

What is the church's responsibility to the poor?

The poor

I take the Biblical category of “poor” to involve more than simple economic poverty, but groups and individuals who lack social power and influence. One might well use the word “marginalization” here, which covers a broad social experience i.e. a lack of resources, few social connections, physical weakness, isolation, powerlessness and vulnerability. So, this category is not simply about wealth, but about a whole life experience. We might think here, in addition to groups with low socio-economic status, of overlapping categories such as immigrants, the severely mentally ill, the homeless and long-term drug users.

I take it as axiomatic that all people and individuals, whatever their social background, are sinners facing the wrath of God and thus in desperate need of forgiveness of sins and justification with God. I also take it as obvious that we must do all we can to reach all groups and all peoples with the gospel. This paper is not written to discuss that issue, but rather to look at what social and economic responsibility the church has with regard to poverty and marginalization.

Obviously, this is a much debated point amongst evangelical churches, given the historical debates and current confusion about what our responsibility is. *Firstly*, I want to briefly outline the nature of our responsibility. *Secondly*, I will discuss the objections. *Thirdly*, I will very briefly list some questions we should ask ourselves as a result.

I. What is our responsibility?

- *The Bible makes very clear that compassion for the poor is a required fruit of regeneration, both individually and corporately.* A lack of compassion for the poor may well indicate that one does not know Christ or that a church is spiritually dead (James 2:14-17, 1 John 3:16-18). Other Scriptures make clear that failure to help the poor will result in judgement and cursing (Prov 21:13, 28:27). It is striking that Sodom's sin is identified in Ezek 16:49 with a failure to help the poor. Thus, how we deal with the poor will reveal the true nature of our relationship with Christ on the last day (Matt 25:31-46).
- *The issue is not simply one of compassion, but also of justice.* Here I am noting the very strong link between justice and concern for the marginalized in the Bible. Not least, this is grounded in the character of God Himself (Jer 9:23-24, Ps 146:5-10). Righteousness itself is defined in close connection with doing social justice (Ezek 18:1-18, Prov 29:7). The task is, therefore, not simply to take pity, but to demonstrate social justice in our relationships (i.e. limitation on economic inequalities, fair play, no favouritism to the rich/powerful). Doing mercy and justice is thus an end *in and of itself* and not merely a means to something else (i.e. evangelism).

- *We must also consider the Kingdom to come.* The future salvation we are expecting is a physical new creation of shalom and social justice, ruled by King Jesus (Ps 72:1-4, Isa 11:1-10). This future world is breaking through into our world now through the church and is transforming the way we live, look at our possessions and do justice (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37).
- *Our responsibility is not simply local, but global.* This kind of global responsibility is clearly shown amongst the first churches (e.g. 2 Cor 8-9), and we already acknowledge our global responsibility in terms of evangelistic proclamation. Further, we already enjoy the fruits of globalization in terms of our own possessions (made very cheaply somewhere else); should we also not take responsibility for the means by which those possessions come to us? If a benefit comes to me at the expense of injustice to someone else, that is clearly ethically relevant for me as a Christian.

"....it is not simply this part or that part of our theology that compels us to show mercy; it is everything in the whole Reformed system of doctrine. To reiterate: it is not just part of our theology that calls us to mercy ministry; it is everything in our entire theology. We must never forget that every doctrine that is taught in every part of Scripture from creation to the final judgment compels us to show the mercy of God to lost sinners, in the gospel of His Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Philip Ryken, Tenth Presbyterian Church)

"Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms and in more peremptory urgent manner than the command of giving to the poor?....I know scarce any duty which is so much insisted on, so pressed and urged upon us, both in the Old Testament and New, as this duty of charity to the poor." (Jonathan Edwards, Treatise on Christian Charity, Section I)

II. What are the objections?

Objection 1: *"Given that the Bible does command deeds of care and compassion for the poor, the poor spoken of here are within the covenant community. So we must not allow our evangelistic responsibility towards outsiders to be deflected by engagement with their practical needs."*

Answer

1. The prioritization of the poor in our own family is a good Biblical principle outlined in the New Testament (Gal 6:10, 1 Thess 3:12). However, we should not take this as a *de-limiting* of our compassion. We do not usually take the need to provide for our own biological family to mean that we do not care about anyone outside of our own family. This issue has to be viewed in light of the broader injunction to love our *neighbour* (and we know the great error of wanting to define our neighbour too closely! (Luke 10:25-37)). To push it even further, what does it mean to love our *enemy*?!! This clearly moves beyond the bounds of our church community. Finally, we might remember how the "alien and stranger" are also to be included in the compassion of the church (Lev 19:33-34, 23:22; Matt 25:31-46).

2. Because God is Creator and Judge, He is concerned about justice for the whole world. Our God is a God who sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45). We can hardly say, doctrinally, that God does not care about unrighteousness and injustice simply because it is happening outside the church! And how weird it would be to think of a Christian living without regard to righteousness just because he is amongst unbelievers?

