

Social Gospel or Piety?

The Word of God is very clear regarding the call of believers to empower the disempowered and the disenfranchised of society.

Jesus opened up His ministry by reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which is quoted in Luke 4:18, when He says the Spirit of the Lord has anointed Him to bring good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, and set at liberty those who are oppressed. Many evangelicals with an individualistic mindset have interpreted this merely as an individual salvific passage related to healing and deliverance. But when we read the context in Isaiah 61:1-4, we see that Jesus was also referring to systemic sin and God's desire to bring cities to wholeness.

The apostle James summarizes our holistic obligation in James 1:27 when he writes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In this great passage, we have both ends of the spectrum that has divided Christianity over the past hundred years. We have the call of the church to reform society and minister to the poor, and we have the call for inward holiness and piety. Many saints are either in one camp or the other; they are either in the so-called "social gospel" camp or the "pietistic" camp, but the Word of God calls us to be in both camps simultaneously!

James also rebukes believers in who only pray for fellow believers who lack food and clothes without doing something to provide for their daily necessities (James 2:15-17).

Even John the apostle speaks to this issue when, in 1 John 3:17, he says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us

not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Jesus changed the course of world history when He told the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In this story He introduced the word *compassion* to the Roman world, resulting in the creation of hospices, then hospitals and charitable organizations. This was countercultural in the surrounding secular Roman culture, which didn't even have a word for compassion and would even leave its sick to die in the streets! Jesus also teaches us in this parable how we ought to be a neighbor to all people, even those of a different ethnicity and religion, which was countercultural to the Jews. So in one parable, He challenged both the Jewish and Roman cultural norms.

Of course, throughout His three-year ministry, Jesus not only preached and healed but also fed the multitudes that came to His meetings. Jesus had an incarnational approach that met the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of those who came to Him.

Also, the New Testament documents had as their background the Old Testament, which has ample material related to our call to have compassion and serve humanity. For example, the “cultural commission” in Genesis 1:28 is the original covenant of creation that gives believers the stewardship of all of creation, culminating in dominion.

Our dominion is intended to be over the created order, not fellow human beings, but the general idea of dominion is to have influence. The New Testament method for influence was demonstrated by Jesus in John 13, when He wrapped a towel around His waist and washed the feet of His disciples. This shows us the way to lead is to serve. Thus, the way for believers to have the greatest amount of influence in the world is to become the greatest problem-solvers and servants of society! If a church is going to have biblical influence, it needs to serve its community not only by preaching but also

by acts of compassionate service. We are not called to take our cities but to reach our cities by meeting the felt needs of our neighbors.

Further in the book of Genesis, we see God calling Joseph to provide food for both Jews and Gentiles by utilizing his incredible gift of wisdom in economics to save the Jewish race and the nation of Egypt. God may call some of you to be involved in public policy; not every believer is called to be a preacher or pastor or full-time church worker!

In Exodus 3, we see God calling Moses to deliver the children of Israel out of slavery. The Jews already had faith in Jehovah, but the political and economic pressure was so great that it was quenching their spiritual lives and stopping them from adequately worshipping the Lord. Hence, in the Exodus narrative we see the importance of liberation from social/economic oppression and its connection to worshipping God. God has called some of you to be deliverers of whole people groups and nations, even as Jesus called the church to disciple whole nations in Matthew 28:19.

Furthermore, the five books of Moses are replete with commandments to care for the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger. Leviticus 19:9-10 teaches that the primary way Israel provided for the poor was not by handing out food or having some sort of state-sanctioned welfare program but through a system of gleaning, where farmers didn't go back and pick up leftover crops but allowed the poor to pick them up. Thus it was not a system of welfare but *workfare* that Moses propagated. Hence, when we are speaking about compassion, we are not necessarily talking about advocating for government handouts but more about the church getting personally involved with the people in their communities and doing what they can to creatively minister to their physical and emotional needs. Sometimes this may also involve partnering with the state to create programs.

Finally, believers in both testaments are commanded to protect the helpless (Is. 1:17; 1 Tim. 5:3) with blessings and curses upon people depending on how strangers and aliens are treated (Jer. 7:3,7; Zech 7:9-14; Ezek. 47:21-22; Deut. 27:19).

Along these lines, lending to the poor should be interest free (Ex. 22:25; Lev 25:25-27), but interest can be collected on business loans (Matt. 25:27).

Also keep in mind that the poor, in order to receive help, had to really be poor with no family or resources to fall back upon (Ex. 22:26-27). Lazy people were not helped but rebuked (Prov. 13:4, 18; 19:15; 20:13; 28:19). Second Thessalonians 3:10 says, "If any man will not work, neither should he eat."

In conclusion, those churches that are only built upon good preaching and worship but do not have a holistic outreach to their communities will become the new dinosaurs if and when the infrastructure of their city collapses. The church has to be ready to do the heavy lifting and even function as a shadow government, ready to administrate whole cities—the same way the early church did after the infrastructure of the old Roman Empire collapsed and all the nobles fled the cities in the fifth century. The only ones left to take the lead in those days were the bishops who already had the infrastructure in place to give leadership to cities. The church of that day went from Christianizing people to also civilizing people, as the Barbarian hordes rushed in and overthrew the Roman systems of government.

I pray the present-day church in every nation of the world would be ready if the day ever comes when there is a deconstruction of infrastructure and government. When social systems begin to fail, churches have their greatest opportunity to serve communities as the salt and light of the world. The greater the present need, the more opportunity the body of Christ has to shine as lights in the world for the glory of God!

Joseph G. Mattera is overseeing bishop of Resurrection Church, Christ Covenant Coalition, in Brooklyn, N.Y. You can read more on [our website](#) or connect with him on Facebook or Twitter.