

FOR THE SAKE OF HIS NAME

CH.3—"The Task of the Great Commission II: The Method of Discipleship"

John Stott: "Mission is our human response to the divine commission. It is the whole Christian lifestyle, including both evangelism and social responsibility" (p.47)... "All authentic mission is incarnational mission. It demands identification without loss of identity...Incarnational mission, whether evangelistic or social or both, necessitates a costly identification with people in their actual situations" (pp. 51, 50).

--Making disciples begins with proclaiming the gospel (Rom 10:13-17; 1 Cor 1:17-2:5)

--Making disciples is not the outcome of social activity (contra "Social Responsibility Report" (pp.48-49))

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"REGAINING OUR FOCUS: A RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL ACTION TREND IN EVANGELICAL MISSIONS"

Joel James, D.Min., Pastor at Grace Fellowship, Pretoria South Africa

Brian Biedebach, D.Min., Pastor at International Fellowship Bible Church, Lilongwe Malawi

8 biblical problems with the social action model of the church and missions:

1. A Redefinition of the Gospel

Social justice advocates are fond of describing the gospel in terms of human flourishing.

The incarnation, they say, was about Christ bringing *shalom* or general well-being to the human race. Many evangelicals (without turning away from substitutionary atonement) have adopted this notion enthusiastically: if the gospel is about human flourishing, then any Christian effort that increases that flourishing is gospel ministry. On that basis, building a hospital or an orphanage is just as much a fulfillment of the Great Commission as church planting.

2. An Overly Realized Eschatology

An idealistic desire to bring the kingdom now often plays a role in the social action vision of the church. Advocates of social justice argue that Christ came to banish the results of the Fall; therefore, "kingdom work" includes anything in the current age that diminishes or reverses those results and promotes the good of individuals and society. In other words, Christ's kingdom is brought into existence through the general reduction of evil and injustice in society just as much as through gospel proclamation...

3. A Preference for Indirect Gospel Ministry over Direct Gospel Ministry

Often lurking behind the indirect approach is the notion that the church must first portray the gospel by means of social justice before it can preach the gospel. This belief has no basis in Acts or the Epistles. The apostle Paul did not say that God was well pleased to save sinners through the foolishness of the gospel *merced*, but rather through the foolishness of the message *preached* (1 Cor 1:21).

After noting that studies have shown that Christians spend about five times more money on poverty relief projects than on evangelism and church planting, D. A. Carson warns that the gospel is too often the missing component in “holistic” or indirect gospel ministry:

At one time, “holistic ministry” was an expression intended to move Christians beyond proclamation to include deeds of mercy. Increasingly, however, “holistic ministry” refers to deeds of mercy without any proclamation of the gospel—and that is not holistic. It is not even halfistic, since the deeds of mercy are not the gospel. . . . Judging by the distribution of American mission dollars, the biggest hole in our gospel is the gospel itself.¹

Our concern, however, is that the Western church is confusing the sending of medical missionaries (for example) with its greater priority of sending missionaries who focus directly on carrying out the Great Commission. Direct gospel ministry must always take both theoretical and actual priority over social relief missions.

4. The New Pragmatism

After centuries of general acceptance in American and Western European culture, evangelicals today are reeling due to the public scorn being heaped on them by an increasingly hostile world. The radicals of the 1960s have grown up and are now running the culture, and as a result, the Bible’s exclusive and authoritative message is openly detested. Shocked that their fellow citizens are labeling them unloving and intolerant, and naively hoping to regain the cultural acceptance of a generation past, many evangelicals are hitching their wagon to the rising star of social involvement. Social action is safe. It avoids the scandal of the gospel. It allows churches to be active and to be accepted by the world.

5. Adopting the Agendas of Political Correctness

Political correctness is today’s secular piety. But the piety of political correctness does not include things like honesty, sexual purity, and humility. Instead, it values multi-culturalism, economic socialism, a false civility toward philosophical opponents, uplifting the oppressed, enfranchising the disenfranchised, and so on. In postmodern piety, personal sin is acceptable; social injustice is definitely taboo.

6. Defective Hermeneutics

The arguments used to promote a social justice philosophy of the church and missions are often based on transparently deficient hermeneutics...

- Passages about mercy within the church are often interpreted as if they were about social action projects outside the church.
- The biblical word justice is wrongly defined and its meaning is confusingly intermingled with the word generosity.
- The words oppression and poverty are equated.
- When interpreting Old Testament passages about social justice, an appropriate distinction between Israel and the church is not maintained.

¹ D.A. Carson, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-hole-in-the-gospel/>. Accessed 4/24/2026.

- God's promise to Abraham ("in you all the families of the earth will be blessed," Gen 12:3) is interpreted as a commission to the church to work for the social betterment of the world.
- The fact that Solomon and Job were civil leaders in their societies (with corresponding social responsibilities and powers) is not given proper weight when interpreting and applying passages about their social justice activities.
- Biblical references to poverty are interpreted as if they all referred to material poverty, and not, on occasion, to spiritual poverty.
- Passages that show Jesus ministered to all social classes are ignored.
- Passages such as Gal 6:10 ("Let us do good to all people") are emphasized as if by position and wording they were intended to play the same defining role in the church as Jesus' commission in Matthew 28:18-20.
- Biblical instructions about generosity are interpreted to mean that Christians must strive to create financial equality between all individuals and groups.

7. A Misunderstanding of Jesus' Ministry and Miracles

Jesus' miracles of healing and of feeding the multitudes were genuine acts of compassion, revealing His power over sickness, nature, and even death. In short, they were a sneak preview of the power Jesus will exercise when He comes in the fullness of His kingdom. In light of Jesus' compassion, we believe that it is perfectly appropriate for medical doctors to make mission trips to Ethiopia or for churches to send hurricane relief to Haiti. Those are good things and have a legitimate and valuable place in the body of Christ. Interestingly, however, Jesus' miracles are never held up as motivation for the church to focus on social action—as if the church were to continue Jesus' program of miraculous social relief by non-miraculous means. In fact, Jesus repeatedly said that the purpose of His miracles was something else: to declare that He was the unique God-sent Messiah (John 5:36, 10:24-25; compare Mark 1:38, 10:45).

8. A Willful Blindness to How the Early Church Fulfilled Jesus' Commission

The Book of Acts reveals that the apostles and the early church fulfilled Jesus' instruction with an astonishing single-mindedness of purpose, preaching the Word of God for the salvation of sinners and the edification of the saints. Luke's summary of Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, and Derbe shows that evangelism for the purpose of starting a church and subsequent leadership training were unequivocally the focus of the early church's missionary labors-- (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 4:31, 33; 5:42; 6:7; 8:4; 10:42-43; 11:19; 12:24; 13:38, 46; 14:21; 17:1-3; 18:9-11; 19:9-10, 20; 28:30-31)...

What about the apostles' social action endeavors? In fact, the only church-organized relief projects mentioned in Acts and the Epistles took place within the church, including the various financial gifts sent by the Greek churches to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30; Rom 15:25-26; Gal 2:10) and widow care (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim 5:3-16).^{51, 52} In short, the deacons of Acts 6 were ministers to the church, not missionaries to the world. And even when it came to these valuable intra-church relief efforts, the apostles deliberately avoided becoming personally enmeshed in the demands and distractions of organizing them (e.g., Acts 6:2-4; 1 Cor 16:2).