THE GOSPEL AND THE POOR

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Our individual and corporate commitment to the gospel ought to motivate ministry to the poor and marginalized among us.

I. THE GOSPEL'S ROLE IN MINISTRY TO THE POOR

Being committed to the primacy of the gospel means, first, that the gospel must be proclaimed. Many today denigrate the importance of this, insisting instead that the only true apologetic is a loving community. People cannot be reasoned into the kingdom, they say; they can only be loved. But while Christian community is indeed a crucial and powerful witness to the truth of the gospel, it cannot replace preaching and proclamation. Second, the primacy of the gospel means the gospel is the basis and mainspring for Christian practice, individually and corporately, within the church and outside it. Gospel ministry is not only proclamation to people so they will embrace and believe; it is also teaching and shepherding believers so that the entirety of their lives are shaped. One of the most prominent areas that the gospel affects is our relationship to the poor.

I know of no better introduction to the gospel's call to minister to the poor than Jonathan Edwards's discourse "Christian Charity."[1] According to Edwards, giving to and caring for the poor is a crucial, nonoptional aspect of living out the gospel. He puts forth two basic arguments to support this position.

BELIEVING THE GOSPEL WILL MOVE US TO GIVE TO THE POOR

Edwards repeatedly shows how an understanding of "the rules of the gospel"—the pattern and logic of the gospel—will inevitably move us to love and help the poor. While Edwards believes the command to give to the poor is an implication of the teaching that all human beings are made in the image of God,[2] he believes 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."[3]

One of the key texts to which Edwards turned to make this case is 2 Corinthians 8:8–9. When Paul asked for financial generosity to the poor, he pointed to the self-emptying of Jesus and vividly depicted him as becoming poor for us, both literally and spiritually, in the incarnation and in crucifixion. Edwards noted that Paul's introduction "I am not commanding you . . . for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is significant, implying that if one truly grasps substitutionary atonement, one will become profoundly generous to the poor. The only way for Jesus to get us out of our spiritual poverty and into spiritual riches was to leave his spiritual riches and enter into spiritual poverty. This should become the pattern of our lives: give away our resources and enter into need so that those in need will be resourced. Paul also implied 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.

1. Jonathan Edwards, "Christian Charity, or The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* rev. and corr. Edward Hickman, vol. 2 (1834; reprint, Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1974).
2. Ibid., 2:164.
3. Ibid., 2:165.

Another text Edwards looks to more than once is Galatians 6:1–10, especially verse 2, which enjoins us to "bear one another's burdens."[4] These burdens, at least partially, are material and financial, because Galatians 6:10 tells us to "do good to all men, especially the household of faith." Edwards understands "doing good" to mean the giving of practical aid to people who need food, shelter, and financial help. 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."[5] Richard Longenecker calls it "prescriptive principles stemming from the heart of the gospel."[6]

If it is the gospel that is moving us, our giving to 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?" This attitude is not gospel-shaped giving. In the last part of his discourse, Edwards cites the objection "You say I should help the poor, but I'm afraid I have nothing to spare," and 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 be never obliged to relieve others' burdens, but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbour's burdens, when we bear no burdens at all?"[7]

Edwards's argument is that if the basis for our ministry to the poor were 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 called that bluff and said, "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."

Edwards took 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 our aid with gratitude and joy. Frankly, almost no one like that exists. And while it is important that our aid to the poor helps them and doesn't create dependency, Edwards makes short work of this objection by again appealing not so much to ethical prescriptions as to the gospel itself.

> *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. . . .*
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> *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.*[8]

4. Ibid., 2:165.

5. Ibid., 2:171.

6. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 275.

7. Edwards, "Christian Charity," 2:171 (emphasis in original).

8. Ibid., 2:171–72.

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. Matthew 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, the immigrant, the sick, and the imprisoned. Does this contradict Paul's teaching that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by our works?

To answer this, Edwards refers to the Old Testament, in which giving to the poor was an essential mark of godliness. The famous verse Micah 6:8 required God's people to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Edwards concludes that this requires the godly person to be involved with the poor.[9] Bruce 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.[10] But this emphasis is not limited to 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).[11] From this (and 2 Cor. 8:8) Edwards concludes that doing justice and mercy is not a meritorious reason that God will accept us.[12] Rather, doing justice and mercy for the poor is an inevitable sign that the doer has justifying faith and grace in the heart.

The principle is, therefore, that 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 distinguish true love of himself from mere lip service (cf. Isa. 1:10–17). Matthew 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 Proverbs 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 on judgment day God 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 hardness, indifference, or superiority, it betrays the self-righteousness of a heart that has not truly embraced the truth of being saved by grace.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP OF GOSPEL PROCLAMATION TO MINISTRY TO THE POOR

While it is obvious that the Bible teaches ministry to the poor, people debate the identity of givers and receivers of such ministry and how the church should engage in it.

