

The Gospel and the Poor¹

— Tim Keller —

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The original question I was asked to address was “How does our commitment to the primacy of the gospel tie into our obligation to do good to all, especially those of the household of faith, to serve as salt and light in the world, to do good to the city?” I will divide this question into two parts: (1) If we are committed to the primacy of the gospel, does the gospel itself serve as the basis and motivation for ministry to the poor? (2) If so, how then does that ministry relate to the proclamation of the gospel?

1. Does the Gospel Itself Move Us to Do Ministry to the Poor?

The Primacy of the Gospel

What does “the primacy of the gospel” mean? I will answer that question from Don Carson’s keynote address delivered at The Gospel Coalition’s first conference in May 2007.² Carson clarifies the gospel from 1 Cor 15:1–19 with eight summarizing words:

1. *Christological*: The gospel centers on the person and work (the life, death, and resurrection) of Jesus Christ.
2. *theological*: The gospel tells us that sin is first and foremost an offense against God and that salvation is first to last the action of God, not our own.
3. *biblical*: The gospel is essentially the message of the whole Bible.
4. *apostolic*: The gospel is passed on to us by Jesus’ disciples as authoritative eyewitnesses.
5. *historical*: The gospel is not philosophy or advice on how to find God, but rather *news* of what God has done in history to find and save us.
6. *personal*: The gospel must be personally believed and appropriated.
7. *universal*: The gospel is for every tongue, tribe, people, and individual.
8. *eschatological*: The gospel includes the good news of the final transformation, not just the blessings we enjoy in this age.

From these exegetical inferences, Carson infers more broadly that the gospel is normally disseminated in proclamation. The overwhelming majority of references to the gospel in the New Testament speak of communicating the gospel through words. However, as a steward of the gospel, Paul’s respon-

¹ I use the term ‘crisis’ in the sense of ‘a crucial stage or turning point in the course of something, esp. in a sequence of events’ (*The Collins Concise Dictionary*).

² D. A. Carson, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:1–19),” a sermon preached on May 23, 2007 at The Gospel Coalition’s conference in Deerfield, IL, available at http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/what_is_the_gospel_1.

sibility was not exhausted simply by disseminating it to non-believers. Paul also “found it necessary to hammer away at the outworking of the gospel in every domain of the lives of the Corinthians.”³ After stressing that the gospel is disseminated primarily through proclamation, Carson writes:

Yet something else must also be said. This chapter [1 Cor 15] comes at the end of a book that repeatedly shows how the gospel rightly works out in the massive transformation of attitudes, morals, relationships, and cultural interactions. As everyone knows, Calvin insists that justification is by faith alone, but genuine faith is never alone; we might add that the gospel focuses on a message of what God has done and is doing, and must be cast in cognitive truths to be believed and obeyed, but this gospel never properly remains exclusively cognitive.⁴

The rest of the Corinthian letters demonstrate this over and over. When Paul denounces the Corinthians’ divisions and party spirit (1 Cor 1:10–17), he says that they come from pride and boasting, a betrayal of the gospel of sovereign grace (1:26–31). When Paul deals with the issue of sexual sin and discipline in chapters 5–6, he gives directions for behavior and grounds his appeal in the gospel of justification (6:11) and the fact that they were ransomed by the death of Christ (6:19–20). In chapter 7, the questions of singleness, divorce, and remarriage “are worked out in the context of the priorities of the gospel and the transformed vision brought about by the dawning of the eschatological age and the anticipation of the end.”⁵ In 2 Cor 8–9, Paul eloquently appeals for financial generosity on the basis of the gospel. Radical, humble generosity is being “submissive to the confession of the gospel” (2 Cor 9:13), that is, materialism fails to take seriously the gospel of Christ’s sacrificial death for us. Similarly, Paul challenges Peter’s attitudes toward Gentile Christians by insisting that he was not “walking in line with the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14).

[T]he gospel must also transform the business practices and priorities of Christians in commerce, the priorities of young men steeped in indecisive but relentless narcissism, the lonely anguish and often the guilty pleasures of single folk who pursue pleasure but who cannot find happiness, the tired despair of those living on the margins, and much more. And this must be done, not by attempting to abstract social principles from the gospel, still less by endless focus on the periphery in a vain effort to sound prophetic, but precisely by preaching and teaching and living out in our churches the glorious gospel of our blessed Redeemer.⁶

So what does it mean to be committed to the *primacy* of the gospel? It means first that the gospel must be proclaimed. Many today denigrate the importance of this. Instead, they say, the only true apologetic is a loving community; people cannot be reasoned into the kingdom, they can only be loved. “Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary.” But while Christian community is indeed a crucial and powerful witness to the truth of the gospel, it cannot replace preaching and proclamation. Nevertheless, the primacy of the gospel also means that it is the basis and mainspring for Christian practice, individually and corporately, inside the church and outside. Gospel ministry is not only proclaiming it to people so that they will embrace and believe it; it is also teaching and shepherding believers with it so that it shapes the

³ Carson, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

entirety of their lives, so that they can “live it out.” And one of the most prominent areas that the gospel effects is our relationship to the poor.

