


Richard Stearns: Living the Whole Gospel

In 1998 Richard Stearns left his position as CEO of Lenox  to become the president of World Vision, a Christian relief organization. This decision changed his life, and he shares his journey in his new book, The Hole in Our Gospel. He has traveled more than 1 million miles and shares stories of how the gospel has revolutionized lives, but it's the whole gospel in action. He says, "Christianity is a faith that was meant to be spread. ... Our charge is to both proclaim and embody the gospel so that others can see, hear, and feel God's love in tangible ways. ... The gospel means much more than personal salvation of individuals. It means a social revolution." Stearns discovered a hole in his own Christian faith and now challenges American Christians and the church to examine their gospel and determine to live the whole gospel, one that gives us a vision for transforming the world today. Here Stearns shares thoughts about his book.

Q: Why did you decide to write your first book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*?

A: I wrote this book because I believe there's something fundamentally missing from the way Americans understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, there's a hole in our gospel. I came to this conclusion over a lifetime, but especially over the last 10 years as God has given me an opportunity to travel to some of the most difficult and poor countries in the world. I've met so many wonderful people. I've seen what's happening across our planet. I've seen the suffering of the people that we serve. And I've come to the conclusion that the American church and American Christians have missed something about the gospel.

We tend to think of the gospel as a private transaction between us and God. It's about being forgiven for our sins and being saved, which *is* good news. But often we leave it there, as a private transaction between us and God. I don't think the gospel was ever meant to be private. I think it was meant to be public as well, and just like we have a private relationship with the Lord, we have to have a public and transforming relationship with the world.

As followers of Jesus Christ we're meant to take this good news across the globe, but not just the good news of salvation—also the good news of God's love for the poor, His concern for the sick and the downtrodden and the broken-hearted. We're to minister in His name. We're to stand up for justice in our world and fight for the underdog. That's why the gospel was good news for the poor, and I think we in America have missed that. Yes, our churches do a lot of good things in our country, in our communities and around the world, but we're not doing nearly enough. We're the wealthiest community of Christians in the history of Christendom in 2,000 years. We have tremendous resources, we have tremendous opportunities, and we need to rise to this challenge to truly be the gospel, to be the good news to the world.

Q: Was it hard to write honestly about the American church?

A: One of the most difficult things for me, as I wrote this book, was to be critical. I love the church; I love my brothers and sisters in Christ in America. And yet I felt I had to be critical of us as a group, as a whole, because I think we have missed the opportunity to do those things that God has called us to do. I think we have not done enough in loving the world the way Jesus loves the world. You know, the most quoted verse in Scripture is John 3:16. Well, the first part of that verse, "God so loved the world," shows that God *did* something. He acted, He got involved, He died for our sins. Do we love the world that much? Do we love it as much as Christ did? That's my prayer for the church in America: that

we would love the world so much that we would minister to it, that we would act, that we would get out of our pews and make a difference, be the salt and light, be the light in the darkness that Christ calls us to be.

Q: Are you concerned about the legacy of the American church?

A: I've been thinking a lot about what history will say about those of us at the beginning of the 21st century. When historians look back in 50 or 100 years and they write about our time, our generation, what will they say about the church? What will they say about the wealthiest community of Christians in the 2,000-year history of the Christian faith in the middle of a world torn by strife, racked by pandemic diseases like AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis? There's tremendous hunger in our world, a lack of clean water and sanitation, economic poverty. There's a tremendous amount of suffering in our world today, and here we sit at the verge of the 21st century, this wealthy community of Christians in the United States. How will history judge us? Will we miss an opportunity to stand up and make a difference?

What will people say about our generation when they look back at our social landscape? Will they recall that the church of the 21st century stared down the AIDS pandemic and rushed to the front lines of compassion to help the widows and orphans in their distress? Will they remember how we wouldn't tolerate hunger in the 21st century and rose up to make sure no child went to bed hungry every night? What will be the legacy of the church of Jesus Christ when historians look back 100 years from now?

I believe that this could be the church's finest hour. This could be the moment in history when we declare, "This is what the Christ we worship is all about. He's about caring for the poor, lifting up the downtrodden, giving sacrificially, making a difference to the least of these. This is what *He* stood for, and this is what we stand for."

Q: What dream do you have for Christians in America?

A: When I think of the church in the United States I always think of the question, *What if?* What if the 340,000 individual churches, and the more than 200,000,000 Christians, in the United States started to *do* the gospel? What if we started to love the world the way God loves the world? What if we started using our resources, not only financial but also our education and our knowledge, our access to different countries around the world, the techniques that we know for bringing clean water, for good? What if we used our resources to end hunger, for improve agricultural yields, to stimulate economic growth in communities? We have all of these tools. What if we used them? What if we stepped up and carried our weight based on the way God has blessed us? I believe we could truly change the world.

To preorder a copy of *The Hole in Our Gospel*, which releases March 12, [click here](#).

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