

# **Semănătorul (The Sower)**

## **The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research**

### **Volume 3, Number 2.**

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel University of Oradea, and International Contributors, April 2023.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

## **Social Ministry and Its Effects on Evangelistic Preaching**

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### **Abstract**

Social issues present an opportunity for Christians to perform social ministry to persons beset by the consequences of sin—whether caused by their own doing or their social surroundings. Social ministry can beneficially undergird evangelism and evangelistic preaching when the social ministry is conducted in the proper manner. This article will discuss the effects of social ministry on evangelistic preaching. The first part will define social ministry and how it contrasts with social action. The scope of this article will focus on social ministry while mentioning social action as a separate function whose aims are distinct from social ministry. The second part of this article will present the application of social ministry in the evangelistic enterprise. This section will discuss some of the biblical principles behind social ministries and how it affects evangelism in positive and negative ways. The last part of this article will discuss some theological and practical issues that affect evangelistic preaching.

**Key Words:** Social ministry, social activism, the social gospel movement, gospel proclamation, Biblical exposition.

### **Introduction**

Social issues are increasingly becoming a concern among many in the contemporary culture. Social issues such as poverty, crime, and unemployment invoke concern and compassion for those interested in the welfare of society. People enthusiastic about certain social issues typically express their passion through various means of social action. Those most passionate about a social cause usually advocate for that cause in some form of activism.

The reasons for growing concerns about social problems vary. One of the main reasons is the prominence of social problems and their negative consequences upon the welfare of society. The prevalence of the media culture and the ease of

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communications make social problems more visible. In a contemporary society where mobility, awareness, and human interaction is unprecedented, social problems are not easy to overlook. Evangelical Christians who do evangelistic outreach or any ministry that interacts with people will recognize the most obvious social problems that people are experiencing.

Social issues matter in designing strategies for effective evangelism. The mission strategist or evangelist should consider these issues since the ethos in which they minister is likely affected by one or more social problems. A strong likelihood exists that the people being evangelized are impacted by social problems. The possibility also exists that persons being evangelized might be advocates or activists for a particular social cause. The evangelist who overlooks these possibilities misses an opportunity to relate to the people in an understanding way and, thus, fails to maximize the evangelistic moment.

### **Clarifications from an evangelical perspective**

#### **Definitions**

The terminology used to describe the various means of social engagement can vary according to perspective and experience. The most fundamental term that needs clarification is *social issues* or *social problems*. William Pinson, former professor of Christian Ethics at Southwestern Seminary, defined social issues as, “significant subjects and problems in society.”<sup>2</sup> Examples of social issues include crime, unemployment, divorce, alcohol and drug abuse, and racism. Social issues are problems that afflict individuals and adversely impact the society of which individuals are a vital part. Every person can relate to social issues since they are quite prominent in a fallen world.

The two common terms used to describe social engagement are *social ministry* and *social action*. Social ministry involves charitable acts of kindness to meet individual and immediate needs. Delos Miles, former Professor of Evangelism at Southeastern Seminary, described social ministry as “deeds of love and mercy.”<sup>3</sup> Miles referred to such deeds as those in Matthew 25:31-16 which includes “feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and the prisoners.”<sup>4</sup> Pinson offered a similar definition of social ministry as “an effort to help persons in special need and those

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<sup>2</sup>William M. Pinson, Jr., *Applying the Gospel: Suggestions for Christian Social Action in a Local Church* (Nasville: Broadman, 1975), 14.

<sup>3</sup>Delos Miles, *Evangelism and Social Involvement* (Nashville: Broadman, 1986), 16.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

hurt by adverse social conditions, such as the poor, the neglected child, the sick, or the aging.”<sup>5</sup> Social ministry seeks to address social problems by providing immediate relief to the affected persons. Social ministry does not necessarily deal with the systems or structures that attribute to social problems.

Another important term used to describe social engagement is *social action*. Social action involves the attempt to change social conditions or structures that cause social problems. Miles described Christian social action as “self-conscious attempts to change sinful social structures.”<sup>6</sup> Social action can also be referred to as *social activism*. Social activism involves advocacy for a particular social issue. This advocacy often requires involvement in the political process to bring about desired change.

Social ministry differs from social action (or activism) in the scope of involvement and the desired changes. The level of involvement in social ministry is hands-on and personal interaction with the person or persons in need. Social ministry seeks to help the hurting rather than deal with social causes of their hurt.<sup>7</sup> The level of involvement in social action is broader which often requires political means to influence public policy. Social action is “distinguished from social ministry in that it is directed primarily to social causes of the human hurt rather than to persons who are hurt.”<sup>8</sup> Social ministry seeks individual change whereas social action seeks institutional change.

