

## **THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH: IS THERE A BIBLICAL SOCIAL GOSPEL?**

### **Introduction**

One of the issues which confronts the minister who attempts to do work in the city more often than a traditional rural ministry (or even suburban ministry) is the issue of meeting the social needs of people through the ministry of the local church.<sup>1</sup> Many Bible-believing churches are limited either in outlook or capability when social concerns are considered. They perhaps do a good job of taking care of church members in catastrophic situations, widows, and people in general at Thanksgiving and Christmas, but lack a comprehensive program of social outreach. Often times conservative churches have ignored social concerns because the "social gospel" is the wrong gospel with many liberal churches using it as a substitute for the gospel of eternal life to the saving of the soul.

**One local church (conservative) across the street from another church [which it considered liberal because of its social gospel emphasis] put up a large sign which read: "A BODY WITHOUT A SOUL IS A CORPSE!" The other church responded with its own sign: "A SOUL WITHOUT A BODY IS A GHOST!"**

However, the issue is not as simplistic as one option or the other. In some measure, any urban ministry will force the minister to consider social ministries of some kind in order to have any credibility in terms of reaching people with great needs. It seems that two things must take place for you to reach city people, especially inner city people: (1) *you must convince them you love them fully* [which is hard to do while ignoring social needs -- see James 2]; (2) *you must show them that God can handle their lives one day at a time* before they will become convinced that God can handle their eternal destiny. Therefore, it is essential that the genuine Bible-believing minister seek the proper balance in biblical truth and application as he does outreach in the city.

### ***I. Some Sample Competing Models for the Mission of the Church***

<i><b>MOVEMENT</b></i>	<i><b>EMPHASIS</b></i>	<i><b>BIBLICAL SUPPORT</b></i>
<b>Fundamentalist</b>	<b>evangelism outreach, <i>redemption of individuals</i></b>	<b>Matthew 28:19-20</b>
<b>Evangelical</b>	<b>teaching and equipping, <i>redemption of individuals</i></b>	<b>Ephesians 4:11-16</b>
<b>Classical Liberalism</b>	<b>social welfare, <i>redemption of society</i></b>	<b>Matthew 25:32-46</b>
<b>Dominion Theology</b>	<b>Christianization of society, <i>redemption of society</i></b>	<b>Gen. 1:26-28</b>
<b>Liberation Theology</b>	<b>political deliverance, <i>redemption of society</i></b>	<b>Isaiah 61:1-3</b>

<sup>1</sup> The "Social Gospel" as opposed to the "Salvation Gospel" is the message and accompanying actions which attempt to "redeem" or change society. The main evil is often considered to be the social environment one is "trapped" in due to the evil intents of others (e.g., slavery, sweat shops for children, poverty, down-trodden women, alcohol industry, political control, etc.).

## ***II. A Brief Sketch of "Modern" Social Gospel efforts in the United States***

### **Early American**

- American Temperance Union (1836)
- Dr. Benjamin Rush (signer of the declaration of Independence)
- The Slavery Debate and the Abolition Movement
- Charles Finney
- Both conservatives and liberals?
- The context of optimistic Postmillennialism

### **Post Civil War America to World War I**

- Education of blacks/Freedmen Schools
- Booker T. Washington
- Charles Sheldon, In His Steps (1896)
- Industrial & Class Warfare (feudalism, capitalism, socialism)
- Washington Gladden (congregationalist) -- Social Facts & Forces (1897)
- Walter Rauschenbusch (liberal Baptist) -- Theology for the Social Gospel (1917)
- Federal Council of Churches (1908)
- Continued attacks upon the liquor industry and the saloon -- the rise of Prohibition [the Anti-Saloon League]

### **The Rest of the 20th Century**

- Depression Rescue Missions (1930s)
- The Civil Rights Movement -- Dr. Martin Luther King (1950s-60s)
- Moral Majority (1979) and the rise of the Christian Right
- The Postmillennialism of Dominion Theology (last 25 years)
- The Pro-Life Movement
- Liberation Theology/Feminist Theology/Black Theology [James Cone]

**Summary:** Both liberals and conservatives have been involved in trying to "redeem" society and continue to do so. The difference is that conservatives have tried, at least on paper, to affirm the prior significance of the "Gospel of Personal Salvation" in effecting change.

