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The Social Gospel Imposing a Cultural Mandate into the Great Commission

by Gary E. Gilley

One of the issues God's people have always faced is their role in society. In the Old Testament, the Lord chose Abraham to be the father of a called-out race of people. Years later, the Lord established the nation of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. Detailed laws and regulations were given to Israel at the time. These included governance, dealing with poverty, helping widows and orphans, and correcting injustices. These matters were addressed almost exclusively within the context of the nation of Israel, with minor concern for surrounding nations.

The Old Covenant was in force until the dawning of the Church Age in Acts 2. The Church, God's chosen people in this age, comprises regenerate people of all nationalities. It is not a nation in an official sense and has not been given laws by which a governmental structure could function.

Still, most recognize that Christians live as citizens not only of heaven but

also of earth and thus have responsibilities here and now. The nature of those responsibilities and their administration have been debated for almost 2000 years. Over time, the consensus has swung from disinterest in societal problems to making their solution the Church's primary objective.

Most recently, a focus on the social agenda has gained popularity in most evangelical circles and is rapidly attaining equal status with the proclamation of the Gospel message. A two-pronged gospel has arisen, composed of the Great Commission and the so-called Cultural Mandate.

(continues on page 11)



Inside this Issue:

TBN FRAUD REPORTED	PAGE 3
THE IMPERATIVE OF DISCERNMENT	PAGE 4
THE SOCIAL GOSPEL OF THE PAST	PAGE 12

It is essential that we read and consider Acts 20:26-32. In those verses Paul warns that false teachers would infiltrate the Ephesian church — both from outside and inside. The heretical teachers would mislead and speak perverse things, divide the flock, and carry off misguided followers. By extension, leaders in the Church are commanded to really be on guard. All of this demands discernment. It is not a “do it if you feel like it” exercise.

Ponder the imperative of discernment — its facts — its failures — and your responsibility to fully embrace it.

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THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

(continued from page 1)

An article by John R.W. Stott, an early architect of the two-pronged approach, was posthumously published in *Christianity Today*. It stated:

“We are convinced of the power of the gospel in evangelism — that it brings salvation and redemption to those who respond and believe in Jesus. But it isn't only the gospel that is powerful. All God's truth is powerful.”¹

Such a statement, on its face, is not debatable. But Christians should take heed of where it leads. Stott has endorsed, if not created, the vision statement of The Lausanne Movement: “The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.” While this makes for a catchy slogan, almost every word has to be examined.

Given the high emphasis on ecumenical unity at all three of the Lausanne conferences on world evangelization, including the latest in Cape Town in 2010, it appears that the “whole church” includes virtually all branches and traditions within Christendom, including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and mainline denominations. The “whole gospel” will be defined by what is meant by the “whole world.” According to The Lausanne Movement, “the whole world” is framed around six major themes, including “The World of Violence” and “The World of Poverty and Injustice.”² The “whole gospel” by default includes not only the good news that Jesus Christ has died to provide salvation, but also addresses the social injustices found in our world today. As further evidence of this, we turn to positional papers flowing from Cape Town 2010. One such document from the conference reads:

“Cape Town 2010 must call evangelicals to recognise afresh the biblical affirmation of God's redemptive purpose for *creation* itself. Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out, the biblical truth that the gospel is God's good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for persons, *and* for society, *and* for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God's people. ... Christians who are working in environmental biology and creation care have a valid missional calling which needs to be recognised, encouraged and resourced by the church, for they model how to integrate the care of creation into what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Caring

for creation is an act of fidelity to the whole biblical gospel and the mission that flows from it. ... Our missional calling demands more careful and critical consumption, creative production, prophetic denunciation, advocacy for and mobilization of the victims of world injustice. While we stand with the Micah Challenge in holding our governments accountable to their commitments to 'make poverty history', we also dedicate ourselves to 'making greed history' in our own lives, churches, communities, countries and world."³

It becomes clear from such statements that Lausanne, which represents much of mainstream evangelicalism, is co-mingling a form of the social gospel with the biblical Gospel. The Lausanne leadership does try to give evangelism pre-eminence, stating:

"Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, *nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.* For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist."⁴

This statement goes to the heart of the issue. The question is not whether Christians should play a responsible role in society, or whether we should denounce evil and injustice, but whether "evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty," and if so, to what extent?

This concern is widespread and contagious. Some of the most popular Christian leaders and authors stress the social agenda. Francis Chan, in his book *Crazy Love*, wants Christians to live as simply as possible in order to



The Social Gospel of the Past

by Gary E. Gilley

Evangelicalism changed radically in the 19th century. The effects of the Great Awakening in the 1730s-1740s in America and the Evangelical Revival in England were a memory. Many longed for something similar but seemed willing to settle for the outward emotionalism¹ instead of the content-oriented approach of their fathers. Thus, when the so-called Second Great Awakening began in Cane Ridge, Ky., in 1800 and spread throughout much of New England and parts of the American South, it differed greatly from the previous century's revival.