## Debate

Many Christians and churches believe that social ministry is necessary in showing the love of Christ toward the needy. A general consensus exists among Christians of various persuasions who agree on the necessity of Christian social ministry. Most churches are involved in social ministry to some extent.<sup>9</sup>

The point of disagreement among Christians typically occurs over the appropriateness and pragmatism of social action. Is there a biblical mandate to change social structures? Will changing social structures accomplish the proper end for an orderly and godly society? Strong convictions exist on each side of this debate. Recent church history includes the intense debate during the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy of the early twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup>Pinson, *Applying the Gospel*, 14.

<sup>6</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 16.

<sup>7</sup>Pinson, *Applying the Gospel*, 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 17.

At the center of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy is the essence of the social gospel. The social issues of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries caused by immigration, urbanization, and industrialization provoked some Christians to seek more active social engagement to improve these declining conditions. The call for social activism among Christian evangelicals became more than a matter of compassionate concern and practical engagement. Social gospel proponents framed a theological system to promote and give credence for making social action the priority of the church. Some theologians sought to make social concerns and activism a gospel issue. The resulting theological system became known as the social gospel.

The social gospel movement originated from strongly-held beliefs that the church's primary mission was to bring God's kingdom to earth through social action. One of the major figures who spearheaded the social gospel movement was Walter Rauschenbusch—a Baptist in New York. Rauschenbusch, straightforward in his theology of social reconstruction as the primary mission of the church, stated that, "the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God."<sup>10</sup> The social gospel was the subject of intense debate between liberals who expanded the meaning of the gospel and conservatives who deemed the social gospel as another gospel.

While the social gospel represented an aberrant interpretation of the gospel, some Christians affirmed the idea of some level of social engagement as responsible Christian living. They saw an inseparable link between the Christian faith and social action. They regarded a Christian faith without works as an impossibility. Seifert and Clinebell declared their view of religion as "a way of life or a quality of man's being and action, rather than a separate segment walled off from the rest of existence."<sup>11</sup>

Some Christians believed that the church had the moral responsibility to lead in addressing the social crises of modern culture. They claimed that the church should assert moral leadership in addressing societal ills. Charles Reynolds Brown, writing from a Congregationalist background during the early 1900's, wrote:

Ministers of religion are sent out to be fishers of men. But when they use exclusively these methods which lay the sole or even the main emphasis upon

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<sup>10</sup>Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crises* (New York: McMillan, 1907), xiii.

<sup>11</sup>Harvey Seifert and Howard J. Clinebell. *Personal Growth and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 27.

individual regeneration, leaving social problems to be worked out sometime, somewhere, quite apart from the inspiration and guidance of the Christian Church, I think you will bear me witness that in these days they do not land the fish to any considerable extent; and in certain classes of society they do not land them at all.<sup>12</sup>

Brown's stance on social responsibility attributed the church's failure at its mission to their neglect to actively engage social issues. Such attitude often poses two issues for the church. First, it places the power of salvation plainly upon their strategy and ability to meet social needs. Such presumption usurps the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit in His unique role in calling and effectively regenerating of the unbeliever (Titus 3:5). Secondly, this attitude can place undue blame and guilt upon Christians when there is no fruit borne in evangelism. The believer, as a result, often resorts to seeking more sophisticated strategy in an attempt to draw unbelievers into the faith.

Although Christians disagreed on the church's responsibility for social action, many agreed to individual efforts to social action "as members of nonchurch or parachurch organizations."<sup>13</sup> The parachurch movement has been very prominent in organizing and mobilizing for the purpose of addressing social needs.

### **Applications for evangelistic practices**

Before delving into the implications of social ministry on evangelistic preaching, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between social ministry and evangelism. In what ways has social ministry either helped or hurt evangelism? The following sections will also look at some biblical principles behind social ministries and its connection with evangelism. Since social ministry can play a key role in evangelism, two sections will present some concerns and effective models.

#### **Biblical Principles**

The Bible contains principles from which Christians draw for proving the relationship between evangelism and social involvement. Delos Miles in his book *Evangelism and Social Involvement* described six "interfaces" in the Bible how evangelism and social involvement fit together.<sup>14</sup> A few of them are worth mentioning.

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<sup>12</sup>Charles Reynolds Brown, *The Social Message of the Modern Pulpit* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 11.

<sup>13</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 17.

<sup>14</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 27-37.

