

## ***Compassion Without Strings***

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Since the Asian Tsunami in 2004, followed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, compassion efforts throughout the world have escalated dramatically. Compassion and justice have become major causes for our culture. People respond to human need. And ministries of compassion are the fastest growing segment of Protestant missions. Missionaries recognized a long time ago that, like Jesus, we love and serve people "without strings attached."

There is a spiritual spectrum among those who minister to human need. At the secular end, there is genuine, well-meaning concern for the welfare of people but little awareness, knowledge or concern for spiritual results. At the Christian end of the spectrum there is a deep and genuine concern for the spiritual well-being of people as well as for their physical and social welfare. Real life in Christ is recognized as the crucial, overriding need. How overt or subtle this spiritual concern is expressed may vary dramatically with the context, but that's a different topic.

The issue of interest here is for those in between, those who are Christians but for whom spiritual issues are a low priority. We know that the Gospel transforms culture but we recognize also that Christianity is shaped by the culture. Perhaps some, if not many, Christians have absorbed the cultural perspective that life is pretty much all about this life, that spiritually, everyone is OK. Spiritual life may be considered significant, but a free, healthy, and productive life here and now is the primary focus of concern.

For some evangelicals, new life in Christ is losing priority. We just don't think about it that much. Physical life confronts us minute-by-minute while spiritual life seems vague and distant. Perhaps many are driving under their own steam and are more or less unaware of the life-giving power and joy of a relationship with Jesus. Some doubt that life is eternal. Some may assume that coming to know Jesus is not a requirement but simply an added bonus.

Our secular culture assumes that everyone will end up in Heaven, if there is a Heaven. A philosophy of tolerance says that we should not interfere in someone's religion. Asking people to commit to follow Jesus is like recruiting them to your political party, or your church. Proselytizing is bad. Helping people *and* encouraging them to come to Jesus is manipulation.

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What happens if our missionaries lose their deep concern about the eternal destiny of those they go to help? How will we know? Perhaps we can hear clues as we listen to them. What stories do they tell? When they "light up," what are they talking about? What are their deepest desires for the people they touch? What do they point to as success? What do they consider failure? What breaks their hearts? Perhaps they serve among people where it is dangerous or inflammatory to speak openly of Christ. If so, do they yearn for people to discover the life-giving Savior?

For decades I have heard missionaries tell their stories. Almost always, they have told of helping people with their needs. And almost always, I have heard their longings for these people to know Jesus, to experience new, abundant, eternal life in Christ. When I hear missionaries today, I listen for their heartbeat.

As evangelicals we understand that people who don't know Jesus do not have life. The ultimate issue--as important as it and as much as we care--is not whether this life is difficult, but what life will be like in the forever world.

We must love people as Jesus loved them--without strings attached--and at the same time we must recognize how desperately they need the Savior.

**Think with me.**

- How does this strike you? Would you say that, in the long run, becoming a follower of Jesus is more or less important than physical and social improvement? On what basis?
- Do you sense a decline in concern about the Christ-transformed eternal life?
- Do you think that approaches to sharing the Gospel must become more subtle and reactive in a world hostile to Christians?
- How can we as church leaders continually reinforce the inestimable importance of spiritual regeneration and life transformation in Christ?

