

Think on These Things Articles

The Social Gospel, Yesterday and Today - Part 2



(December 2011/January 2012 - Volume 17, Issue 6)

In the first part of this study, we examined together the history of the social gospel as it presented itself in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and then documented a resurgence of the social gospel agenda as found at the present time. The original social gospel movement began as an appendage to the emerging liberalism that started in Germany and ultimately swept through the Western church. As the growing liberal movement matured, it left behind most doctrinal distinctives held by earlier Protestants and eventually came to be defined by social action. Today a new wave of social involvement, as a major tenant of church ministry, is flowing through evangelical churches, changing the very nature of church dynamics and outreach. The issue at hand is not whether Christians should be involved with their culture, but to what extent attempting to solve the injustices and problems of the culture is the mission of the church. This has become one of the more hotly debated concerns (some believe the hottest) within evangelism today. Has the church been commissioned to proclaim the gospel of redemption and to disciple converts, or has the church been called to improve society, or both? Liberalism would almost exclusively emphasize social causes. For example, the National Council of Churches states, “The central moral imperative of our time is the care for earth as God’s Creation.”[\[1\]](#) Postmodern liberalism, as found in the emergent movement, would agree. Emergent leader Brian McLaren believes that Jesus’ message has everything to do with “poverty, slavery, and a social agenda – it is not about justification from sin.”[\[2\]](#)

Fundamentalism has historically stressed evangelism and discipleship, while a growing number, if not the vast majority, of those within the middle camp of evangelicalism would claim that the church has been given a two-prong mandate containing both spiritual and social marching orders. Read almost any issue of *Christianity Today* and you will discover that the focus of evangelicalism has shifted. Social concerns are rapidly swallowing up spiritual concerns. Let’s briefly examine the rationale behind the latter view and then take a careful look at Scripture.

Support for a Two-prong Mandate

Those who back the concept that the church has been called to both disciple men and women for Christ and improve social conditions on earth do so on the basis of three primary arguments:

Old Testament Israel

When attempting to provide a biblical foundation for social involvement of the church, supporters most often turn to the teaching found in the Old Testament directed to Israel. There are numerous commands and admonishments given to Israel under the Old Covenant that have social implications. For example, we find God’s concern for:

Justice: “Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions. So as to **deprive the needy of justice**” (Isa 10:1-2a). The Lord made provision for fair and impartial courts of law, not just for the poor but for all: “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly” (Lev 19:15).

The poor: “Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions. So as to deprive the needy of justice and **rob the poor of My people** of their rights” (Isa 10:1-2b).

The Lord provided several means to help the poor in Israel. One method was to provide the Jewish people with a “Kinsman-redeemer” who was a close relative designated to alleviate their relative’s troubles, including poverty. The book of Ruth supplies the best illustration of how this system worked, but in Leviticus 25:25 we read, “If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative sold.” In Deuteronomy 15:11 the Lord tells Israel, “For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’”

Widows and orphans: Quoting again from Isaiah 10:1-2 the Lord tells His people, “Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions. So as to deprive the needy of justice and rob the poor of My people of their rights, so that **widows may be their spoil** and that **they may plunder the orphans.**” There is a special place in the heart of God for orphans and widows.

The hungry: One of the characteristics the Lord gives of the fool is “to keep the hungry person unsatisfied and to withhold drink from the thirsty” (Isa 32:6). Proverbs calls for the Jews to feed even their enemies: “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (25:21). And the Lord gives this promise, “If you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday” (Isa 58:10). Regarding the hungry, the Lord made unique provisions demanding the farmers to leave a bit of their harvest in the fields for the poor to glean: “When you reap the harvest of your land, moreover, you shall not reap the very corners of your field nor gather the gleaning of your harvest; you are to leave them for the needy and the alien. I am the Lord your God” (Lev 23:22).

These concerns for the needy, which express the heart of God, must be taken seriously, and many are contemplating such instructions afresh. For example, Francis Chan, in his bestselling book *Crazy Love*, sees Jesus’ words at the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 25 as a continuation or application of the Old Testament teachings. Chan believes the actions we take toward the poor have been set by our Lord as the paradigm to determine the validity of our faith. He backs his understanding on verses 34-40 which read,

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite you in? or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.”