Miles noted the “cultural mandate” in Genesis 1:26-31 and the “evangelistic mandate” in Matthew 28:16-20 (the “Great Commission”). Miles stated these mandates continue to apply to Christians today. Miles went further and declared that one can see the cultural mandate in the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:37-40—to love God and neighbor as self. The Great Commission as the evangelistic mandate and the Great Commandment as the ethical and social mandate work together and are inseparable. These mandates, per Miles, are “on par with each other. Neither one supersedes [*sic*] or exhausts or explains the other.”<sup>15</sup>

Many theologians also saw a biblical connection between evangelism and social concerns in the healing ministry of Jesus as recording the Gospels. This perhaps represents the strongest biblical proof for relating social ministry to evangelism. The Gospel accounts where Jesus went about doing good and preaching give credence to social ministry as an important aspect of evangelism. Jesus, during His itinerate ministry, went about “preaching the gospel and healing everywhere” (Luke 9:6). A relationship between the Jesus’ miracles and the gospel is evident when John stated that these miracles—which included many healings and meeting other physical needs—were written for evangelistic purposes (John 20:31).

An important biblical text to consider in the New Testament is the story when Jesus fed the 5,000 men plus women and children. This is only miracle that Jesus performed that is recorded in all four Gospels. Jesus had been preaching to the people for a long period of time and the people had become hungry. Jesus posed a question to the disciples on how to address the people’s physical need. Seeing they had nothing to help, the disciples recommended that Jesus send the people away. Jesus responded that the disciples not send the people away, but instead told them, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat” (Matthew 14:16). This text showed a strong correlation between social ministry and evangelism.

Another biblical passage that some theologians use to make the social concern and evangelistic relationship is Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus declared:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

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<sup>15</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 28.

Theologians who have liberally interpreted this text saw Jesus' ministry as having primarily a social purpose. Miles stated that "His targets were the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Jesus saw Himself as God's instrument for liberation."<sup>16</sup> This text has been used as the fundamental proof text for liberation theology that interprets the gospel as having a social purpose.

Other theologians, with whom the author agrees, see a broader interpretation in the Luke 4 passage that has spiritual implications and not merely social. Robert Stein stated that "term 'poor' does refer to an economic condition, but not merely to economic status, for the poor and humble hope in God."<sup>17</sup> Stein also stated concerning the term "release to the captives" as a metaphorical statement since the Greek word ἄφεσιν is always interpreted in Luke and Acts as the "forgiveness of sins."<sup>18</sup> Other commentators also interpreted that "this captivity symbolizes enslavement to sin and Satan."<sup>19</sup> The words "blind" and "oppressed" also have metaphorical meanings for those who are spiritually blind and oppressed by sin.<sup>20</sup> Passages like Luke 4 and others that can be interpreted in a social meaning require careful exegesis to avoid imposing meanings to justify unbalanced and unbiblical positions of social justice.

Other New Testament biblical texts have meanings that make possible connection between evangelism and social engagement. These passages include two from the Gospels—Luke 16:19-31 and Matthew 25:31-46—which some interpreters also stretch exegetically to suit their stance on social mandates. Several biblical texts in James also address the believer's social responsibility especially to those in need—James 1:27; 2:14-16. The biblical passages in James, however, are typically applied to believers' care for other believers and may not be suitable for the evangelistic application. Careful exegesis of these passages is also necessary to avoid incorrect interpretations and applications.

### Advantages

Social ministry offers some advantages to evangelism. These advantages can help overcome some inhibitions of believers toward social ministry. Social ministry provides the opportunity to build relationships with the unsaved and meet the holistic needs of people which can open doors for the gospel. Most

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<sup>16</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 33.

<sup>17</sup>Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 156.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11 of *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 253.

<sup>20</sup>Stein, *Luke*, 156.



unbelievers will not come to a church to hear the gospel; the church must reach out them. Social ministry provides a good opportunity to serve needs and share the gospel which meets a person's greatest need. Through social ministry, the evangelist can gain a hearing for the gospel message he proclaims with the intent of persuading the lost person to faith in Jesus Christ.

Social ministry prepares the atmosphere for evangelistic witness through good deeds which show forth the grace of God toward all people—common grace. Common grace involves meeting needs because it's right to do so. Wayne Grudem defined common grace as “the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.”<sup>21</sup> Common grace expressed through social ministry involves helping people out of love for God and a response to His grace. Tim Keller stated that, “if a person has grasped the meaning of God's grace in his heart, he will do justice.”<sup>22</sup> The believer should be able to conduct social ministry for the good of people without expecting them to make professions of faith. The expectation of people coming to faith should be a response to the gospel and not a response to the believers' good deeds.