Jonathan Edwards believed the Great Awakening was a true revival, but he also knew that there were excesses, pretenders, and "false spirits" mingled in. While there were undoubtedly true conversions and fervor for the Lord in the 19th century revivals, much of it was fleshly passion. A good speaker, such as Charles Finney, could draw huge crowds. Churches would be packed during "revivals," but after the evangelists had moved on, life returned to its pre-revival state.

Many pastors decided to offer revival-style services. One critic of the Finney-style revivals wrote that in 1858: "Singing, shouting, jumping, talking, praying, all at the same time ... in a crowded house, filled to suffocation," according to a more sober Congregational missionary, led to people having fits and giving in their names as converts but, as soon as the excitement was over, falling away."²

This cycle became so common that certain sections of New England and

the state of New York became known as the "Burnt-over District" where the fire of revival meetings had swept so often through some areas that people ultimately had grown resistant to the things of God. To this day, these regions remain perhaps the most spiritually hardened parts of the American landscape. It is interesting, however, that in the mid-1800s many of the standard cults that are prominent today emerged from this same area.

By the mid-1800s, some saw a need to establish criteria by which a true Evangelical could be identified. In 1846, "the Evangelical Alliance was formed to bring together the Protestants all over the world who were the heirs of the awakening of the previous century."³ The Evangelical Alliance confirmed the standard doctrines of the faith and offered four hallmarks of an Evangelical:

- Belief in the inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture.
- Acknowledgement of the centrality of the cross, upon which Jesus' sacrifice provided the way of salvation for men.
- Affirmation of the need for conversion in which by repentance and faith a sinner becomes a new creature in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Activism in which the child of God is busy presenting the Gospel and ministering to those in need.⁴

Those who rejected the doctrinal orthodoxy of the World Evangelical Alliance, as it was also called, tried

to infiltrate it with liberal theology. When that failed, they withdrew in 1894 to form their own organization, The Open Church League, which later was renamed the National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers in 1900. By 1950 the National Federation was reorganized as the National Council of Churches.⁵ This breaking away by the liberal factions and the forming of their own organization led to the demise of the World Evangelical Alliance.

The liberal theologians (known as “modernists” in the late 1800s) were bringing German rationalism into English-speaking churches, especially in America. Many in these churches had abandoned the careful study and teaching of Scripture, making these churches fertile ground for heresy.

Added to this was a move from the precise thinking of the Enlightenment to Romanticism and emphasis on feeling and experience over theology and Scripture.⁶ Together all of these threads were combined during the second half of the 19th century to produce a radical makeover in Christianity. Doctrines held dear by Evangelicals were abandoned. And with the denial of essential biblical truth came a shift in the focus and purpose of the Church. If the incarnation was in doubt, and the Scriptures suspect, and theology itself under attack, then that left social action as the mission of the Church. And thus the “social gospel” was born.

Church historian David Bebbington wrote:

“The most characteristic doctrine of the social gospelers, that the kingdom of God was to be realized by social improvement, was derived primarily from the German liberal theologian Albrecht Ritschl.”⁷

However, it is important to realize that the social gospel did not overwhelm the Gospel of spiritual salvation all at once. For some time,

“There was much agreement in America that the gospel was primarily a matter of spiritual salvation, but that under modern conditions it was also necessary to strive for social reform. In its origins the social gospel movement was in large part a broadening expression of evangelicalism.”⁸

Perhaps doctrine took a back seat to social action because of pressure by people such as George Eliot who taught that “salvation of the individual soul was not sufficient. Society must be saved as well as Christians.”⁹

Nevertheless, evangelical forces held their ground during most of the latter half of the century, but the front lines began to crumble by the last decade and the war was essentially lost by 1900. And with that loss not only had the great truths of Scripture been undermined, but the purpose of the Church had been shifted from fulfillment of the Great Commission with its emphasis on evangelism and discipleship to the social gospel and saving society from itself. Probably no one has described the social gospel better than H. Richard Niebuhr who wrote, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”¹⁰

By the early 1900s, most theological liberals had made social concerns central to their understanding of the Gospel. Historian George Marsden wrote:

“While not necessarily denying the value of the traditional evangelical approach of starting with evangelism, social gospel spokesmen subordinated such themes, often suggesting that stress on evangelism had made American evangelicalism too otherworldly ... and individualistic ... Such themes fit well with the emerging liberal theology of the day.”¹¹

(continues on page 21)

give more toward the alleviation of “suffering in the world and change the reputation of His bride in America.”⁵ One of the reasons Chan’s book has been received with such enthusiasm is that he is not telling people anything that our culture is not already saying. When Bill Gates and Warren Buffett pledged much of their vast fortunes toward the same agenda, the world applauded, just as it has for Chan.