Chan writes, “Jesus is saying that we show tangible love for God in how we care for the poor and the desperate as if they were Christ himself.”^[3] By way of application Chan continues, “Much of their (the poor) daily hardship and suffering could be relieved with access to food, clean water, clothing, adequate shelter, or basic medical attention. I believe that God wants His people, the church, to meet these needs.”^[4]

Jesus’ Salt and Light Metaphors

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus tells his disciples that they are the salt and light of the world. John R. W. Stott is representative of how many people interpret these verses when he writes, “[Jesus] emphasizes the influences Christians ought to have on the non-Christian environment. The distinction between the two is clear. The world, he says, is like rotting meat. But you are to be the world’s salt. The world is like a dark night, but you are to be the world’s light... Then he goes on from the distinction to the influence. Like salt in putrefying meat, Christians are to hinder social decay. Like light in the prevailing darkness, Christians are to illumine society and show it a better way.”^[5] Francis Chan writes, “Non-churchgoers tend to see Christians as takers rather than givers. When Christians sacrifice and give wildly to the poor, that is truly a light that glimmers. The Bible teaches that the church is to be that light, that sign of hope, in an increasingly dark and hopeless world. Matthew 5:16 says, ‘Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.’”^[6] The means by which believers are fulfilling Jesus’ teaching to be salt and light in the world is increasingly seen by evangelicals as being through social and political involvement. As we mobilize the church to meet the needs of the hungry, sick and poor and as we protect the environment and become active in political reform, we are seen by many as living out our salt and light obligations.

The Cultural Mandate

Recently evangelicals have been turning to what they call the “Cultural Mandate” to provide a biblical base for social action. The idea is that the Lord has actually given the church two overall and interrelated callings: The Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) in which believers are to go into the whole world and make disciples for Christ, and the Cultural Mandate in which the church is authorized to be directly involved in physical and social issues related to the planet. No true evangelical questions the Great Commission, but the Cultural Mandate is not so clear. The biblical teaching for the Cultural Mandate is drawn from Genesis 1:26, 28 which reads,

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth”... God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

From this pre-Fall text has been developed the belief that the church retains the mandate given to Adam in the Garden to subdue and rule over the earth. Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew wrote *Living at the Crossroads* to promote this thesis. They write,

If redemption is, as the Bible teaches, the restoration of the whole of creation, then our mission is to embody this good news: every part of creational life, including the public life of our culture, is being restored. The good news will be evident in our care for the environment, in our approach to international relations, economic justice, business, media, scholarship, family, journalism, industry, and

law. But if redemption were merely about an otherworldly salvation, (as, for example, Moody believed), then our mission would be reduced to the sort of evangelism that tries to get people into heaven.^[7]

Nancy Pearcey virtually opens her award winning book *Total Truth* by saying that “Christians are to redeem entire cultures, not just individuals.”^[8] Pearcey speaks often of the Cultural Mandate saying,

Our calling is not just to “get to heaven” but also to cultivate the earth, not just to “save souls” but also to serve God through our work. For God Himself is engaged not only in the work of salvation (special grace) but also in the work of preserving and developing His creation (common grace). When we obey the Cultural Mandate, we participate in the work of God Himself, as agents of His common grace. This is the rich content that should come to mind when we hear the word *Redemption*. The term does not refer only to a one-time conversion event. It means entering upon a lifelong quest to devote our skills and talents to building things that are beautiful and useful, while fighting the forces of evil and sin that oppress and distort the creation.^[9]

Pearcey and company are not content with merely influencing culture or attempting to mitigate injustices. They are desirous of creating culture. In one section Pearcey mentions the social efforts of some Christians who minister to “the poor, the homeless, the addicted” but laments that “none of them attempt to transform social or cultural systems, but merely to alleviate some of the harm caused by the existing system.”^[10] It becomes apparent that many leading evangelicals see the Cultural Mandate as fully in force as it was when first given to Adam and Eve. Christians then have a charge to change culture, transform culture, create culture and subdue creation. This is seen as a duty on par with making disciples, and thus the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate have joined hands as equal partners in fulfilling God’s mission on earth.

Biblical Examination of the Two-prong Mandate

It is important that we directly critique the three supporting arguments of this two-prong mandate that many now promote, in order to get a comprehensive understanding and lay a foundation for the more positive examination of the New Testament Scriptures on the subject.

How Should God’s Commands to Israel Be Viewed for This Age?

We could ask two questions here: Are Jewish civil laws still applicable to the New Testament church, and if they are how would they function in the church age?