Many evangelists consider the most important advantage of social ministry as the building of bridges between the lost and the saved. Many Christians do not have the proper rapport with lost people to gain a hearing for their gospel message. Delos Miles concurred by stating that, “Honesty compels us to admit that we do not now have the kind of partnership between church social work and evangelism which many of us desire.”<sup>23</sup>

Social ministry helps the evangelists and other Christian servants see the humanness of the people in the midst of their adversity. Although all Christians can identify with sin and its consequences, some believers cannot identify with the particular problems that some people experience. For instance, a Christian of a middle-class socio-economic status likely cannot identify with a person who was raised in dire poverty. Social issues are complex and it takes time to gain sympathy for a person's plight. Seeing people up close provides better understanding and produces genuine compassion. The Christian stops seeing the person to whom he or she is ministering as a project or another notch in the evangelistic belt. Harvie Conn in his book *Doing Justice and Preaching Grace*

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<sup>21</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 657.

<sup>22</sup>Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), 93.

<sup>23</sup>Delos Miles, “Church Social Work and Evangelism: Partners in Ministry.” *Review & Expositor* 85 no. 2 (1988): 274.

reflected on his time as a missionary trying to evangelize oppressed women in another country. Conn stated that his initial results were meager. After learning how these women ended up in their condition, Conn stated that his attitude changed and he became compassionate. He “discovered that a person is not only a sinner. He or she is also sinned against.”<sup>24</sup> Compassion becomes possible when believers “perceive people as the sinned-against, as well as the sinning.”<sup>25</sup>

## Concerns

Social ministry supports evangelism and can be an important element for effective evangelism. While social ministry helps people in need and builds bridges for evangelism, some concerns merit mentioning. One of the greatest concerns about social ministry is it usurping the ministry of gospel proclamation. Social ministry that does not include the gospel proclamation is insufficient to bring about salvation. The common grace rendered through social ministry is not the biblical manner to call people to faith in Christ. Grudem stated that, “Common grace does not change the human heart or bring people to genuine repentance and faith—it cannot and does not save people... Common grace restrains sin but does not change anyone’s foundational disposition to sin, nor does it in any significant measure purify fallen human nature.”<sup>26</sup> Gospel proclamation is essentially necessary for saving faith (Romans 10:14-17).

Social ministry that turns into social activism can consume the church’s resources and cause the church to drift away from its primary mission: to win souls for Jesus Christ. Social activism can also make enemies of people who hold different points of view, thus alienating a contingent of people with whom the church needs to reach for Christ.

The pitfalls of social ministry relate to social activism and, in some instances, social legalism. Conn discussed these two dangers with which the church needs to be concerned:

On the one hand, [service] can remake evangelism into just one more Christian word for political involvement or social action. The social-gospel history reminds us that the danger is always real. Evangelism can become a loose term for freedom marches, the boycotting of South African investments, and antinuclear demonstrations. On the other hand, the call for justice as an intrinsic

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<sup>24</sup>Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 44-5.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>26</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 663.

part of evangelism can be reduced to protesting pornographic films, contributing to special offering for the “boat people,” and being a decent and pleasant person at the office or school.<sup>27</sup>

Either of these above extremes represents diversions and distortions of evangelism. Whenever these extremes exist, the true nature and purpose of evangelism is lost, oftentimes to the undiscerning believer.

The necessity of social ministry as an essential aspect of evangelism is another debatable topic. Is social ministry integral to evangelism? Delos Miles believed that evangelism and social ministry are inextricably linked:

Evangelism and Christian social concern are two sides of the same coin. If one side of a coin is missing, that coin has lost its value. The lack of a social conscience impugns the reputation of the holy God and leads to societal failure. Evangelism is surely a blood brother to social involvement.<sup>28</sup>

Chester and Timmis, while holding that evangelism and social action are distinct activities, agreed that they are inseparable.<sup>29</sup> They offered as proof text the Bible verse from 1 Thessalonians 2:8: “...we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.” The question on whether social ministry is a critical element to effective evangelism is debatable. While social ministry is an important part of effective evangelism, the author does not believe that social ministry is integral to effective gospel proclamation. Effective gospel ministry occurs through the power of the Holy Spirit and His word and not through meeting physical needs. Social ministry must not always be rendered for evangelism or evangelistic preaching to reach the hearts of the unsaved.

The church must beware of becoming assimilated into culture and, as a result, the church’s priorities being determined by the secular culture rather than biblical mission. William Richardson stated, “Strange as it may seem, the current advocacy of active involvement of the church in changing social and political structures trends toward the result of assimilating the church in secular culture despite its intentions to the contrary.”<sup>30</sup> He stated further the negative consequences: “As the church discovers where the action is it throws it resources

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<sup>27</sup>Conn, *Evangelism*, 44.

<sup>28</sup>Miles, *Evangelism*, 7.

<sup>29</sup>Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 78-79.