I know of no better introduction to how the gospel moves us to minister to the poor than Jonathan Edwards’s discourse “Christian Charity.”⁷ Edwards concludes that giving and caring for the poor is a crucial, non-optional aspect of “living out the gospel.” There are two basic arguments Edwards puts forth for this conclusion.

(1) Believing the Gospel Will Move Us to Give to the Poor

Edwards repeatedly shows us how an understanding of what he calls “the rules of the gospel”—the pattern and logic of the gospel—inevitably moves us to love and help the poor. While Edwards believes that the command to give to the poor is an implication of the teaching that all human beings are made in the image of God,⁸ he believes that the most important motivation for giving to the poor is the gospel: Giving to the poor “is especially reasonable, considering our circumstances, under such a dispensation of grace as that of the gospel.”⁹

One of the key texts to which Edwards turns to make this case is 2 Cor 8:8-9 (within the context of the entirety of chapters 8 and 9). When Paul asks for financial generosity to the poor, he points to the self-emptying of Jesus, vividly depicting him as becoming poor for us, both literally and spiritually, in the incarnation and on the cross. For Edwards, Paul’s little introduction “I am not commanding you... for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” is significant. The argument seems to be that if you grasp substitutionary atonement in both your head and your heart, you will be profoundly generous to the poor. Think it out! The only way for Jesus to get us out of our spiritual poverty and into spiritual riches was to get out of his spiritual riches into spiritual poverty. This should now be the pattern of your life. Give your resources away and enter into need so that those in need will be resourced. Paul also implies here that all sinners saved by grace will look at the poor of this world and feel that in some way they are looking in the mirror. The superiority will be gone.

Another text Edwards looks to more than once is Gal 6:1–10, especially verse 2, which enjoins us to “bear one another’s burdens.”¹⁰ What are these burdens? Paul has in view, at least partially, material and financial burdens, because Gal 6:10 tells us to “do good to all men, especially the household of faith.” Edwards (rightly, according to modern exegetes) understands “doing good” as including the giving of practical aid to people who need food, shelter, and financial help. Most commentators understand “burden-bearing” to be comprehensive. We share love and emotional strength with those who are sinking under sorrow; we share money and possessions with those who are in economic distress. But what does Paul mean when he says that burden-bearing “fulfills the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2)? Edwards calls this “the rules of the gospel.”¹¹ Richard Longenecker agrees, calling this “prescriptive principles stemming from the heart of the gospel.”¹² As Phil Ryken points out, the ultimate act of burden-bearing

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity: or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (rev. and corrected by Edward Hickman; 1834; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:163–73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:164.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2:171.

¹² Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990), 275.

was substitutionary atonement in which Jesus bore the infinite burden of our guilt and sin.¹³ Again we see Paul reasoning that anyone who understands the gospel will share money and possessions with those with less of the world's goods.

And if it is the *gospel* that is moving us to help the poor, Edwards reasons, our giving and involvement with the poor will be significant, remarkable, and sacrificial. Those who give to the poor out of a desire to comply with a moral prescription will always do the minimum. If we give to the poor simply because “God says so,” the next question will be “How much do we have to give so that we aren’t out of compliance?” That question and attitude shows that this is not gospel-shaped giving. In the last part of his discourse, Edwards answers the objection “You say I should help the poor, but I’m afraid I have nothing to spare. I can’t do it.” Edwards responds,

In many cases, we may, by the rules of the gospel, be obliged to give to others, when we cannot do it without suffering ourselves . . . else how is that rule of *bearing one another’s burdens* fulfilled? If we never be obliged to relieve others’ burdens, but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor’s burdens, when we bear no burdens at all?¹⁴

Edwards is arguing that if the basis for our ministry to the poor was simply a moral prescription, things might be different. But if the basis for our involvement with the poor is “the rules of the gospel,” namely substitutionary sacrifice, then we must help the poor even when we think “we can’t afford it.” Edwards calls the bluff and says, “What you mean is, you can’t help them without sacrificing and bringing suffering on yourself. But that’s how Jesus relieved you of *your* burdens! And that is how you must minister to others with their burdens.”

In the most powerful part of the discourse, Edwards answers a series of common objections he gets when he preaches about the gospel-duty of giving to the poor. In almost every case, he uses the logic of the gospel—of substitutionary atonement and free justification—on the objection. In every case, radical, remarkable, sacrificial generosity to the poor is the result of thinking out and living out the gospel. To the objection “I don’t have to help someone unless he is destitute,” Edwards answers that “the rule of the gospel” means that we are to love our neighbor as Christ loved us, literally entering into our afflictions. “When our neighbor is in difficulty, he is afflicted; and we ought to have such a spirit of love to him, as to be afflicted with him in his affliction.”¹⁵ He then goes on to reason that, if we do this, we will *need* to relieve the affliction even if my neighbor’s situation is short of destitution. To wait until people are utterly destitute before you help them shows that the logic of the gospel has not yet turned you into the socially and emotionally empathetic person you should be.