First, we must recognize that the inspired authors of the New Testament express the same concerns as we find in the Old Testament. James 1:27 tells us that “pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” The early church made provisions to feed orphans and widows in Acts 6:1-6 and later, as the church became more established, widows without other means of support or resources were placed on a list to be given special care (1 Tim 5:11-16). One of the primary reasons for Paul’s third missionary journey was to collect from the western churches a relief offering to help the poor believers in Jerusalem, “For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.” And James calls for justice for the poor: “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism...” (James 2:1ff). Without

question the social concerns of God in the Old Testament remain the same in the church age.

However, it is often overlooked that God's commands concerning social issues in the Old Testament were given almost exclusively to Israel, and dealt almost entirely with the needs of those living within the boundaries of geographical Israel and under direct authority of the Mosaic Law. Charles Ryrie notes that the Old Testament "does not command the establishment of justice in the world, nor the care of all the poor and oppressed in the world. It is more 'isolationist' than the New Testament. But it does show God's love for justice and holiness in personal living..."[\[11\]](#)

Drawing strictly from the Old Testament Scriptures yields a picture of a loving, concerned, caring God who nevertheless focused attention, with almost no exceptions, on the poor and needy living in Israel under the Theocratic kingdom and the Mosaic Law. In the Old Testament no provisions were made for the destitute living throughout the world. No social outreach to surrounding nations can be found. Therefore, to press into service the social program found in the Old Testament as a pattern for today's global outreach to the needy is to go beyond what the Old Testament teaches. In as Israel cared for the needs of her own poor, it was every poor person who was helped. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert encourage us to "remember that the 'poor' in Scripture are usually the pious poor. They are the righteous poor... The poor God favors are not the slothful poor (Prov. 6:6-11; 2 Thess. 3:6-12) or the disobedient poor (Prov. 30:9), but the humble poor who wait on God (Matt. 5:3; 6:33)."[\[12\]](#)

The Meaning of Jesus' Salt and Light Metaphors.

Jesus' identification of His disciples as salt and light in the world is straightforward and has been the source of much contemplation throughout the years concerning what the followers of the Lord are to be like. Interpreting what Jesus said in Matthew 5:13-16 in general is not difficult. Most would agree with New Testament scholar William Hendriksen who writes, "Salt, then, has especially a negative function. It combats deterioration. Similarly Christians, by showing themselves to be Christians indeed, are constantly combating moral and spiritual decay... Light, on the other hand, has a positive function and shines openly, publicly."[\[13\]](#)

The specific application is where things get sticky. As noted above, many are interpreting this text to mean that believers are to engage culture through political involvement and social action. Most commentators, who are simply addressing the text with no agenda to push, do not agree. Hendriksen writes,

Now since it is the business of the church to shine for Jesus, it should not permit itself to be thrown off its course. It is not the task of the church to specialize in and deliver all kinds of pronouncements concerning economic, social, and political problems... The primary duty of the church remains the spreading forth of the message of salvation, that the lost may be found (Luke 15:4; 1 Cor 9:16, 22; 10:33), those found may be strengthened in the faith (Eph 4:15; 1 Thess 3:11-13; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18), and God may be glorified (John 17:4; 1 Cor 10:31).[\[14\]](#)

Respected preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones states, "The great hope for society today is in an increasing number of individual Christians. Let the church of God concentrate on that and not waste her time and energy on matters outside her providence."[\[15\]](#) A. W. Pink agrees, "Spiritually the world is in darkness (2 Pet 1:19) and sits in the shadow of death (Matt 4:16)... By their [the believers'] preaching ignorance is to be exposed, that their hearers may be 'turned from darkness to light' (Acts 26:18)."[\[16\]](#) And commentator R. T. France adds,

It is only as this distinctive lifestyle is visible to others that it can have its desired effect. But that effect is also now spelled out not as the improvement and enlightenment of society as such, but rather as the glorifying of God by those outside the disciple community. The subject of this discourse, and the aim of the discipleship which it promotes, is not so much the betterment of life on earth as the implementation of the reign of God. The goal of disciples' witness is not that others emulate their way of life, or applaud their probity, but that they recognize the source of their distinctive lifestyle in "your Father in heaven."[\[17\]](#)

I believe these commentators have interpreted and applied the words of Jesus accurately. In the salt and light metaphors the Lord is not calling for His disciples to change society through good deeds but to live in such a way as to glorify God (Matt 5:16). Such a lifestyle will have a beneficial effect on society in many cases, but the goal is to magnify the Lord and draw people to Him.