TO WHOM?

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 or her need was gone (Deut. 15:8–10). Tithes went to the poor (Deut. 14:28–29). The poor were not to be given a handout but rather to be provided tools, grain (Deut. 15:12–15), and land (Lev. 25), in order to become productive and self-sufficient citizens. Later, the prophets condemned Israel's insensitivity to the poor as covenant breaking. They taught that spending needlessly and ignoring the poor were sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6–7). Mercy to the poor was evidence of true commitment to God (Isa. 1:10–17; 58:6–7; Amos 4:1–6; 5:21–24). The seventy-year exile was a punishment for failure to observe Sabbath and Jubilee years (2 Chron. 36:20–21), in which the wealthy were to cancel debts.

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 to

9. See Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids. Mich.: 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.

10. Ibid., 390–94.

11. Edwards, "Christian Charity," 2:166 (emphasis in original).

12. Ibid.

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 generously between rich and poor (2 Cor. 8:13–15; cf. Lev. 25). The apostles taught that true faith would show itself through deeds of mercy (James 2:1–23). Materialism was condemned as a grievous sin (1 Tim. 6:17–19; James 5:1–6). A special class of officers—deacons—were established to coordinate the church's ministry of mercy. We should not be surprised then that the first two sets of church leaders were word-leaders (apostles) and deed-leaders (the *diakonoi* of Acts 6).

Other issues remain. Even if it is recognized that the congregation as a whole (as well as individuals within it) is to give to the poor, the majority of biblical references are to giving within the Christian community—that is, 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. But both Israel (Lev. 19:33–34) and the new covenant community (1 Tim. 5:10; Heb. 13:2;) were directed to show hospitality to strangers and aliens—those not of the believing community. Likewise, the main thrust of Jesus' famous parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is that ministry of mercy should not be confined to the covenant community but also extended to outsiders. Again in Luke 6:32–36 Jesus urged his disciples to engage in deed-ministry to the ungrateful and wicked, replicating 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). Perhaps the most useful passage is the brief statement by Paul in Galatians 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 second to "all people" without regard to distinctions of ethnicity, nationality, or belief.

HOW?

Following are a few helpful pointers regarding the relationship of mercy ministry to evangelism within the context of the church.

Evangelism is distinct. The modernist church of the early twentieth century reduced gospel ministry to social ethics and social action. But this contradicts the Bible's commands to proclaim the gospel. It 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 disappears. In reaction to the social gospel movement, many churches remain deeply suspicious of too much emphasis placed on ministry to the poor.

In light of the biblical material, many today seek some sort of balance. On the one hand, some say we should do mercy and justice only as it helps us bring people to faith in Christ.[13] This does not seem to fit in with Jesus' good Samaritan parable, which calls us to care 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 ministers who evaluate mercy ministries by the number of converts or church members they produce. The sociologist Robert Putnam characterizes such church-based initiatives as church-centered bonding (or exclusive) social capital, as opposed to community-centered bridging (or inclusive) social capital.[14] That is, the ministry of these kinds of churches is not really designed to build up the neighbors but only to expand the church. It's easy to see how this approach may be perceived as tribal and self-centered, giving only to get something in return (Luke 6:32–35).

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

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

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

"Social 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."[15] This approach seems to detach mercy ministry too much from the ministry of the Word. It opens the possibility that ministry to the poor might stand on its own without the preaching of the gospel. I propose something else: an *asymmetrical but inseparable* relationship.

Evangelism is more basic than ministry to the poor. Evangelism should 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 Corinthians 4:16–18, Paul speaks of the importance of strengthening the "inner man" even as the outer, physical nature is aging and decaying. Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being, not because the spiritual is more important than the physical but because the eternal is more important than the temporal (Matt. 11:1–6; John 17:18; 1 John 3:17–18).

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. In Jesus' ministry, healing the sick and feeding the hungry were 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 rather 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.*[16]

The book of Acts draws a close connection between the economic sharing of possessions and the multiplication of converts through the preaching of the Word. In the early church the descent of the Holy Spirit and an explosive growth in numbers (Acts 2:41) were connected to radical sharing with the needy (2:44–45). After the ministry of *diakonia* was firmly established, "the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly" (Acts 6:7). Moreover, 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."[17]

Inseparable does not mean a rigid temporal order. 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

15. John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now!* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 27.
16. Edmund P. Clowney, "Kingdom Evangelism," in *The Pastor-Evangelist: Preacher, Model, and Mobilizer for Church Growth*, ed. Roger S. Greenway (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 22.
17. 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.

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. It should always be clear that the motivation for our aid is our Christian faith, and pains should be taken to find nonartificial and nonexploitative ways to keep ministries of the Word closely connected to ministries of aid.

III. HOW TO ENGAGE IN MINISTRY TO THE POOR

While I do not aim for this essay to specify the details of a church's healthy ministry to the poor,[18] I urge churches to strike a proper balance in the following ways.