Edwards takes on two other objections: “I don’t want to help this person because he is of an ill temper and an ungrateful spirit” and “I think this person brought on their poverty by their own fault.” This is an abiding problem with helping the poor. We all want to help kindhearted, upright people, whose poverty came on without any contribution from them and who will respond to your aid with gratitude and joy. Frankly, almost no one like that exists. And while it *is* important that our aid to the poor really helps them and doesn’t create dependency (see my last section), Edwards makes short work of this objection by again appealing not so much to ethical prescriptions but to the gospel itself.

¹³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (Reformed Expositor’s Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005), 248.

¹⁴ Edwards, “Christian Charity,” 2:171 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:170.

Christ loved us, was kind to us, and was willing to relieve us, though we were very evil and hateful, of an evil disposition, not deserving of any good . . . so we should be willing to be kind to those who are of an ill disposition, and are very undeserving. . . .

If they are come to want by a vicious idleness and prodigality; yet we are not thereby excused from all obligation to relieve them, unless they continue in those vices. If they continue not in those vices, the rules of the gospel direct us to forgive them [For] Christ hath loved us, pitied us, and greatly laid out himself to relieve us from that want and misery which we brought on ourselves by our own folly and wickedness. We foolishly and perversely threw away those riches with which we were provided, upon which we might have lived and been happy to all eternity.¹⁶

Edwards goes on to argue, wisely, that for the sake of children within families, sometimes we will need to sustain aid to families in which the parents do not turn away from their irresponsible behavior.¹⁷

In short, Edwards teaches that the gospel requires us to be involved in the life of the poor—not only financially, but personally and emotionally. Our giving must not be token but so radical that it brings a measure of suffering into our own lives. And we should be very patiently and nonpaternalistically open-handed to those whose behavior has caused or aggravated their poverty. These attitudes and dimensions of ministry to the poor proceed not simply from general biblical ethical principles but from the gospel itself.

(2) Ministry to the Poor Is a Crucial Sign That We Believe the Gospel

Edwards also deals with a cluster of texts that seems to make our care of and concern for the poor the basis for God’s judgment on the Day of the Lord. Matt 25:34–46 famously teaches that people will be accepted or condemned by God on the last day depending on how they treated the hungry, the homeless and immigrant, the sick, and the imprisoned. How can this be? Does this contradict Paul’s teaching that we are saved by faith in Christ, not our works?

Edwards notices that in the Old Testament giving to the poor is an essential mark of godliness. The famous verse Micah 6:8 requires that a man “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” Edwards concludes (rightly, according to Bruce Waltke) that this requires the godly man to be involved with the poor.¹⁸ Waltke says that both “do justice” and “love mercy” mean to be kind to the oppressed and marginalized and active in helping people who are financially and socially in a weaker condition.¹⁹ But this emphasis is not only in the Old Testament. Care for the poor is “a thing so essential, that the contrary cannot consist with a *sincere* love to God” (1 John 3:17–19).²⁰ From this (and 2 Cor 8:8, which speaks of generosity to the poor as a *proof* of a grace-changed, loving heart), Edwards concludes that doing justice and mercy is not a meritorious reason that God will accept us.²¹ Rather, doing justice and mercy for the poor is an inevitable sign that someone has justifying faith and grace in the heart.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2:171–72.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2:172 (Objection IX.4).

¹⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 164. Waltke points out that helping the poor is sometimes called “justice” and sometimes “mercy.” I will use both terms and give a bit of an explanation of their difference later in the essay.

¹⁹ Ibid., 390–94.

²⁰ Edwards, “Christian Charity,” 2:166 (emphasis in original).

²¹ Ibid.

Another version of the teaching of Matt 25:34–46 is found in the book of James. Protestants who have wrestled with the teaching of Jas 2 have concluded, “We are saved by faith alone—but not by faith that remains alone; faith without works is dead, not true justifying faith.” Absolutely right. But notice that, in the context, all the “works” James says are the marks of saving faith are caring for widows and orphans (1:27), showing the poor respect and treating them equally (2:2–6), and caring for the material needs of food and clothing (2:15–16). James says, point blank, that those who say that they have justifying faith but close their hearts to the poor are mistaken or liars (2:15–18). James concludes, “judgment will be without mercy for those who have shown no mercy!” (2:13). The “mercy” James speaks of here is strong concern and help for the poor.²² Here again we have the teaching: you will not find mercy from God on judgment day if you have not shown mercy to the poor during your lifetime. This is not because caring for the poor saves you, but because it is the inevitable outcome of saving, justifying faith.

The principle: a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith. By deeds of service, God can judge true love of himself from lip-service (cf. Isa 1:10–17). Matt 25, in which Jesus identifies himself with the poor (“as you did it to the least of them, you did it to me”) can be compared to Prov 14:31 and 19:17, in which we are told that to be gracious to the poor is to lend to God himself and to trample on the poor is to trample on God himself. This means that God on judgment day can tell what a person’s heart attitude is to him by what the person’s heart attitude is to the poor. If there is a hardness, indifference, or superiority, it betrays the self-righteousness of a heart that has not truly embraced the truth that he or she is a lost sinner saved only by free yet costly grace.

