

“Perspectives on Justice and Frontier Missions”

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“Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live forever and this must be true or false. Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only 70 years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live forever.” C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (Page 159)

From the beginning, missionaries have sought to obey Christ’s Great Commission by seeking to make disciples by the means of “teaching them to obey all I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19). Jesus taught that his primary commandments were to love God and our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39) so consequently missionaries have always sought to obey both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Simple logic dictates that we must, like Lewis, decide what we will be “bothering about” with the limited amount of time we have to serve God here on earth. Historically missions thinkers have had three basic positions on the Church’s responsibility to be involved in “justice issues” as we go about the task of making disciples.

1. **Liberationism** – Liberationists tend to equate the Biblical notion of Salvation from sin with the struggle of poor and oppressed people for justice. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest, is the primary developer “liberation theology”. This view, leaning heavily on Jesus’ announcement of his job description in Nazareth (Luke 4:17-18) sees salvation through the eyes of a Marxist view of class struggle with the Biblical liberation at Israel’s exodus from Egypt as the primary lens through which to view salvation.

2. **Holism** – To use a “spicy” analogy, holists can be found on the spectrum from mild to medium to hot. Mild holists would seek to minister both to society and individuals, socially and spiritually but giving a certain priority to evangelism. Hot Holists see the Great Commission ideally as equally distributed between society/individuals, physical/spiritual and body/soul.

Some call holism “incarnational” ministry and view Jesus as their primary model who ministered both to the physical and spiritual needs of people. Hot holists would emphasize his healings and ministry to the poor while mild holists would emphasize his teachings on eternity and destiny.

3. **Prioritism** – Prioritism sees the Great Commission as primarily to make disciples of the nations through evangelism and church planting with the Book of Acts being the primary model. This has been the more traditional viewpoint on missions (up until World War II) and sees other Christian ministries such as mercy and justice for the poor as good and needed but secondary and supportive.

From my observations of YWAM, I see very little liberation theology (thank God!) in our midst. Most of our workers tend to be either somewhere along the Holistic spicy continuum or lean toward the traditional Prioritism approach. While everyone, of course, has to seek God for His strategies for the particular arena of ministry He has called them to, I would like to offer a few additional perspectives.

The Historical Perspective

When we read the biographies of William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, Adoniram Judson and others in the 19th Century (what Ralph Winter has called the “Great Century” of Christian missions) we certainly see at least a mild holistic approach (i.e. Carey’s stand against the injustice of *suttee* (widow burning) in India). Thousands of schools, orphanages, medical clinics, hospitals, feeding programs, etc. that were established by Christian missionaries and some, like Carey and Wilberforce even worked for legal changes to bring justice for the poor and slaves.

John Elliot, who worked among the Algonquin Native Americans, fought for justice and clemency for Native American prisoners, freedom for Native American slaves, and prevented Algonquins from being defrauded of their land. He also established schools for the poor.

Two of the most successful missionary pioneers and historical models for YWAM have been William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army and John Wesley and the Methodists. Both were soul-winning, church-planting, gospel preaching movements but both have also been given credit by British historians as being effective social justice reformers, using the whole Bible as their paradigm.

I believe history, to use a broad brush, would paint a picture that would confirm the following statement: Those missionaries that were the most successful in influencing society towards Biblical justice were those who put the preaching of the gospel and the changing of individual hearts at the top of their agenda. The Salvation Army and the Methodists are a classic example of this.

The Theological Perspective

Taking the Bible as a whole, there are hundreds of references either implicit in the text or commanded by God for His people to care for the poor and to stand for social justice – hence our mandate to disciple nations from which we can draw much from God’s instructions to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament.

As we turn to the New Testament, however, the Biblical data for Christians being involved in social justice activities gets much slimmer. A hard-core observation and inductive study of the passages in their context reveals that most of the social justice issues dealt with in the New Testament were “in-house”. The caring for the widows in Acts 6, for instance, was among the *Christian* widows. James’ exhortation to faith and works was given to *believers* to take care of “...a *brother* or *sister* be needy of daily food...” (James 2). John’s encouragement to share our goods with the poor likewise seems to be an in-house commandment (1 Jn. 3:17-18). Even Jesus’ oft-quoted exhortation to feed and clothe the poor and visit the prisoners was apparently not referring to all poor and prisoners but to “*these brothers of mine*” (Matt. 25:40).

Furthermore a simple lexical review of the Hebrew word for “poor” (*anao*) and the Greek word for poor (*ptochos*) can both be translated “meek”, “poor in spirit”, “broken” and “contrite” as well as physically and circumstantially poor. As we observe the book of Acts, of course, and get an idea of how the original disciples understood Jesus’ Commission we see, even from a casual look that their primary emphasis was evangelism, casting out demons, healing the sick and planting churches.

The Eternal Perspective

In a scene from the blockbuster movie, *Gladiator*, the hero of the story exclaims, “What we do in life will echo in eternity.” John Wesley said, “I value all things only by the price they shall gain in eternity”. C.S. Lewis said, “Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither!”

Simple logic, as Lewis explained in the above quote, forces us to the conclusion that Christianity’s assertion that “every individual human being is going to live forever, and this must be true or false”, leads us to a certain priority on what we should be “bothering about”.

Jesus asked the following rhetorical question, “What would it profit a man if he gained the whole world and lost his own soul?” or “What will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Jesus’ obvious and logical answer to his question was that the value of a human soul is worth more than all the value of all the possessions in the whole world, which would include any services we can give to anyone here on the earth.

In Conclusion

Should we, as Frontier missionaries, seek to obey the Great Commandment and improve the lot of people in this life and alleviate suffering whenever and wherever possible (as did the good Samaritan)? **Yes**. Should we feed the poor, visit the prisoners, clothe the naked, heal the sick and perform other expressions of the Father’s heart simply because God’s love is unconditional? **Yes**. Should we, without partiality, love our neighbors as ourselves, be they individuals or nations, rich or poor? **Yes**. Should we be “salt” as well as “light” and bring godly influences into the various spheres of society that make up the social structures of the nations to which we are called? **Yes**. But Biblical discipleship has to center around the Lordship of Jesus and the keeping of his commandments which includes his “first” commands to “repent and believe the gospel” (Mk. 1:14-15)

To swing to the Liberation extreme and import a 21st Century paradigm on the Biblical text, trying to influence nations with Biblical principles of justice and righteousness without the Cross of Christ at the center would have been ludicrous to the original apostles.

One of the reasons we are so enamored with causes other than simply winning people to Christ and taking care of their needs as we do it, while not neglecting societal influences in the spheres is because we tend to focus on the things which are seen rather than the unseen world as Paul commanded us (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

I recently heard a heart-breaking story of some Christians who raised money in the West to go to the developing world to rescue young girls from human trafficking. With pure motives they went to a brothel “bought” the girls out of slavery but delivered them back to their Buddhist village to integrate back into their society without once telling them the good news of the gospel. They thought they had set the girls free. The Biblical worldview would inform us that they were rescued from one form of slavery, delivered back into another form of slavery and if they don’t meet the Jesus alone who has the truth that can truly set them free (Jn.8:32), they will be in slavery for all eternity.

Wherever we find ourselves along this continuum, whether holistically mild, medium, hot or following traditional Prioritism may we keep in mind Jesus’ question, “What would it profit a man if he gained the whole world and lost his own soul?”

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