



Evangelism And Social Action

Sample

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Unit 1. A Vision For Social Action

Exercise

Read about Albert, Brian, Catherine, and Douglas. With whom do you sympathise?

Let me introduce **Albert**. Albert calls himself a post-evangelical. He says there are many good things about the evangelical church in which he grew up, but he himself has grown out of evangelicalism's narrowness. Like his postmodern friends, he is wary of truth claims and instead he wants to emphasise symbols and images. This makes him much more comfortable with social involvement than evangelism. Evangelism makes him uneasy because, as he puts it, "We are all on a faith journey," and he thinks that evangelism among the poor is simply manipulative. His catchphrase is "Don't force your truth on others." Instead, we should walk with the poor, care for them and help them on their faith journey while expecting them to enrich our own faith journeys.

Then there is **Brian**. Brian happily calls himself a conservative evangelical. As far as he is concerned the main task of the church is preaching the gospel. He is regularly involved in open-air preaching and door-to-door visitation. He sees any form of social involvement as a return to the social gospel — a movement at the beginning of the 20th century that believed the kingdom of God could come in history through Christian social action. He complains about trendy new Christian organisations doing social work and diverting money from traditional missionary agencies. As far as he is concerned, and he is not slow to tell you this, "Social action is heresy." In fact, however, he has taken action on abortion and Sunday trading because he sees these as undermining the Christian foundations of the nation.

Meet **Catherine**. Catherine is unashamedly an evangelical. She believes strongly in the authority of the Bible and is enthusiastic about evangelism — she runs the seekers' course in her church. However, when people say that the church should focus on preaching her hackles rise. She points out that the Bible has a lot to say about the poor and the need to care for both physical and spiritual needs. She thinks it is unhelpful to say that one thing is more important than another. "Physical and spiritual together" is her motto. She has spent many hours arguing it out with people like Brian in her church. Every time the church discusses reaching its community or spending its missionary funds the argument starts up again.

Finally, let me introduce **Douglas**. Douglas is the minister of an evangelical church which is popular with students from the nearby university. He is committed to an expository ministry because he believes the word is central to Christian mission and Christian experience. Douglas sees students affected by the relativism of their peers and the postmodernism of their lecturers. He sees them lacking the confidence to share the gospel with their friends and opting for social involvement

as a socially acceptable alternative. He fears that people like Albert are leading evangelicals back into liberalism. He acknowledges the validity of Christian social involvement and he is happy for his church to have Tearfund Sunday each year. However, he wants to reassert the centrality of the word and the priority of word-centred ministry.

All these examples are based on real people but their names have been changed to protect their identities. Their positions characterise — and perhaps caricature — the ongoing debate about social involvement and its place in mission. Is social involvement something we do as well as evangelism? Is it another way of doing evangelism? Or perhaps it is a distraction from the real job of proclaiming the gospel? With whom do you sympathise?

I have introduced the four characters above not only to present the issues, but to make an important preliminary observation. Catherine has always discussed these issues with people like Brian. She has spent her life trying to persuade the Brians of this world that social involvement is legitimate. Douglas on the other hand has people like Albert in mind when he thinks about these issues. He has real concerns about the effect that Albert's ideas are having on young Christians. When Catherine and Douglas come together they appear poles apart. When they talk to each other Catherine thinks she is still arguing with Brian, and Douglas thinks he is arguing with Albert. The debate gets heated and there appears to be no agreement, but I want to suggest that Catherine and Douglas may be much closer to each other than they realise.

Exercise

How would you present a Christian case for social involvement? Where would you go in the Bible? Which theological themes would you emphasise?

Unit one of this course presents a biblical case for social involvement. Then units two to four consider principles for effective gospel-centred social involvement. Unit five emphasises the importance of keeping evangelism central and explores how this connects with social involvement. Units six to nine then build on this to consider how the church can effectively do evangelism among needy and marginalised people.

What is the biblical case for concern for the poor?

The character of God

The Psalmist describes God in the following way:

He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (Psalm 146:7-9 NIV)

Social involvement is rooted in the character of God. God is the God of the poor. He is the God who upholds the cause of the oppressed, who provides for the poor and liberates the prisoner. He sustains the marginalised and the vulnerable.

