

Shepherds' Conference  
Wednesday, March 9, 2016 — lunch seminar

“What Would Jesus Do? Social Justice Versus the Great Commission”  
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One of the obvious effects of sin is human poverty. The faces of the poor are diverse. Some your heart breaks for and others that you have little compassion for because they are there by their own volition.

And against that background are Jesus' words in Mt. 26 — “the poor you will always have with you.” Poverty is real and they will always be present and we shouldn't be upset when people spend lavishly to address that issue.

There has been little cohesive biblical response to this problem.

Two errors:

- ✓ “I don't care about it.” This is not the normal problem. We should care. Jesus made the lives of rich people very uncomfortable and elevated the plight of the poor; giving to the poor was a basic standard of righteousness. Paul's ordination (initial) task was in part to remember the poor, which he was glad to do. The collection in 1 Cor. 16 is first to help people with their physical needs. James warns against neglecting the needs of the poor.
- ✓ To respond to poverty as if it is the church's mission to combat it. This is what this seminar is about.

The idea is the church has the resources to combat poverty and so it should. When we embrace this error, it begins to eclipse the priority of evangelism. The uniqueness of the gospel is diluted. And it commits the church to an unwinnable war.

A biblical view of social justice is essential. Cf. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* And Grudem, *Poverty of Nations* (society's perspective).

**Social justice** is either RESULTS oriented, focusing on social goods as commonly understood (utilitarianism — what does the most good for the most people is good for society; it becomes people all have the same amount of wealth). Zimbabwe is a good example of this process. Charity is no longer part of the equation because it is mandated that goods *must* be transferred to the needy. It's *just*. It's so focused on results that are hard to measure or define, it is hard to give a biblical response.

Or, **social justice** is PROCESS oriented, focusing on a fair legal and social structure. This is what the Bible talks about, particularly in the OT. It's opposed to favoritism and slavery and against two standards of justice. We call sin, sin.

Cf. DeYoung's definition.

The Great Commission is the command of the Lord to evangelize, baptize and disciple the

unreached. It's all about proclamation. The GC is a call to reach the world for Christ — to go to every ethnic group with the gospel so that culture's are converted to Christ.

*And* the GC is about people, not programs. It is about seeing people converted and being light to their society. It is not about changing cultures. The end *may* result in transformed societies, but to see individual people are transformed.

Acts 6 illustrates the tension between ministry to people and the proclamation of the gospel.

Does the church have an obligation to social justice as an end or evangelism as an end? Does God give the church the possibility of transforming social orders as an objective which they should pursue? Is one of our end goals to transform the social order of our culture or not? That is the essential question.

Wesley addressed this question — you can transform society, but never as the goal. And that has been the basic perspective of American churches for 200 years, but that changed over the problem of slavery. It became untenable to say, "I'm for evangelizing slave owners and waiting to see what happens in the next generation."

Some foundational principles:

- ✓ There is an OT and NT discontinuity in evangelism. There is a hard and fast distinction. In the OT the Israelites were to cultivate a just culture and be transformed and the people of the world would be drawn to Israel. They didn't go on short-term mission trips to Egypt the worked to have Egypt drawn to them. But the NT turns that on its head — the church is to go to the world (cf. Acts 1:8...). The final words of Jesus were repeated numerous times because they were new and so very different.
- ✓ There is an OT and NT *continuity* in (most) ethics. Israel was to treat one another in a fair and equitable way; the same principles applied in the church in the NT. No one in the church in Acts had material needs. This is the model of the NT. The church's own internal culture is changed. The NT gives no commands to giving to the indiscriminate needs of the culture; all the giving of resources away in the NT are within the context of the church.
- ✓ There is a personal and corporate distinction. Not every command in the Bible is given both to both the church and the person (e.g., discipline is for the church, not the individual). There is distinction between what the individual is called to do and what the corporate church body is called to do. Cf. Charles Ryrie... "Are the commands...given to the church corporate or the person individually." Cf. David Doran on missions.
- ✓ There is a priority of proximity (a mercy triage). Not all needs are equal. (This principle applies to individuals and not the corporate body.) People within the church are the priority. This is what we see in Acts 4 and 6.
- ✓ There is a role of eschatology in this. (*cf. chart*) If you see the kingdom as being now, you end up with a different perspective on the nature of your responsibility than if you see the kingdom as being something that Christ will usher in.

"This is one of those tensions under which Christians live..." (Ryrie)