Chan is concerned about the reputation of the Church in America, and not without reason. However, the true Church doing the true work of God (calling people to Christ) will never win the world’s approval. The Church’s message is offensive (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) and we are far more likely to be vilified and persecuted than cheered — as Jesus promised (Matthew 5:11-12). We should find it a source of concern, not a reason for rejoicing, when the world likes us.

A similar voice is David Platt’s and his book *Radical*. Platt offers better balance than Chan but still propagates a two-pronged gospel: the Gospel of redemption and the social gospel. While Platt is careful to elevate the true Gospel, the social gospel of feeding the hungry and giving to the poor is the primary focus of the book and accounts for its popularity.⁶ He writes, “as we meet needs on earth, we are proclaiming a gospel that transforms lives for eternity.”⁷ The author does not advocate the social agenda as opposed to true evangelism, but he does say that caring for the poor is evidence of salvation. He writes, “rich people who neglect the poor are not the people of God.”⁸

However, when we turn to the New Testament, we find that while Christians are to be loving and generous to all people, they are never told to try to alleviate the consequences of the sin of unbelieving humanity through social action. Instead, they are told to supply the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ, something Platt admits in a footnote.⁹ In fact, the Church is never commissioned to rectify injustices by dealing with the symptoms of sin, but to “radically” uproot sin

itself through the Gospel. Kevin DeYoung and Gregory Gilbert wrote, "If you are looking for a picture of the early church giving itself to creation care, plans for societal renewal, and strategies to serve the community in Jesus' name, you won't find them in Acts. But if you are looking for preaching, teaching, and the centrality of the Word, this is your book."¹⁰

Nevertheless, evangelical leader Timothy Keller offers a different message. In his book *The Reason for God*, Keller promotes the two-pronged gospel. Drawing from N.T. Wright and the "missional" understanding of Christianity, Keller infuses a social dimension into his gospel definition. Keller's gospel is more than the good news that Christ has come to reconcile us to God; it is also solving the world's problems of injustice, poverty, and healing the troubles of this earth. He quotes Wright, not Scripture, to support his view:

"The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won ... But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world ... Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things — and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all."¹¹

Later Keller makes clear what he means:

"The purpose of Jesus's coming is to put the whole world right, to renew and restore the creation, not to escape it. It is not just to bring personal forgiveness and peace, but also justice and *shalom* to the world. ... The work of the Spirit of God is not only to save souls but also to care and cultivate the face of the earth, the material world."¹²

Nowhere in the New Testament is such a commission given to the

people of God. One will, however, find a similar message in the emergent church, Wright's "New Perspective on Paul," and those reviving the old "social gospel" agenda.

With this in mind, we turn to Wright himself. In his *What Saint Paul Really Said*, he writes that, "The gospel' is supposed to be a description of how people get saved," or how "Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness," or something along that order.¹³ To Wright this is not what Paul meant by the Gospel. The Gospel instead is "the narrative proclamation of King Jesus;"¹⁴ and Paul "is announcing that ... Jesus is the king, not only of Israel but of all the world."¹⁵ Said with greater clarity, "The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord — Lord of the world, Lord of the cosmos, Lord of the earth, of the ozone layer, of whales and waterfalls, of trees and tortoises."¹⁶

While no thinking Christian would deny the lordship of Christ over all things, when the Gospel itself becomes the message of lordship rather than the message of redemption and justification, a seismic shift in the understanding of Jesus' mission is necessary. Wright leaves no doubt where he is headed: "As soon as we get this right we destroy at a stroke the disastrous dichotomy that has existed in people's minds between 'preaching the gospel' on the one hand and what used to be called loosely 'social action' or 'social justice' on the other. Preaching the gospel means announcing Jesus as Lord of the world; and ... we cannot make that announcement without seeking to bring that lordship to bear over every aspect of the world. ... It is bringing the whole world under the lordship of Christ."¹⁷

Add to all this Rick Warren's PEACE plan. After the success of his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Warren developed a plan for changing the world. PEACE is an acronym for "Promote Reconciliation," "Equip Servant Leaders," "Assist the Poor," "Care for the Sick," and "Educate the Next Generation." Originally, the first letter of the acronym PEACE stood for "Plant Churches" and, as such,

would be the only thing distinguishing the plan from any other well-meaning secular program. The initial idea was to motivate and coordinate churches to solve the four social problems identified in the rest of the acronym (E-A-C-E). Warren's logic is that the Church is already present throughout the world and where churches were lacking, more could be planted to meet these social needs. But as Warren's focus changed and he wanted to enlarge his influence, he changed what the "P" stood for and has removed any Christian distinctiveness from the plan.