Edwards’s appeal and argument is very powerful. He begins his study asking, “Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?”²³ He concludes his survey of the biblical material with Proverbs 21:3: “Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he shall cry himself and not be heard.” Edwards adds, “God hath threatened uncharitable persons, that if ever they come to be in calamity and distress they shall be left helpless.”²⁴ Edwards brings home the Bible’s demand that *gospel-shaped Christians must be remarkable for their involvement with and concern for the poor*. We should literally be “famous” for it. That is the implication of texts such as Matt 5:13–16 and 1 Pet 2:11–12.

The Place of Eschatology

Notice that Edwards does not appeal to eschatology to make his case for ministry to the poor. It has often been argued (including by me!) that because Jesus’ saving work has as its ultimate end the restoration of the material world, therefore, God cares about the body as well as the soul, so we should relieve the hungry and the sick as well as saving souls. Many counter that this physical world is all going to be burned up (2 Pet 3:10–11; Rev 21:1), so we should simply save souls and not worry too much about improving the material conditions of people here.

Below we will tackle the relationship between the ministries of word and deed, but for the moment let’s observe that it is possible to make an extremely strong case for significant ministry to the poor without any reference to questions of eschatology. People debate whether this world is renewed by

²² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 117.

²³ Edwards, “Christian Charity,” 2:164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:169.

burning or destroyed and replaced.²⁵ But, as we can see from Edwards's exposition and argument, the case for the importance of ministry to the poor does not rest on these controversial issues. As he says, the mandate to care for the poor is as strong as any in the Bible, and in the New Testament (and even the Old Testament), it is usually grounded in the gospel of substitution, ransom, and grace.²⁶ Uncertainty as to whether the physical world will be replaced or not should not undermine our embrace of the scores of positive biblical demands that we open our hearts to the poor.

Edwards's study is rhetorically powerful, but a much more complete and accessible exegetical survey of all the relationship of the gospel and the poor is Craig Blomberg's *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*.²⁷ No one can read Blomberg's study or Edwards's discourse and not be struck by how relatively absent—in comparison with its power and prominence in the Bible itself—is this emphasis on the poor in evangelical preaching today, especially among conservative and Reformed churches. Why would this be? We come to this under the next heading.

What Is the Relationship of Gospel Proclamation to Ministry to the Poor?

How should the church respond to such remarkably strong biblical teaching about the importance of giving to the poor? It is obvious to nearly everyone that the Bible does teach this. The debates, however, are about *to whom* and *how* the church should go about giving its help.

To Whom?

Some believe that all the texts enjoining believers to give to the poor are given only to individual believers, not to the church as an institution or body. But it is difficult to square this view with the power of the statements we have read. If it is really true that justice and mercy to the poor is not optional for a Christian and is in fact the inevitable sign of justifying faith, it is hard to believe that the church is not to reflect this duty corporately in some way. But we do not have to go on surmise and inference here.

God gave Israel many laws of social responsibility that were to be carried out corporately. The covenant community was obligated to give to the poor member until his need was gone (Deut 15:8–10). Tithes went to the poor (Deut 14:28–29). The poor were not to be given simply a “handout,” but tools, grain (Deut 15:12–15), and land (Lev 25) so that they could become productive and self-sufficient. Later, the prophets condemned Israel's insensitivity to the poor as covenant-breaking. They taught that materialism and ignoring the poor are sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6–7). Mercy to the poor is an evidence of true heart-commitment to God (Isa 1:10–17; 58:6–7; Amos 4:1–6; 5:21–24). The great accumulation of wealth, “adding of house to house and field to field till no space is left” (Isa 5:8–9), even though it is by legal means, may be sinful if the rich are proud and callous toward the poor (Isa 3:16–26; Amos 6:4–7). The seventy-year exile itself was a punishment for the unobserved Sabbath and jubilee years (2 Chron 36:20–21). In these years the well-to-do were to cancel debts, but the wealthy refused to do this.

²⁵ For the case that the world will be renewed rather than replaced, see Douglas J. Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 449–88; and Herman Bavinck, “The Renewal of Creation,” chap. 18 in *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:715–30.

²⁶ E.g., “And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (Deut 10:19).

²⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 7; Downers Grove: IVP, 2001).

But that was Israel. What about the church? The church reflects the social righteousness of the old covenant community, but with the greater vigor and power of the new age. Christians too are called are to open their hand to the needy as far as there is need (1 John 3:16–17; cf. Deut 15:7–8). Within the church, wealth is to be shared very generously between rich and poor (2 Cor 8:13–15; cf. Lev 25). Following the prophets, the apostles teach that true faith will inevitably show itself through deeds of mercy (Jas 2:1–23). Materialism is still a grievous sin (Jas 5:1–6; 1 Tim 6:17–19). Not only do individual believers have these responsibilities, but a special class of officers—deacons—is established to coordinate the church’s ministry of mercy. We should not be surprised then that the first two sets of church leaders are word-leaders (apostles) and deed-leaders (the *diakonoï* of Acts 6). By the time of Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3, officers oversee word-ministry (elders) and deed-ministry (deacons). This is because the ministry gifts of Jesus have come to us (Eph 4:7–12). The Body of Christ gets both speaking gifts and *diakonia* gifts (1 Pet 4:10). All this shows that the ministry of mercy is a required, mandated work of the church just as is the ministry of the word and discipline (cf. Rom 15:23–29). Second Cor 8:13–14 and Gal 2:10 show actual case studies of corporate *diakonia*, in which the church gives offerings and relief to the poor (administered by those appointed by the church). So not only individuals but the church as a body is to be involved in caring for and giving to the poor.

