

Introduction

Charles Spurgeon is remembered as one of the greatest preachers in church history. However, as David Kingdon says, “He was more than that. He was also a man of social concern and social action.”¹ Spurgeon was committed to preaching the gospel, but he was also committed to addressing the physical needs of suffering people – a facet of his ministry that is not as widely known or appreciated as his preaching ministry.² For Spurgeon, gospel proclamation and social ministry were not in competition with one another. He did, however, have a clear sense as to how these two types of ministry should be related to one another in the mission of the church.

The contemporary church faces several competing options regarding how to define her mission in the world, specifically about how word and deed ministry relate to one another. There are differing views among scholars and practitioners concerning the nature of the relationship of word and deed ministry, or gospel proclamation and mercy ministry.³

1. David Kingdon, in *A Marvelous Ministry: How the All-round Ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon Speaks to Us Today* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 91.

2. Alex DiPrima’s recent book, *Spurgeon and the Poor: How the Gospel Compels Social Concern* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2023), is a needed corrective to the imbalanced perception that Spurgeon’s ministry focused solely on preaching and evangelism. In part one of the book, DiPrima summarizes Spurgeon’s theology of mercy ministry and in part two of the book he summarizes Spurgeon’s practice of mercy ministry through the Metropolitan Tabernacle. We will interact with his work throughout this book.

3. See John Sybert, *The One Balm for All Earth’s Wounds: The Priority of Gospel Proclamation in Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s Missiology* (PhD Dissertation, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 10-31, for an overview of options for categorizing the church’s mission, and *Four Views on the Church’s Mission*, ed. Jason S. Sexton

Three Options for Word and Deed Ministry

These differences can create confusion and unnecessary division among evangelicals engaged in the study and practice of mission.⁴ This is nothing new. The church has historically had difficulty keeping a proper balance over the roles of word and deed in mission. As Duane Litfin says, “Over time the pendulum has sometimes swung too far in one direction or the other.”⁵ John Stott made this point a generation ago in his 1975 book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. In his book, Stott aimed to provide “a more balanced and more biblical way” of defining the roles that word and deed ministry have in the mission of the church.⁶ According to Stott, there are at least three options concerning the roles that word and deed ministry play in missions: deed as a bridge to word, deed as a consequence of word, and deed and word as partners in mission. Each of these options will now be discussed briefly.

Deed as Bridge to Word

This view understands social action, or deed ministry, as a means to evangelism. This view, according to Stott, says that “[e]vangelism and the winning of converts are the primary ends in view, but social action is a useful preliminary, and effective means to these ends.”⁷ According to this view, social action gives the gospel a credibility that it might otherwise lack, while also creating opportunities for evangelism that otherwise might not exist.⁸

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), for an introduction to the various views regarding the nature of the church’s mission in the world.

4. Jerry M. Ireland, *Evangelism and Social Concern in the Theology of Carl F. H. Henry* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 2.

5. Duane Litfin, *Word vs. Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 21.

6. John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (1975; repr. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 25-32.

7. Ibid., 41.

8. Stott rightly acknowledges the dangers inherent in this approach, saying that this view makes social work “the sugar on the pill,” or “the bait on the hook.” Stott says that this approach is why “the smell of hypocrisy hangs round our philanthropy” (ibid.). Andrew Kirk also provides helpful advice on the danger of using social ministry as a means to evangelism. He says, “If Christians are engaged in works of compassion

Deed as Consequence of Word

This view understands social action as a “manifestation” of evangelism.⁹ In this view, “philanthropy is not attached to evangelism rather artificially from the outside, but grows out of it as its natural expression.”¹⁰ Stott says that this view finds a strong precedent in the ministry of Jesus, as His “words and deeds belonged to each other, the words interpreting the deeds and the deeds embodying the words.”¹¹ Timothy Keller also understands the relationship between word and deed in this way. He says, “The Biblical gospel of Jesus necessarily and powerfully leads to a passion for justice in the world.”¹² In other words, the gospel creates people who care about justice, or the Word creates workers.