3. Well, even if we accept this point, there are enough poor Christians in the world to keep us busy for many centuries. The average Anglican is an African female who lives on less than \$2 a day and is related to someone with HIV. What do I think the Lord Jesus will say to me on the last day when I stand before Him, next to my African sister? If we have shown no concern, what will He say about my wealth versus her poverty on that last day? Thus, an obvious rejoinder to the objection mentioned above is: well, *what am I doing* for my poor Christian brothers and sisters?

4. Evangelical church history is awash with men and women who have campaigned for justice for all regardless of their spiritual status (can we imagine Wilberforce only campaigning for the release of slaves who acknowledged Christ?!). It is part of the glory of church history that we are a group who do not simply look after our own.

Objection 2: *“We must prioritize that which is most important - evangelism - because feeding people’s bodies will not save them from the wrath of God.”*

Answer

1. A thought experiment (taken from David Field): what is more important, to take someone to Christianity Explored or to mow the lawn? Of course, we would answer “taking someone to Christianity Explored”! However, David Field makes the point that we do not live our lives in such constant existential dilemmas. Normally, we can get to do both and combine different tasks. Otherwise, I would have to live with a constantly overgrown garden, and see mowing the lawn as a sin of omission. We recognize that the most important thing does not cancel out everything else. So we must be careful not to polarize alternatives all the time.

2. Christians go out to restaurants, re-decorate their houses and use their resources for all kinds of things that are not evangelistic. We take our own bodies and comfort very seriously. We are not officially ascetics or dualists who see physical creation as bad, and so we do not condemn the appropriate use of these things. Given that we are to love our neighbour as *ourselves*, can we not at least do the same for the people around us as we do for ourselves? Why would we ever consider treating someone according to ascetic principles when we do not do that for ourselves?! The objection above (which I confess to having used myself before!) can easily lead to a hypocritical distinction between the way I treat myself and the way I treat others.

3. This is a case of systematic theological thinking that has lost touch with the Scriptures, which explicitly command us to help the poor. We must be very careful not to pit God’s

commandments against each other so that we start canceling some of them out with other ones. To use a point from Tim Keller, we don't say that we have the capability to do only 8 out of the 10 commandments this year because we need to prioritize! Rather, we try to do all of them with the resources and time that we have.

4. *But, how about Acts 6:1-6?* This is a much-used passage on this topic. *Firstly*, these decisions are particular, individual ministerial decisions, and not decisions for the whole church. This is an issue of gifting and calling of certain members within the church, but it does not remove mercy ministry from the overall ministry of the church as a whole. *Secondly*, we should not miss the obvious - that ministries of mercy were already taking place (already implied in 2:42-47 and 4:32-37)! *Thirdly*, the apostolic decision was *not to cancel* the ministries, but rather to strengthen them (!) by calling men who were extremely capable, mature and gifted (note that Philip was a gifted evangelist!). *Fourthly*, it is interesting to read Acts 6:1-6 with 1 Tim 5:3-16 and 2 Cor 9 in mind. Here we see Paul (and Timothy) taking a very active role in the organization of mercy ministry in the churches, nuancing the way we might read Acts 6:1-6.

Objection 3: *“Engaging with the poor will drain the church of its resources and try to fill a black-hole of need that can never be filled until the future kingdom.”*

Answer

1. Any strategy, ministry or action has the potential to drain the church's resources if handled unwisely, so this is simply an issue of wisdom whereby we use *all* our resources to do *everything* God has commanded us to do (cf. Keller's point above). Ironically, is not evangelism itself a 'black-hole of need that can never be filled until the future kingdom'? We would not see this as a reason not to do it!

2. One could take an opposite viewpoint; that is, that we lack resources because we do not engage with the poor. Isaiah 58 outlines the hypocritical religiosity of Israel, who come to worship but who do nothing about injustice and the suffering of those around them. The condition for renewal, blessing and prosperity in that passage is a repentance from this indifference and social sin (see also Deut 15:7-11). My personal experience of running a homeless shelter in my last church showed me that more resources (financial and human) become available when you try to start something along those lines.

3. The mere fact that we can not do everything, does not mean that we do nothing. The very fact that the future kingdom will be a kingdom of justice and goodness, which is breaking through already in the church, should inspire us to reflect it in our lives now.

“ . . . Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. . . . Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope

with many urgent problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fire, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services. . . . For what they brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable.” (Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton University Press, 1996, page 161)

III. What do we do about it?

It is at the point of implementation that ‘the rubber hits the road’ on this issue. To what extent is this Biblical mandate being practically demonstrated in our circles? Here are some questions each congregation might want to ask:

- 1. To what extent does the issue of mercy and compassion come out in preaching and teaching in our churches?*
- 2. How are we responding to the poor around us locally?*
- 3. How are we responding to poor brothers and sisters internationally?*
- 4. How much of our giving is going to specific physical and social help of the poor?*
- 5. How are we encouraging individuals gifted in this area? Should we be electing deacons to be responsible / oversee such matters?*