

The Mission of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel

In the time between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus gave His church its mission. He said, “Go into the entire world and preach the Good News to the whole creation!” (Mark 16:15). “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations by baptising them... and by teaching them” (Matt. 28:19-20). The church is to share with the world the good news of what Jesus has done to gain salvation for us.

The book of Acts relates how the disciples carried out Jesus’ commission. Believers did this as individuals (8:4) or as groups of people (13:2-3). The church is also to proclaim the Law because people need to realise their need for a Saviour. The Law is proclaimed in the service of the Gospel. It prepares people so they see the need for the Gospel.

The church also administers the sacraments as it carries out the mission Christ gave it. Through Baptism God brings people into His church, gives them the forgiveness and righteousness Christ has won by His holy life and substitutionary death. Through the Lord’s Supper God gives to believers the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. He invites us to His Supper and gives us a foretaste of heaven.

The church’s mission is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make disciples of all nations. Sadly, people obscure the mission of the church when they focus on people’s earthly needs rather than on their spiritual needs. Love and concern for our neighbour is a fruit of our faith, but only the Gospel can change people’s hearts so that they will be concerned about their neighbour’s needs.

There is no doubt that God wants us to be concerned about those who are in need. Through the Old Testament prophets, God condemned the oppression of the poor. Jesus condemned the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees for their lack of mercy. When Paul met with James, Peter, and John in Jerusalem, the subject of helping the poor came up. Paul wrote, “They agreed that we should go the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was also eager to do,” (Gal 2:9-10).

There was concern for the poor demonstrated in the early church. The believers in Jerusalem sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with the poor (Acts 2:45; 4:32). The early church chose seven deacons to manage the distribution of food to the widows (Acts 6). Paul gathered a collection for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16). He speaks of a list of widows in his letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:9). This was a list of widows to be cared for by the church.

This concern for the poor was a fruit of faith. It was part of the sanctified life of God’s people. It was the result of justification by faith. Deeds of love flow from faith. If those deeds are absent, more than likely faith is also absent. The Gospel ought to move us to show concern for the poor and needy. However, our primary mission remains the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Deeds of love to the needy are fruits of the Gospel in the lives of people whose hearts have been touched by God’s love for them.

In addition to works of love done by Christians, there are two agencies in society that God instituted for taking care of the needy. The primary caregiving unit in society is the family. As Paul said, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever,” (1 Tim. 5:8). The other caregiving agency in society is the government. God instituted government to provide for the temporal welfare of its citizens (1 Tim. 2:2; Ro 13:4).

Two movements have obscured the God-given mission of the church. They have focused the mission of the church on ministry to the temporal needs of people and have neglected the preaching of the Gospel. They have focused the church on effecting changes and improvements in the structures and patterns of society. They are the Social Gospel (Social Action) Movement and Liberation Theology.

Washington Gladden (1836-1918), a Congregationalist, and Walter Rauschenbush (1861-1918), a Baptist, are the fathers of the Social Gospel Movement. This movement focused on making this world a better place in which to live. It obscured a Christian’s anticipation of a better home in heaven by looking for a kingdom of God on earth. It encouraged churches to focus on meeting the earthly needs of the poor and neglected the proclamation of sin and grace. It caused many seminaries to add social ethics courses to their curricula. It encouraged churches to become involved in attempting to change the structures and patterns of society. Working to change legislation is something individual Christians can do as a part of their citizenship in the state. This is not, however, the mission of the church.

Our Lord lived in a time when government was corrupt. Yet He did not advocate, nor engage in, attempts to change the structures and patterns of society. Paul lived under corrupt Roman rulers. Yet he encouraged submission to government (Rom. 13:1). Finally, the attempt by the church to use government to force people to change will fail. Only the Gospel can change people’s hearts. A church that fails to proclaim the Gospel is neglecting the only tool on earth that can cause people to love their neighbour.

Another movement that looks for a kingdom of God on earth is Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology is political activism with a veneer of religiosity. Here again, it is true that the church will demonstrate concern for those in need as a fruit of faith. Yet there are those who feel the church’s responsibility is to remove the inequities one finds in the world

between the haves and the have-nots. The 20th century's main spokesman for the movement was Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest. His book, *A Theology of Liberation*, is the movement's bible. Building a "just society" is considered the "salvific" work of the church. Sadly, this movement also neglects the preaching of the Gospel, which alone can set people free. It obscures a Christian's anticipation of heaven by looking for a kingdom of God on earth. The theology of liberation, with its emphasis upon this world, is simply another tool of Satan by which he attempts to mislead the church from its real mission.