

WHOLISTIC MINISTRY¹

By Tim Keller

Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers...the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.

-- Julian, a Roman emperor.

A. BIBLICAL NARRATIVE FOR WHOLISTIC MINISTRY

As we have said, a church that is missional through an understanding of the gospel of the kingdom and which is seeking the peace of the city is also a church that is wholistic in ministering both word and deed. Following the Biblical narrative, we are instructed in wholistic ministry:

- Creation. Adam was told to have dominion over all creation—both the physical and spiritual realms— and to bring it under the order and rule of God (Genesis 1:28). God's servants were, therefore, to be subduing the physical disorder as well as the spiritual disorder caused by sin. Both were fundamental to covenant service.
- Fall. Sin defaced all of nature. Man was alienated from God (Gen.3:8), causing guilt and hostility to the knowledge of the Lord. Man was alienated from himself (Gen.3:10), causing loss of identity and loss of meaning, as well as anxiety and emptiness. Man was alienated from other men (Gen.3:7), causing war, crime, family breakdown, oppression, and injustice. Finally, man was alienated from nature itself (Gen. 3:17-19), causing hunger, sickness, aging and physical death. God's first redemptive act, the clothing of Adam and Eve, pointed to the salvation of Christ's sacrifice; but it also met a deep psychological need (for privacy) and a fundamental physical need (for shelter). In this first deed of ministry, God revealed that his redemption would heal all the effects of sin. Therefore, we must follow Him in our own patterns of ministry.
- Patriarchal period. Through Joseph, Abraham's seed became a blessing to the nations through a hunger relief program (Gen. 41:53-57). Job, who lived in this period, was aware that God's judgment falls on those who forgot the poor (Job 29:15-16; 31:16-23).
- Early Israel. God gave Israel many laws of social responsibility. Kinsmen and neighbors were obligated to give to the poor man until his need was gone (Deuteronomy 15:8-10). Tithes went to the poor (Deut. 14:28-29). The poor were not to be given simply a "handout", but tools, grain (Deut. 15:12-15) and land (Leviticus 25), so that they could become productive and self-sufficient.
- Later Israel. The prophets condemned Israel's insensitivity to the poor as breaking covenant. They taught that materialism and ignoring the poor were sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6-7). Mercy to the poor was evidence of true-heart commitment to God (Isaiah 1:10-17 and 58:6-7; Amos 4:1-6 and 5:21-24). The great accumulation of wealth ("adding of house to house and field to field till no space is left," Isaiah 5:8-9), even if it was legal, may have been sinful if the rich were proud and callous

¹ Material taken from the appendix from "Gospel and the World" Conference, 2005

toward the poor (Is.3:16-26; Amos 6:4-7). The 70-year exile itself was a punishment for the unobserved Sabbath and Jubilee Years (2 Chronicles 36:20-21). In these Years the affluent were to cancel debts, but the wealthy refused to do so.

- The ministry of Christ. Jesus proved to John the Baptist that he was the Christ by pointing out that he healed bodies and preached to the poor (Matthew 11:1-6), even as the prophets said he would (Isaiah 11:1-4 and 61:1-2, cf. Luke 1:52-53). Jesus taught that anyone who had truly been touched by the grace of a merciful God would be vigorous in helping the needy (Luke 6:35-36; Matt. 5:43-48). God judged the presence of justifying faith by looking at one's service to the poor, the refugee, the sick and the prisoner (Matt. 25:44-46). Jesus, in his incarnation, "moved in" with the poor (Luke 2:24; 2 Corinthians 8:9). He lived with, ate with and associated with the lowest class of society. He called this "mercy" (Matt. 9:13). The Bible commands that we emulate Christ in showing mercy (2 Co. 8:8-15).

- The early church. The church reflected the social righteousness of the old covenant community, but with the greater vigor and power of the new age. Christians were to open their hand to the needy as far as there was need (1 John 3:16-17; cf. Deut. 15:7-8). Within the church, wealth was to be shared very generously between rich and poor (2 Cor. 8:13-15; cf. Lev. 25). Following the prophets, the apostles taught that true faith would inevitably demonstrate itself through deeds of mercy (James 2:1-23). Materialism was a grievous sin (James 5:1-6; I Timothy 6:17-19). Not only did all believers have these responsibilities, but a special class of officers—deacons—were established to coordinate the church's ministry of mercy. This showed that the ministry of mercy was a mandated work of the church equal to the ministry of the word and discipline (cf. Romans 15:23-29). Paul told the Ephesian elders in his farewell address that he had taught them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). It's significant, then, that in his very last words, Paul exhorted them to give to the weak and poor (Acts 20:35). Not only did Paul consider mercy to the poor as part of the "whole counsel of God", but he deemed it so crucial as to make it the very last piece of teaching he gave them.

- The church was not simply a collection of individuals who were forgiven. It was a "royal nation", a new society (I Peter 2:9). Today, the world must see in us the wisdom of God; namely, what family life, business practices, race relations, and inter-personal relationships can be in all their beauty under the kingship of Jesus Christ. We are a pilot plant of the kingdom of God (see Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Tyndale, 1970, pp. 81-93). The church is to use its gifts and power to heal all the results of sin—spiritual, psychological, social, physical.

