

THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL

by Richard Stearns, President, World Vision US

Evangelical Christian Publishers Association 2010 Book of the Year

BOOK SUMMARY from Givers by Design

The Hole....	2
The Least....	3
The Church....	
AWOL....	4
What if....	5
A Tip....	6
Implications....	7
Final Thoughts....	8

Dear Church Leaders, Brothers and Sisters in Christ;

Why is this book so important? Why have church leaders around the country chosen this book for sermon series', small group work, and whole-congregation book studies? Why have many called it transforming?

*In giving *The Hole in Our Gospel* his highest endorsement, pastor and author Bill Hybels summed up by saying that this book "will call you to a higher level of discipleship." Echoing this comment, Madeline Albright noted that it "inspires us as individuals to reconsider our basic decisions about life." As speaker, pastor, and author John Ortberg observed "It is a prophetic and hope-filled word for our day. If enough people read it, and do it, the world will change."*

The Hole in Our Gospel describes clearly God's heart for the poor, the oppressed, "the least of these" -- and our part in His plans for them. It powerfully illuminates the Church in America's tepid response; Lazarus is indeed lying at the gate, and we the Church are passing him by. It considers the implications of our apparent indifference: our discipleship stunted, the reputation and relevance of the Church compromised, the profoundly negative witness to a watching world. This is a message, a call, that the church can not afford to ignore if we are to truly proclaim the love of Christ to a hurting world.

There is a growing sense, both within the Church and on the part of the next generation of Christ followers, that this "hole" in our gospel, this difference between God's plain call to serve the "least of these" and our predominately internally focused programs, must somehow be addressed....

*We believe that there is a flood of Christian generosity, waiting to be released.... *The Hole in Our Gospel* touches the nerve that can release that flood.... Mr. Ortberg's observation is spot on.*

We present this summary so that you may preview the book's message with a minimal investment of your time, and go on to read this important book in its entirety. We pray that our churches will hear, and heed, our Father's call to a bolder and more faithful action in tangibly demonstrating His love to the world's least and last. Appreciatively Yours in Christ,

The team at Givers by Design

THE HOLE

- **Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and the needy.... Ezekiel 16:49**
- **It's not about charity; its about justice.... Bono**
- **Justice is a serious gospel-prophetic mandate.... Eugene Peterson**

2 Timothy 4:3 – *For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.* That is, the gospel with a hole in it – a gospel that gives us a ticket to heaven and asks nothing in return, a gospel that relieves us of responsibility towards others, towards injustice, towards the poor, perhaps even towards God himself – a gospel with ourselves and our own comfort and fulfillment at the center.

Many writers have noted that the Church of Jesus Christ in America reflects our times, culture, and values – embracing the gospel of salvation, but much less so the gospel of obedience, sacrifice, and responsibility that Jesus preached. In his book The Hole In Our Gospel, Richard Stearns likens this gospel “with a hole in it” to fire insurance – we’re covered, and can go on about our business. John Ortberg, in God is Closer Than You Think, calls this incomplete gospel “the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven.” Not exactly picking up our crosses and following....

Both authors point to the unifying theme of Scripture: “Immanuel”, God with us, Jesus coming to earth and bringing the kingdom of God with him. Both authors then go on to note that we have the incredible privilege of partnering with God in “making up there come down here,” building for the kingdom. The Lord’s Prayer does not say “God, get me out of here so I can come up there” --- rather, it says *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”* Believers and their churches have the privilege of doing his will, participating in his plan, sharing this work. Granted, this kingdom building will not be complete until Christ’s return, but do we as Christians – during our lives here and now – have the option of turning our back on the world’s problems, on injustice, on the least and the last? The real question, says Stearns, is this: What does God expect of us?

The “whole” gospel tells the story of salvation by grace, through faith, to build – with God – for His Kingdom (Ephesians 2:8-10). Stearns presents us with a simple, God-given mandate – a way to help “make up there come down here” – that is, to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves by paying attention to the needs of the “least of these.” As Stearns points out, there are over 2000 verses (encompassing all 66 books of the bible) concerning justice and poverty; and further, that tangibly loving our less fortunate neighbors here on earth *is seen in heaven as loving God*. This biblical call to action concerning the poor is no minor matter – Jesus explicitly and repeatedly links these issues, in his parables, actions, and commandments, to building His Father’s Kingdom.