Other issues remain. Even if it is recognized that the congregation (as well as individuals) are to give to the poor, the vast majority of the references to such ministry are within the Christian community—caring for believers. Some conclude that while individual Christians should be involved in caring for all kinds of poor people, the church should confine its ministry to the poor only within the church. Again, there are many texts that militate against this view. Both Israel (Lev 19:33–34) and the new covenant community (Heb 13:2; 1 Tim 5:10) are directed to show hospitality to strangers and aliens, those not of the believing community. The main thrust of Jesus’ famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is that the ministry of mercy should not be confined to the covenant community, but should also be extended to those outside. Also, Jesus in Luke 6:32–36 urges his disciples to do deed-ministry to the ungrateful and wicked because that is the pattern of the common grace of God, who makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine on the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). This final exhortation cannot be read to mean that we give to anyone who asks, even if the gift would make it easy for them to sin. Nevertheless, these texts clearly warn the church against restricting its mercy ministry only to its own community.

Perhaps the most useful passage is the brief statement by Paul in Gal 6:10 (written to be read to a church as a body, not just as individuals), which explicitly sets up a prioritized list for ministering to practical and material needs. First of all, we are to minister to “the household of faith” and secondly, “*all* people” without regard to distinctions of ethnicity, nationality, or belief.

How?

But what about the relationship of ministry to the poor to the ministry of evangelism and the preaching of the gospel?

(1) Evangelism is distinct.

The modernist church of the early twentieth century reduced gospel ministry to social ethics and social action. The quaint saying “preach the gospel; use words if necessary” fits in with this idea that the gospel is basically “a way of life” and that gospel ministry is “making a better world.” But this not only contradicts the Bible’s teaching that the gospel must be verbally proclaimed and responded to in repentance and faith. It essentially denies the gospel of *grace* through God’s saving acts in history and

replaces it with good works and moral improvement. In the social gospel, evangelism simply disappears. Loving the poor *is* “communicating the good news.” In response to this, the conservative church is deeply suspicious of too much emphasis on ministry to the poor. They hear many in the “Emerging Church” talking about doing justice and working for peace as the main way we do apologetics and evangelize people. Considering the disaster of modernist, liberal theology, the suspicion is warranted. But as I argue above, conservative evangelical preaching consequently does not give the emphasis to the poor that we have in the Bible itself. Why? It is the legacy of the social gospel. Both those who accepted and rejected the social gospel distorted the Bible’s emphasis on the poor (though in different ways).

In light of the biblical material, many today are seeking for some sort of balance. On the one hand, some say that while both are necessary, social concern is the means to the end of evangelism. That is, we should do mercy and justice only because and as it helps us bring people to faith in Christ.²⁸ This does not seem to fit in with Jesus’ Good Samaritan parable, which calls us to care even for those who are “ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:35). The means-to-an-end view opens Christians to the charge of manipulation. Instead of truly loving people freely, we are helping them only to help ourselves and increase our own numbers. One of the great ironies of this approach is that it undermines itself. I have known many evangelicals who evaluate mercy ministries by the number of converts or church attenders/members it produces. The sociologist Robert Putnam describes such church-based initiatives as church-centred *bonding* (or exclusive) social capital, as opposed to community-centred *bridging* (or inclusive) social capital.²⁹ That is, the ministry of these kinds of churches is not really designed to build up the neighbors but only to expand the church. But this approach is perceived as selfish and tribal by the people around the church, and so they don’t glorify God (Matt 5:13–16) because they don’t see us expressing God’s sacrificial, unconditional grace. They see us giving only where we get something in return (Luke 6:32–35).

On the other hand, others such as John Stott see evangelism and social concern as equal partners:

[S]ocial action is *a partner of evangelism*. As partners the two belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself.³⁰

This seems to detach ministry too much from the ministry of the Word. It opens the possibility of it standing on its own without the preaching of the gospel. I propose something else, an asymmetrical, inseparable relationship.

(2) Evangelism is more basic than ministry to the poor.

Evangelism has to be seen as the “leading edge” of a church’s ministry in the world. It must be given a priority in the church’s ministry. It stands to reason that, while saving a lost soul and feeding a hungry stomach are both acts of love, one has an infinitely greater effect than the other. In 2 Cor 4:16–18, Paul speaks of the importance of strengthening the “inner man” even as the outer, physical nature is aging

²⁸ See C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 101–4.

²⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22–24.

³⁰ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now!* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 27.

and decaying. Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being. This is true, not because the “spiritual” is more important than the physical (we must be careful not to fall into a Greek-style dualism!), but because the eternal is more important than the temporal (Matt 11:1–6; John 17:18; 1 John 3:17–18).

