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Hole in Our Gospel: The Answer that Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Stearns, Richard. *The Hole in our Gospel: The Answer that Changed my Life and Might Just Change the World*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010. ISBN: 0849947001. Reviewed by Abby M. Foreman, Social Work Instructor and Program Director, Dordt College.

Author Richard Stearns begins *The Hole in our Gospel* by recounting his personal journey from successful corporate CEO to the president of one of the largest Christian relief and development organizations, World Vision. His decision to lead World Vision and leave behind the more lucrative corporate world was a culmination of his maturation as a Christian, his sense of God's call in his life, and a number of not-so-subtle nudges by fellow Christians and family members who challenged him to make the change. Part 1 covers the journey that Stearns himself takes in discovering the hole in his understanding of the Gospel. He becomes convinced of the social and global implications of a Gospel meant for the whole world. The book's message is directed primarily towards Christians and the church in North America and includes practical steps for those inspired to take further action. For those who have read extensively on global poverty, the statistics and current realities to poverty are not new, and yet *The Hole in our Gospel* offers new insights and conveys urgency to the problem of poverty while making a convincing argument that the problem is not just the poor's but ours.

In Part 2, "The Hole Gets Deeper," Stearns argues that the primary hole in our gospel is our tendency as Christians to understand faith as only a personal salvation issue without considering larger implications for behavior towards our families, civil society, or the world. Stearns uses such passages as Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 to argue that "God expects our lives—our churches and faith communities too—to be characterized by these authentic signs of our own transformation: compassion, mercy, justice, and love—demonstrated *tangibly*" (57). This tangible demonstration of the Gospel is often ignored or overlooked by many Christians despite repeated calls in the Bible for followers of Jesus Christ to do justice and love mercy. Stearns considers our non-response to be a sin of omission and uses the parable of Lazarus and the rich man as illustration. The rich man, who ended up in the torments of hell, walked by Lazarus every day at the gates and *ignored him*: "He was aware of the beggar's plight, had the power to relieve his suffering—and yet chose to do nothing" (187).

Throughout, Stearns gently urges us to honestly evaluate our response and our view of the Gospel. In Part 3, "A Hole in the World," he also urges us to acknowledge and understand the need in the world. Though historically inadequate communication systems, lack of technol-

ogy and travel opportunities, and proper disbursement of medication slowed down our response, these impediments have lessened considerably in the last half of the twentieth century (101-104). But even with these advancements, the response has been slow. One reason for our slow response is a simplistic view of the causes and solutions of poverty. Americans believe that poverty is an "absence of things" or a lack of knowledge (125) and that once equipped, the poor will no longer be poor. Systematic corruption and oppression and their effects are often not considered. Finally, believing that poverty is a result of sinfulness, many do not realize that many of the world's poorest people are Christians, no more sin-ridden than the rest of us (126). In contrast to this simplistic understanding of the problems and solutions, Stearns offers a comprehensive explanation of the interconnected and complex factors that affect the global poor. For example, the AIDS epidemic is not only a health issue but also has devastating social and economic impacts on families and communities. Education can be threatened when teachers die from AIDS or when children quit coming when their parents are stricken with the disease. Stearns appropriately describes the compounding and complicated issues as a spider web.

Stearns conveys a sense of urgency and timeliness for action by North American Christians, showing first the relatively recent and growing inequality between the world's rich and the world's poor:

According to Jeffrey D. Sachs, in 1820 the difference in per capita income between the wealthiest region and the poorest was perhaps four to one. Compare that to the seventy-five to one cited by President Carter in 2002. Prior to 1800, disease and inadequate health care were facts of life that affected all people. (100)

The industrial revolution and technological advancements sparked rapid advancement and improvement in quality of life in only some countries and became a major contributor to the growing inequality. With this growing gap between rich and poor, there exists a moral dilemma, Stearns argues, for those who are wealthy in comparison to the one billion people who live on less than one U.S. dollar a day. But Stearns shows that there is hope; progress has been made with significant improvements in health, life expectancy, literacy, and quality of life for many. Although we often despair and are immobilized by the sheer size of

need, Stearns offers three simple principles for Christians to embrace: “Every one of these hurting people is created in God’s image and loved by him. Every one of these challenges has a solution. Every one of us can make a difference” (162). The technology and resources exist to drastically change the circumstances of the world’s most vulnerable, but a concentrated and significant movement of will is needed. The remainder of the book shifts focus toward the response of the church and individuals in repairing the hole in the world and in our gospel.