<sup>30</sup>William J. Richardson, *Social Action versus Evangelism* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977), 29.

into the struggle. In this concept of mission the church tends to be united more by its commitment to making social changes than by its commitment to the God of the covenant. It is thus threatened with the loss of its integrity.”<sup>31</sup>

Donald McGavran, well-known church growth missiologist of the twentieth century, declared the priority of evangelism in the mission of the local church. He stated that “It maintains that Christianizing the social order is a fruit of new life in Christ and of church multiplication and must, therefore, receive a lower priority.”<sup>32</sup> Attempting to reform society to the principles and practices of Christianity can usurp the evangelistic mandate and adversely affect the Christian witness.

### Effective Models

Many churches and Christian organizations often conduct social ministry under the umbrella of missions. The service that the church renders in missions can be an implementation of social ministry. Social ministry through missionary endeavors is an effective way to serve people thus opening the doors for gospel witness.

Elmer Towns, in his article “How Social is the Gospel?” mentioned four attitudes toward social ministry that determine how it can be implemented.<sup>33</sup> These attitudes develop the methodology for conducting social ministry. The first method is social service that grows out of evangelism. Believers engage in social ministry out of the biblical call to perform good works (Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:14; James 2:14-26). Through the preaching of the gospel, more people come to faith who also pursue good works through social ministry. As the Lord calls more people to salvation, more people mobilize for social ministry for the ultimate purpose of seeing others come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Towns referred to his method as an “outgrowth of the gospel... and leaves little room for criticism.”<sup>34</sup>

The second attitude is social service as bridge to evangelism. This method involves serving people needs through social ministry in order to build relationships and remove any barriers or prejudices that the unbelievers may hold against Christians. Towns commented “Some have criticized this approach,

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 22.

<sup>33</sup>Elmer L. Towns, "How Social is the Gospel?" *Fundamentalist Journal* 4 no. 4 (April 1, 1985): 25.

<sup>34</sup>Elmer L. Towns, "How Social is the Gospel?" 25.

calling it a bribe to get people to listen to the gospel. If good works are done out of a sincere heart of gratitude to Christ, then good works become a bridge rather than a bribe. If the church closes its heart to the needs of people, the people will turn a deaf ear to the gospel.<sup>35</sup>

The third attitude toward social service is social ministry and the gospel working together with each dependent on the other. This model of inseparability raises concerns on which aspect—social service or the gospel—becomes the priority. Eventually one will have to be lessened for the other to be accomplished.

The fourth attitude toward social service is social action for the cause of justice. Social action becomes collaborative attempts to resolve the structured causes of human suffering. This attitude results in the model where social action dominates the cause and abandons the gospel purpose.

The Gospels contain many accounts of Jesus performing practical helps with His preaching and teaching ministry. Jesus apparently performed these good deeds to prove His Person and power as the Son of God. Jesus performed good deeds because it was right and loving to do so. Doing good deeds solely as a “hook” to proclaim the gospel message can seem to be a form of trickery, even if subtle or unintentional. Social ministries should be conducted out of compassion and genuine care for the person being served. Elmer Towns commented that “not all social work is a doorway to win souls, but when we minister to the physical needs of people we break down their prejudice and suspicion against us and the gospel.”<sup>36</sup>

The social ministries of the church represent an opportunity to render good to people in the name of Christ. Social ministry can become a significant part of the church’s mission where all ministries can serve. For instance, Sunday School classes can participate in mission projects that meet holistic needs. Social ministry need not be restricted to certain organizations within the local church. Walter Delamarter considered the social component to all ministries of the church:

... every function of the church—preaching, teaching, healing, and helping, for the redemptive witness of God-committed social action is not the exclusive prerogative of pastoral counselors, ethics majors, church-related social workers, or iconoclastic social reformers. A ministry of social action is an integral part of total ministry to the whole man and the whole world. It is an essential to the life-

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

style of the church. To deny this component is to render the church's ministry incomplete and rob it of one of its most vital life-giving qualities.<sup>37</sup>

Each ministry of the church can conduct social ministry as an act of grace toward those in need. This social component of church ministry can become an important aspect of evangelistic outreach. Social ministry, in this regard, can support the spiritual growth of believers through their serving on mission.

### **Implications on evangelistic preaching**

Whatever impacts evangelism in general impacts evangelistic preaching in particular. Evangelistic preaching is an important aspect of evangelism where the evangelist communicates the gospel in such a way in an attempt to persuade unbelievers to personal faith in Jesus Christ. Since all preaching is based on some theology, the theological positions that influence social ministries and how they affect evangelistic preaching warrant discussion.

#### **Theology of the Gospel**

All Christian ministries with evangelistic purpose should have the furtherance of the gospel as their primary goal. Social ministries, likewise, should pursue the furtherance of the gospel through their specific work. Believers who undertake social ministry should have a biblical understanding of the gospel. The church's understanding and appreciation for the biblical gospel will allow believers to participate in social ministry without forfeiting the gospel priority.

