

COMMERCE WITHOUT MORALITY

Jesus called Christians to be salt and light in the world. We have often said that the body of Christ should act as the conscience of the community. We are here to bring hope for eternity and help for the present. If you surveyed the general public about on what issues Christians take public stands, they would probably list- abortion, stem-cell research, pornography and homosexual marriage, as these are often in the news.

While there are Scriptural references that would lead us to speak out on these social problems, Jesus never actually mentioned any of them, specifically. But Jesus did speak about our treatment of others and the poor and neglected in society. He associated with those of the lower socio-economic scale and the outcasts. His mission statement recorded by Luke as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy said he had come to the poor, the blind, the imprisoned and oppressed. Jesus is declared as the chosen one in Matthew 12 as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He is the one who will "proclaim justice to the nations." Christ taught often about materialism and a person's relationship to money. In fact about one of every six verses in the synoptic gospels relates to that subject.

In this country, statistics show a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Corporate executives in most cases make hundreds of times their employees here in the States and thousand of times greater salary than their company's overseas employees. Corporate profits rise to record level, while median family income remains stagnant adjusted for inflation. The 225 wealthiest people in the world earn more than 3 Billion of the world's poorest folks combined. Companies establish off-shore storefront corporations to avoid taxes and regulations here. They fatten their executive's wallets by exploiting the desperate in other lands, paying pennies per hour for labor. At home, many workers of major profitable companies struggle with low wages and no health insurance or benefits. The rash of corporate scandals is alarming to all fair-minded people.

We live in a wonderful free society where capitalism allows us to reach our potential. Naturally there will be differences in earnings based on supply and demand, education, opportunity and skill. Profit is not a dirty word, of course. Companies must have the money to expand and reward investors. But the issue here is how people are treated by others who have control. It is about maintaining peace and comfort for as many as possible and giving everyone opportunity to pursue goals in life. When the gaps between rich and poor grow wider and the treatment of workers by corporations becomes unjust, we have commerce without morality and Christians should be upset. It is an issue that we must publicly address to a stronger degree.

When Israel was a theocracy, God made provisions to provide for the poor, the strangers and years of Jubilee to cancel debts. Laws provided for grain to be left for foreigners, orphans, and widows. Other laws provided for sharing with the immigrants and lending to those in need without interest. The intent of the laws was to prevent the concentration of wealth in a few.

The principle of “he that gathered much did not have too much and he that gathered little did not have too little” is seen in the distribution of the manna in the wilderness and emphasized again by the apostle Paul in his philosophy of giving and equality in II Corinthians, chapters 8-9. The Old Testament prophets are filled with warnings to not abuse the workers, the poor and the disenfranchised of society in order to gain wealth. Social injustice and idolatry are the two most popular themes of the prophets. Yet social injustice is often overlooked by evangelical Christians today, for fear they may somehow be labeled promoters of the “social gospel” or “liberation theology.” Others accuse those of engaging in such talk as being guilty of “class envy” or advocating “communism.”

Isaiah writes- “What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces and grind the faces of the poor”.... “How terrible it will be for those who make unfair laws and those who make life hard on people.” He condemned those who exploited workers, widows and were oblivious to the suffering around them, while living in self-centered wantonness. Malachi condemns those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless and turn aside the stranger.

The Psalmist writes- “God judges in favor of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. Happy are those who are concerned for the poor.” Advocacy for the poor and vulnerable of the land permeates Hebrew literature. It flows from the revelation of God through the rescue of his own enslaved people, Israel. God’s people knew what it was like to live in oppression, and they were to rise above that in their treatment of others in their life and in commerce. The Proverb writer calls on God’s people to defend the rights of the poor.

There is real virtue in neither poverty nor wealth. The issue here, goes to the very foundation of Christian ethics... Do unto others as you would have them do unto you...and a person should not think only of himself, but others. It is about fairness in our dealings and opportunity for everyone. We will be judged on how we treat the less fortunate and the suffering. (Mt. 25) Jesus’ anger is seen when commerce in the temple was exploiting the poor even in the name of religion. He redefined the meaning of neighbor as anyone who is in need in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He taught us in that story that our religion is more than right doctrine, it is right actions toward others who need assistance. He talked much about accountability when we are blessed. To whom much is given, much is expected.