- *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.... Galatians 5:6*
- *Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Matthew 25:37-40*

THE LEAST....

For the world's poorest people, misery and death are the norm – and the numbers are staggering. Imagine, Stearns asks, that a jetliner full of American travelers crashes, killing all aboard – not once, but three times in the space of a month. There would be an outcry, investigations, a mobilization of tremendous resources to prevent further tragedy. Yet, the equivalent of 100 planeloads of children crash every day, killing all – that's 26,500 children, first suffering, and then dying, each and every day of the year – from entirely preventable causes due to their extreme poverty.

Over 1 billion people (about 15% of the world's population) live in extreme poverty. In monetary terms, they live on less than \$1 per day.... for reference, the average American income is \$105 per day. Try to imagine living on less than 1% of your current income, day after day, month after month, year after year! The harsh reality for these people includes:

- 9,000,000 die each year from hunger related causes; a child dies every 5 seconds
- 5,000,000 die each year from water related illness; a child dies every 15 seconds
- millions more die from AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis; millions of children are orphaned each year
- millions of children grow up mentally impaired, handicapped due to malnutrition and unsafe water
- 200 million man-hours of work are spent *every day* in the Third World just hauling water
- despair gnaws at the hearts of helpless parents as they watch their children suffer and die

Hunger, thirst, and disease combine to make work, education, and community improvements all but impossible. For many living in this grinding poverty, *desperation and hopelessness rule*. Even with hard work, determination, and ability, they know they have *no real choices*, no way out of the trap....

The poorest of the poor – what would it take to lift these one billion human beings, created in God's image, out of their extreme poverty? By Stearns' estimate, \$65 billion. That takes care of the worst of it. And surprisingly, the cost for solutions to the most serious problems affecting the rest of the world's poor (2.6 billion others) is small by comparison:

- basic health and nutrition for all -- \$13 billion
- clean, safe water for most -- \$9 billion
- primary education for all children -- \$6 billion

Such large numbers are hard to grasp, so Stearns offers some figures to help put these costs into perspective. Here are the amounts spent by Americans for a few of the more common luxuries:

- entertainment and recreation -- \$705 billion
- state lottery tickets -- \$58 billion
- pets and their care -- \$31 billion

Obviously, a relatively minor adjustment to our priorities could have a tremendous impact! How little does it take to make a difference? Consider this: it costs just one dollar to bring one person an adequate supply of clean, safe water – for a full year.

The “least of these” – Christ's brothers – if the Church does not come to their aid, then who will?

The Church in America must confront the uncomfortable challenge of being endowed with an abundance of blessings in an extremely poor world – The Hole in Our Gospel, p. 172.

THE CHURCH....

“AWOL for the Greatest Humanitarian Crisis of All Time”

That’s how Stearns summarizes the American Church’s response to poverty in the Third World. The United States is home to some 340,000 churches; American churchgoers are wealthier, by far, than most of the rest of the world, with an annual income of over \$5.2 trillion. American Christians give, on average, 2.58% of their income to their churches or other nonprofit ministries. The Church, in its turn, gives just 2% of what it receives to overseas missions involved in evangelism or assistance to the poor. The net result amounts to *six pennies* per person per day – this is what American Christians give to the overseas poor through their churches.... *less than one thousandth of our income.*

Every pastor, every church member in America should cringe; have we made a mockery of Jesus’ concern for the last and the least? As Stearns notes, we did not make the world’s poor as they are – yet, if they *remain* poor, it will most certainly be our fault.... we have the awareness, the resources, the ability.... the only remaining question is, will we share?

How has this happened? We have, as a Church, ignored the biblical mandate to care for the poor, preferring instead to focus our energies and resources on our own needs and desires. Just as individual church members fall far short (2.58%) of a true tithe, offering leftovers instead of first fruits, so has the Church fallen short of its responsibility to the least and the last. Preoccupied with serving its own membership, internal programs and ministries consume the annual budget, leaving only a pitiful scrap (2%) for the desperately poor.... *less than one thousandth of our income.* Is this what the Church of Jesus Christ in America is called to be: inwardly focused and self-serving, *to the exclusion of the last and the least?*

This is the big picture; of course, many individuals and churches give sacrificially of their time, energy, and money to help the poor, both at home and internationally. However, this is by far the exception rather than the rule, as Stearns’ data plainly reveals.

