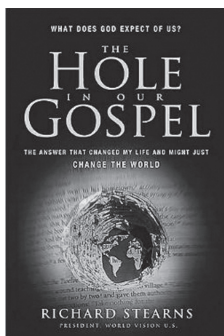


MARCELO DIAS

BOOK REVIEW



Richard Stearns
The Hole in Our Gospel
Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009
\$22.99

From its outset, *The Hole in Our Gospel* aims at challenging readers on their understanding of the gospel, on how they cope with global misery, and their coherent lives in the midst of it all as the author seeks to answer the ultimate question posed on page 1: “What does God expect of us?”

Unlike what one might expect, Richard Stearns, president of World Vision since 1998, does not write about his charity or our important monetary contributions, but draws from his experience as a successful corporate executive to look for a meaningful Christian life as he seeks to understand what is lacking in the response by Christians to the major world challenges.

The Hole in Our Gospel has 303 pages of biblical explanations mixed with social insights, seasoned with real-life experiences, and sprinkled with carefully-chosen quotations. This book’s twenty-six chapters of thought-provoking and deeply-engaging reading is divided into five major parts: The Hole in My Gospel—And Maybe Yours, The Hole Gets Deeper, A Hole in the World, A Hole in the Church, and Repairing the Hole.

Stearns begins with his understanding of the gospel and states that “in our evangelistic efforts to make the good news accessible and simple to understand, we seem to have boiled it down to a kind of ‘fire insurance’ that one can buy. . . . Focusing almost exclusively on the afterlife reduces the importance of what God expects of us in this life” (17), when “the

gospel—the whole gospel—means more than the personal salvation of individuals. It means a social revolution” (20).

The practical implications of the book are described in the third section when Stearns draws the readers’ attention to the many challenges that the poor of the world face (disease, poverty, lack of water, hunger, and political turmoil) and fills in the text with details, statistics, and stories.

The hole in the church is introduced in the next section with information from a survey that asked evangelical Christians whether they would be willing to donate money to help children orphaned by AIDS, assuming they were asked by a reputable Christian organization that was doing this work. Only 3 percent answered that they definitely would help, while 52 percent said that they probably or definitely would not help (198). Many Christians believe poverty to be the result of sinfulness and therefore see evangelism as the best, and sometimes only, medicine. Poverty indeed can have profound spiritual dimensions, and reconciliation through Christ is a powerful salve in the lives of both rich and poor. But salvation of the soul, as crucial as it may be for fullness of life both in the here and now and in eternity, does not by itself put food on the table, bring water out of the ground, or save a child from malaria (128).

What makes this book even more relevant, in my opinion, is the fact that the author bravely and skillfully undertakes the difficult task of walking a fine line between being criticized for being an extremist on the position of the social gospel or having a shallow biblical understanding, and therefore, not being very balanced. Stearns explains his position saying, “I don’t want to also suggest that all true followers of Christ must forsake everything to bring comfort and justice to the poor. I only propose that a genuine concern for ‘the least of these’ that finds tangible expression must be woven into the pattern of their life and faith” (60) Even Jesus did not spend every waking hour helping the poor. He dined with the wealthy, celebrated at weddings and feasts, taught in the synagogue, and perhaps even did a bit of carpentry. Still, there is no question that his love for the poor found consistent and concrete expression in his life and ministry (60).

All the issues presented in this book are very relevant to the Adventist Church, but a specific passage may speak even more directly to us. Stearns thinks that because of a rise in premillennial eschatology, some Christian groups reasoned that since Jesus is coming back, why bother trying to fix the world now? It is easy to see how this dividing of the gospel leaves people with only half a gospel, that is, a gospel with a hole in it, as people became satisfied with their particular piece. This “holey” gospel, on the other hand, reduced the full gospel (201).

The Adventist Church, however, is directly quoted in a positive way as part of a real-life illustration when the book is telling about pastor Morgan

Chilulu's vision for his 120 member church in Kamfinsa, Zambia in an AIDS affected community. He was excited about the other churches in his community that came together. "All churches have become one," he said. "There is no Pentecostal; there is no Evangelical; there is no Seventh-day Adventist. Thirty churches have come together. Now thirty churches are speaking the same language. We work together without any quarrel" (236).

Although Stearns is an executive, he approaches the issues as a good missiologist, shows the empathy of a social worker, and makes appeals like a good minister. The book's ending is certainly directed to all the above and especially to everyone who is part of the Christian family. "What will historians write about this nation of 340,000 churches? Will they look back and see a Church too comfortable, insulated from the pain of the rest of the world, empty of compassion, and devoid of deeds? God's image and identity are still defaced. They are slandered by poverty, by injustice, by corruption, by disease, and by human exploitation and suffering" (255).

The Hole in Our Gospel received the 2010 Christian Book of the Year award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA). On the last pages, the reader will find a useful study guide while other material can be found on its website: www.theholeinourgospel.com