A matter of vital importance for social ministry is an understanding of the gospel. What is the gospel? This question may seem to be a fairly trivial one for believers. Such question, however, must not be taken for granted. Christians of varying backgrounds can have differing understandings of the gospel. Graeme Goldsworthy acknowledged the differences among Christians even when the word "gospel" is used in a biblical way.<sup>38</sup> Social ministry often detours off its biblical course when the gospel ceases to be central and binding on the work. Therefore, the theology of the gospel is of utmost importance for the principles and practices social ministry. The manner and meaning of social ministry rests on the gospel. The evangelists' power and purpose in his message rests on the gospel. The Apostle Paul declared the gospel as "the power of God unto salvation

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<sup>37</sup>Walter R. Delamarter, "Social issues and social change." *Review & Expositor* 68, no. 3 (June 1, 1971): 351.

<sup>38</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 81.

to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The key issue that the evangelist must settle in his heart, mind, and purpose is the matter of the gospel.

To establish a solid gospel understanding, the evangelist must study the biblical texts that specify the word—the English transliteration of the Greek word *euangelion* which means “good news.” This good news, according to some theologians, refer to the redemptive acts of Jesus. C. H. Dodd indicated an important aspect of the *euangelion* as the *kerygma*, which according to Pauline writings and the apostles is “the proclamation of the facts of the death and resurrection of Christ in an eschatological setting which give significance to the facts.”<sup>39</sup>

Another perspective of the gospel comes from the Gospel accounts that, according to some, broadens the understanding of the gospel. This perspective deals with the gospel that Jesus proclaimed, for instance, in Mark 1:15 to “repent, and believe in the gospel.” Could Jesus have been referring to His crucifixion and resurrection when He made this exhortation at the beginning of His ministry? Some theologians believe that the gospel should not be limited to facts about Jesus’ death and resurrection. The gospel has a broader application. Limiting the gospel to facts about Jesus’ death and resurrection seem reductionistic. Loscalzo believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the gospel which included His ministry was “the genesis of God’s *euangelion* to the world.”<sup>40</sup> Michael Green stated that the gospel was “nothing less than God’s long-awaited salvation, proclaimed by the Messiah Himself.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the gospel, by these accounts, involves Jesus Himself and the totality of His ministry. Goldsworthy agreed that the gospel is “the message about Jesus in his *life*, death and resurrection (italics mine).”<sup>42</sup> The broader view holds validity when considering all biblical accounts. DeYoung and Gilbert referred to this perspective of the gospel as the “wide-angle lens” that includes “all the other blessings that come to those who are in Christ.”<sup>43</sup>

So how do these perspectives of the gospel relate to the idea of social ministry? Bryan Chapell referred to the gospel as the biblical message “that God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue broken people, restore creation’s

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<sup>39</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 13.

<sup>40</sup>Craig Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching that Connects: Guidance in Shaping Fresh and Appealing Sermons* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>41</sup>Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 7.

<sup>42</sup>Goldsworthy, 83.

<sup>43</sup>Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 94.

glory, and rule over all with compassion and justice.”<sup>44</sup> Looking at the broader view of the gospel can lead to the understanding of the gospel ministry as being a holistic one that ministers to the whole person—not just the spiritual. Therefore, some believe that social ministry in the name of Jesus can be considered gospel ministry even if the death and resurrection of Christ is never proclaimed. In the author’s view, this broad view of the gospel can lead to a narrow view of social ministry that addresses physical needs only.

While the broader view of the gospel is biblical, proclamation is still needed. Even when Jesus preached the gospel—His message before His death and resurrection—He called His hearers to respond through repentance and faith (Mark 1:15). DeYoung and Gilbert provided a helpful explanation:

Because the broader blessings of the gospel are attained *only* by means of forgiveness through the cross, and because those broader blessings are attained *infallibly* by means of forgiveness through the cross, it’s entirely appropriate and makes perfect sense for the New Testament writers to call forgiveness through the cross—the fountainhead of and gateway to all the rest— “the gospel.”<sup>45</sup>

Social ministry done to meet physical needs only cannot implicitly or even explicitly call someone to faith. Proclamation, therefore, still must be a necessary component of social ministry.

Evangelistic preaching includes the full gospel—Jesus death and resurrection; and the blessed life that He graciously gives. The gospel ministers to the physical and the spiritual. Loscalzo stated that evangelistic preaching “holds in balance the spiritual and physical dimensions of our existence... The good news remains a holistic message.”<sup>46</sup>

### Theology of the Kingdom

Another important theological issue requiring clarification for social ministry is the theology of the kingdom. What is the kingdom of God? Is social ministry considered kingdom work? The theology of the kingdom is important as it determines the evangelistic thrust and defines the scope of social ministry.

