Become About Me?

The problem with typical benevolence ministries became painfully apparent to me recently. I am part of a small faith community in the early stages of planting a church in

¹ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden,” in *Rudyard Kipling: The Complete Verse* (London: Kyle Cathie Ltd., 1995), 261.

² Gary W. Deddo, “Neighbors in Racial Reconciliation: The Contribution of a Trinitarian Theological Anthropology,” *Cultural Encounters* 3.2 (2007): 35.

southeast Portland. Last year, as the holidays approached, we decided as a community that, through two local schools, we would seek to help meet the needs of area families by providing them with food and gift cards. Our intention was to do more than give people one-time assistance; by delivering the food ourselves we hoped to make personal connections with the people whom we were assisting. We thought that by doing this we would gain credibility, which might lead to opportunities for deeper relationships.

I served as the contact person for our group, making delivery arrangements with families. During one telephone call I spoke to a gentleman who explained that he had been unable to work for medical reasons and that he and his family very much appreciated the assistance. Then, to my surprise, he asked what he could do for me. Unprepared for the question, I quickly responded that his offer was unnecessary. Immediately after the conversation I realized that in declining this man's offer out of hand I had stripped him of his dignity. I also realized that it had been my pride that had kept me from accepting his offer. Didn't he know that *he* was the one who needed help, *not me*? As I reflected further I began to see the problems with this sort of "ministry."

Benevolence ministries that are based on giving some small amount of money to people in financial need are often, in a subtle and perverse way, designed to satisfy a need of the giver—the need to feel good about one's self by doing one's heavenly duty. They are perverse because, although they might meet a short-term need that some impoverished person (sometimes white, though more often brown) may have, a need for food or clothing, they often do so at the expense of the recipient's dignity. They subtly turn the recipient's very need into a commodity to be consumed by the giver, a modern-day indulgence whereby the giver believes he gains a measure of God's favor. As a bonus, the giver can feel good about his efforts to bridge racial divides precisely because the recipients of the "blessing" are often people of color.³ These ministries provide the giver what they want (an opportunity to feel good about self), when they want it (usually only during the holidays), at the least personal cost to themselves (a little money or a

³ David Augsburger says of this sort of service: "It seizes the opportunity to seem compassionate, appear benevolent, while in reality it uses another gratuitously." David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 149.

little time).⁴ Too often the “ministry” ends once the check has been written (at least until tax time, when the “blessing” becomes a charitable deduction!); there is no real effort to know or understand the recipient or her circumstances.⁵ Knowing too much about a person might require genuine investment in the life of that person, a commitment for which many of us are simply not prepared. John Perkins summarizes the problem well when he writes:

[A]s far as the poor in the surrounding community are concerned, they are viewed simply as a side issue—simply the beneficiaries of our charity. In some cases, we may actually go so far as to invite the beneficiaries of our charity to church. But charity does not build community. It fosters dependence on the one hand and separation on the other hand—keeping the poor at the far end of our outstretched hand.⁶

Sadly, that is true of a great deal of Christian benevolence ministry.

Even so, these ministry efforts do meet real needs—the people my faith community assisted last year were truly grateful for the needed assistance—and I am not suggesting that Christians cease making efforts to assist people in financial need. But when these efforts end with a handout they are little more than the “be-warmed-and-filled” variety of “ministry” James warned against (Jam. 2:16). What is needed is a more holistic approach to ministry, one that seeks to meet financial or other needs but does so in the context of relationship, thus better reflecting the nature of God’s interaction with humankind.

Toward a More Holistic Approach to Benevolence Ministry

Part of the problem with many efforts at benevolence is the inability of Christians to see the extent to which we—and by extension, our ministry efforts—have been shaped by our culture. On one level, our approach to ministry is deeply rooted in an

⁴ This is the definition of the “consumerist mindset,” according to Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 40.

⁵ The insidiousness of some of these ministries was underscored by a recent guest column in the *Oregonian*, written by a single mother who last year was forced to seek assistance to provide a Thanksgiving meal for her family. She described a highly choreographed distribution system that left her humiliated and even sent her away without a turkey. Wendy Alexander, “Single Mom in Need Finds Holidays Exact Humiliation,” *Oregonian*, 18 November 2007, sec. E, p. 1.

⁶ John M. Perkins, Afterword to Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 175.

individualist, modernist, Pelagian, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps theology.⁷ By offering handouts to people (ostensibly in the name of Jesus), we seem to hope that we are giving them the bootstraps they need to pull themselves to Christ. On another level, our ministry efforts are not only shaped by, but actually perpetuate, the consumer culture in which we live. Why is it we believe that giving food, money, or other items to people is the solution to their problems if not for a deep-seated, though unspoken, belief in the sanctifying nature of physical consumption? Vincent J. Miller calls this phenomenon “misdirection,” which he says, “encourages consumers to fulfill more profound needs and desires through consumption.” Miller continues: “Misdirection works by encouraging consumers to think of consumption as a way of enacting profound values and fulfilling serious desires. It is about the substitution of a practice, not the substitution of values.”⁸ In the realm of Christian benevolence ministry we have opted for the practice of giving handouts, rather than the biblical practices of community and hospitality, while seeking to maintain the values embodied by those two practices. The Bible makes it clear, however, that there is no way to compromise practice without simultaneously compromising value.

