

Should Pastors Speak Out on Social Issues?

Recently a well-known New York City pastor of a megachurch (whom I know and like) was interviewed by Katie Couric regarding his stance on several issues including same-sex marriage.

To paraphrase in my own words, the pastor essentially said that Jesus only dealt with the root issues of the heart and not the symptoms of sin. Thus, since Jesus never took a stand on the moral issues of His day, we should not make general statements regarding important moral issues of society but deal with these controversial issues in personal dialogue with those with questions.

I want to make a few observations regarding his statements.

I agree Jesus did not directly tackle the moral issues related to His surrounding culture, but it was because His focus in the gospels was to reveal Himself as Messiah to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6). Hence, although Jesus did not focus on said social issues of the empire, He did indeed deal with controversial moral issues related to His fellow Jews, such as:

- Marriage, adultery and divorce (see Matt. 19:4-10);
- Greed and money (see Luke 12:13-21);
- The true meaning of the Sabbath (see Mark 3:1-6).

Since Israel was a theocracy, there was no separation between faith and civic law. Thus, Jesus was indeed dealing with some of the more salient issues of His day that were religious, legal and even political.

Furthermore, in Mark 7:20-23 Jesus mentioned various sins including sexual immorality, which He described as emanating

from evil thoughts and which defile a person. Jesus' reference point for the definition of sexual immorality is found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Leviticus 18 has the most comprehensive list: It teaches that all sexual relationships outside of a marriage between one man and one woman is sin.

Jesus had no need to restate these sins specifically because He was speaking to Jews who already knew the law. Furthermore, Jesus said He didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In saying this He validated the Old Testament definitions of morality (see Matt. 5: 17-20).

Furthermore, the church has historically adopted a body of Scripture that includes all 66 books of both testaments—not merely the four Gospels—thus, in order to faithfully proclaim the Word we need to go by the whole counsel of God contained in the full body of Scripture, which Jesus said pointed to Him (see Luke 24:27).

Jesus did not operate in a vacuum in isolation from the former prophets, but pointed to the Old Testament writings to affirm His legitimacy. Thus, to answer the question related to the title of this article, we need to include the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament writings that practically apply the teachings of Jesus.

The first two chapters of the book of the Old Testament prophet Amos was a current events commentary regarding the sins of the surrounding nations. All of the Old Testament prophets from Samuel to Elisha dealt with the contemporary social/moral issues of their times—and even John the Baptist explained to his potential adherents that true repentance meant they were to cease from receiving bribes and extortion (see Luke 3:12-14), which were symptomatic of the social and moral decay of the Roman/Greco/Jewish culture, and not just an issue of personal heart transformation (true internal change always results in behavior modification as well).

Finally, what would said pastor say about the apostle Paul, who not only named as sin many practices that are controversial today, but also said those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God? (See 1 Cor. 6:9-10.)

Speaking the truth in love we need to be honest from the pulpit regarding our biblical beliefs or we run the risk of misleading our flock and/or having a syncretistic church that waffles between biblical Christianity and humanistic paganism. The apostle Paul's hands were free from the blood of all men because he never ceased preaching the whole will of God (see Acts 20:26, 27).

While I agree with my fellow pastor that the primary focus of church preaching should be on personal change, intimacy with God and inner transformation, at appropriate times and with much humility, love and wit, pastors are obligated to take public stands on relevant social and moral issues.

As the church leads the way in practically serving our cities, meeting the holistic needs of our communities and loving our neighbor (irrespective of their worldview or stated lifestyle), our prophetic voice regarding controversial issues will not be easy to ignore.

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