Our understanding of poverty is fundamentally related to our understanding of God. It is a question of what kind of God we worship. According to Ron Sider, concern for the poor is not “merely an ethical teaching”: “it is first of all a theological truth, a central doctrine of the creed, a constantly repeated biblical teaching about the God we worship. The biblical insistence on God’s concern for the poor is first of all a theological statement about the Creator and Sovereign of the universe.”¹ Commenting on Deuteronomy 10:12-17 Vinoth Ramachandra says:

Among Israel’s neighbours, as indeed in the ancient cultures of the world (including Indian, Chinese, African and South American civilisations), the power of the gods was channelled through the power of certain males — the priests, kings and warriors embodied divine power. Opposition to them was tantamount to rebellion against the gods. But here, in Israel’s rival vision, it is “the orphan, the widow and the stranger” with whom Yahweh takes his stand. His power is exercised in history for their empowerment.²

It is sometimes said that God is ‘biased to the poor’ or people speak of his ‘preferential option for the poor’. Such statements are open to misunderstanding. It is not that God is prejudiced in some way, still less that the poor are more deserving because of their poverty. Rather, because he is a God of justice, God opposes those who perpetrate injustice and sides with the victims of oppression. Vinoth Ramachandra comments: “in a sinful world where life is biased towards the wealthy and the powerful, God’s actions will always be perceived as a counter-bias.”³ In situations of exploitation it is the cause of the oppressed that God upholds. God expects us to do the same:

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9)

Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23-24)

¹ Sider, R., *Evangelism and Social Action* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 141

² Peskett, H., and Ramachandra, V., *The Message of Mission* (IVP, 2003), 113

³ Peskett, H., and Ramachandra, V., *The Message of Mission*, 112

To walk in the ways of the LORD, says Chris Wright, is the summary of Old Testament ethics.⁴ The God who “upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry” expects us to walk in his ways. He expects his people to share his concern for justice. Again and again the indictment of the Old Testament prophets against God’s people was both that they had turned from God to idols *and* that they had not upheld social justice (Amos 5:11-12). In Isaiah the people of God complain that God does not hear their prayers or respond to their fasting. It seems as if God is indifferent, but the problem, says Isaiah, is the indifference of the people to the cries of the poor:

‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:3-7)

God will not hear his people when they ignore the claims of the poor (Isaiah 1:10-17). The appropriate response to the God who upholds the poor is for us likewise to uphold the cause of the poor. This is the truly religious activity of those who follow the God of the Bible. This is what it means to know God. Addressing King Jehoahaz through the prophet Jeremiah, God reminds him of his father Josiah: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 22:16). In a similar way James says: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27). Part of Job’s argument is that he *has* cared for the poor and therefore his suffering is undeserved (Job 31:13-28).

God’s concern for the poor was embodied in the Mosaic law. “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Numerous laws safeguarded both the needs and the dignity of the poor. The law of gleaning stated that landowners were to leave produce missed by the initial harvest so it could be gathered by the poor, enabling the poor to provide for themselves without being dependent on charity. Interest was not to be charged on loans to the poor so that people did not profit from their misfortune. When a coat or millstone was taken as a guarantee for a loan it was to be returned when it was needed. Calvin argues that the eighth commandment forbidding theft involves an obligation to assist those “we see pressed by the difficulty of affairs ... with our abundance”.⁵ Jesus summed up the law as to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:34-40).

It is sometimes said that concern for the poor in the Bible is commanded only within the covenant community — whether the nation of Israel in the Old Testament or the church in

⁴ Wright, C., *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Hendrickson/Paternoster, 1996), 145

⁵ Calvin, J., *Institutes*, 2.8.46; see also *Commentary on the Harmony of the Law*, Book 3

the New Testament. Indeed, with many texts often cited in support of social involvement this is the case. The fate of people in the parable of the sheep and the goats turns on how they have treated “the least of these my brothers” — a reference to the Christian community (Matthew 25:31-46). Examples of the care of widows in the New Testament are within the Christian community (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:3-16). The command to love is focused on the people of God because we are to be a community of love reflecting the loving nature of our Father.