Jesus often spoke of the “kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33; Mark 1:15) or the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 3:2; 10:7). Jesus, in speaking about His coming,

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<sup>44</sup>Bryan Chapell, “What is the Gospel?” in *The Gospel as Center: Renewing Our Faith and Reforming Our Ministry Practices*, eds. D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 116.

<sup>45</sup>DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 109.

<sup>46</sup>Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching*,



declared that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Theologians and Christians have diverse views on the meaning of “kingdom.” The views range from God’s redemptive reign, the kingdom in the right now, and the kingdom to come.<sup>47</sup>

Some theological views such as postmillennialism believed that the kingdom of God is ushered in after an age of peace and righteousness brought about by “the progress of the gospel and the growth of the church.”<sup>48</sup> This view can be a major motivator for social ministry and perhaps a greater motivator for social action or activism. Proponents of this view often see social ministry as “kingdom work.” They see their work as a part of the redemptive work that prepares the culture for the imminent reign of Jesus.

The kingdom theology of the social gospel was a major theological issue that sharply divided theologians and the church. The social gospel’s view of the kingdom held that believers are called to establish God’s social order. Elmer Towns stated that conservatives rejected the social gospel because of the liberals’ position “that there was no distinction between spiritual redemption and social restoration.”<sup>49</sup> When believers, in a passion for social ministry, take a similar view of the kingdom, it is the author’s conviction that such a liberal and broad view be likewise rejected. Would God require the establishment of a kingdom for people who do not submit to Him as King?

Many do not see the kingdom as merely personal piety, but social changes in conformance to God’s will that promote the general welfare of the public. C.R. Brown stated concerning the kingdom, “The kingdom was not a distant state to which men were to go at death—the kingdom was to come; it was to come down, like a holy city out of heaven, finding its secure foundations in nobler conditions of earthly life as these came to be dominated by the spirit of the Master.”<sup>50</sup>

The biblical view of the kingdom keeps social ministry in perspective and prevents believers from unrealistic hopes for social change. DeYoung and Gilbert declared that “God certainly uses means and employs us in his work. But we are not makers or bringers of the kingdom.”<sup>51</sup> They further declared that “the

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<sup>47</sup>Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 86-93.

<sup>48</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1251.

<sup>49</sup>Elmer L. Towns, “How Social is the Gospel,” *Articles* Paper 6 (April 1985), under “Articles,” [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/view\\_content.cgi?\\_article=1005&context=towns\\_articles](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/view_content.cgi?_article=1005&context=towns_articles) (accessed April 29, 2012).

<sup>50</sup>Charles Reynolds Brown, *The Social Message of the Modern Pulpit* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 153.

<sup>51</sup>DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 134.

kingdom is specifically the reign of Jesus the Messiah, and that leads us to a simple answer ... Inclusion in the kingdom of God is wholly conditioned on one's response to the King."<sup>52</sup>

### Proclamation from the Pulpit

Should preachers address social issues from the pulpit? John Stott, in his book *Between Two Worlds*, described preaching as "bridge-building" where the preacher should balance himself between the Bible and the world in which he lives.<sup>53</sup> This "bridge-building" should occur between the culture and the Scripture. Stott advocated a study of the culture to learn how to address it biblically. He asserted that social issues such as abortion and poverty should be addressed from the pulpit. He suggested that the preacher bring biblical principles to bear on such issues that plague contemporary society. Stott, who was well-known as an evangelical figure, maintained the preference of expository preaching even in dealing with social issues.

While having the liberty to address social issues from the pulpit, the preacher must maintain a balance to avoid an overemphasis on social issues. Craig Loscalzo commented on the balance that the evangelist must keep:

Evangelistic preaching holds in balance the spiritual and the physical dimensions of our existence.... The Gospels are replete with accounts of Jesus' tending to the physical and spiritual needs of people. The good news remains a holistic message... The good news speaks to body, soul, mind and spirit. Our evangelistic preaching can reflect no less.<sup>54</sup>

The preacher should beware of using the pulpit as a platform for social justice. Stott stated that, "Rather that it is the preacher's responsibility to open up the biblical principles which relate to the problems of contemporary society, in such a way as to help everybody to develop a Christian judgment about them, and to inspire and encourage the opinion-formers and policy-makers in the congregation, who occupy influential positions in public life, to apply these biblical principles to public life."<sup>55</sup> He stated further that, "The pulpit should help them to develop their Christian thinking and so to penetrate their segment of the human community more deeply for Christ."<sup>56</sup> Preaching should aim for change

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>53</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Nashville: Eerdmans, 1992), 135-179.

<sup>54</sup>Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching*, 51.