What is unfolding before us is what emergent church leader Brian McLaren calls "missional." Missional, McLaren tells us, is "a generous third way" between the conservative personal Savior gospel and the liberal version of it.¹⁸ McLaren explains his missional calling as "blessed in this life to be a blessing to everyone on earth. ... my mission isn't to figure out who is already blessed, or not blessed, or unbleasable. My calling is to be blessed so I can bless everyone."¹⁹ He continues, "From this understanding we place less emphasis on whose lineage, rites, doctrines, structures, and terminology are *right* and more emphasis on whose actions, service, outreach, kindness, and effectiveness are *good*. ... [In order] to help our world get back on the road to being truly and wholly good again, the way God created it to be."²⁰

Rob Bell adds:

"For Jesus, the question wasn't, how do I get into heaven? but how do I bring heaven here? ... The goal isn't escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to. And God is remaking us into the kind of people who can do this kind of work."²¹

McLaren's and Bell's rationale is an echo of the founders of liberalism.

IN SEARCH OF THE MESSAGE

The original social gospel movement began as an appendage to the emerging liberalism that started in Germany and ultimately swept

through the Western Church. As the liberal movement matured, it left behind most doctrinal distinctives held by earlier Protestants and came to be defined by social action. Today, a new wave of social involvement, as a major tenet of Church ministry, is flowing through evangelical churches, changing the very nature of Church dynamics and outreach. The issue is not whether Christians should be involved with their culture, but whether trying to solve problems of the culture is the mission of the Church.

Liberalism would almost exclusively emphasize social causes. For example, the National Council of Churches states, "*the central moral imperative of our time is the care for Earth as God's creation.*"²² Postmodern liberalism, as found in the emergent movement, would agree. McLaren believes that "Jesus and his message have everything to do with poverty, slavery, and a 'social agenda'"²³ — it is not about justification from sin.

SUPPORT FOR A TWO-PRONGED MANDATE

Those who back the concept that the Church has been called to both disciple men and women for Christ and improve social conditions cite three primary arguments:

1. Old Testament Israel. When trying to provide a biblical foundation for social involvement of the Church, supporters most often turn to Old Testament teaching directed at Israel. There are numerous commands and admonitions that have social implications. For example, we find God's concern for:

• **Justice.** "Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune, which they have prescribed to rob the needy of justice" (Isaiah 10:1-2a, emphasis added). The Lord made provision for fair and impartial courts of law, not just for the poor but for all: "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:15).

• **The poor.** "He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished" (Proverbs 17:5, emphasis added).

The Lord provided several means to help the poor in Israel. One method was to provide the Jewish people with a "kinsman-redeemer," a close relative designated to alleviate the relative's troubles, including poverty. The book of Ruth supplies the best illustration of how this system worked, but in Leviticus 25:25 we read, "If one of your brethren becomes poor, and has sold some of his possession, and if his redeeming relative comes to redeem it, then he may redeem what his brother sold." In Deuteronomy 15:11 the Lord tells Israel, "For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'"

• **Widows and orphans.** Again in Isaiah 10:1-2 the Lord tells His people, "Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune, which they have prescribed to rob the needy of justice, and to take what is right from the poor of My people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless" (emphasis added). There is a special place in the heart of God for orphans and widows.

• **The hungry.** One of the characteristics the Lord gives of the fool is "to keep the hungry unsatisfied, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail" (Isaiah 32:6). Proverbs calls for the Jews to feed even their enemies: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (25:21). And the Lord gives this promise, "If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday" (Isaiah 58:10). Regarding the hungry, the Lord made unique provisions demanding the farmers to leave a bit of their harvest in the fields for the poor to glean: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You

shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:22).