Whether one is talking about individual believers, or the Church as a whole, our check stubs belie our true priorities. As Stearns concludes (pp. 238-9), “Most of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the developing world live in grinding poverty. And in the midst of this stands the Church of Jesus Christ in America, with resources, knowledge, and tools unequaled in the history of Christendom.... Will (historians) write about a people who stood by and watched.... of Christians who lived in luxury and self-indulgence while millions died for lack of food and water.... The heart and soul of the Church of Jesus Christ, the very integrity of our faith and our relevance in the world, hang in the balance.”

Where, indeed, is the Church?

What If

- *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8*
- *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 1 John 3:17*
- *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? James 2:15*
- *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:18*
- *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. James 2:16*
- *Then the King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Matthew 25:40*

Commenting on Jesus' parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19), Stearns observes that the rich man "....was aware of the beggar's plight, had the power to relieve his suffering – and yet chose to do nothing. I see in this parable a great metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ in the third millennium. Has not God laid a beggar at our gate as well? Outside of our comfortable homes and great church buildings lie the poorest of the poor in our world, suffering, hungry, and sick, longing for just a few crumbs from our "rich man's" table. And like the rich man, we cannot say that we do not know about the suffering poor; we cannot claim that we don't have the means to help. We, too, will one day stand before God and give an accounting." p 187-188.

Yes, we are all aware of the suffering Third World poor; the information age, worldwide news media, and internet leave us without excuse. We know as much, or as little, as we care to know: their faces, their needs, their stories.

Likewise, we have the ability, tools, and know how. World Vision is just one of literally hundreds of reputable, professional organizations with proven track records in helping desperately poor communities climb out of extreme poverty with the training and tools to lead self sustaining lives.

And yes, we have the financial resources. The American Church is the wealthiest in the world; if not us, then who?

We are, like the rich man in the parable, without excuse. The gospel calls us to a certain amount of self denial, taking up our cross daily to follow Christ – are we as individuals, and our churches, as the body of Christ, willing to share our wealth to build for His Kingdom? Recall that Stearns estimates that it will take \$65 billion to lift the 1,000,000,000 people living on less than one dollar a day out of their extreme poverty, and an additional \$28 billion to meet the basic food, water, and education needs of all the world's poor, or \$93 billion in all. Imagine with me....

What if.... American Christians diverted or sacrificed just enough of their discretionary spending (think \$705 billion in entertainment and recreation expenditures) to bring the whole tithe, instead of a quarter of it, into the storehouse? We would have an extra \$168 billion to spend in funding the work of the Church – more than enough to fully address the most pressing issues afflicting the desperately poor. Imagine a watching world's amazement as the Church brought an end to extreme poverty -- 1,000,000,000 prayers of desperation replaced with prayers of thanksgiving, and basic needs for food, health, water, and education met – worldwide. What an appealing and inspiring picture: vigorous, life-giving faith and a relevant church, in action – making a difference, building for the kingdom!

A Tip from the Boss....

The foregoing illustration of how a scripturally based financial commitment on the part of Christians could end extreme poverty around the world assumes nothing more than a true tithe on the part of individual Christians, and a Church that is willing to use the extra funds to fulfill God's mandate to help the last and the least.

Again, we did not make the poor the way they are, but whether they are to remain poor is truly up to us. Our Father has, in over 2000 verses woven throughout all 66 books of the Bible, made His desire abundantly clear.

There are lots of different ways to massage the numbers, many "what if" scenarios; but they all have one thing in common – sacrificial giving. "Sacrificial" because, even though we are undeniably wealthy compared to the rest of the world, our budgets – both individual budgets and church budgets – could almost universally be described as "tight." In this context, giving is sacrificial, or denying oneself, because we could have spent the same dollars on something else that we, as individuals or churches, wanted or needed. It is simply a matter of priority: satisfying our own wants and needs, versus attaching the same importance to helping the poor *that the Gospel does*.

