

The Local Church's Role In Social Issues

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Introduction:

The concept of "social issues" is a fairly recent phenomenon in the life of the church. The church being the world wide body of believers that makes up the body of Christ. It seems a division has come about in reaction by evangelicals to some denominations that made a focus of feeding and housing the poor, providing health care, and services that generally assist the less fortunate. The claim was that they were providing these services without the sharing of the gospel. Whether or not this was actually the case, I do not know. But the term social gospel was brought about and the Evangelical side went to the far extreme of not dealing with any of the social issues. They had the opinion that we should not be involved with those "social" issues. It was the churches' job to preach the gospel and nothing more.

In fact a whole new theology arose in some Central American countries called Liberation Theology. This is the idea that if people would just come to Christ then the world would be right and all the injustice would be done away with.

Unfortunately, I believe scripture teaches something that is neither extreme nor shallow, but something in the middle. While it is the church's role to preach the gospel

1 Cor 9:16

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

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It is also the church's role to meet the needs of the poor.

Luke 12:33-34

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

NIV

Titus 3:14

Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

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Definitions:

The Church- This is the world wide body of Christ.

Rom 12:4-6

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

NIV

The Poor- Not everyone that is lacking would fit into a Biblical category of poor. There are those who choose to be poor. These would be considered lazy.

2 Thess 3:10

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

NIV

However if one is unable to work because of physical disabilities, old age, or other limiting factors I believe they qualify as poor.

Assistance - This may take many forms depending on the individual situation. It may mean talking with the family in order to help them see that they need to help this person.

1 Tim 5:3-4

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.

NIV

It may mean helping them go over their finances in order to help them spend what they have more wisely.

Prov 21:17

He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

NIV

Or it may mean actually providing food or housing. But we do not just ignore the situation.

Prov 28:27

He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.

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Social Issues The definition of this is going to vary from culture to culture, even varying from city to city. This is because these problems that plague mankind have been around since the Garden of Eden. Basically these issues can be divided into two categories.

1. Unavoidable – This would include widows, orphans, disabled, and other things that happen not as a result of a person’s own behavior.
2. Avoidable - This is a much wider range of circumstances. This would include but is not limited to drunkenness, laziness drug abuse, abortion, unwed pregnancy, fornication, occultism, and homosexuality to name a few.

Although I make these two distinctions with a bit of uneasiness, because I don’t really see scripture saying we should determine how one became “poor”. While it does address those not willing to work, the idea of how one became unable is not addressed as I see it. In fact the one place where Jesus is asked “saying, Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind? “

John 9:2, 3

Jesus answered, Neither did this man sin, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

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So I am not sure that we need to be in the position of judging whether or not one ended up unable to support themselves in a manner worthy of our help.

The Church’s Response

Before I address what the response of the church should be I feel I need to determine whether there should be any response at all. After all, there are those very well meaning brothers and sisters that feel helping someone that has gotten themselves into trouble “deserve” what they get. If we are to attempt to lessen their suffering, then we are only encouraging that behavior.

So in an attempt to respond to these brothers and sisters let me take the two previous categories; the unavoidable and the avoidable and address them separately.

Unavoidable – I would hope that we can all agree that this category is deserving of our help. Since there is no less than 100 verses dealing with the poor, for instance:

Job 22:9-11

And you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.

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The degree of assistance is going to vary with each situation. As mentioned earlier the assistance may only involve talking with the family, which would cost the church nothing.

Or it may involve providing for this person either with food, housing, or both. This can be done by giving them a place of their own or a family taking them into their home.

The church needs to be innovative in the ways they try and help. We are to encourage people to support themselves as much as is possible. If there is a business owner in the congregation they may be able to give some work to the person, benefiting both the business and the person. This also gives the person some self respect in doing something for themselves. I have run into very few situations where there was an individual who could do nothing.

Avoidable - This is where things can get a bit difficult. These people are sometimes ones who are involved in some deep moral failure. This may be someone involved in drugs, alcohol, fornication, stealing, or any of the numerous ways people find to attempt to destroy their lives. The first question that needs to be asked is “do you want to change your life”. You might think that everyone would answer yes to this question, but there are many who are perfectly happy in their sin and have no interest in changing anything. Jesus set this example with the man at the pool of Bethesda when he asked him “do you want to get well?” I am sure all of you at one time or another has seen a professional beggar. In the U.S. we have people that prey on the kindness of churches. They go from church to church looking for money. Some of them have the saddest stories to try and make people feel sorry for them and give them money.

When we were at the maternity home we ran, we had a woman stay with us that we discovered very soon after she came, that she was using drugs. We sat her down and said she was going to have to stop or leave. She chose to leave. A couple days later we got a phone call looking for her. It was the prosecuting attorney informing her that the state was going to terminate her rights as a parent to a little girl she had and was taken away from her. It turns out she was going to churches with her very small baby and asking for money to feed her child. They would give her money and she would then buy drugs. The attorney told me when they took the baby it was very nearly starved to death.

So we need to determine if there is a real desire to change. I know there are going to be those that say yes just to get something to eat. Yes, you are going to be taken advantage of. But I believe that we are to do acts of mercy because Jesus has asked us to. Not really for the benefit of that person. If you are doing it for that person, and that person never appreciates what you have done then you are going to feel robbed. But if you do it because Jesus has asked you to then the response of that person doesn't matter.

We need to use great discernment in offering help to people with these kinds of troubles. But this does not mean that we do not try to help, however we need to pay attention to a scriptural admonition that should be practiced.

Gal 6:1

Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

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It is very easy to be pulled into the sins of others especially if you had a problem with that sin at one time in your life.

If there is a real desire to change their life then we need to offer our help. It is hard for a person to talk about freedom when they are caught in a trap of their own making.

James 1:13-15

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempteth no man: but each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed. Then the lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is fullgrown, bringeth forth death.

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We must remember,

Rom 5:8

But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

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Let us never forget that we were once them. Unless the grace of God stepped into our lives we could still be them.

Eph 2:8-10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

NIV

We need to show compassion and patience in working with people who come for help. Remember, sinners sin. It is part of their nature. Dogs bite, cats scratch, donkeys kick, sinners sin. Do not be surprised when someone you are trying to help falls. None of us become perfect the moment we turn to Christ. You are not going to change a lifetime of behavior in a day.

Jesus gave us the story of the Good Samaritan as a response to a statement.

Luke 10:27-29

He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

*But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "**And who is my neighbor?**"*

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We need to understand that it was not who this man was, or where he was, or even how he got there. But the fact that he needed help is what made him a neighbor.

“Do this and you will live”

Conclusion

Gal 6:7-10

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

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Social issues may at times give the impression that we are condoning behavior that is contrary to scripture. To show compassion on an individual who has made wrong choices and has a desire to turn around is not contrary at all. Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons without separating those who deserved it from those who didn't because none of them deserved it. We need to have the same mind that Jesus had:

Phil 2:5-11

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient (even) unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of (things) in heaven and (things) on earth and (things) under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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Jesus could look down through the ages and see us, sinners, rebelling against God, wanting our own desires above all and choose to go to a cross to redeem us out of the bondage of sin. As we look around us at the people just like us, can we show them the love that has been shown to us? Can we withhold food, shelter, a caring touch, a compassionate ear?

Isa 58:6-9

"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 to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then 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.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

NIV

So I challenge you this day. Go and minister to the needy without reserve. When things get hard cry out to God on their behalf and He will answer and He glorify himself in your ministry.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Eph. 3:17-17