<sup>55</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 167.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

in the lives of the hearers who can become the change agents in society. Speaking to change society while overlooking the people of society seems ineffective.

Is neutrality on socio-political issues possible? In other words, can the preacher just avoid speaking about social issues from the pulpit without any unintended consequence? Stott stated:

What is certain is that the pulpit has political influence, even if nothing remotely connected with politics is ever uttered from it. For then the preacher's silence endorses the contemporary socio-political conditions, and instead of helping to change society and make it more pleasing to God, the pulpit becomes a mirror which reflects contemporary society, and the Church conforms to the world. The neutrality of the pulpit is impossible."<sup>57</sup>

Neutrality on social issues often casts the wrong message from the church. William J. Richardson stated, "The separatist approach often appears under the guise of being neutral on social problems. But the neutralist, however sincere he may be in taking this position, cannot avoid the appearance of standing with the side that wins out on a particular issue."<sup>58</sup> Passivity on social issues can have unintended consequences.

When social ministry turns into activism, the preacher's pulpit ministry can become imbalanced—overly concerned on the social aspect. Henry Young, in his collection of sermons by well-known African-American preachers, included a sermon by Andrew Young, former pastor who was a civil rights activist and public official, which clearly stated the social Christianity that he believed was required of the church:

I became awakened to the realization that the ministry had to have social and political implication. It is not enough to minister to the spiritual well-being of a people; we must also transform the structures of society that prevent people from relating to each other as authentic persons.... Therefore, if the church can have a ministry that concerns itself with the totality of society, we can begin to change the lives of people.<sup>59</sup>

Andrew Young's context, the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, likely predisposed him to such a philosophy. The idea that social action can really change the lives of people can be challenged. The best that social

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<sup>57</sup>Stott, 168.

<sup>58</sup>Richardson, *Social Action*, 28.

<sup>59</sup>Andrew Young, "The Political and Social Implications of the Ministry," in *Preaching the Gospel*, ed. Henry J. Young (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 17-18.

action can do is change life *for* people. But only the gospel—through the Word of God—can change the lives *of* people.

Expository preaching through books of the Bible can cover Scripture texts that deal with social issues. Charles Reynolds Brown, a Congregationalist minister from the early twentieth century, commented on the advantages of expository preaching concerning social issues:

The habit of expository preaching thus fortifies the minister in his position; it tends to remove the prejudice which many people feel toward preaching upon questions of the day, a prejudice which sometimes closes the door against a helpful message; and it lodges many disturbing but useful lessons within the hearts of those who cannot put the Bible out of the door, as they are sometimes tempted to do with the minister whose sermon has made them uncomfortable.<sup>60</sup>

A preacher who preaches expositionally from the whole counsel of Scripture will have a well-balance preaching ministry—one that touches on social issues not out of personal interest, but as “thus saith the Lord.” The preacher who has an affinity for social issues can avoid the temptation to overemphasize social concerns in his preaching.

## **Conclusion**

Social issues will continue to be an issue in a fallen world. The entire creation groans under the crushing and unrelenting weight of sin (Romans 8:22). Social ministry provides believers a great opportunity to show the grace of God by helping meet physical needs. Social ministry puts believers in contact with unbelievers and helps to build rapport among them.

The gospel is the only sure and true hope for people seeking a better world. Since the gospel addresses the needs of the whole person, the evangelist should apply the word of God in its sufficiency to fulfill all human needs. Craig Loscalzo stated that “The good news speaks to body, soul, mind and spirit. Our evangelistic preaching can reflect no less.”<sup>61</sup>

Those who believe in the authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice must deal with social problems biblically. Pastors and theologians, especially conservative ones, should not be afraid to deal with the social problems for fear of being labeled a “social gospeler” or “liberation theologian.” The negligence of conservatives in addressing social problems biblically has left a void that is

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<sup>60</sup>Brown, *The Social Message of the Modern Pulpit*, 58.

<sup>61</sup>Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching*, 51.

being filled by liberal theologians. Truman Dollar stated that, “The nation deserves to hear what the Bible says about these problems.”<sup>62</sup>

While believers are called to be “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20), the ministry of reconciliation should be rendered with grace. Harvie Conn stated that, “Evangelism must become gospel show-and-tell, showing mercy and preaching grace.”<sup>63</sup> The gospel is a message of grace that believers are called to practice and proclaim. The Bible exhorts Christians to do good to everyone as they have opportunity (Galatians 6:10). Social ministry provides such an opportunity and prepares the way for effective evangelistic preaching.

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<sup>62</sup>Truman Dollar, "Social Concern? Not me, I'm a Fundamentalist," *Fundamentalist Journal* 4, no. 3 (March 1, 1985): 66.

<sup>63</sup>Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching*, 33.

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