

Ministry to the Social and Physical Needs of our Society

Orientation

Although, as we saw earlier, the church is not intended to take over the state, or to see itself as the state, this does not mean that the church need not be concerned with socio-economic conditions in our society. In fact, the Bible lays special responsibility on the people of God, including the New Testament church, to watch out for the disadvantaged members of society. We will look briefly at two aspects of this area of biblical teaching:

1. The biblical mandate for social ministry
2. The strategic outlook of Xenos for dealing with this task

The biblical mandate for social relief ministry

The ethics of generosity in helping the poor is rooted in the person and work of Christ himself according to 2 Cor. 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." This example of Christ's should lead us to see our responsibility to use the wealth God has entrusted to us to glorify him by sharing with the poor.

John draws the connection this way: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (1 Jn. 3:16-19) Christ's love should move us to compassion for those who are suffering from poverty.

Jesus agreed that caring for the physical needs of others is an essential part of what it means to love others as we love ourselves in the parable of the good Samaritan. (Lk. 10:25-37)

We are all made in the image of God, and it should pain us that there is gross inequality. When Paul led relief efforts for the poor believers in Judea, he reasoned with the Corinthians that they should give generously to the effort because, "this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality--at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality; as it is written, 'He who {gathered} much did not have too much, and he who {gathered} little had no lack.'" (2 Cor. 8:13-15) Of course, the ideal is not that all Christians become poor so that there will be equality.

Rather, the ideal is that the poor become more prosperous so that their needs are met.

Jesus taught caring for the poor in very strong terms when he described this scene at the last judgment:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me {something} to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe you? And when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.'" (Mt. 25:34-40)

Paul makes it clear that we should also prioritize the needs of Christian poor, without neglecting non-Christian poor. (Gal. 6:10) However, this support of the poor is for those who are victims of tragedy, or who are disadvantaged, or not able to work. It is not for those who are unwilling to work. (2 Thess. 3:6-10)

Finally, the extent to which we go in helping the disadvantaged is a matter of private conscience. It is not to be legislated by the church. This can be seen from Paul's comments in 2 Cor. 9:7 "Let each do just as he has purposed in his own heart. . . not under compulsion. . ."

Discussion

The book of Proverbs has some striking promises and warnings in the area of caring for the poor. It may be appropriate to go around the room, each reading one of the following proverbs, and the group summarizing what the verse teaches, or what the application(s) is.

- Prov. 13:23 "Abundant food is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice."
- Prov. 14:21 "He who despises his neighbor sins, But happy is he who is gracious to the poor."
- Prov. 14:31 "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors him."
- Prov. 19:17 "He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, And he will repay him for his good deed."
- Prov. 21:13 "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be answered."
- Prov. 22:9 "He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor."
- Prov. 28:27 "He who gives to the poor will never want, but he who shuts his eyes will have many curses."
- Prov. 29:7 "The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor; the wicked does not understand such concern."

Xenos' strategy for dealing with social relief ministry

At Xenos, we believe that the church needs to carry out the biblical mandate outlined above to the extent we are able, based on a carefully thought-out [community development strategy](#). Our social relief ministry, [Urban Concern](#) follows these principles:

1. We should devote the vast majority of our resources to projects that effect permanent socio-economic as well as spiritual change. In other words, we want to impact families and communities with money, help, and the gospel in a way that is self-sustaining over decades, not merely feed hungry people in a way that is soon forgotten in an endless sea of need. Many social problems have spiritual and moral causes which need to be addressed at the same time that we meet immediate need. Any immediate needs that we meet should be a part of an over all strategy to effect permanent change within a specified community.
2. We should devote more resources to meeting need in foreign countries where poverty is much worse than in the United States. This part of our strategy must be worked out in conjunction with the imperatives in the area of world missionary outreach mentioned earlier.

3. We should accept limitations in the size of the area and the number of people we help for the sake of effecting real change. This means that we are obligated to say "No" to many worth-while projects in order to avoid diluting our impact in chosen communities.

Discussion

Ask the group if they agree with the above three points, and if they understand the thinking behind each. Are there any exceptions to these points?