

November 7, 2010

Job 31:13-23 / Galatians 2:6-10 / James 1:26-27 / Acts 6:1-7

Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#8) - Practical Gospel-Centered Social Concern

Today we come to the one link in the chain whose presence in it I have had to defend time and time again -- at least in evangelical church circles. The link I've purposely chosen to call "**Social Action**"-- the **SIXTH** or the next to the last link.

And I stress the fact that although I have placed "Social Action" or "Social Concern" near the end of the chain, it is in no way meant to suggest that it is somehow less necessary than all the others (any more than Foreign Missions is somehow even less necessary because it comes last in the chain).

Nothing could be further from the truth! My whole point has been to stress the fact that since each link is mandated by God in His Word, they are all equally necessary and equally indispensable to the strength of the chain!

There is no one link that trumps all the others, just as there is no one link that can be dropped from the chain without severely weakening the health of any church!

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So **FIRST** I'd like to speak on why it is that despite the fact that caring for the poor and the marginalized or reaching out in practical and concrete ways to show compassion for those who suffer is so frequently commanded in the Bible, I've still had to defend the presence of this one link in the chain more than any other.

Why is it? Because in the early 1900's a very noticeable divide or pronounced theological rift occurred -- primarily in the Christian church in America. And the result of that rift was to separate two things that up until that time had always been harmoniously joined together -- concern for the salvation of souls (or evangelistic outreach) and concern for the relief of poverty and human suffering (or social action).

Christians divided into two camps: Those who preached the "Spiritual Gospel" and those who preached the "Social Gospel." In fact, the divide between the two groups became so pronounced that instead of seeing that the Bible commands us to work for both the salvation of souls and the relief of social ills, each group tended to do one or the other exclusively.

Up until that time they tended to be seen as inseparable expressions of Christian love -- flip sides of the same coin if you like -- care for one's temporal physical needs and care for one spiritual and eternal needs.

Those of a more liberal theological persuasion tended to champion the need to address things like poverty and unjust laws and racial prejudice / and those of a fundamentalist or evangelical persuasion tended to focus almost exclusively on saving souls -- except when it came to foreign missions!

In fact, it was still so ingrained in the minds of some evangelical pastors in MA, that when I started a food bank and clothing bank in my church in Westport, I was told by at least two local pastors that that's what the liberals do! To which my response was - "No, that's what Christians do."

I even had one missionary friend in Honduras (from a Pentecostal group) whose denomination still clung to such ideas when Hurricane Mitch hit in 1998 and devastated the country.

Our church immediately responded with relief efforts (distributing food, building houses and digging out entire villages inundated with the mud of flooded rivers and landslides) -- and he wanted to help -- but his mission board forbid him from getting involved, because that was humanitarian relief and his purpose for being there, they said, was "to save souls through the preaching of the Gospel." To do evangelism, not relief work.

My friends, it's a divide which never should have taken place! As Tim Keller wisely points this out in his book *Ministries of Mercy*:

***"It is unthinkable that we could truly love an individual and not want both to share the gospel as well as meet the person's basic human needs. Word and deed are the proverbial 'two wings of the airplane.' Which wing***

***is more important?... Some teach that evangelism has primacy over mercy, meaning that mercy needs only to be done in certain circumstances (like when we can afford it). The attitude is that mercy ministry is a great idea, if we can find the time or the money for it. But to fail to provide for BOTH the ministry of the word and the ministry of mercy is sin, since both are commands of God!... Can the local church "afford" to fulfill the evangelistic mandate to take the gospel to every creature? (No.) And neither can it "afford" to feed all the hungry. But we must use the resources we do have to obey ALL the mandates of God to His people."***

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You see, over and over and over again in the OT / and in the life of Jesus / and on into the early church / helping the poor was part and parcel of being a righteous, godly or saved person!

In fact, when Job defends himself against people's accusations that he's sinned, what does he say?