These concerns for the needy, which express the heart of God, must be taken seriously, and many are contemplating such instructions anew. For example, Chan sees Jesus' words at the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 25 as a continuation or application of the Old Testament teachings. Chan believes the actions we take toward the poor have been set by our Lord as the paradigm to determine the validity of our faith. He bases his understanding on verses 34-40 which read: "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was 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? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"

Chan writes, "Jesus is saying that we show tangible love for God in how we care for the poor and those who are suffering. He expects us to treat the poor and the desperate as if they were Christ Himself."²⁴ By way of application Chan continues, "Much of their [the poor] daily hardship and suffering could be relieved with access to food, clean water, clothing, adequate shelter, or basic medical attention. I believe that God wants His people, His church, to meet these needs."²⁵

2. Jesus' Salt and Light Metaphors. In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus tells His disciples that they are the salt and light of the world. Stott represents how many people interpret these verses when he writes:

“[Jesus] emphasizes the influences Christians ought to have on the non-Christian environment. The distinction between the two is clear. The world, he says, is like rotting meat. But you are to be the world’s salt. The world is like a dark night, but you are to be the world’s light. ... Then he goes on from the distinction to the influence. Like salt in putrefying meat, Christians are to hinder social decay. Like light in the prevailing darkness, Christians are to illumine society and show it a better way.”²⁶

Chan writes:

“Non-churchgoers tend to see Christians as takers rather than givers. When Christians sacrifice and give wildly to the poor, that is truly a light that glimmers. The Bible teaches that the church is to be that light, that sign of hope, in an increasingly dark and hopeless world. Matthew 5:16 says, ‘Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.’”²⁷

The means by which believers are fulfilling Jesus’ teaching to be salt and light in the world is increasingly seen by Evangelicals as being through social and political involvement. As we mobilize the Church to meet the needs of the hungry, sick and poor, and as we protect the environment and become active in political reform, we are seen by many as living out our salt and light obligations.

3. The Cultural Mandate. Recently Evangelicals have been turning to what they call the “Cultural Mandate” to provide a biblical base for social action. The idea is that the Lord has actually given the Church two interrelated callings: The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) in which believers are to go into the whole world and make disciples for Christ, and the Cultural Mandate in which the Church is authorized to be directly involved in physical and social issues related to the planet. No true Evangelical questions the Great Commission, but the Cultural Mandate is

not so clear. The biblical teaching for the Cultural Mandate is drawn from Genesis 1:26, 28:

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ ... Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

From this pre-Fall text has come the belief that the Church retains the mandate given to Adam in the Garden to subdue and rule over the earth. Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, authors of *Living at the Crossroads*, write:

“If redemption is, as the Bible teaches, the restoration of the whole of creation, then our mission is to embody this good news: every part of creational life, including the public life of our culture, is being restored. The good news will be evident in our care for the environment, in our approach to international relations, economic justice, business, media, scholarship, family, journalism, industry, and law. But if redemption were merely about an otherworldly salvation (as, for example, Moody believed), then our mission would be reduced to the sort of evangelism that tries to get people into heaven.”²⁸

Nancy Pearcey writes in her book *Total Truth*, “Christians are to redeem entire cultures, not just individuals.”²⁹

Pearcey speaks often of the Cultural Mandate:

“Our calling is not just to ‘get to heaven’ but also to cultivate the earth, not just to ‘save souls’ but also to serve God through our work. For God Himself is engaged not only in the work of salvation (special grace) but also

in the work of preserving and developing His creation (common grace). When we obey the Cultural Mandate, we participate in the work of God Himself, as agents of His common grace. This is the rich content that should come to mind when we hear the word *Redemption*. The term does not refer only to a one-time conversion event. It means entering upon a lifelong quest to devote our skills and talents to building things that are beautiful and useful, while fighting the forces of evil and sin that oppress and distort the creation.”³⁰

Pearcey and company are not content with influencing culture or trying to mitigate injustices. They want to *create* culture. In one section Pearcey mentions the social efforts of some Christians who minister to “the poor, the homeless, the addicted” but laments that “none of them attempt to transform social or cultural systems, but merely [minister] to alleviate some of the harm caused by the existing system.”³¹

It becomes apparent that many leading Evangelicals see the Cultural Mandate as fully in force as it was when first given to Adam and Eve. Christians then have a charge to change culture, transform culture, create culture, and subdue creation. This is seen as a duty on par with making disciples, and thus the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate are equal parts of fulfilling the Church’s mission on earth.

BIBLICAL EXAMINATION OF THE TWO-PRONGED MANDATE

In critiquing the three arguments for this mandate we can first ask, “How should God’s commands to Israel be viewed for this age?” And we could break that question down into two questions: “Are Jewish civil laws applicable to the New Testament Church, and if so, how would they function in the Church age?”

The authors of the New Testament express the same concerns as we find

in the Old Testament. James 1:27 tells us that, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." The early Church made provisions to feed orphans and widows in Acts 6:1-6 and later, as the Church became more established, widows without other means of support or resources were placed on a list to be given special care (1 Timothy 5:11-16).

One of the primary reasons for Paul's third missionary journey was to collect from the western churches a relief offering to help the poor believers in Jerusalem, "For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem" (Romans 15:26).