To help us understand this better, it would be good to observe what Jesus did while on earth (a much better question than the popular "What would Jesus do?" is "What **did** Jesus do?" The first question leads to guesswork, the second to certainty). Without doubt He often healed the sick, fed great crowds at times, and ministered to the poor and despised of society. Jesus had compassion on the hurting and rejected and spent time with sinners. But it should also be observed that Jesus spent much time with wealthy people, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He ate in the homes of well-to-do tax collectors such as Zacchaeus and powerful Pharisees. He spent time with notorious sinners such as Mary Magdalene but also with religious leaders such as Nicodemus. The financial status and social standing of people around Jesus did not seem to matter – He ministered to everyone who would listen and challenged (and often condemned) those who would not. In short, Jesus was the perfect embodiment of the command found in Leviticus: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly" (19:15).

It is also instructive to note what **Jesus did not do**. He healed some sick, but not all. He healed many in His immediate presence, but He established no hospitals or clinics, nor did He eradicate sickness in Israel, or on earth, although it was in His power to do so. Jesus fed up to 5000 people on occasion but He did not start a soup kitchen or breadline. He paid special attention to the poor but He did not relieve their debt or set them up in small businesses or give them loans. Jesus loved widows and orphans but did not establish a home for either. Whether Christian agencies should be established for these concerns today is another matter, but it would be going beyond both the instruction of Scripture and the example of Christ (or His apostles later in the New Testament history) to claim that we are to do so today because of what Jesus did while on earth. Jesus neither commanded us to do such things nor did He do them Himself.

Is the Cultural Mandate Still in Effect?

Contrary to much common opinion, I do not believe the Cultural Mandate is still in effect today for two reasons. First, it was only given once in Scripture and that before the fall of man. In Genesis 1:28 the Lord commanded Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." At this stage in human history, mankind was in harmony with creation. They did not battle the elements, weeds, insects or beasts. There was no fear of the animals and the animals did not fear man – they lived peacefully together. Following the Fall, however, both humans and creation were cursed and harmony between man and the physical universe was lost. Never again are humans told to subdue the earth or rule over the animal kingdom, for they are no longer capable of doing so. While man is still

the chief of God's creations and able to control and tame much of the animal kingdom (James 3:7), he is no longer able, due to sin and the curse, to either subdue the earth nor rule over the animals. The closest thing to the Cultural Mandate in the remainder of Scripture is following the Flood when God commissions Noah and his family. In Genesis 9:1 a portion of the original Mandate is given for Noah's family to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (see also verse 7). But rather than repeat the command to subdue and rule the Lord says, "The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky... Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give it all to you, as I gave the green plant" (9:2-3). Man is no longer living in harmony with the animal kingdom; rather animals will fear man and man will consume animals.

While there will be many other commands and covenants that the Lord gives people as found in Scripture, never does He repeat the Cultural Mandate after the Fall. When we examine the New Testament for God's directives to the church we do not find anything remotely in common with the instructions given to Adam and Eve; instead the Great Commission to make disciples of Christ is central.

A second reason I reject the Cultural Mandate as incumbent on mankind today is because of the details of the Mandate itself. Adam and Eve are called to "subdue" something. The Hebrew word for "subdue" requires an object. To subdue implies that something needed to be conquered or put in its place. The question in Genesis 1:28 is what needed to be subdued prior to the Fall, since sin had not yet corrupted the human race nor any of physical creation. The only possibility seems to be Satan and the fallen angels, who were at war with God and apparently desired to rule earth. If this is the case, then part of man's mission was to win the struggle for the earth over demonic creatures. When Adam failed, because he chose to sin, Satan temporarily won this war and has been promoted to the "god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4), a role he certainly did not have prior to the Fall. Man, in his fallen state, has no ability to subdue either demonic forces or the earth, both of which will be subdued by the New Adam. The day will come when Christ will create a new heaven and earth (2 Pet 3:13); until then creation groans under the curse of sin (Rom 8:22). The Lord will ultimately subdue and conquer the devil and his followers (Rev 20:10); until that time man is no longer called to subdue demons (he is told to resist – James 4:7) or rule over the animal kingdom. We are called to be light and salt in the world (Matt 5:13) and to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20).

