

AND SOME FELL ON ROCKY SOIL

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The last two decades have witnessed a gigantic transfer of money, material and expertise from the industrial West to the euphemistically labeled “developing world”. We are only now awakening to the realization that the results of this action have fallen dismally short of our expectations. Last year I questioned a senior official of the international development community if he could think of any effort in Bangladesh, in the field of agricultural development, which had even remotely achieved its objectives. After a long pause he shook his head and said there was none.

As Christians, we have undoubtedly had better results in our efforts to make more Christians in the Third World. However, are Christians better able to cope with the problems of underdevelopment than those who have not become Christians? During my two years in Asia I was intensely interested in changes in attitude, ethics, and lifestyles, as well as any other changes which enabled people to cope better with the pressures of population, technology and other aspects of development—changes which could be traced to the people being or becoming Christian. My preliminary conclusion is that becoming Christian has little positive effect on the development potential of Asians.

When a transaction takes place between us as individuals or as businesses, how is the value established? By what is sent, or by what is received? Obviously by what is received. When we measure the assistance flowing from the developed to the underdeveloped world, how do we measure it? We are most conscious of what we have sent, but when there is little evidence of anything being received, whom do we blame?

If Jesus came among us as a man in our own time, surely he would have something to teach us about development. With a little imagination we may be able to find guidance.

Listen! A farmer decided to sow some grain. As he scattered it across his field, some of it fell on a path, and the birds came and picked it off the hard ground and ate it. Some fell on rocky soil. It grew up quickly enough, but soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the rocky soil. Other seeds fell among thorns that shot up and crowded the young plants so that they produced no grain. But some of the seed fell into good soil and yielded thirty times as much as he had planted—some of it even sixty or a hundred times as much!

You will note that the birds, the rocks, and the thorns take the blame for the poor performance of that seed. Have you ever questioned that conclusion? Isn't it just like all the goodies which we shower on the Third World which seem to find more thorns and rocks than good fields? Let's pretend Jesus was using this parable in 1974.

Listen! A farmer decided to sow some grain. He loaded his drill, hitched it to his Massey and drove out of his yard. When he reached the highway he opened his drill and the seed poured onto the pavement whereupon the birds ate it and the traffic crushed it. Then he drove into the ditch among the thorns and crabgrass and seeded that. Then he headed onto a field of rocks and seeded it whereupon he came upon a field of good soil which he planted and it produced thirty times as much as he had planted—some of it even sixty or a hundred times as much!

Why is it that we examine these passages so uncritically? Possibly because we identify with the sower, and the seed is our gift or assistance.

May I suggest a parallel between this parable and development? The path, the thorns and the rocky soil were never intended for grain, at least they were not prepared for it. In the same sense, most of the Third World is not prepared for our technology and our expertise. The well-intended projects found on the rocks of illiteracy and over-population, strangle among the thorns of social strife and political incompetence.

When we speak of good seed and rocky soil, what do we have in mind? Water has always been a problem in the grazing lands along the Sahara, and in recent years, numerous wells have been dug to improve the supply. With drinking water assured, the nomads could support larger herds with less wandering. Since cattle must remain within 20 miles of their water source, the lands around each well were heavily grazed. When the drought began, these areas attracted even greater numbers of cattle and people. The result has been such intensive damage to the ecology around each well that those lands may take decades to recover.

Bangladesh is receiving a fabulously expensive communications satellite ground station, courtesy of the Canadian government. The waiting list for a telephone in Dacca is seven years, and the problem of calling from the exchange in one half of the city to the exchange in the other half is still unresolved. I predict thorns.

It is hard to argue with a free gift of food, but sometimes one has to. The U.S. government donated huge quantities of soybean oil to Bangladesh and insisted that it be sold at low prices, so that the poor would benefit. It just happens that soybean oil tastes and cooks very much like peanut oil, which forced the price of peanut oil so low that it became uneconomic to raise peanuts. This forced the closure of the only mill for processing peanuts and the acreage in peanuts is now only a fraction of what it was several years ago.

The German government installed 300 irrigation wells in northern Bangladesh, with each well designed to irrigate 100 acres. Since farmer's holdings average two to three acres, and there is no history of farmers working in groups, the wells are irrigating less than 20% of their potential. Other donors are presently installing 3,000 more wells and there is talk of another 15,000 after that. If the rocky soil doesn't produce with 300 wells, then try 3,000.

Medicine has made the greatest breakthrough in the developing world, and it has also created the greatest problems. The Asian social security system consists of 12 live births so that six children reach maturity, of which three will be boys who take care of you when you are old. Our intervention with a handful of vaccines and antibiotics has dramatically altered the life expectancy with the well-known results of populations doubling in 23 years. We have succeeded at the cost of dropping huge new boulders in fields that were already hard to work.