And James calls for justice for the poor: "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality" (James 2:1ff). Without question, the social concerns of God in the Old Testament remain the same in the Church age.

However, it is often overlooked that God's commands concerning social issues in the Old Testament were given almost exclusively to Israel, and dealt almost entirely with the needs of those living within the boundaries of geographical Israel and under direct authority of the Mosaic Law. Charles Ryrie notes that the Old Testament "does not command the establishment of justice in the world, nor the care of all the poor and oppressed in the world. It is more 'isolationist' than the New Testament. But it does show God's love for justice and holiness in personal living."³²

Drawing strictly from the Old Testament Scriptures yields a picture of a loving, concerned, caring God who nevertheless focused attention, with almost no exceptions, on the poor and needy living in Israel under the theocratic kingdom and the Mosaic Law. In the Old Testament no provision was made for the destitute living throughout the world. No social outreach to surrounding nations can be found. Therefore, to press into service

the social program found in the Old Testament as a pattern for today's global outreach to the needy is to go beyond what the Old Testament teaches. As Israel cared for the needs of her own poor, it was every poor person who was helped. Kevin DeYoung and Gregory Gilbert encourage us to "remember that the 'poor' in Scripture are usually the pious poor. They are the righteous poor ... the poor whom God favors are not the slothful poor (Prov. 6:6-11; 2 Thess. 3:6-12) or the disobedient poor (Prov. 30:9), but the humble poor who wait on God (Matt. 5:3; 6:33)."³³

THE MEANING OF JESUS' SALT AND LIGHT METAPHORS

Jesus' identification of His disciples as salt and light in the world is straightforward and has been the source of much contemplation throughout the years concerning what the followers of the Lord are to be like. Interpreting what Jesus said in Matthew 5:13-16 in general is not difficult. Most would agree with New Testament scholar William Hendriksen who writes:

"Salt, then, has *especially* a *negative* function. It combats deterioration. Similarly Christians, by showing themselves to be Christians indeed, are constantly combating moral and spiritual decay. ... Light, on the other hand, has a *positive* function and shines *openly*, publicly."³⁴

The specific application is where things get sticky. As noted above, many are interpreting this text to mean that believers are to engage culture through political involvement and social action. Most commentators, who are addressing the text with no agenda to push, do not agree. Hendriksen writes:

"Now since it is the business of the church to shine for Jesus, it should not permit itself to be thrown off its course. It is not the task of the church to specialize in and deliver all kinds of pronouncements concerning economic, social, and political prob-

lems. ... But the *primary* duty of the church remains the spreading forth of the message of salvation, that the lost may be found (Luke 15:4; I Cor. 9:16, 22; 10:33), those found may be strengthened in the faith (Eph. 4:15; I Thess. 3:11-13; I Peter 2:2; II Peter 3:18), and God may be glorified (John 17:4; I Cor. 10:31)."³⁵

Respected preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones states:

"The great hope for society today is an increasing number of individual Christians. Let the Church of God concentrate on that and not waste her time and energy on matters outside her province."³⁶

A.W. Pink agrees:

"Spiritually the world is in darkness (II Peter i, 19) and sits in the shadow of death (Matt. iv, 16) ... By their [the believers'] preaching ignorance is to be exposed, that their hearers may be 'turned from darkness to light' (Acts xxvi, 18)."³⁷

Commentator R.T. France adds:

"It is only as this distinctive lifestyle is visible to others that it can have its desired effect. But that effect is also now spelled out not as the improvement and enlightenment of society as such, but rather as the glorifying of God by those outside the disciple community. The subject of this discourse, and the aim of the discipleship which it promotes, is not so much the betterment of life on earth as the implementation of the reign of God. The goal of disciples' witness is not that others emulate their way of life, or applaud their probity, but that they recognize the source of their distinctive lifestyle in 'your Father in heaven.'"³⁸

In the salt and light metaphors Jesus is not calling on His disciples to change society through good deeds but to live in such a way as to glorify God (Matthew 5:16). Such a lifestyle will have a beneficial effect on society in many cases, but the goal is to

magnify Jesus and draw people to Him.

To help us understand this better, it would be good to observe what Jesus did while on earth. He often healed the sick, fed crowds, and ministered to the poor and despised of society. Jesus had compassion on the hurting and rejected, and spent time with sinners. But it should also be observed that Jesus spent much time with wealthy people, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He ate in the homes of well-to-do tax collectors such as Zacchaeus and powerful Pharisees. He spent time with sinners and with religious leaders such as Nicodemus. He ministered to everyone who would listen and challenged (and often condemned) those who would not. In short, Jesus was the perfect embodiment of the command found in Leviticus: "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" (19:15).