Deed and Word as Partners

This view understands social action and evangelism as partners in Christian missions, with neither one prioritized over the other. Stott believes that this view provides the biblically balanced approach to word and deed ministry that evangelicals have long struggled to attain. He argues that word and deed ministry

... it is essential that they do not impose any conditions on the inclusiveness of their activities.” He says that it would of course be “natural” for Christians to express their motivation behind their work, inviting people to respond to the claims of the gospel. But he says that is “entirely different from saying that people can only benefit from their work if they are willing to undergo instruction in the Christian faith” (J. Andrew Kirk, *Mission Under Scrutiny: Confronting Contemporary Challenges* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006], 94). See Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 37-39, for a good example of a ministry that was designed to create opportunities for evangelism that otherwise might not have existed.

9. Stott, *Christian Mission*, 42.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. Despite its strengths, Stott also thinks that this view is deficient, as it “makes service a subdivision of evangelism.” Ibid., 43.

12. Timothy J. Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), xiv. Similarly, in another work, Keller says, “When Christians realize they did not save themselves but were rescued from spiritual poverty, it naturally changes their attitudes toward people who are in economic and physical poverty.... Christians renewed by the gospel render sacrificial service to neighbors, the poor, and the community and city around them.” *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 81. See also his *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), esp. ch. 3, “The Motivation for Mercy.”

“belong to each other and yet are independent of each other,” and that neither social action nor evangelism is a means to the other, or a manifestation of the other.¹³ According to this view, evangelism and social action are ends in themselves because both are “expressions of unfeigned love.”¹⁴ In the most recent edition of *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, Stott says that, like a bird that needs two wings to fly, the church needs both the gospel and good deeds to be who God made her to be. Each “wing” helps the church fulfill her mission in the world.¹⁵

A Fourth Option

While Spurgeon’s ministry contained aspects of each of the above options, the last option (Deed and Word as Partners) most accurately portrays Spurgeon’s understanding of the roles of word and deed ministry in missions. But to arrive at a more precise understanding of Spurgeon’s approach, one major caveat must be added to Stott’s last option. While it is true that important aspects of Spurgeon’s ministry displayed a close partnership between word and deed ministry (e.g. the Stockwell Orphanage), this partnering did not preclude a prioritizing of word over deed ministry. There was a partnership with priority.

In Spurgeon’s ministry, there was a close relationship between word and deed ministries, but there was also a distinguishing of priorities. Spurgeon valued both types of ministry, but he believed that word ministry had a logical priority over deed ministry. He would have agreed with Stott’s attempt to provide balance to the church’s mission, but he would have argued that balance does not prohibit prioritization. His formulation of the roles that word and deed ministry have in missions would have been more akin to Samuel Moffett’s statement that gospel proclamation should

13. Stott, *Christian Mission*, 43.

14. Ibid.

15. John Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, updated and expanded (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 44.

be the “leading partner” in the partnership between word and deed ministry.¹⁶

Jonathan Leeman, in his Foreword to DiPrima’s *Spurgeon and the Poor*, says that Stott’s third category does not go far enough because it fails to account for the fact that, because faith creates deeds, the preaching of faith “must be our priority.” He says that “faith and deeds, preaching and good works, don’t play the same role. They aren’t equal.” I think he’s right on this point, but then he says, “This is the picture DiPrima offers us of Spurgeon.” He says that DiPrima argues for the “priority that Spurgeon gave to making disciples.”¹⁷ This is clear in DiPrima’s chapter on “Gospel Proclamation and Social Ministry” (ch. 4). In the chapter, he says this: “In Spurgeon’s view, the proclamation of the gospel through the ministry of the Word is at the very center of the mission of the church.”¹⁸ Also, “Spurgeon would urge local churches to remain committed to the ministry of the Word and the proclamation of the truth as its central task. He believed that the church’s chief mission was to preach the gospel.”¹⁹

However, DiPrima closes the chapter with “A Note of Caution,” where he says that, though Spurgeon can “probably” be characterized as one who subordinates social ministry to gospel preaching, Spurgeon would “likely object” to any notion of prioritizing gospel ministry over social ministry.²⁰ He says, “Integrating social ministry in terms of a scheme of priorities would probably have felt artificial to Spurgeon.... Attempting to construct a hierarchy of priorities for Christian obedience would have been intolerable to Spurgeon.”²¹ He notes that Spurgeon viewed gospel proclamation as “the main thing,” but word and deed ministry must be seen as “mutually reinforcing.”²²

16. Samuel Hugh Moffett, in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 575-77.

17. Jonathan Leeman, “Foreword,” in DiPrima, *Spurgeon and the Poor*, xiii.

18. DiPrima, *Spurgeon and the Poor*, 47.

19. *Ibid.*, 57.