Am I suggesting that all development efforts are failures? No, there are numerous excellent projects. However, the pattern of development is such that the majority of money and efforts produces few results, with the effect that these countries are falling further behind the developed world, and many are actually slipping back. Given this situation – is the problem lack of money and expertise, or is there a much more basic flaw? As Christians, can we endorse a philosophy which is a failure from all points of view, or do we search for a new approach?

Eventually the question comes down to this. Do we search for the good soil, which means that we ignore the most needy nations of the world, or do we work with the rocky soil. If we knowingly accept this challenge, do we blame the rocks or do we do something about them? Let's turn again to Jesus, to the lessons given on a rocky hillside near the Sea of Galilee.

First Lesson: "You are the world's seasoning, to make it tolerable...you are the world's light – a city on a hill, glowing in the night for all to see."

Our life and our methods are to be in distinct contrast to the secular world around us. In Trueblood's *Incendiary Fellowship*, he states "When church ceases to be in tension with its contemporary culture, it ceases to be an effective witness." The Western world relates to the developing nations in terms of knowledge and technology. Presumably our approach must go beyond this.

Second lesson: "There is a saying, love your friends, and hate your enemies! But I say, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you!...for he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust too. If you love only those who love you, what good is that?"

In my Bangladesh experience, we were dealing with the frustrations of being resented most by those individuals and groups whom we felt were making the greatest progress. We concluded that genuine development was slow and painful, requiring wrenching adjustments in attitudes, methods and community structures. Assistance which did not require fundamental adjustment was more appreciated, but of little long term value.

Jesus met little criticism when he distributed bread and fish, but was hated when he challenged men where it counts. Jesus did not choose his words by the applause they would generate, and likewise we should not choose the soil on the basis of expected return. If we were following Jesus today, undoubtedly we would all head for the rocky fields—to first remove the rocks, before we sow.

Third lesson: "Take care! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, for then you will lose your reward from your Father in Heaven...but when you do a kindness, do it secretly. Don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing."

Recently a U.S. based, so-called Christian broadcaster lamented on the airwaves that the U.S., with its gifts measured in millions of dollars and tons, is the most generous nation in all history, yet rarely receives any thanks or credit for its generosity from the recipients.

One soon learns to work without the expectations of continuous applause, but possibly there is a deeper meaning. The various secular agencies have poured tremendous sums and energies into the expectation of achieving results, but almost invariably have fallen short. Are they falling short because they aren't good enough, or because their expectations are too high? Remember the parable of the sower. Would you throw good seed into a rocky field, or would you do something about the rocks first? Picking rocks will seldom be applauded, since many of the rocks are embedded in human nature, nor does that of itself produce a crop. However, it does get at the heart of the problem. Jesus said, "And your Father who knows all secrets will reward you."

Fourth lesson: “And now about fasting. When you fast, declining your food for a spiritual purpose, don’t do it publicly as the hypocrites do, who try to look wan and disheveled so people will feel sorry for them...but when you fast, put on festive clothing so that no one will suspect you are hungry.”

When one of our numbers departs to work in Haiti, Zaire or Bangladesh, we admire the sacrifices that are being made. But Jesus teaches that the visible sacrifices are not important. Presumably we are to work on the rocky soil, expect to be surrounded by enemies, expect neither thanks nor results, and not even take credit for laboring under such difficult conditions.

It’s conceivable, after hearing this, that you interpret my thoughts as being somewhat pessimistic. I am, because what I have seen in Bangladesh makes me less than hopeful about the capability, or willingness, of the major sources of assistance to attack the fundamental problems; and secondly, the recognition that these fundamental problems can only be resolved with the very active participation of the people themselves.

Another thought may have entered your mind – why does he deal abstractly with problems, rather than use the more acceptable Christian jargon of human relationships. It’s because the third world problems are real, not psychological. If we produce only a meaningful relationship, it is of little help; if this can lead to solving a problem, then it is also a part of development.

Let’s return to the example of Jesus. He died leaving no money and few friends, yet we consider his sojourn on Earth a pivotal point in history. The teaching and example of Jesus pointed towards the rocks which littered the path between one man and another, and his death removed the great barrier between man and God. Jesus neither sowed nor reaped, but he cleared away the rocks, so that those who followed could plant in good soil.

This summer I stood on the rocky Israeli slopes where Jesus taught us these very things and watched a bulldozer patiently working on a neighbouring hill. The hill was so rocky it was scarcely useful for grazing, and was probably that way when Jesus looked at it. The bulldozer scraped away the top few feet, composed of boulders with only a little soil: the product of years of erosion and careless agricultural practices. It exposed a rich layer of soil with only the occasional rock. Another part of the hill revealed his purpose; an orange orchard was taking hold and doing well. The developing world is like that rocky hillside. A lot of good seed has been scattered; it comes up for a little while; then withers and dies because there is not enough soil. If Jesus were among us to give his example I would expect him to be picking rocks.