



A P P E N D I X
THREE

Kevyn Harris is the National Director of Voice of Friendship NZ, and has a background in business and ministry. He has been a pastor and senior pastor, as well as a business trainer and skills assessor. Kevyn is a graduate of Emmanuel Bible College, New Zealand Baptist Theological College, Melbourne College of Divinity, and Massey University. He has practised as an employment advocate and mediator as well as being a consultant to companies and organisations in the area of conflict management and dispute resolution.

True Gospel Must Be Heard¹

K E V Y N H A R R I S

director@vof.org.nz

Obviously the answer would be directed by the response to other questions: Which gospel? What is the content of the good news? How is it received and therefore communicated?

No one questions the need in our world. It is tragically apparent, and even more so if you live in or regularly visit developing countries. Along with poverty, there are graft and structural injustices which are endemic in some Southeast Asian and African countries.

Westerners, either from the guilt which comes from having too much when others have so little or from altruistic motives, contribute generously to disaster relief such as we recently saw

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following the Asian tsunami.

Along with other citizens and groups, evangelical churches responded with prayers and monetary help.

All this is laudable, but unmatched by their support of the propagation of the good news of God concerning His Son.

When it comes to guilt and altruism, Christians have competition. It takes no faith or special revelation of God to respond to these needs. But when it comes to the business of evangelical mission we have only the faithful. The problem appears to be that the faithful believe a humanitarian response is the Gospel.

We have become subverted by need instead of by what is needful. The maxim of **General Booth**, that I feed a man so he is able to hear the gospel, has become: feed the man and he has heard the gospel. Social concern is dangerously close to becoming a contradiction of the truth that the Word is heard, not eaten. It is a subtle shift but, like all subtle suggestions, a potentially dangerous one which should not go unquestioned.

The evangelical church is falling over itself to be a good citizen and show that, yes, it too cares. But then so does Jesus, and yet the poor will always be with us. If all we offer is what the world can offer how does our response configure to the axiom that man does not live by bread alone?

For some years the missions that have the preaching of the gospel and the encouragement of the saints as their first priority have been losing out to those agencies that have the meeting of material need as their first objective. We might be defined as being in the same business, and we do certainly work to complement each other. However, the Government does not believe we are in the same business, even if evangelicals might be confused in this area.

If you are a Christian organisation and confront poverty and structural injustice your donors are likely to be afforded a tax refund. If you are a Christian organisation and your first priority is to declare the Lordship of Christ and make disciples, your donors are not afforded a tax exemption.

If the evangelical church has drifted into believing the two activities are synonymous, the world has not. Someone's thinking

has shifted and it is not the world's.

If evangelicals do not support evangelistic enterprises, who will? Certainly not the Government and not the average generous New Zealander either. Charitable appeals have a huge pool from which to draw; the work of the gospel has, by comparison, a limited constituency. The question is not, should we care for our fellow man? The question is, what do I believe about humanity in the light of the cross and resurrection?

There appears to be a theological dearth, with our theology looking more like anthropology. Moreover, it is an anthropology which owes more to Marx and Jung than to Moses and Jesus. Marx famously defined religion (and he meant the Christian religion) as the opiate of the masses. The promise of a better world when we died lessened our determination to improve this one.

However, what do we believe about the human condition and its remedy? What do we profess concerning the nature of God and of man and the status of their fellowship? What do we hold to any more, concerning eternity?

If Christ came and died so that the debt of developing nations would be forgiven, then let us throw all our efforts to that end. If God gave Himself in the person of Jesus so that the hungry could eat, then let's go into the food production business.

The tsunami left us with a question. For those who perished, did the food they ate or the aid they received make an eternal difference? Or was it by hearing and believing the good news that they were accepted by God in Jesus Christ? If the Church does not hold to the priority and presentation of this message, who will?

None of the arguments preclude material assistance for those in need, in conjunction with the proclamation of Christ's Lordship and the call to faith. No doubt there are many testimonies of how the recipient has gone on and inquired as to the reason for the kindness.

Neither should we deny assistance even to those who hate us and persecute the Christians among them.

However, neither must we forget the primary communication which is the command and invitation of the gospel to repent and believe. This must be the primary thrust of the evangelical effort.