20. *Ibid.*, 59.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

DiPrima's thesis and mine are in substantial agreement. We both argue that Spurgeon would never have said that the church should do word ministry at the expense of deed ministry, but rather that the church must do *both*. DiPrima helpfully and rightfully points out that Spurgeon viewed social ministry as more central to the church's work than many modern Christians do. But, using Spurgeon's own words, I will argue in this book that Spurgeon did indeed have a "scheme of priorities" and often articulated his understanding of the relationship between word and deed ministry as a "hierarchy of priorities." DiPrima's work and mine come to the same conclusions, but you will find in this work an emphasis on Spurgeon's belief in the priority of word ministry. In word and deed ministry, Spurgeon believed in a close partnership with a clear priority.

Many of Spurgeon's biographers and church historians say that Spurgeon's approach to missions was holistic, rather than prioritistic.²³ Holism is defined in several ways by various scholars, but the category began to crystallize when John Stott, seeking to mediate between the liberal tendency to think of missions as merely the establishment of shalom (or social harmony) and the conservative tendency to think of missions as only evangelism (or gospel proclamation), put forward his definition of mission. "Mission," he said, "describes ... everything the church is sent into the world to do."²⁴ This definition of mission became the basis for the broader understanding of missions that came to be known as "holistic missions." Missiologist David Hesselgrave says

23. Cf. Ian M. Randall, "A Mode of Training: A Baptist Seminary's Missional Vision," *Transformation*, 24, no. 1 (January 2007), 6; William G. Travis, "Urban Pilgrims and Pioneers: Charles H. Spurgeon and the Poor," *Urban Mission*, 10 (September 1992), 35; David Kingdon, "Spurgeon and His Social Concern," in *A Marvelous Ministry: How the All-round Ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon Speaks to Us Today* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 99; Mike Nicholls, *Lights to the World: A History of Spurgeon's College 1856-1992* (Harpden, England: Nuprint, 1993), 50; Peter Morden, "The Spirituality of C. H. Spurgeon: The Outworking of Communion, Active Exertion," *Baptistic Theologies*, 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 68; and Lewis A. Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992), 397. Drummond does not use this exact language, but he does seem to portray Spurgeon as a holist.

24. Stott, *Christian Mission*, 48.

that although “holistic missions” has been variously defined, it is usually used “in ways consonant with Stott’s understanding.”²⁵

Prioritism upholds the primacy of the church’s evangelistic mandate, asserting that the priority of the church’s mission is the proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples. The prioritist does not exclude various types of social ministry as illegitimate, but he does argue that gospel proclamation, not social action, is the priority of the church’s mission. Christopher Little, an ardent defender of prioritism, says, “While prioritists would place varying emphases on the role of social work in mission, all would grant that word should take precedent over deed, or proclamation over social action, while pursuing mission to the world.”²⁶

The argument of this book is that Spurgeon’s approach to missions was prioritistic, rather than holistic, in nature. Because many in the church today lack a clear vision concerning what the mission of the church is, this book seeks to use Spurgeon’s approach to missions as an apologetic for a biblically precise missiology, namely, one that prioritizes gospel proclamation without neglecting the physical needs of those who suffer. Spurgeon’s approach to missions could be called “benevolent prioritism” because it prioritizes the proclamation of the gospel while not neglecting benevolent works of charity.²⁷ His missiology was a partnership with a priority.

25. David J. Hesselgrave, “Redefining Holism,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 35, no. 3 (July 1999), 280.

26. “Breaking Bad Missiological Habits,” In *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century*, edited by Mike Barnett and Robin Martin, 481-97. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012. 491; cf. Christopher R. Little, *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, 203-22; idem, *Polemic Missiology For the 21st Century: In Memoriam of Roland Allen* (2013), chap. 1; idem, “What Makes Mission Christian?,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 25, no. 2 (Summer 2008), 65-73.

27. Kelly Kacic summarizes this view well when he says, “The spiritually poor and materially poor and relationally poor are all a legitimate concern for those who worship the Creator and Redeemer. Bearing witness to this God, we do not pit the material against the spiritual, but recognize him as the Lord of it all.” *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflects God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 170, emphasis his.