Of course, there is a much simpler, even child-like way to look at giving, and that is to recognize that giving can be a simple matter of sharing what one has. In Luke 3:11, John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus' coming ministry, spoke to the crowds in this way about bearing fruit: "*The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.*" Plain enough...

God provided his people a model of budgeting for sharing in Leviticus 23:22 -- *When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien.* Stearns points out that this model is still relevant today; a modern translation might read: "If your job produces a decent income for you, do not spend it all on yourself. Make some of it available to the poor and the less fortunate, that they, too, might live a decent life." (p. 123). Of course, the same could be said for church budgets as for individual incomes. This amounts to a lifestyle choice, then, for individual Christians and for their churches. The question is, shall we continue with our inwardly focused, self-serving lifestyles and our "holey" gospel, or shall we endeavor to live in faithful obedience to the "whole" Gospel, God's Living Word?

Implications for Evangelism....

If the American Church were to step up and actively engage with the problem of extreme poverty in the Third World, evangelistic efforts would benefit.

Imagine the billions of desperate prayers for help, for a way out, answered through the Church of Jesus Christ – and replaced with prayers of thanksgiving. Consider, too, the following statements, quoted by Stearns:

- He who is dying of hunger must be fed rather than taught.... Saint Thomas Aquinas
- Preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words.... Saint Francis of Assisi
- Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence, or learning.... Frederick Faber

There are many other quotations along the same lines, not the least of which would be Jesus' command (Matthew 5:13-16) that we are to be salt and light: *....let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* Similarly, Paul concludes his instruction about generosity in giving by noting that *....through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God... (2 Corinthians 9:11-13.)*

The world is watching – will we Christians actively engage the problem of extreme poverty? What would be the impact on the effectiveness of the Church's evangelical effort, both at home and around the world? The enormous positive impact on our evangelical effort in the Third World should be obvious. The professionalism and efficiency of hundreds of Christian development organizations serves to pool and magnify countless small contributions, nurturing entire communities towards self-sufficiency, and in the process, spiritual transformation.

Stearns notes that at home, the Church is known predominately for what it is against, rather than what it is for, resulting in a reputation for being judgmental, hypocritical, and irrelevant (data, pp. 228-30). Many other prominent Christian authors have recently written about the modern Church's lack of attractiveness to the young, about the Church's perceived lack of relevance in the 21st century, about the need to become externally focused in order to remain viable, much less truly serving God. Even atheist morality holds that if it is within our power to prevent something tragic from happening, at comparatively little cost to ourselves, then we are bound to act. Given recent attacks on the Christian faith by atheist writers, this too is relevant for the Church. Actively engaging with the problem of extreme poverty in the Third World could go a very long way towards solving the modern Church's "PR" problem at home.

In acting on the biblical mandate to help the least and the last, the Christian Church has an incredible opportunity to tangibly demonstrate the power of the "whole" Gospel – to the entire world – setting the Light that is Christ on a hilltop, shining so brightly that none can miss it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Of course, the “hole” is in our gospel; there is no hole in Christ’s Gospel.... it’s a simple question of obedience, not interpretation.

The American Church’s lack of substantive engagement with the problem of extreme poverty should be convicting for all of us as the body of Christ. This “hole” threatens the vitality of our faith, the integrity of our walk as disciples, and the relevance of our Church to the world God has placed us in.

This “hole” also represents an incredible opportunity. As a Church, and as individual followers of Christ, we have a clear choice between the downward spiral of self-absorption, or the joy of partnering with God in building for His Kingdom.

This “hole” is an opportunity for the Church to show the way: confessing our omission, illuminating the call, and leading her membership by example in sacrificial giving as she reprioritizes her budgets, obeying God’s command to help the least and the last.

This “hole” is an opportunity for millions of individual Christians to engage and re-energize, giving more and giving joyfully, knowing that the help they send truly makes a difference.

The greatest opportunity ever presented to modern Christendom lies waiting; how shall we answer?

This summary was prepared by Givers by Design; permission is granted for use of this work for all but commercial / for-profit uses. The Hole in Our Gospel, by Richard Stearns, can be purchased at \$3.92 per copy, no quantity restrictions, direct from World Vision Resources – go here for discount coupon: <http://www.giversbydesign.org/resources/books-and-studies/coupon/>