(3) But ministry to the poor is inseparably connected to evangelism.

We all know the dictum: “we are saved by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.” Faith is what saves us, and yet faith is inseparably connected with good works. We saw in Jas 2 that this is also the case with the gospel of justification by faith and mercy to the poor. The gospel of justification has the priority; it is what saves us. But just as good works are inseparable from faith in the life of the believer, so caring for the poor is inseparable from the work of evangelism and the ministry of the Word. In Jesus’ ministry, healing the sick and feeding the hungry was inseparable from evangelism (John 9:1–7, 35–41). His miracles were not simply naked displays of power designed to prove his supernatural status, but were signs of the coming kingdom (Matt 11:2–5.)

The renewal of Christ’s salvation ultimately includes a renewed universe. In the meantime, there is no part of our existence that is untouched by His blessing. Christ’s miracles were miracles of the kingdom, performed as signs of what the kingdom means. . . .

His blessing was pronounced upon the poor, the afflicted, the burdened and heavy-laden who came to Him and believed in Him. . . .

The miraculous signs that attested Jesus’ deity and authenticated the witness of those who transmitted the gospel to the church are not continued, for their purpose is fulfilled. But the pattern of the kingdom that was revealed through those signs must continue in the church. We cannot be faithful to the words of Jesus if our deeds do not reflect the compassion of His ministry. Kingdom evangelism is therefore holistic as it transmits by word and deed the promise of Christ for body and soul as well as the demand of Christ for body and soul.³¹

Several times Acts makes a very close connection between economic sharing of possessions with those in need and the multiplication of converts through the preaching of the Word. The descent of the Holy Spirit and an explosive growth in numbers (Acts 2:41) is connected to radical sharing with the needy (2:44–45). Acts 4 is a recapitulation: after the filling of the Spirit, the economic sharing of the people inside the church accompanies the preaching of the resurrection with great power (4:32–35). After the ministry of *diakonia* is more firmly established, Luke adds, “so the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (6:7). Luke is again pointing out the extremely close connection between deed-ministry and word-ministry. The practical actions of Christians for people in need demonstrated the truth and power of the gospel. Acts of mercy and justice are visible to non-believers and can lead men to glorify God (Matt 5:13–16). The Roman emperor Julian the Apostate noted that Christians were remarkably benevolent to strangers, “The impious Galileans [i.e., Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”³²

³¹ Edmund P. Clowney, “Kingdom Evangelism,” in *The Pastor-Evangelist: Preacher, Model, and Mobilizer for Church Growth* (ed. Roger S. Greenway; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 22.

³² Quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 84.

(4) Inseparable does not mean a rigid, temporal order.

What do we mean by “inseparable”? Ministry to the poor may precede the sharing of the gospel as in Jesus’ ministry to the blind man. Though the deed-ministry led to the blind man’s spiritual illumination, there is no indication that Jesus gave the aid conditionally. He did not press him to believe as he healed him; he just told him to “go and wash” (John 9:7). Even so when Jesus spoke of giving money and clothing to those who ask, he insisted that we should give without expecting anything in return (Luke 6:32–35). We should not give aid only because the person is open to the gospel, nor should we withdraw it if he or she does not become spiritually receptive. However, it should always be clear that the motivation for our aid is our Christian faith, and pains should be taken to find non-artificial and non-exploitative ways to keep ministries of the Word and gatherings for teaching and fellowship closely connected to ministries of aid.

Summary

Jesus calls Christians to be “witnesses,” to evangelize others, but also to be deeply concerned for the poor. He calls his disciples *both* to “gospel-messaging” (urging everyone to believe the gospel) *and* to “gospel-neighboring” (sacrificially meeting the needs of those around them whether they believe or not! The two absolutely go together.

1. They go together theologically. The resurrection shows us that God not only *created both* body and spirit but will also *redeem* both body and spirit. The salvation Jesus will eventually bring in its fullness will include liberation from *all* the effects of sin—not only spiritual but physical and material as well. Jesus came both preaching the Word and healing and feeding.

2. They go together practically. We must be ever wary of collapsing evangelism into deed ministry as the social gospel did, but loving deeds are an irreplaceable witness to the power and nature of God’s grace, an irreplaceable testimony to the truth of the gospel.

2. Some Thoughts on the Practice of This Ministry

I don’t think that this essay is the place to lay out all the details of what ministry to the poor looks like in practice.³³ But there are two practical balances I would urge churches to strike in their ministry to the poor.

A Balance of Analysis: Justice and Mercy

It is one thing to want to help the poor. It is another thing to go about it wisely. It is extremely easy to become involved in the life of a poor family and make things worse rather than better. One of the main reasons this happens so often is because of the two unbiblical political ideologies and reductionisms that reign in our culture today. Conservatives, in general, see poverty as caused by personal irresponsibility. Liberals, in general, see poverty as caused by unjust social systems; poor individuals have no ability to escape them.