It is also instructive to note what *Jesus did not do*. He healed some sick, but not all. He established no hospitals or clinics, nor did He eradicate sickness in Israel, or on earth, although it was in His power to do so. He did not start a soup kitchen or a breadline. He paid special attention to the poor but He did not relieve their debt or set them up in small businesses or give them loans. Jesus loved widows and orphans but did not establish a home for either. Whether Christian agencies should be established for these concerns today is another matter, but it would be going beyond both the instruction of Scripture and the example of Christ (or His apostles later in the New Testament history) to claim that we are to do so today because of what Jesus did while on earth. Jesus neither commanded us to do such things nor did He do them Himself.

IS THE CULTURAL MANDATE STILL IN EFFECT?

The Cultural Mandate is not in effect today for two reasons. First, it was only given once in Scripture and

that before the Fall of man. In Genesis 1:28 the Lord commanded Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

At this stage in human history, mankind was in harmony with creation. Following the Fall, however, both humans and creation were cursed and harmony between man and the physical universe was lost. Never again were humans told to subdue the earth or rule over the animal kingdom, for they were no longer capable of doing so. While man is still the chief of God's creations and able to control and tame much of the animal kingdom (James 3:7), he is no longer able, due to sin and the curse, to either subdue the earth or rule over the animals.

The closest thing to the Cultural Mandate in the remainder of Scripture is following the Flood when God commissioned Noah and his family. In Genesis 9:1 a portion of the original Mandate is given for Noah's family to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (see also verse 7). But rather than repeat the command to subdue and rule, the Lord says, "the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, ... Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs" (9:2-3). Man is no longer living in harmony with the animal kingdom; rather animals will fear man and man will consume animals.

When we examine the New Testament for God's directives to the Church, we do not find anything resembling the instructions given to Adam and Eve. Instead we find the Great Commission.

A second reason to reject the Cultural Mandate today is in the details of the Mandate itself. Adam and Eve are called to "subdue" something. The Hebrew word for "subdue" requires an object. To subdue implies that something needed to be conquered or put in its place. The question in Genesis 1:28 is what needed to be subdued prior to the Fall, because

sin had not yet corrupted the human race or any of physical creation. The only possibility seems to be Satan and the fallen angels, who were at war with God and apparently desired to rule the earth.

If this is the case, then part of man's mission was to win the struggle for the earth over demonic creatures. When Adam failed because he chose to sin, Satan temporarily won the battle and was promoted to "god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Man, in his fallen state, has no ability to subdue either demonic forces or the earth, both of which will be subdued by the New Adam. The day will come when Christ will create a new heaven and earth (2 Peter 3:13). Until then, creation groans under the curse of sin (Romans 8:22). The Lord will ultimately subdue and conquer the devil and his followers (Revelation 20:10). Until that time man is no longer called to subdue demons (he is told to resist — James 4:7) or rule over the animal kingdom. We are called to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16) and to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL ACTION

The general drift in evangelicalism, as we have seen, is toward adding the social action agenda to the Great Commission as the two-prong mission of the Church. N.T. Wright is certain:

"The call of the gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world *through suffering love*. ... God's ultimate purpose, which is to rid the world of evil altogether and to establish his new creation of justice, beauty and peace. And it's clear from the start that this was not intended simply as a distant goal for which one was compelled to wait in passive expectation. God's future has already broken into the present in Jesus, and the church's task consisted not least of *implementing* that achievement and thus *anticipating* that future."³⁹

Yet some of the best thinkers within conservative Christianity disagree.

D.A. Carson writes:

"It is hard to ignore the many injunctions of Scripture to do good, to show mercy, to care for the poor, to be concerned with matters of justice. If all such responsibilities belong to the church *as a church*, to the church *as an institution*, then surely the leaders of the church ... should take responsibility for them and direct them. But what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:2)."⁴⁰

Michael Horton writes:

"Terrorism, global warming, and AIDS are problems that we need to address as responsible human beings together with non-Christians in our common life together. ... However, the Great Commission is not the Great Cultural Mandate. ... If we could resolve our top ten crises in the world today, we would still have the devil on our back, sin mastering our heart, and everlasting death as the penalty for our mutiny."⁴¹

David Wells agrees:

"Churches that actually do influence the culture — here is the paradox — distance themselves from it in their internal life. They do not offer what can already be had on secular terms in the culture. They are an alternative to it."⁴²

Wells calls for the Church to be *sola Scriptura* as opposed to *sola cultura*.⁴³

Charles Ryrie writes:

"The Christian's primary responsibilities are evangelism and godly living. Through witnessing he changes people; through godly living he does affect society; and through private and public obedience he honors God."⁴⁴

