Does Mission Include Heaven and Earth?

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Student Forum
Monday, February 6, 2006
Ralph D. Winter

W1426

A very liberal Congregational church in Los Angeles, the First Congregational Church, used to have out in front, displayed where it is usual to see the next Sunday's sermon topic, a piece of advice seemingly offered to the whole world. The statement was, "One World At a Time."

This perspective, of course, was a holdover from the era of a liberalism characterized in part by an emphasis on social action, as well as doubts about the Bible and much of traditional theology.

As you know, the conservatives, often called Fundamentalists not only opposed the low view of the Bible but along with that they opposed the seemingly earth-bound emphasis on social action as well.

My theory is, this liberal/conservative polarization took place in the era of the 1900s, the 1910s, and the 1920s, as the result of a huge new mass of common people being brought into the church predominantly through the immense impact of Dwight L. Moody - who himself came from the back woods of Massachusetts. The divergence was thus not only due to the low views of the Bible of the liberals but to the pre-existing social distance between two classes of people.

Of course, this is a generalization. The conservative category were not all poor, uneducated, or "uncolleged."

However, it is substantially true that one group believed in college and seminary education and the other group, suspicious of the first, founded Bible Institutes, Moody Bible Institute being one of the earliest. The latter, pretty much reinventing Biblical studies, soon became devotees of eschatology rather than social solutions involving human government and politics, domains far removed from their normal involvement. Thus, not just Bible conferences were common among them but especially Prophecy conferences. The next world was central to their hope, this world being considered hopeless and getting worse.

This, of course, was the very opposite of many in the liberal tradition, who, if they believed in the return of Christ at all, believed that social action could solve all problems such that instead of getting worse and worse the world would get better and better.

The early Bible institutes of these later Moody-won Evangelicals were evening schools established to educate adults who had not grown up in Christian homes. Such adults already had a few years of schooling and the additional study of the Bible in evening classes was an excellent supplement.

However, when these same adults persuaded the Moody Bible Institute to open its doors during the day for the younger generation this significant transition exposed the young people to the Bible but unwittingly removed them from further conventional schooling. This, then, established a new pattern of alternative education which essentially displaced college education for two or more generations.

This massive detour into an alterna-

tive world accounts for the relative absence of Evangelicals in the professions throughout a 60 to 90-year period. It explains the absence also of very much thinking about social solutions of the kind involving or requiring civil government, something in which they had little part anyway. This is parallel to the Spirituals developed in the slave churches, which talk mostly about heaven, not the earth in which they have had little influence.

More recently we have seen the vast majority of these Bible institutes shifting gears to become Bible Colleges and then to secular curricula enabling students to go on to become attorneys, doctors, businessmen and members of Congress and the Senate.

This fairly recent visibility, along with growth in numbers, then has created the impression that "Evangelicals" have suddenly become *numerous* when mostly it is a case of Evangelicals suddenly becoming *visible*.

However, along with this massive, almost century-long transition from obscurity, Evangelicals have only belatedly begun to rethink the earthly dimension of the Biblical revelation.

The earlier Evangelicals now were not only talking about what has been dubbed "the social gospel," but were making lots of use of the word "kingdom." The later Evangelicals, accordingly, dropped any reference to the Kingdom of God coming on earth, except in an evangelistic, spiritual sense, because they believed human conditions were supposed to go from bad to worse. The massive social concerns of the 1850s were no longer typical of their agendas.

Their one question now was, "Are you winning people to Christ?" Their focus was more likely on the next world - eschatology, prophecy, as mentioned.

A young man named Bob Pierce founded World Vision out of an emotional and heart response to human need. He was driven not by theology or exegesis. Ron Sider's book *Rich Christians in a World of Hunger,* or something like that tried to piece together some theology for earthly action. Carl Henry's now famous *The Uneasy Conscience of the Modern Fundamentalist* arrested the attention of many.

A good deal of good work was done on the mission field, where intuition often overpowered lagging theological rationale. But it would take a long time - and not even yet - for contemporary mission theology to catch up with that of the older and earlier agencies whose missionaries established universities on the field and often were architects of the entire educational structure of nations. They recognized that the very different spheres of government, education and commerce must all work together if the situation in this world will approach the full implications of the phrase in the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* …