The Bible moves back and forth in calling ministry to the poor sometimes “justice” and sometimes “service” (*diakonia*) or mercy. Perhaps the most famous biblical appeal to help the poor is the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which this aid is called “mercy” (Luke 10:37). But elsewhere, sharing food, shelter, and other basic resources with those who have fewer of them (Isa 58:6–10; cf. Lev 19:13, Jer

³³ Editor’s note: Cf. Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997).

22:13) is called “doing justice.” To fail to share is considered not simply a failure to be compassionate, but also a failure to be fair.

I think that the reason for this usage of both the terms “justice” and “mercy” is that the biblical explanation of the causes of poverty is much more complex than our current ideologies.³⁴ The wisdom literature provides a remarkably balanced and nuanced view of the “root causes” of poverty. In Proverbs we see the familiar statements to the effect that “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Prov 14:23). And yet we are also told, “A poor man’s field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away” (Prov 13:23). Both personal and social, systemic factors can lead to poverty.

Actually, the Bible reveals at least three causal factors for poverty.

1. *Injustice and oppression*: This refers to any unjust social condition or treatment that keeps a person in poverty (Ps 82:1–8; Prov 14:31; Exod 22:21–27). The main Hebrew word for “the poor” in the Old Testament means “the wrongfully oppressed.” Examples of oppression in the Bible include social systems weighted in favor of the powerful (Lev 19:15), high-interest loans (Exod 22:25–27), and unjustly low wages (Eph 6:8–9; Jas 5:4).

2. *Circumstantial calamity*: This refers to any natural disaster or circumstance that brings or keeps a person in poverty. The Scripture is filled with examples such as famines (Gen 47), disabling injury, floods, and fires.

3. *Personal failure*: Poverty can also be caused by one’s own personal sins and failures, such as indolence (Prov 6:6–7) and other problems with self-discipline (Prov 23:21).

These three factors are intertwined. They do not usually produce separate “categories” of poverty (except in acute situations, such as a hurricane that leaves people homeless and in need of immediate short-term material care). Rather, the three factors are usually interactively present. For example, a person raised in an ethnic/economic ghetto (factor #1) is likely to have poor health (factor #2) and also learn many habits from their community that do not fit with material/social progress (factor #3).

Yet factor #3 can be seen as a version of factor #1. For example, the failure of a child’s parents to read to them, nurture them, or teach them habits of honesty, diligence, and delayed gratification is factor #3 (personal irresponsibility) for the adults but factor #1 (injustice) for the children. Inner-city children, through no fault of their own, may grow up with vastly inferior schooling and with an overall environment extremely detrimental to learning. Conservatives may argue that this is the parents’ fault or the “culture’s” fault while liberals see it as a failure of government and/or the fruit of systemic racism. But no one argues that it is the *children’s* fault! Of course, it is possible for youth born into poverty to break out of it, but it takes many times more fortitude, independence, creativity, and courage simply to go to college and get a job than it does for any child born into a middle-class world. In short, some children grow up with about a two-hundred-times better opportunity for academic and economic success than others do. (You can’t ask an illiterate eight-year-old—soon to be an illiterate seventeen-year-old—to “pull himself up by his bootstraps”!) Why does this situation exist? It is part of the deep injustice of our world. The problem is simply an unjust distribution of opportunity and resources.

In summary, many “conservatives” are motivated to help the poor mainly by compassion. This may come from a belief that poverty is mainly a matter of individual irresponsibility. It misses the fact that the “haves” have what they have to a great degree because of unjust distribution of opportunities and resources at birth. If we have the world’s goods, they are ultimately a gift. If we were born in other circumstances, we could easily be very poor through no fault of our own. To fail to share what you have

³⁴ Cf. D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 51–59, which discusses six “Kinds of Poverty.”

is not just uncompassionate but unfair, unjust. On the other hand, many “liberals” are motivated to help the poor mainly out of a sense of indignation and aborted justice. This misses the fact that individual responsibility and transformation has a great deal to do with escape from poverty. Poverty is seen strictly in terms of structural inequities. While the conservative “compassion only” motivation leads to paternalism and patronizing, the liberal “justice only” motivation leads to great anger and rancor.

Both views, ironically, become self-righteous. One tends to blame the poor for everything, the other to blame the rich for everything. One over-emphasizes individual responsibility, the other under-emphasizes it. A balanced motivation arises from a heart touched by grace, which has lost its superiority-feelings toward any particular class of people. Let’s keep something very clear: it is the gospel that motivates us to act *both* in mercy *and* in justice. God tells Israel, “The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev 19:34). The Israelites had been “aliens” and oppressed slaves in Egypt. They did not have the ability to free themselves—God liberated them by his grace and power. Now they are to treat all people with less power or fewer assets as neighbors, doing love and justice to them. So the basis for “doing justice” is salvation by grace!

We said at the beginning of this section that this balance of mercy and justice—of seeing both the personal and social aspects and causes of poverty—is necessary for a church’s ministry to the poor to be *wise*. A conservative ideology will be far too impatient and probably harsh with a poor family and won’t be cognizant of the more invisible social-cultural factors contributing to the problems. A liberal ideology will not put enough emphasis on repentance and personal change.