Jesus even challenged the Sabbath laws that denied helping people or providing their needs. He condemned the Pharisees for exploiting the widows and forgetting the important matters of justice, love and mercy. He himself, of course, set the example of living simply. The early church sold possessions so that all might be cared for and appointed the first deacons to remedy the unfair treatment of widows in food distribution. While Paul didn’t advocate changing the economic system of the first century that involved servants and slaves, he strongly urged the masters to treat their workers with principled fairness. James told the church that it is the rich who exploit you. About the rich he said, “you hoarded your wealth in the last days, look, the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you.”

Are we responding to the inequities in our society, taking a stand against maltreatment of workers in the world by corporations? Do we work to relieve the oppressed? Are we preaching about materialism? Why are churches not addressing this issue more?

It could be that, sadly, the church is part of the problem, often operating in an environment of comfort and wealth. We have big-time evangelists preaching the “prosperity gospel,” living in grandiose fashion themselves, telling us that if we don’t have riches, God isn’t blessing us. The prevailing message in this movement is that it is all about me. I deserve to be happy, to feel good and have healing and money. With their philosophy, all it takes is believing and giving them a little “seed money” and poverty and disease will disappear. We know many of these preachers have themselves been guilty of exploiting the poor and aged while using that income to embellish their own fortunes. Jesus said his true followers would “deny themselves and take up the cross and follow.” He told us to seek first the kingdom’s purpose, and the needs of life will be provided. He told the rich young ruler that he had to sell what he had to come and follow. It is hard, Jesus said, for the rich to enter heaven, because of the love of money and material goods. Pure religion, James says, is to take care of the widows and orphans in their distress.

We have churches functioning with a self-centered philosophy that keeps money invested in their own property, staff and programs rather than missions and benevolence to relieve suffering and preach the gospel to the unreached. With such emphasis in Scripture on the widows and orphans, you would think, churches would be busy daily constructing homes and shelters, directing programs by the thousands throughout the world. Instead, it seems our concern is more about new buildings for ourselves. Yes, Christians do have many organized efforts of aid everywhere, but the fact is we still spend less than \$3 overseas for every \$100 of church offerings. Hopelessness, poverty, despair and bitterness anywhere in the world affects us all. The church needs to be the bastion of charity and compassion.

With regard to a contemporary issue prominent in our nation, many conservative columnists and Christian groups have joined the chorus calling for immediate jailing or deportation of illegal immigrants working here. Most of these people have actually violated no commandment in coming here, only crossing a man-made boundary in order to feed their families that are destitute. Shouldn’t Christians be asking instead “what can we do to help these neighbors either here or in the context of their country and culture?”

In our nation’s past, Christians have led great campaigns to alleviate injustice including the abolition of slavery, the establishment of child-labor and workplace safety laws, the civil rights movement. The duty is not to change the free-enterprise system, but to show that Christian morality means a more even-handed treatment of people, using riches to share and not for pure self-indulgent excess.

The widening gap between the wealthy and poor in the world, the exploitation of the worker, corporate greed, white collar crime, the lack of concern for the sick, needy and

homeless; all these should touch our heartstrings and motivate us to preach about it, pray about it and then do something about it.

We, as Christians, must live temperate lives ourselves, as an example. The committed wealthy person can certainly be a great blessing to the church. But we must refuse to get involved in the race of always bigger, better and more. Don't buy into the doctrine that only if I have riches is God truly blessing me. Support companies that seem to have a Christian philosophy in treatment of workers.

Churches should examine their budgets for what percentages are being spent on missions and benevolence throughout the world. Congregations should generously provide for the work of saving and serving others in all the nations and seek to increase it yearly.

We can strive for change in our culture through publicity, voting, participating in non-violent organized efforts. We can also call on the government to enact laws to reform corporate abuses and injustice in many areas. We can amplify the call for more spending for aid to those in need everywhere and less government waste.

Three key Biblical principles are evident for all of us to keep in mind----

Work Hard- The Bible is clear that sloth is sin. Use whatever talent you have fully and if wealth comes to you, that is wonderful. Give your best at what you do as if working unto the Lord. Live Right- Realize that the important matters in life are character, your soul, and how you treat others, not your material possessions. Share Much- Our responsibility is to be generous so that the Lord's work is accomplished and those who suffer are lifted up. Only by understanding the principles of humility and sacrifice can we grasp the true message of Christianity.

In reality, we know that the real cure for all the social sins we deal with daily is the change within the heart of each individual. We have that medicine with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ and then the simple question- "what would our Leader do?"