AN ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATION: JUSTICE AND MERCY

It is one thing to want to help the poor; it is another thing to go about it wisely. In fact, it is rather easy for one's involvement in the life of a poor family to make things worse rather than better. This happens because of two unbiblical political ideologies and reductionisms that permeate our culture today. Conservatives, in general, see poverty as caused by personal irresponsibility. Liberals, in general, see poverty as caused by unjust social systems. But the Bible moves back and forth in calling ministry to the poor *both* "justice" and "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). Elsewhere, however, the sharing of food and shelter and other basic resources is called "doing justice" (Isa. 58:6–10; cf. Lev. 19:13; Jer. 22:13).

I think the reason for this dual usage of the terms *justice* and *mercy* involves the biblical explanation of the causes of poverty as much more complex than our current ideologies.[19] The wisdom literature provides a remarkably balanced and nuanced view of the root causes of poverty. In Proverbs we read that "all hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Prov. 14:23). Yet we are also told, "A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away" (Prov. 13:23). Both personal issues and social, systemic factors can lead to poverty.

Many conservatives are motivated to help the poor out of 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 we have is not just uncompassionate but unfair and unjust. On the other hand, many liberals are motivated to help the poor out of a sense of indignation and aborted justice. Poverty is seen strictly in terms of structural inequities. This misses the fact that individual responsibility and transformation have a great deal to do with escape from poverty. 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 overemphasizes individual responsibility; the other underemphasizes it. A balanced motivation arises from a heart touched by grace, which has lost its feeling of superiority toward any particular class of people. It is the gospel that motivates us to act out of both mercy and justice. God told 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; rather, God

18. Editor's note: Cf. Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road,* 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997).

19. Cf. D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 51–59, which discusses six "kinds of poverty."

liberated them by his grace and power. Now they were to treat immigrants and the poor as their neighbors. Their motivation was clear—because of God's liberating salvation of them from the tyranny of Egypt.

A DIVISION OF LABOR: INDIVIDUAL AND CHURCH

The church's ministry to the poor makes great sense as a corporate vehicle for Christians to fulfill their biblical duty to the poor. The church should recognize different levels of ministry to the poor, however, and understand the limits of each.

+ **Relief.** This is direct aid to meet physical, material, or social needs. Common relief ministries include temporary shelters for the homeless, food and clothing services, medical services, crisis counseling, and the like. A more active form of relief is advocacy, in which people in need are given active assistance to get legal aid, find housing, and locate other kinds of aid.
+ **Development.** This is what is needed to bring a person or community to self-sufficiency. In the Old Testament, 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 life (Deut. 15:13–14). Development includes education, job creation, and vocational training. Development for a neighborhood or community involves reinvesting social and financial capital into a social system, such as through housing development, home ownership, and other capital investments.
+ **Reform.** Social reform moves beyond relief of immediate needs and seeks to change social conditions and structures that cause the dependency. In Job we see that Job not only clothed the naked but also "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 (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 24:17), and capital-lending systems that gouged the persons of modest means (Exod. 22:25–27; Lev. 19:35–37; 25:37). These examples prove that Christians should get involved in their particular communities and work for fair and just practices as needed.

As a general rule, I believe the church should be involved in the first of these (relief ministry) and that voluntary associations, organizations, and ministries should be organized to do the second (development) and third (reform). Many would argue that development and reform require an abundance of resources that may infringe upon the church's ministry of the Word. Others would say that development and reform create unhealthy political alliances within the congregation. And still others would maintain that development and reform are too complex to be included in the mandate or qualifications of church elders. All of these arguments have some merit, and I do not have the time and space to adequately address the issues here. I would only observe that most American churches that are deeply involved in caring for the poor have found the wisest course of action to be the creation of separate nonprofit corporations to handle community development and social reform, rather than to work directly through the local congregation.

IV. JESUS THE POOR MAN

The Bible resounds with the message that God identifies with the poor. As noted earlier, this means that on judgment day God will be able to judge a person's attitude toward him by the person's attitude toward the poor (Matt. 25). It also means something even more profound.

In Matthew 25 God identified with the poor symbolically. But in the incarnation and death of Jesus, God identified with the poor literally (cf. Phil 2.5-11). Jesus was born in a feeding trough. At his circumcision ceremony, Jesus' family could offer only the bare minimum, what was required of the poor (Luke 2:24). During his earthly ministry Jesus 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 and spent his last evening in a borrowed room, and when he died, he was laid in a

borrowed tomb. His tormentors cast lots for his only possession, his robe, because 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?" (Matt. 25:44). The answer is: on the cross, where he died among the thieves and 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.

This article is adapted from a paper presented at The Gospel Coalition's Pastors' Colloquium in Deerfield, IL on May 28, 2008, and printed in Themelios, Volume 33, Issue 3, December 2008.