A Division of Labor: Individual and Church

The church’s gospel ministry includes *both* evangelizing non-believers *and* shaping every area of believers’ lives with the gospel, but that doesn’t mean that the church as an institution under its elders is to carry out corporately all the activity that we equip our members to do. For example, while the church should disciple its members who are film-makers so that their cinematic art will be profoundly influenced by the gospel, the church should not operate a film production company. Here is where Abraham Kuyper’s “sphere sovereignty” can be of some help (though I recognize its limits and problems). Kuyper rightly insists that the church *qua* church is to preach the gospel (evangelize and disciple), worship and observe the sacraments, and engage in church discipline. In these activities it is producing members who will engage in art, science, education, journalism, film-making, business, and so on. But the church itself should not itself engage in these enterprises. Kuyper would, for example, not even allow a local congregation to operate a Christian school, since he believed that the education of children belonged to the family, not to the church.

With this in mind, the church’s ministry to the poor makes great sense as a corporate vehicle for Christians to fulfill their biblical duty to the poor, as a corporate witness to the community of Christ’s transforming love, and as an important “plausibility structure” for the preaching of the gospel. However, the church should recognize different “levels” of ministry to the poor and should know its limits.

1. *Relief*: This is direct aid to meet physical/material/social needs. Common relief ministries are temporary shelter for the homeless, food and clothing services for people in dire need, medical services, crisis counseling, and so on. A more active form of relief is “advocacy,” in which people in need are given active assistance to get legal aid, help them find housing, and find other kinds of aid. Relief programs alone can create patterns of dependency.

2. *Development*: This is what is needed is to bring a person or community to self-sufficiency. In the OT, when a slave's debt was erased and he was released, God directed that his former master send him out with grain, tools, and resources for a new, self-sufficient economic life (Deut 15:13–14). "Development" for an individual includes education, job creation, and training. But development for a neighborhood or community means reinvesting social and financial capital into a social system—housing development and home ownership, other capital investments, and so on.

3. *Reform*: Social reform moves beyond relief of immediate needs and dependency and seeks to change social conditions and structures that aggravate or cause that dependency. Job tells us that he not only clothed the naked, but he "broke the fangs of the wicked and made them drop their victims" (Job 29:17). The prophets denounced unfair wages (Jer 22:13), corrupt business practices (Amos 8:2, 6), legal systems weighted in favor of the rich and influential (Lev 19:15; Deut 24:17), and a system of lending capital that gouges the person of modest means (Exod 22:25–27; Lev 19:35–37; 25:37). Daniel calls a pagan government to account for its lack of mercy to the poor (Dan 4:27). This means that Christians should also work for a particular community to get better police protection, more just and fair banking practices, zoning practices, and better laws.

But should the church be doing reform or even development? For theological and practical reasons, the answer is, in general, that the institutional church should concentrate on the first and part of the second level—on relief and some individual development. When it comes to the second and third level, on community development, social reform, and the addressing of social structures, believers should work through associations and organizations rather than through the local church. It is not easy to dogmatically draw lines here. Different social and cultural conditions can affect how directly the church is involved in addressing issues of justice. As we look back on it now, we applaud white-Anglo churches that preached against and worked against the evils of African slavery in America. So, too, the African-American church, under the extreme conditions of slavery and near-slavery, took on all three levels of ministry to the poor, and this continues to this day.

As a general rule, however, I believe that the church should be involved in the first of these, but voluntary associations, organizations, and ministries should be organized to do the second and the third. Why?

1. Many would argue that the second and third levels are too expensive and would take away financial resources from the ministry of the Word.

2. Others say that they are too political and would require that the congregation be too allied with particular civil magistrates and political parties in ways that would compromise the church.

3. Others say that the second and third levels are too complex and that it is not within the skill-set or mandate of the elders of the church to manage them; their job is the ministry of the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:1–7).

All of these arguments have some merit but would need to be nuanced and worked out in order to do justice to my thesis. I cannot here give that process the time and space it would require. I would observe only that most of the churches in the U.S. who are deeply involved in caring for the poor have found it wisest to spin off non-profit corporations to do community development and reform of social structures, rather than seek to do them directly through the local congregation under the elders.

3. Jesus, the Poor Man

Proverbs tells us that God identifies with the poor. "If you do it to the poor, you do it to me." Matt 25 says the same thing. I showed above that this means that on judgment day God will be able to

judge a person's heart attitude toward *him* by the person's heart-attitude toward the poor. It also means, however, something more profound.

In Proverbs and Matt 25, God identifies with the poor symbolically. But in the incarnation and death of Jesus, see God identifies with the poor and marginal literally. Jesus was born in a feeding trough. At his circumcision Jesus' family offered what was required of the poor (Luke 2:24). He said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). At the end of his life, he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, spent his last evening in a borrowed room, and when he died, he was laid in a borrowed tomb. They cast lots for his only possession, his robe, for there on the cross he was stripped of everything.

All this gives new meaning to the question: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison?" The answer is—*on the cross*, where he died amidst the thieves, among the marginalized. No wonder Paul could say that once you see Jesus becoming poor for us, you will never look at the poor the same way again.