When one looks at the biblical narrative, one sees that God spared nothing in his desire for relationship with humankind (John 3:16; Rom. 5); one sees sacrificial lives in those who understood the implications of God's sacrifice. For example, the Apostle Paul was completely transformed by his encounter with the risen Christ. Thereafter it meant nothing to him to endure great physical and personal suffering for the sake of serving God (2 Cor. 11). For Paul, service to God manifested itself in years of service to others, whom Paul regarded not as a burden or an inconvenience, but as his hope, his joy, his glory, and the “crown in which [he] will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes” (1 Thes. 2:19-20). As he reflected on his life while awaiting execution, Paul could say without a hint of bitterness or anger that by loving God and loving others his

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 153.

⁸ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 109.

life had been an offering to God (2 Tim. 4:6). It was his relationships with God and others that drove Paul.

Indeed, the scriptures paint a picture of radical relationality that finds its sharpest focus in Jesus' high priestly prayer (John 17). The prayer provides a picture of relationality within the Church, which is an expression of the relationality within the Godhead ("I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you," vv. 20-21). In addition, it provides a picture of relationality between God and humanity, and in turn, between humans themselves ("As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world," v. 18). Of course, for Jesus that meant being the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). Not content to drop a benevolence offering into the collection plate, Jesus spent his time with prostitutes and drunkards, the sick and the demon-possessed.

Humanity is invited into relationship with the triune God and through that relationship to find meaning and purpose. "Relationship at a profound ontological depth is essential to human being reflecting something of the very nature of God's own triune being. Relationship is not optional for divine or human being, but makes divine and human being what they are."⁹ Having entered into that relationship with God, man is invited to share it with others. "According to trinitarian theology, Jesus and I are only who we are in relationship to the other, including the orphan and the widow and the homeless person in distress."¹⁰ Once a person has entered into a relationship with God through Christ, his life is thereafter defined by that relationship and by the way that relationship manifests itself in relationship with others. Neither pharisaical efforts to redefine "neighbor" (Luke 10:25-37) nor efforts to fulfill values through misdirected, consumerist means can substitute for the relational imperatives embodied by biblical community and hospitality.

But what are we to do? How can Christians reclaim these values and begin redirecting (as opposed to misdirecting) their resources so as to meet people's actual needs? The first step is to recognize that the Church is and should be a community. "The

⁹ Deddo, "Neighbors in Racial Reconciliation," 30.

¹⁰ Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 105.

physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”¹¹ But the Church must not be a cloistered community from which outsiders are excluded. “The experience of Christian togetherness is not simply for the benefit of those who participate in Christian community. A community of love rooted in the redemptive reign of God can never be an in-house enterprise, for such love is contagious and overflowing. It seeks to embrace all humanity.”¹² Bonhoeffer even suggests that “[t]he exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; in the poor brother Christ is knocking at the door.”¹³ The Christian community must not only be inclusive, but must also take steps to secure the well-being of those both inside and outside the community, thus inviting people into the community.¹⁴ It is from this sort of community that benevolence must flow. This is precisely what Jesus modeled when he came into the world, leaving for a time the fullness of relationship within the Godhead in order to seek the wellbeing of those outside and inviting them into relationship with the divine.

Hospitality is the second value that must underlie true benevolence ministry. Hospitality is more than a handout; it “includes but is not limited to the offer of aid and comfort to the visitor and outsider.”¹⁵ Thus, it means offering food and drink to those who are hungry and thirsty, but it also means inviting the stranger into one’s home to share a meal; it means caring for the sick, and it means visiting the person in jail (Matt. 25:35-40). Too often our concern for personal safety—and more than that, our desire not to be made uncomfortable—keeps us from offering true hospitality to others. Unquestionably we should exercise a level of discernment when we invite outsiders into

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 19.

¹² Darrell L. Guder, ed., “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 149.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 38.

¹⁴ Deddo, “Neighbors in Racial Reconciliation,” 36.

¹⁵ Guder, “Missional Community,” in *Missional Church*, 178.

our homes, but we should also recognize that genuine hospitality brings glory to God.¹⁶ As we serve others hospitably, we reflect the manner in which Jesus came to serve (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45).

Finally, as we seek to live in community and be hospitable to others, we must never do so out of a sense of duty or obligation. Instead, our motivation should be love for God and others. “Contrary to moralism, authentic Christian action is an overflow of God’s love poured out in believers’ hearts through the indwelling presence of the Spirit.”¹⁷ As we serve others out of love, “a humble spirit of giving and receiving will replace the haughty spirit of charity and snobbery toward the poor.”¹⁸ That humble spirit sees the person in need not simply as one to whom I should give, but someone from whom I in turn receive.

A New Look at Benevolence

Still wanting to assist those in our neighborhoods who might be in need, my faith community is attempting something new this holiday season. At the suggestion of a college student who is part of our community, we are encouraging members to invite neighbors and those in need to share meals in our homes. We are still providing meals to families at a local school in order to honor our commitment there, but it is our hope that by taking the extra step of inviting outsiders into our lives, seeking to live in community and humbly to offer hospitality to those around us, genuine Christian love will be evident.

¹⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, “Evangelical Contextualism,” in *Readings in Christian Ethics, Volume 1: Theory and Method*, David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 160.

¹⁷ Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 95.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 143.

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