B. SUMMARY

- God has a special concern for the poor. People with an already conservative bent resist this idea; but while it is hinted at in many places, it is spelled out unmistakably in James. People with a liberal bent often like to speak of God's "preferential option" for the poor; but often they use this term to mean God always favors all poor people over all affluent people, or that the church should preclude and oppose wealthy persons per se. That seems to go well beyond what the texts really say. What the texts do seem to say is:

- Generally speaking, the poorer members of the human race are faster to grasp and respond to the gospel of grace.
- God shows special delight in pouring out his grace on them, lifting up the ones trodden down by the world.

- This special concern, respect and love must be exhibited in the life and practices of the church.
- The gospel by its very nature will produce a general willingness to share your money and heart for the poorest people.
 - When James says that “true faith will show itself in works,” the works he has in mind are service to the poor or members of the community with fewer resources than you.
 - The new gospel identity humbles the wealthy and privileged and affirms the poor and down-trodden. This should mean that the wealthy lose their patronizing attitudes and the poor lose their defensiveness—which shows itself in either timidity or belligerence.
 - James is by no means unique in his assertion; Isaiah 1:10-17 and Matthew 25:31-46 essentially say the same thing. A sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith. By such deeds God can distinguish true grace-born love from mere lip-service and nominal belief (Cf. Proverbs 14:31 and 19:17; Luke 16:16-31 with Matthew 25).
- The Bible urges us to balance the motives of mercy and justice as we reach out in service to others, the community and the poor.
 - On one hand, it is clear that Christians are not obligated to divest themselves of all wealth, as if having wealth is inherently unjust. The book of Acts shows that even the communalism of the early church was voluntary. We see many wealthy Christians basically remaining in their social strata and using their wealth generously. We are to give freely out of mercy for others.
 - On the other hand, as James shows us, God clearly considers some economic practices unjust, even if they are perfectly legal and in line with “market dynamics.” God considers some levels of luxurious consumption levels unjust, even if the money has been earned through hard work. It is not enough, then, to simply be merciful with the money we have made. We must be just in both a) the way we make the money, and b) the way we consume our goods.
 - We should keep in mind that people who are motivated strictly by a sense of justice or strictly by a sense of compassion tend to lose the sense of how God’s grace is the root of our giving.
 - The typical conservative view may be totally motivated by compassion. It thinks we need to help the pitiful poor out of the goodness of our hearts. But this thinking misses the fact that the “haves” have what we have to a great degree because of unjust distribution of opportunities and resources at birth. It is simple justice to spread the wealth around.
 - The typical liberal view may be totally motivated by concern for justice. Poverty is seen strictly in terms of structural inequities. 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. Jesus had it right. “Act justly and love mercy” (Micah 6:8). A balanced motivation arises from a heart touched by grace, which has lost its feelings of superiority toward any particular class of people.
- The local church should be as active in deed ministry as in word ministry.
 - We are told that Jesus (Luke 24:19) was mighty in word and deed. He did not come simply to preach, but also to heal the sick, feed the hungry and raise the dead. Why?

The good news of salvation pardons us now, but that is only the beginning of the salvation of God. Eventually the whole world will be redeemed—materially as well as spiritually. Jesus did not simply go to heaven but was raised from the dead. He created both body and soul, and he will redeem both body and soul. So he came not only to save spiritual souls, but also to begin his repair of the whole material world.

- We should not be surprised, then, that the first two sets of church leaders are word-leaders (apostles) and deed-leaders (the diakonoi of Acts 6.) By the time of Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, we see there are officers that oversee word ministry (elders) and deed ministry (deacons). This is because the ministry gifts of Jesus have come to us (Ephesians 4:7-12). The Body of Christ gets both speaking gifts and diakonia gifts (1 Peter 4:10). Moreover, Acts 6:1-7, 2 Corinthians 8:13-14 and Galations 2:10 show that Jesus Christ has given the duty of diaconal service not only to individual Christians but to the church as well.
- In general, this balance is not seen in churches. The mainline churches are very committed to social justice but not to evangelism. The conservative churches are committed to evangelism but are squeamish about what they consider “social work.” But as the book of Acts shows us, these two kinds of ministry are deeply interdependent and inseparable. If you eliminate one, you cripple the other.
- The very hard work of diaconal (deed) ministry requires individuals whose identities have been changed by the gospel and whose hearts are filled with gratitude and love. Only churches with the spiritual intensity of continual conversions will really have the “soldiers” who are motivated and equipped to do deed ministry. Nothing is less effective than to preach “social justice” to a congregation of people who have not been revolutionized by the gospel. All you get is guilt and dwindling attendance.
- On the other hand, nothing supports evangelism better than a church involved in extremely generous, loving, vital community service. Listeners to the gospel are far more likely to find it credible if they see Christians meeting needs. Acts 4:32-35, Matthew 5:16, and Luke 6:32 show us that radical generosity had an evangelistic impact in early church history. When we simply live a morally “pure” life, the world may see it but may only feel somewhat condemned by it. However, when the world sees us meeting common, material human needs through deeds, it pays attention.
- Principle: Diaconal ministry is an inseparable and indispensable partner to evangelism in the mission of the church.