***He says this: "I didn't deny the desires of the poor, or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, or keep my bread to myself, or refuse to share it with the fatherless. / I raised the fatherless as their own father would, I cared for the widow, I gave clothes to the naked and my garments to the needy (warming him with fleece from my sheep). I never raised my hand to strike the fatherless. / I used my influence in the courts to defend them (or work for just legislation on their behalf). No stranger had to spend the night in the streets, because the door of my house was always open to the traveler."***

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But here, I ask you: If you were to suffer greatly, and people were to say it was because you "sinned," how would you defend the fact that you haven't?

Would you do it by pointing out the fact that you had helped the poor and needy / and given clothes to the naked / and food to the hungry / and taken in orphans / or housed strangers passing through? Would you even think to defend your "righteousness" and "godliness" by pointing out how you had helped the poor and marginalized and worked for just legislation on their behalf in the court system?

Most of us (raised in evangelical circles) probably would not. We'd probably think in terms of personal piety issues and not social responsibility issues.

Yet, as my professor Gordon Fee once pointed out (regarding the OT): ***"If you read all the prophets, and make a list of all the times God is bringing judgment upon His people or a foreign oppressor, THREE things will take up 90% of that list -- Idolatry, adultery and failure to plead the case of the poor -- and most often the last (refusal to help or stand up for the poor) is what stands out in the text."***

He's right! Do it some time and you'll see: God is the Defender of the weak! God delivers and rescues the needy from violence and oppression, says Ps. 72, because ***"their blood is precious in His sight."***

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***"Whoever is kind to the poor,"*** says Prov. 14:31 ***"honors God."*** / ***"Speak up,"*** says Prov. 31:8-9, ***"for those who cannot speak for themselves; for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."***

In fact, anyone who ignores the plight of the needy is guilty of sin (Jer. 5:28-29/Ezek. 16:49) / and as the entire book of Amos declares, whoever oppresses or tramples underfoot the poor and needy commits one of the most vile forms of wickedness and risks the wrath of God.

Do you know that in all my 30 years in evangelical circles I can count on one hand the number of times I heard that preached on. Even though care for the poor and needy and those who suffer is so close to the heart of God.

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And its not just in the OT. That's my **SECOND** point. Paul, speaking in Galatians, tells Peter, James and John of God's call on his life to be "the apostle to the Gentiles." / And they affirm that call and give him their approval for him to go, with Barnabas, to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Yet I hope you noticed that their approval came with one very distinct condition in V. 10: ***"All they asked,"*** says Paul, ***"was that we should CONTINUE to remember the poor, the very thing I was EAGER to do."***

And the word "**continue**" suggests it was something Paul and Barnabas had already been making a priority -- a priority so high that the other Apostles wanted to make sure it continued to remain a priority as they brought the message of the Gospel and made disciples among the Gentiles.

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It's as if they're saying: Make sure that care for the poor and the needy and the destitute and the oppressed (or a general overall concern for the social welfare of people who had little) remains a priority for you and becomes a priority for those who come to faith through your preaching!

And that one little statement reveals that it was a priority for all the Apostles, reflected the general overall attitude of all Christians, and was surely a core element in the instruction and discipling process that was taking place throughout the entire early Church!

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And that's confirmed when we look at the history of the church ever since! It's present in the "Didache" (written around 125 A.D. after all the apostles had passed off the scene) which is the first widely accepted Christian catechism, summarizing the basics of Christian instruction. In fact, that's what the name the "Didache" means -- "the teaching."

And what does it say? ***"Do not be one who holds out his hand to take, but shuts it when it comes to giving... Do not turn your back on the needy, but share everything with your brother and call nothing your own. For if you have what is eternal in common, how much more what is transient."***

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That's the **THIRD** thing we need to see. It's not just the OT and NT that stress this. It continues throughout church history! Irenaeus (180 A.D.) / Tertullian (200 A.D.) / Cyprian (240 A.D.) / Basil (350 A.D.) / and Clement of Alexandria (from the same period) all stressed the same idea. ***"Give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, lodging to the stranger, clothes to the naked, medicine to the sick, and company to the imprisoned,"*** says Clement.

