

# Response to hunger shows gospel's relevance to unbelieving culture

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BROWNWOOD—When Christians help hungry people, they earn the right to share the gospel—not only with people in need, but also with a skeptical society, Jim Denison told a conference on ethics and evangelism.

Jim Denison 

“The church must respond to hunger if it wishes to reach the culture,” said Denison, Baptist General Convention of Texas theologian-in-residence and founding president of the Center for Informed Faith.

He joined Bill Tillman, the T.B. Maston professor of Christian ethics at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon School of Theology, in delivering the Currie-Strickland Distinguished Lectures April 27 at Howard Payne University.

The imperatives of Scripture, the need to offer a holistic response to people in need and the skeptical nature of post-modern society all underscore the necessity of Christians’ response to hunger, Denison insisted.

“The church must respond to hunger if it wishes to obey the Scriptures,” he said. “Hunger is addressed in every category of biblical revelation.”

Denison cited examples from the law, the prophets and wisdom literature in the Old Testament, as well as the Gospels, the epistles and the testimony of the early church in the book of Acts to stress the overwhelming emphasis the Bible gives to the subject of care for the poor and hungry.

Failure to meet the needs of hungry people demonstrates disobedience to Scripture and calls into question the validity of Christians' claims in the eyes of needy people, he continued.

"I have no right to preach the gospel to a hungry person," Denison said, quoting BGCT Executive Director Randel Everett, who—through the Texas Hope 2010 challenge—has linked alleviating hunger with sharing the gospel throughout the state.

Bill Tillman 

"When we feed the hungry, we demonstrate the relevance of our message," Denison continued. "We show them God's love is real when our love is real."

Response to the problem of hunger demonstrates the gospel's veracity not only to poor people who benefit from Christians' acts of caring ministry, but also to the larger culture, he emphasized.

"The church must respond to hunger if it would earn the right to speak to our culture," Denison said. "Why must we earn that right? Because you and I are living in a time of unprecedented skepticism in the Western world with regard to historic Christianity."

According to the American Religious Identification Survey, the number of Americans who describe themselves as Christian dropped from 86 percent to 76 percent, he noted. Furthermore, the number who say they have "no religion" doubled to nearly 15 percent, and the number of self-identified atheists and agnostics in the United States is nearly twice the number of Episcopalians.

Spiritual trends in Europe are even more discouraging to Christians, he added, but Christianity is flourishing in Asia, Africa and Latin America where "more people are becoming Christians every day than at any time in

Christian history,” he said.

“Why are we not seeing such an advance in Western Europe and North America? Because we live in a post-modern culture which considers truth to be personal, subjective and individual. In our culture, religion is a hobby, a matter of personal preference with no transcendent meaning or truth,” Denison said.

Consequently, he concluded, non-Christians in American and European culture no longer view the church as relevant to their lives and needs.

However, Denison asserted the 21st century will look more like the first century than any time in-between, and just as the early church “turned the world upside-down” by showing a skeptical culture the love of God by acts of love, the church today can do the same thing.

“The first century church demonstrated the rightness of its faith by the relevance of its ministry,” he said. “Culture today believes if it’s relevant, it might be right. If we feed hungry bodies, it earns us the right to feed souls.”

Tillman, likewise, stressed the biblical imperative of meeting the needs of hungry people, as well as the way living out that imperative can be transforming—both to the recipients of ministry and to Christians who are involved in it.

The “weight of evidence”—hundreds of references in the Bible to matters related to hunger and poverty—demonstrates the importance of the subject to God, he asserted.

“So much attention is given to the matters of hunger that one surely can begin to put together where some of the will of God lives, where kingdom emphases are and where creative thinking on the part of Christians needs to be applied,” he said.

Tillman presented a five-part approach examining biblical principles and applying them to social issues—"thou shalt not," "thou shalt," "I must," "I will" and "I am." Matters related to hunger and poverty fit each of these categories, from the negative and positive commands to personal internalizing of the principles.

"I suggest that Scripture can inspire us with regard to hunger in this world, illuminate our hearts and minds with regard to these matters interrelated. As well, I will add ... integration and implementation. For, bringing to bear Scripture on life we can find integration for our own selves," Tillman said.

"In short, extending literal food to another in the name of Jesus demonstrates we have an extraordinary understanding of God's message to humanity of how to be related to one another and to God. Nothing can be so authenticating to ourselves and others as to what it means to live the Christian life."

Gary and Molli Elliston of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas established the Currie-Strickland lectures in honor of David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, and in memory of Phil Strickland, longtime director of the BGCT Christian Life Commission.