The Church and Social Action

The general drift in evangelicalism, as we have seen, is toward adding the social action agenda to the Great Commission as the two-prong mission of the church. N. T. Wright is certain that

the call of the gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world *through suffering love*... God's ultimate purpose... is to rid the world of evil altogether and to establish his new creation of justice, beauty and peace. And it's clear from the start that this was not intended simply as a distant goal for which one was compelled to wait in passive expectation. God's future has already broken into the present in Jesus, and the church's task consisted not least of *implementing* that achievement and thus anticipating that future. [\[18\]](#)

Yet some of the best thinkers within the conservative Christianity disagree. Here is a sampling:

D. A. Carson writes, "It is hard to ignore the many injunctions of Scripture to do good, to be concerned

with matters of justice to show mercy, to care for the poor, to be concerned with matters of justice. [Yet] If all such responsibilities belong to the church *as a church*, to the church *as an institution*, then surely the leaders of the church... should take responsibility for them and direct them. But what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:2).”[\[19\]](#)

Michael Horton is insightful when he writes, “Terrorism, global warming, and AIDS are problems we need to address as responsible human beings together with non-Christians in our common life together... However, the Great Commission is not the Great Cultural Mandate... If we could resolve our top ten crises in the world today, we would still have the devil on our back, sin mastering our heart, and everlasting death as the penalty for our mutiny.”[\[20\]](#)

David Wells agrees, “Churches that actually do influence the culture – here is the paradox – distance themselves from it in their internal life. They do not offer what can already be had on secular terms in the culture. They are an alternative to it.”[\[21\]](#) Wells calls for the church to be *sola Scriptura* as opposed to *sola cultura*.[\[22\]](#)

Charles Ryrie writes, “The Christian’s primary responsibilities are evangelism and godly living. Through witnessing he changes people; through godly living he does affect society; and through private and public obedience he honors God.”[\[23\]](#)

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert in their newly released book *What Is the Mission of the Church?* are concerned “that in all our passion for renewing the city or tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ.”[\[24\]](#) They maintain the mission of the church is found in the Great Commission passages, “We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling.”[\[25\]](#)

And John MacArthur adds, “When people look to the church to end poverty, halt human trafficking, bring drinking water to Africa, or cure AIDS, they are looking in the wrong place. The church is not commissioned to do any of these tasks.”[\[26\]](#)

If the above men have understood the New Testament correctly, and I believe they have, what has the church been commissioned to do?

The New Testament Instructions to the Individual Christian

As we have already demonstrated, Jesus’ general description of the role of His disciples in the world is to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-16). The debate surrounds the details of how to accomplish this task. In response, Jesus’ example is important and often misunderstood. Jesus showed compassion to the poor and sick and disenfranchised. He ate with these people, healed their diseases and gave them the gospel (Matt 9:36-38). But it is important to remember that Jesus healed people primarily as a sign pointing to who He was (Matt 9:6; John 20:30). And while Jesus showed personal compassion to such people, He also did not set up or authorize any campaigns dealing with injustice, world hunger, orphanages, hospitals, anti-poverty programs, or the like. This was not because He presumably did not care, but because these things were not His mission (Luke 19:10) and could possibly be a distraction to His followers. Later when Jesus commissioned His disciples, He did not send them forth to heal the world’s problems but to make disciples and to teach people to obey God (Matt 28:20). But this begs the question as to what commandments the disciples were to obey and teach. The best approach to

discovering what these commandments are is to examine the examples of the early Christians, especially as found in the book of Acts, and through study of the direct teachings primarily found in the epistles.

In the book of Acts we find the believers coming together for instruction in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, and scattering to evangelize (Acts 2:41-42). A major task of the early Christians was to establish churches (13:1-3), but there are no examples of early Christians attempting to transform or create culture, or influence the political system in a direct way. Nor do we find them organizing programs to feed the hungry of the world or to right social injustices. Almost all of their attention was on evangelizing the lost as well as the spiritual life and physical needs of the believing community.

The teachings drawn from the epistles focus on establishing truth, combating error, correcting false living and leading Christians into godliness. The subject of society is seldom addressed, but when it is the emphasis is on being excellent representatives of Christ to the world (salt and light) (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:11-15; Titus 3:1). Specifically, Christians were taught to take care of their (Christians') poor (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; 1 John 3:17; James 2:15-17), handle their own legal differences (1 Cor 6:1-8), and discipline their rebellious people (1 Cor 5). But they were not instructed to take care of society's poor, handle its legal issues or discipline its sinners. In addition they were to treat their employees fairly (James 5:1-4). Passages such as 1 John 3:17 and James 2:15-17 could have implications for the treatment of unbelievers, but since the rest of the New Testament instruction is directed almost exclusively toward treatment of believers, it seems best to apply these verses primarily to Christians as well.

