

Humanitarian Jesus

By Christian Buckley and Ryan Dobson, Moody, 224 pp., \$14.99

Reviewed by Kelly Givens, FASTEN staff

The terms “social justice” and “social gospel” are hot topics today within evangelical Christianity. Magazine writers, bloggers, and pastors are all tackling the subject. According to Christian Buckley and Ryan Dobson, at the heart of the debate is a key question: “What is more important, evangelism or humanitarianism?” In *Humanitarian Jesus*, these authors argue that conservatives choose the former. Conservatives contend the primary concern of the church has always been and should always be “defining, declaring and defending the gospel.” Liberals favor an emphasis on the latter. And some with a “socially oriented viewpoint” believe the two should be equally intertwined.

In *Humanitarian Jesus*, the authors try for a both/and position, though their overall leaning is towards the conservative side. Buckley (a blogger who runs Covered Images, Inc.) and Dobson (founder of KOR ministries and a co-host of *Family Talk* with Dr. James Dobson) try to find the “sweet spot” between sharing the gospel and feeding the hungry. They do so by first analyzing the theological basis for social justice, then sharing a variety of viewpoints by way of transcribed interviews with various top executives in justice organizations. Their goal is that activist readers take time to reconsider their views on humanitarian efforts and that unengaged readers wrestle with the “social gospel” for perhaps the first time.

In Part One, the authors present a theological look at what the Bible—and in particular Christ’s ministry—has to say about humanitarianism. They cover a spectrum of viewpoints on the issue, showing us how past and current minds have viewed the social gospel movement. Then they offer their own take, which is grounded on three key truths: 1) eternity is real, 2) temporal investment is important, and 3) “every servant has a master” (i.e., we’re called to serve Christ in his work of reconciling others to him). For Buckley and Dobson, this triumvirate lays the foundation for “true evangelism,” which they define as “allowing Christ to so live in and through us that who we are, what we do, and what we say become the very expression of who He is, what He did, and what He said.”

Humanitarian Jesus argues that Jesus met physical needs in order to reveal the deeper spiritual needs of the people he helped. “Jesus healed to reveal true healing, fed to reveal true food,” the authors assert, and “he quenched thirst to reveal everlasting water.” In an interesting chapter titled “Last Breath Equality” they also note that not everything in our lives is equally important; we weigh the importance of something in relation to other things. This “Lifeboat Game” (where the least important thing is tossed overboard) we play is relevant, because if truly pressed, most people admit that “one thing, passion, idea, pursuit, or person is more important than another.” Buckley and Dobson then discuss the reality of death, and the shortness of this life, asserting that “[n]o matter what we do in this life to improve our condition or the condition of mankind in general, it will

be rendered meaningless at the last breath of equality, unless what we did reaches into eternity.”

This approach belies the authors’ bent towards evangelism over humanitarianism, despite their claim for an even-handed approach. Their interpretation of Jesus’ deeds is problematic for those who believe such deeds were not mere instruments of spiritual revelations, but of critical importance in themselves as signs and foretastes of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. Buckley and Dobson do not appear to share the view that such “Kingdom-foretaste-bringing” actions done in this life have important (if admittedly mysterious) connections to life in the New Jerusalem. On this point, theologian N.T. Wright and missiologist Lesslie Newbegin would likely quibble with Buckley and Dobson—even while ultimately agreeing on the primary importance of evangelism.

Part Two contains transcripts of conversations with 15 leaders of various organizations committed to social justice. Given the view they express in Part One, I expected a nuanced critique of those interviewees whose views differ from the authors’. Instead they simply present the transcripts. This apparently arises from the authors’ repeated assurance that the point of the interviews was not “to critique, but rather to gain insight from how each of the individuals and organizations is working out God’s call to invest in His creation and serve His desires.” This, it seems to me, was taking the easy way out. The authors’ stated intention was to allow readers to make their own judgments. But some of the interviewees in Part Two seemed to sharply differ from the authors’ own views presented in Part One, and I found it disappointing that Buckley and Dobson didn’t offer more critique and analysis.