***"The wealth in your power is not your own, therefore do not wait for Christians in need to ask you for help. Seek them out! As eagerly as a merchant looks for a new market, so should you seek out the needy."***

A few years later St. Augustine would write of the unnecessary hoarding of excess things: ***"The bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; the coat you preserve in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession belong to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground (we use banks today!) belongs to the needy. Therefore, as often as you are able to help others and refuse, so often do you do them wrong."*** (So often do you sin.)

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And I could go on and on and on, because ALL truly godly people know this! Martin Luther's first major effort in the newly formed Protestant church in Wittenburg was to establish what he called a ***"common chest"*** for welfare work. The monies, he said, were to be used to provide for orphans / the children of the poor / poor maidens who needed a dowry in order to get married / and pay for educational and vocational training for poor children.

By 1523 there were similar "common chest programs for social welfare" in eight other German cities. In fact, Luther himself was so generous, that when his wife Katie would hear an unexpected knock on the door, she would hide the family silverware for fear that he husband would give it to some poor widow!

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Likewise, the church in Geneva (under John Calvin) gave 50% of its budget to the aid of the poor / and later on, in the early 1700's the Pietists (under Herman Franke's leadership) ***"built two orphanages / two homes for widows / a school for poor children / gave free food to needy students / created a home for beggars / a hospital / gave free medicine to those who couldn't afford it / regularly visited those in prisons or in hospitals / and cared for the disabled and handicapped."***

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Spurgeon (the great English preacher of the 1800's) used the larger percentage of the monies he received from the sale of his books and sermons to fund a preachers college / establish and support two orphanages (an orphanage for 250 boys and another for 250 girls) / and an "Old Ladies Home" for women 60 years of age and older who were destitute.

That was before Social Security, and it was still the church's job to take care of the poor! **"Let us set it straight,"** said Spurgeon. **"Our aged sisters are worthy of all that we can do for them..."**

Like the rest, Spurgeon did not see caring for the poor as "optional charity" which a Christian could give to if he felt like doing so. He saw it as a Christian's social responsibility before God! If people are suffering and in dyer straights or deep uncontestable need, we don't simply have the option of helping them, we have a responsibility before God to help them -- even if it means we have to get by with less or go without.

Jesus' brother James made it clear that people of earnest faith will care for those who have little or nothing. **"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to care for the widows and orphans in their distress and keep one's self from being polluted by the world."**

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George Mueller of Bristol, England built an orphanage for 2000 children around the same time as Spurgeon, and prayed over 7 million dollars through it without ever asking anyone for a single penny.

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And closer to the turn of the century, when the industrial revolution produced so much social suffering for so many, William Booth (the founder of The Salvation Army) made it his goal (as one raised in abject poverty) to preach the Gospel to the poor malnourished street children of London -- a Gospel which he felt, in changing hearts would bring with it social change.

It wasn't enough to merely evangelize. People must not only hear of God's love in the Gospel but see His love expressed in our tangible acts of love toward them! Salvation, he said, must include, **"salvation from pinching poverty, rags and misery."** / It's nearly impossible, he would say, for a starving person to listen the gospel being preached by someone who has food enough to share but doesn't do so.

Therefore before he preached, he handed out his **"farthing breakfasts"** to the malnourished children who would line up for blocks and receive a scoop of hot porridge poured into a tin cup (which cost about a farthing apiece).

He published a detailed plan for ending unemployment among England's huge slum population, which numbered nearly 3,000,000 people. People, who, "if left to their own income alone, would be dead of starvation within a month."

He established scores of urban workshops (we would call them micro-businesses today) as the first step out of poverty / a farm colony in Essex and Hadleigh to teach poor slum dwellers how to farm / and he even helped many emigrate to the U.S. and Canada where they could get land to farm.

