

AIDS, Africa, and the impact of the Gospel.

by Rob Smith

Matt 5:13-16 "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (NAS)"

It was about three and a half years ago that I began to take a deeper interest in the current crisis in Southern Africa caused by the AIDS virus. I do not remember what I was looking for as I surfed the web, but I ended up at a website that pointed out the magnitude of the epidemic.

At first the numbers were significant to me in an unusual respect. I had long argued that there was little hope for Africa, as each solution that I had observed seemed to be as ineffective as every other. The staggering predictions of some 85 million being infected by the year 2010 confirmed my hopeless sentiment. As bad as colonialism might have been, followed by apartheid in South Africa, the subsequent corrupt regimes and their failures seemed just as bad.

As I continued to muse over the numbers, I began to think of my own opinion of Africa in respect to my theology. I had long been proposing to my employees, friends, those in my Sunday School classes and Bible Studies, that the Gospel gives a man hope. As he embraces the gospel, he begins to affect those around him, and this brings hope and change to his community. He, along with those Christians around him, is like salt. They flavor the community, and impact it. They are a city on a hill whose light cannot be hidden.

I came to the conclusion that either my theology had to change, or my view of Africa had to change. Clearly the gospel does provide hope. Clearly the solution to the crisis in Africa is the gospel.

This change in my perspective led me down a troubling path, and I take you along with a certain level of trepidation. Statistically, sub-Saharan Africa is generally more Christian than we are here in the USA. If the gospel is the answer to the crisis in Southern Africa, then why does it exist? Do we need more evangelism and put more zeal in our efforts to reach Africa for Christ? Most people that I have met in Southern Africa have heard the gospel. There

have been and are massive evangelical efforts occurring all the time, and we are constantly hearing of thousands coming to Christ. Why then this huge crisis?

I began to notice another disturbing observation. I used to live in the small country of Swaziland. This beautiful little country of 750,000 citizens, nestled between South Africa and Mozambique, has an unusual distinction. This country has more missionaries per capita than any other country in the world. This country also has the second highest rate of AIDS in the world - a staggering 38%.

This clearly ought to lead those of us interested in missiology into deep introspection. Several thoughts come to mind, several of them troubling and provocative:

Firstly, recognizing that Africa has pagan roots, deeply entrenched in ancestral worship and pagan philosophy, one has to ask if this kind of statistic is to be expected. Polygamy, still advocated there, and other cultural values lead to promiscuity and sexual recklessness, and that makes spreading the gospel a difficult affair. Surely, the fact that there is so much evangelical effort here is because this is such a difficult field in which to harvest.

Having lived in Swaziland however I must take exception to this line of thought. The people there are receptive and respectful. They are open and most will claim to know Christ. The statistics, in terms of claiming to be Christians, reflect the missionary effort that has occurred. Without the dark staggering AIDS statistic looming over our heads, we could say that the country has been won to Christ. We must explore and probe this troubling issue further.

This leads us to ask, secondly, if there has been a failure on the part of our missionary efforts? Surely, in a country where one can hardly cross the street without bumping into a missionary, we should not be seeing a crisis that clearly is spread by godless living. Have the missionaries not been effectively spreading the gospel? Should they redouble their efforts and hold more campaigns?

The reality is that it would be difficult to find many Swazi's that have not heard the gospel and been given the opportunity to respond. I attended a campaign years ago at a packed stadium in Manzini where thousands responded and came to Christ. I have talked with Swazis that have never ridden an elevator or seen the sea, but they know and speak tenderly of Christ. Despite my conviction that the gospel is the solution to the crisis in Swaziland, I cannot see how further evangelization will help at all.

We can then ask a third question. Is the failure to impact the African culture one of lack of discipleship. This is surely the case to some extent. Many barriers make effective discipleship difficult, from language to culture. While

apartheid and colonialism were struck with a deathblow in past years, like our sin nature, they continue to dominate the social structure. We see this in the USA as well.

Missionaries and white Christians for the most part do not engage black Christians as they do each other, and there is clearly a line of separation that needs to be broken. This was no clearer to me than in a recent conversation I had with a young black man in Pretoria, South Africa.

I had just finished preaching at a predominantly white church in South Africa, and had shared the Agathos Vision with the church in the course of my sermon. A young black man approached me afterward and said that in view of us "Americans" leaving our homeland to help in the AIDS crisis, the least he could do was to work with us. This was encouraging, and I asked him about his relationship to Christ. He immediately stated that he was a Christian, and that he did not smoke or drink.