Instructions to the Corporate Body—the Church

In the New Testament we find the church as a body (an institution) coming together to worship God, receive the instruction of the Word (2 Tim 3:16-17) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34), and participating in body life (1 Cor 12). The Scriptures are clear that God's people must do good, show mercy, care for the poor, and be concerned with matters of justice in every aspect of society. But there is never any indication that the church as an institution is to see this as its task. If it were to do so, then surely the leaders of the church (elders/deacons) should take responsibility for them and direct them. "But," as Carson notes, "what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:2). Even matters of justice within the congregation were in some measure handed over to other Spirit-filled men (Acts 6:1-7). When the distinctive duties of elders are canvassed, the priority of the ministry of the Word and prayer is paramount,"^[27] not organizing community and social outreaches.

Conclusion:

What this brief overview of the New Testament shows is that the church, as the church, is never given the task of transforming or creating culture. Its sole biblical mandate to the world was, and is, to make disciples. Christians as individuals are to be salt and light in our world which may take many forms. Individual believers may very well be involved, alongside the unbeliever and within biblical parameters, in politics, social action and protecting God's creation. Much variety on the cultural level is allowed by our Lord. But it must not be minimized that the New Testament example and precept is that followers of Christ are to disciple people for Him which includes evangelism and training in obedience.

What then is the mission of the church? This is the question at the root of current evangelical debates

about social engagement. Is the mission of the church to address all of the needs of all people, or is it more limited in scope? It is currently popular to understand the mission of the church as that of evangelization, discipleship, meeting the needs of both believers and unbelievers and transforming society. But when we draw our marching orders from the New Testament rather than the culture (*sola Scriptura* rather than *sola cultura* as Wells frames it), it becomes clear that the task of the church is to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all who come to Christ (Matt 28:18-20) and caring for the needy who become part of the body of Christ (1 Tim 5:16; Gal 2:10). Broader social action is not expressly prohibited, and certainly should be of concern for all God's people as citizens of earth, but it should not be equated with these two essential obligations.

Historically, it has proven almost impossible for the church to keep the biblical command of the Great Commission in balance with the Cultural Mandate, once a cultural mandate is accepted as part of the mission of the church. We saw this in part one of this study when in the late 1800s liberal theologians taught that it was imperative for the church to step up and change the social and industrial conditions in the United States. Charlie Sheldon's bestselling book *In His Steps* (1897) reduced Christianity to, "What would Jesus Do?" and was one of the most popular and prominent books of the Social Gospel era. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) became known as the father of the "Social Gospel" movement. He believed the church should remedy societal ills as the temporary kingdom of God.^[28] The Social Gospel of the 1800s swallowed up the church of that day and ultimately gutted the evangelical church of the gospel, turning it into a social agency. Those following this philosophy would abandon the Christ-given mission of making disciples for the task of improving society. Those churches and Christians who saw the error of the Social Gospel continued to center their lives and ministries on the Great Commission. It is the descendants of these very churches and believers who are now being influenced to widen their understanding of the calling of Christ to include a social improving agenda. Unless there is a return to the biblical mandate given in the New Testament, the evangelical church is in danger of repeating the same error of the 19th and 20th century church with predictable results.

[1] Quoted in *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong* p. 154.

[2] Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, pp. 135,137.

[3] Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 119.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

[5] John R. W. Stott, "Salt & Light, Four Ways Christians Can Influence the World," *Christianity Today*, Oct. 2011; pp. 40-41.

[6] Francis Chan, p. 140.

[7] Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008), p. 66.

[8] Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), p. 17.

[9] Ibid., pp. 48-49 (emphasis hers).

[10] Ibid., p. 73.

[11] Charles Ryrie, *The Christian & Social Responsibility* (Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), p. 38.

[12] Kevin DeYoung and Great Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), p. 175.

[13] William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1977, pp. 282.

[14] Ibid., pp. 283-284.

[15] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studied in the Sermon on the Mount Vol 1*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 158.

[16] Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953). 48-49.

[17] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 177.

[18] N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp 98, 102 (emphasis his).

[19] D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2008), p. 151.

[20] Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), p. 164.

[21] David Well, *The Courage to be Protestant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 224.

[22] Ibid., p. 4.

[23] Charles Ryrie, p. 69.

[24] Kevin DeYoung and Great Gilbert, p. 22.

[25] Ibid., p. 26.

[26] John MacArthur, *Right thinking in a World Gone Wrong* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2009), p. 213.

[27] D. A. Carson, p. 151.

[28] Christopher Cone, Gen. Ed., *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond, A Theological Collection in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie*, (Ft. Worth, Texas: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), pp. 442-445.

Hide Box

Settings

Dismiss after 15 seconds

Display in Bottom Right

Google Analytics
Tracker
1