He was one of the first to build a factory for producing nonpoisonous safety matches, since many in the match making industry were suffering intense pain and facial disfigurement from a necrosis caused by getting phosphorus on their gums. A disease called "**Phossy Jaw.**"

***"In providing relief of temporal misery," said Booth, "I reckon I am only making it easy where it is now difficult, and possible where it is now all but impossible, for men and women to find their way to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ... and thus the salvation of their souls."***

You see, growing up, I always thought the Salvation Army was called the Salvation Army because they saved clothes (in those big red drop off boxes)! I did! I'm embarrassed to say it but I did. Yet if you attend a Salvation Army worship service, you'll see that most of them are as evangelical as they can be -- combining in perfect balance, the preaching of the Gospel and help for the poor. The Red Christmas Kettles you see outside at WalMart and other stores around Christmas help provide Christmas dinners, and Christmas gifts and grocery checks to over 4,500,000 people every year -- from the U.S. to Canada to Chile to Japan.

Yet, in the early 1900's (due to things I already mentioned) a huge percentage of Christians dropped as a priority and even staunchly opposed the biblical mandate to help and plead the cause of the poor. "***That's what the liberals do,***" was the response of many evangelicals. "***The liberals champion social justice, and we evangelicals preach to save souls.***"

Which brings us to our **LAST** point -- the one I've stressed from the very beginning: ***That we haven't been given the RIGHT to pick and choose between biblical mandates!*** The Bible does not present us with a selection of nice options from which we get to choose the ones we prefer and ignore all the rest! Para-church organizations can do that because they're "specialists" (so to speak) but NOT the Church!

The Church has been given many scriptural mandates! Things we are to make and keep as priorities at all costs! And every church everywhere is called to carry out each one -- including the decree given to Paul to ***"continue to remember the poor"*** as we go about preaching the Gospel to the salvation of their souls!

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Acts 6 makes this crystal clear as well! The church immediately established a feeding program for Greek and Hebrew Jewish widows, which because of apparent prejudice against the Greek Jews meant they often got over-looked and went without.

***"So," we are told in v. 2, "the Twelve (apostles) gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. So choose from among you, seven men known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'"***

And, although it's not specifically stated, it is still no less clear that feeding these poor widows could not be neglected either! That's why they decide that instead of doing away with this feeding program, they will put others in charge of it, so it will function better and run more smoothly and be administrated more wisely and the provisions distributed more justly!

Notice also that they call it a ***"responsibility"*** or ***"duty"*** in v. 3, depending on your version. That's what care for the poor is: Not optional charity, that we can engage in if we like, or if it's convenient, but a social and spiritual or Gospel responsibility or duty that is to go on side by side with evangelism and is a part of discipleship!

Keller was right: ***"To fail to provide for both the ministry of the word and the ministry of mercy is sin, since both are commands of God!... We must obey ALL the mandates of God..."***

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So my closing question to you is this: Are you, like the prophets, and Jesus, and Paul, and all the other Apostles, ***"eager to remember the poor?"***

Do we see it as a priority never to be overlooked, or a Gospel duty and responsibility to be carried side by side with evangelism and disciple-ship?

Better yet, do we see it as an indispensable expression of Christian love, an integral part of Christian discipleship, and one of the most concrete ways of showing in our actions, the love of God we proclaim in our words?

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Let me end with the words of Isaiah the prophet, chapter 58, starting in verse 6:

***"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter -- when you see the naked to clothe him, and not turn away from your own flesh and blood? The your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. The you will call and the Lord will answer, you will cry for help and he will say: Here I am.***

***If you will do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you will spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like noonday. The Lord will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs and strengthen your frame."***

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In light of that passage I ask you: Is care for the poor a priority for God?

And does He want it to be a priority for us? There's only one possible answer -  
**YES!**