I pointed out that I didn't care if he smoked or drank, and asked if I could ask him a question or two. I asked him about the young lady he had hanging onto his arm. Did they have any children, and were they married? He replied that they had one child and that they were not married. I then asked him a question I have asked many young adults in Africa. Did he have other children by other women? He answered without any sense of guilt or remorse that he did. Of course this initiated a long discussion with him about marriage and sex that he should have had years earlier in his local church.

The most amazing fact to me was yet to come. It turned out that this young man worked for the church he was attending, and that he and his girl friend lived on the property as caretakers. This amazed me, so I later asked the assistant pastor if he would challenge me as a brother in Christ if I were found to be shacking up with a girl to whom I was not married.

He answered that of course he would challenge me. I am sure that had I not repented he would have taken the appropriate steps to see me repent and correct the situation by instruction and rebuke. I then asked him about the young man in his church. Why had they not, in love and care, confronted him, and taught him in a way that would bring correction. It had simply not occurred to this pastor, after all, the young man was black. Living in such a manner was commonplace. He was not used to even thinking about this level of engagement with black brothers and sisters, even though he would certainly confront you or me.

Having grown up in this particular church, there is a level that would have elicited engagement, had it been necessary. If this young man had been caught smoking or drinking, he would have most certainly been sternly corrected, and

quite possibly would have lost his job. Thus the young man's answer to my question in the first place.

This leads to another question in our quest - one that is most troubling and where I do not really wish to go, except that I must, because if we are to reach the nations, we must ask and ponder these questions.

Is there a cause and effect relationship between evangelical efforts in Southern Africa, and the high rate of AIDS. This is a shocking question, and I do not think we can answer it with a simple yes or no. We can, however, ponder the implications of a gospel that leads men to avoid wine and tobacco, yet allows them to have sex with multiple women with a clear conscience. I was raised a pastor's kid, and most of my uncles and aunts have given their lives to the mission field in Africa. I truly love and respect the men and women who have sacrificed for the sake of Christ in this part of the world. I do not wish to malign their efforts. I must however, continue to honestly probe this strange relationship I see, and draw enough out of this musing to be useful in helping Agathos to be effective in reaching the African culture for Christ.

"I am a Christian, I do not drink or smoke". The words of this young man open up to me a big part of the failure of historic evangelism in Southern Africa. As with many of you, I was raised in an atmosphere of rules and regulation. While the church I was raised in would adamantly deny being legalistic, there was a clear set of rules that were adhered to if you joined the church. Most were unwritten, but clear nonetheless. In those days, a women did not wear "pants" or make-up, and you did not smoke or drink, or go to the movies. There were many other rules, all clear, and all actually doable. It was almost as if you did not need Christ, you just had to keep the rules. You came to Christ, and then kept the rules.

I would say that to a vast number of African Christians, the Christian life is a matter of keeping the rules. Come to Jesus, and keep the rules. The Gospel that has penetrated the African culture, to a large degree, is a Gospel similar to the Gospel Paul corrected in his letter to the Galatians. Come to Jesus and get circumcised! We know Paul's repudiation of this type of gospel. I think many of the best adherents to the legalism we have grown up in were called to be missionaries to Africa - after all, what would be more pleasing to God?

When discussing this recently with Dr. Norman Geisler, he pointed out that legalism leads to licentiousness. Wow! The truth of that statement, certainly argued by Paul in passages like Romans 5 and 7, began to impact my thinking. A legalistic gospel can have a causative effect it hearers. This certainly calls for careful evaluation of the gospel we bring to the nations, and forces us to go back to the Scriptures with an attitude of repentance and openness.

The last thing we want is to redouble our efforts if these are in fact causing a failure to deal with the very issue for which Christ hung on the cross. We need to have a message that directs men to the holy standards of God, which cannot be obeyed for salvation, rather than a list of rules that can be obeyed. Only then will Christ's life and death make sense, and then will men and woman come to the cross -- not to be enabled to become righteous as they obey the rules, but to embrace the righteousness of Christ that is theirs through repentance and faith in him.

We therefore at Agathos Foundation, are asking God to give us the boldness to confront a gospel shrouded in legalism, however unintended it may be, for what it is -- a false gospel. Some of the rules in the gospel Africans have heard would even condemn Christ himself. We know that as we raise Children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, that we present to them a standard that Christ has met fully, and that our freedom in Christ, purchased by his blood, gives us the desire to be like him.

We also ask God to allow us to lovingly engage our black brothers and sisters, showing them the same care and intimacy that we should to all Christians, and to strive to disciple them - a process that takes time, love and effort. If we can do this, I believe that we can impact the African culture, and our efforts prove to be salt and light in a barren place.

For more information about the Agathos Foundation and our mission, please refer to our website at <http://www.agathosfoundation.org/>. I encourage you to look at our vision and pray about how you and your church can get involved in this massive and compelling ministry.

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