**III. A Modern Issue: Is Capitalism Christian?**

One issue which impacts our thinking on social action is our understanding of basic economics. Our approach to how we attempt to help those in the city who are poor & perhaps oppressed will be affected by our views of welfare, for example. Do I try to help them plug into the "system" of government bureaucratic help or do I disciple them away from that "system" or is there some combination that I could be comfortable in light of biblical teaching.

One good book to get (if still in print): Franky Schaeffer, ed., Is Capitalism Christian? (Crossway Books, 1985)

<p><b>LAISSEZ-FAIRE CAPITALISM</b></p> <p>Free Enterprise with no restraints</p>	<p><b>RESPONSIBLE CAPITALISM</b></p> <p>Free Enterprise with biblical &amp; responsible care for others</p>	<p><b>DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM</b></p> <p>An attempted socialism through democratic institutions</p>	<p><b>MARXISM</b></p> <p>An attempted socialism through the dictatorship of the State</p>
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**Biblical Issues:**

1. Is there a form of government mandated by Scripture?
2. Is there an economic system mandated by Scripture?

**IV. An Overview of Biblical Evidence Concerning Treatment of the Poor**

Old Testament

(1) Mosaic legislation about the poor

- Note the theological implications of the image of God in man in Gen. 1:26-28
- Ex. 21:2; 22:22ff; 23:3, 6, 10, 11
- Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22
- Deut. 15:4-11; 24:12

**(2) Principles in Proverbs**

14:31	He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.
19:17	He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And he will repay him for his good deed.
21:13	He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor, Will also cry himself and not be answered.
22:23	Do not rob the poor because he is poor, Or crush the afflicted at the gate; For the LORD will plead their case, And take the life of those who rob them.
29:7	The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, The wicked does not understand such concern.
31:20	She [the virtuous woman] extends her hand to the poor; And she stretches out hands to the needy.

**New Testament****(1) The Synoptic Gospels**

- Matthew 6:19-34; 19:16-21; 25:31-46
- Mark 4:19; 10:24; 14:7
- Luke 4:18 (Isa. 61:1-2); 6:20-30; 7:41; 12:16-21, 25, 31-34; 16:19-31

**(2) Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-5:11**

Communism in the early church?

**(3) Epistles**

- Paul  
Gal. 2:10, 6:10; 2 Cor. 8; Phil. 4:11, 12; 2 Thess. 3:7-10; I Tim. 6:7-10, 17-19
- James  
1:9-11, 27; 2:2-6, 15-17; 5:1-6

***V. Illustrations of urban city social action***

- Political action against abortion
- Serving on a city committee or commission to deal with race problems
- Fixing a man's computer when he was out of a job and could not pay
- Taking some foreigners from Armenia to visit a lawyer concerning immigration
- Taking a family down to the police car pound to help them get their car released following an accident
- Medical services
- Dental services
- Clothes closet (also toys)
- Food pantry
- Providing furniture
- Assistance on utilities and rent, negotiating with services for others
- Holiday banquets
- Offering special games and training in sports for kids
- Counseling services
- Seminars on practical how to live topics (how to do a budget, etc.)
- Going through job ads for others -- helping them make resumes
- Serving as a work place for community service workers (ordered by a judge)

**DO ALL IN THE  
NAME OF JESUS**

***VI. APPLICATION***

I have concentrated on the poor and have not emphasized passages on oppression, justice, etc. which are often related to economic issues. I have not discussed biblical principles and subsequent actions for the church in social areas like sexual immorality, teen-age pregnancy, etc. However, in short, social action covers all areas of helping people to cope with this life.

- (1) Yes, there is a valid social ministry of the Church.
- (2) The social ministry should be carried out in the context of a "holistic" view of the Church's Mission and levels of priority.

<b>1</b>	<b><i>EVANGELISM: THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL (1 COR. 15:1-5)</i></b>	<b>EMPHASIS: THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD</b>
<b>2</b>	<b><i>TEACHING: TRAINING IN THE WAYS OF THE LORD</i></b>	<b>EMPHASIS: THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD AND THE SALT OF THE EARTH</b>
<b>3</b>	<b><i>SOCIAL ACTIONS</i></b>	<b>EMPHASIS: THE SALT OF THE EARTH</b>

- (3) Since believers cannot take care of all social needs, there must be graded levels of responsibility. See other handout.