The most powerful and convicting parts of in *The Hole in our Gospel* are Parts 4 and 5: “The Hole in the Church” and “Repairing the Hole.” Stearns makes a convincing and passionate argument that Christians can and should be the ones who lead the charge to change the world. The American church is *the wealthiest group of Christians in history* (216). He calculates that if all churchgoers committed to tithing their full ten percent, there would be an extra \$168 billion per year: “If every American churchgoer tithed, we could literally change the world. In fact...\$65 billion—less than 40 percent of the extra \$168 billion—could eliminate the most extreme poverty on the planet for more than a billion people” (218). Instead of being known by what we are against, the church needs to be known by our successful efforts to change the world (228). Instead of being comfortable with the American Dream (individual hard work bringing individual success), we should find comfort in belonging to God and being entrusted with, not entitled to, His resources (207).

Stearns laments the failure of the church’s full participation in major social change efforts:

If the Church is indeed a revolutionary kind of institution, called to foment a social revolution by promoting justice, lifting up the sanctity of human life, fighting for the underdog, and challenging the prevailing value systems in our world, then it seems we should be out in front on social justice issues rather than bringing up the rear” (190).

Israel, Jonathan I. *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 276 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-69114200-5.

Witte, John, Jr. *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 388 pages including bibliography. ISBN-13: 978-0-521-81842-1. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

When and how did liberty arise? How did we arrive at multi-party, wide-franchise, secret-ballot elections for determining who shall hold office as a legislator? How did we arrive at contemporary democracy with all its faults and blessings? These closely related questions, and others like them, have been posed repeatedly by politicians, lawyers, and historians alike. In the West, as public life over the last two hundred years has lost clear contact with the Christian religion (though is not a whit less religious for all that), the

He shows how the church has lagged behind by citing enslavement of blacks and treatment of Native Americans as examples (190-202). Although his argument is valid, the assumption that the institutional church acts in concentrated ways is questionable. On any issue, there seems to be wide and diverse response within the body of Christ. The church certainly should move together to respond to the vast need in the world, but it seems Stearns even agrees that this response really begins with individuals and small groups of committed people. He mentions Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., William Wilberforce, and others as examples of those who have fought against social injustice and inspired others to join the effort. The chapter “A Tale of Two Real Churches” gives us examples of how local churches saw the need around them and responded with action (231-241). World Vision and other development organizations serve as powerful examples of the impact and influence that a few committed Christians can have in inspiring organizations that do a great amount of good.

Stearns presents a compelling case for the urgency of Christians to “repair the hole” in the world. The final section of the book turns the challenge to us, asking what we are going to do with our time, talent, and treasure. Stearns reminds us again that each of us has a responsibility to act and live out the whole Gospel in a world full of need. He does not argue that everyone should join the mission field but rather that each should give of what he or she has and use influence and resources to make a difference. Interspersed throughout the book are stories of inspiring people and churches that have done amazing things to respond to various problems in their neighborhoods and around the world. One small group of people can change the world. *The Hole in our Gospel* contains an inspiring and convicting message, and Stearns pushes us to imagine a world where a concentrated effort of the church makes a drastic difference in the lives of the world’s most vulnerable people.

tendency has been to answer these questions by ascribing a pivotal role to the American and French revolutions. Certainly, the period 1763 to 1799 is of central significance, as any careful reader of Robert R. Palmer’s now classic *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (1959-64) will appreciate. The question is this: do we owe the things that we prize—when we speak of liberty, democracy, and free elections—pre-eminently to the French Revolution and the frequently anti-Christian (and especially anti-Catholic) teachings of