Kevin DeYoung and Gregory Gilbert, in their book *What Is the Mission*

of the Church?, express concern "that in all our passion for renewing the city or tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ."⁴⁵ They maintain that the mission of the Church is found in the Great Commission passages: "We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling."⁴⁶

And Jesse Johnson adds:

"When people look to the church to end poverty, halt human trafficking, bring drinking water to Africa, or cure AIDS, they are looking in the wrong place. The church is not commissioned to do any of these tasks."⁴⁷

THE NEW TESTAMENT INSTRUCTIONS TO THE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN

Jesus' general description of the role of His disciples in the world is to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). The debate surrounds the details of how to accomplish this task. In response, Jesus' example is important and often misunderstood. Jesus healed people primarily as a sign pointing to who He was (Matthew 9:6; John 20:30). Later when Jesus commissioned His disciples, He did not send them forth to solve the world's problems but to make disciples and to teach people to obey God (Matthew 28:20). But this raises the question as to what commandments the disciples were to obey and teach. The best approach to discovering these commandments is to examine the examples of the early Christians, especially as found in the book of Acts, and through study of the direct teachings primarily found in the Epistles.

In the book of Acts we find the believers coming together for instruction in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, and scattering to evangelize (Acts 2:41-42). A major task of the early Christians was to establish churches (13:1-3), but there are no examples of

early Christians attempting to transform or create culture, or influence the political system in a direct way. Nor do we find them organizing programs to feed the hungry of the world or to right social injustices. Almost all of their attention was on evangelizing the lost as well as the spiritual life and physical needs of the believing community.

The teachings drawn from the Epistles focus on establishing truth, combating error, correcting false living, and leading Christians into godliness. The subject of society is seldom addressed, but when it is, the emphasis is on being excellent representatives of Christ to the world (salt and light) (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:11-15; Titus 3:1). Specifically, Christians were taught to take care of their (Christians') poor (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; 1 John 3:17; James 2:15-17), handle their own legal differences (1 Corinthians 6:1-8), and discipline their rebellious people (1 Corinthians 5). But they were not instructed to take care of society's poor, handle its legal issues, or discipline its sinners. In addition they were to treat their employees fairly (James 5:1-4). Passages such as 1 John 3:17 and James 2:15-17 could have implications for the treatment of unbelievers, but because the rest of the New Testament instruction is directed almost exclusively toward treatment of believers, it seems best to apply these verses primarily to Christians as well.

INSTRUCTIONS TO THE CORPORATE BODY — THE CHURCH

In the New Testament we find the Church as a body coming together to worship God, receive the instruction of the Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34), and participate in "body" life (1 Corinthians 12). The Scriptures are clear that God's people must do good, show mercy, care for the poor, and be concerned with matters of justice in every aspect of society. But there is never any indication that the Church as an institution is to see this as its task. If it were to do so, then surely the leaders of the church (elders/deacons) should take respon-

sibility for them and direct them. "But," as Carson notes, "what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:2). Even matters of justice *within the congregation* were in some measure handed over to other spirit-filled men (6:1-7). When the distinctive duties of pastors/elders/bishops are canvassed, the priority of the ministry of the Word and prayer is paramount,"⁴⁸ not organizing community and social outreaches.

The Church, as the Church, was never given the task of transforming or creating culture. Its sole biblical mandate to the world is to make disciples. Christians as individuals are to be salt and light in our world. Individual believers may very well be involved, alongside the unbeliever and within biblical parameters, in politics, social action, and protecting God's creation. Much variety on the cultural level is allowed by our Lord. But it must not be minimized that the New Testament example and precept is that followers of Christ are to disciple people for Him which includes evangelism and training in obedience.

When we draw our marching orders from the New Testament rather than the culture, it becomes clear that the task of the Church is to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all who come to Christ (Matthew 28:18-20), and caring for the needy who become part of the body of Christ (1 Timothy 5:16; Galatians 2:10). Broader social action is not prohibited, but it should not be equated with these two essential obligations.

It has proven almost impossible for the Church to keep the biblical command of the Great Commission in balance with the Cultural Mandate, once such a mandate is accepted as part of the mission of the Church. Those following this philosophy would abandon the Christ-given mission of making disciples for the task of improving society. Those churches and Christians who saw the error of the social gospel continued to center

their lives and ministries on the Great Commission. It is the descendants of these very churches and believers who are now being influenced to widen their understanding of the calling of Christ to include a social improving agenda. Unless there is a return to the biblical mandate given in the New Testament, the evangelical Church is in danger of repeating the same error of the 19th and 20th century Church with predictable results.

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