However, our love is not to be confined to fellow Christians. The Mosaic law was given to the redeemed, covenant community, but it made specific provision in its social legislation for the care of those outside the covenant community — “the alien.” Moreover, the prophets of the Old Testament condemned the injustice of other nations while Paul challenged the behaviour of the Roman Governor, Felix, when he had the opportunity (Acts 21:25). We are commanded to love our neighbours (Romans 13:9; James 2:8). Jesus redefined love for our neighbours in the story of the good Samaritan in a way that crosses social and cultural divides to meet the one in need (Luke 10:25-37). Indeed, we are commanded to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-44; Luke 6:27-35; Romans 12:17-21). Crucially, this love for others, including even the enemies of the covenant community, reflects the character of God. “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good” and “is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36). Sometimes it is said that we should only evangelise because there is little point helping someone in this life when they will face eternal death. However, this ignores the example of our God who lavishes his kindness on those destined for hell.

The character of God is ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. In his life he showed concern for the poor (Matthew 4:23; 9:35-38). He responded to the needy with compassionate action (Matthew 14:14; Luke 7:13). He told the rich that they had to give everything to the poor if they wanted to follow him (Luke 12:33; 18:22), warning that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25). He offered acceptance to the marginalised, expressing the grace of God in his table fellowship with ‘sinners’ (Mark 2:13-17). The poor were drawn to him just as the religious leaders were repelled by him (Luke 15:1-2). Then finally and ultimately in his death he gave us a model of love that we should extend to those in need: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 John 3:16-17)

A private or a public faith?

Imagine you have just turned on the television. You have one of those old television sets that takes a moment or two to warm up so that the sound comes before you see the picture. You hear the words, “Jesus is Lord.” What kind of an image would you expect to see? An interview with a Government minister explaining the factors that have shaped Government policy? A businessman explaining his company’s strategy? A world leader discussing international affairs? An arts programme assessing a recent novel? I guess that you would be surprised if any of these pictures came into view. In all these contexts the phrase “Jesus is Lord” sounds out of place. In modern thinking, public truth and private faith have become polarised. Public truth means the truth we operate with in public life: in politics, the media, education, science and culture. In public discourse God-talk has no

place. This reflects the legacy of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment tried to establish truth on the basis of human reason or experience. You could not bring God into political debate, economic policy and so on. So the lordship of Christ is not allowed to have any bearing on public truth. Public truth must be observable and verifiable. Faith and values are relegated to one's private life. You can hold beliefs in God, but you must not let them intrude into public life. They are private. Opinion polls show that the majority of people believe in God, but our society is resistant to the intrusion of religion in public life. God may be in heaven, but we do not want him meddling down here on earth. The only truth that can be commended universally is truth based on reason and observation.

Evangelicalism in the 20th century latched onto this space for private faith. Much Christian scholarship moved towards liberalism under the influence of rationalism. This left evangelicalism without the intellectual resources to withstand the assault of modernist thinking. Instead it retreated into the private sphere which modernity allowed for it. Evangelicals practised their religion and maintained their orthodoxy within their own circles. However, they no longer engaged with public truth. They no longer asserted the gospel as public truth, as truth relevant to politics, economics or science. It was the safe option — to live within a ghetto unaffected and unchallenged by the world. Its missiological consequences have been far-reaching.

Exercise

Can you think of examples of this private-public split in Christian thinking and practice? How would you respond? Look at Colossians 1:15-20. What does the passage say about Christ's relationship to the world?

Consider, for example:

- a political agenda focused on personal morality and not social justice
- students who do not engage with attacks on Christian truth in their studies, but fortify themselves with the worship experience on Sundays
- Christians who operate with two sets of values: the public values of the market and the private values of compassion

At its heart the issue has to do with the lordship of Christ. The Bible claims that Jesus is Lord over all things. Every area of human life is under his authority. Abraham Kuyper said: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not say, 'Mine'".⁶ This means that Christians should live under the authority of Christ in *all* dimensions of life — in social life as well as family life, in political and economic relationships as well as in personal morality. In the New Testament the scope of true repentance extends to social affairs (Luke 3:7–14; James 2:14–26). Jesus says that salvation has come to Zacchaeus as Zacchaeus demonstrates that the gospel has transformed his economic relationships (Luke 19:8–10).

⁶ Cited in Peskett, H., and Ramachandra, V., *The Message of Mission* (IVP, 2003), 29

The grace of God

Our attitude to the poor is to reflect the character of the God we worship. Above all, Christians are to reflect the grace of God. We are to reflect the experience of grace that we have received. We are to be gracious because God has been gracious to us. Often the commands of the Mosaic law were rooted in the people's experience of redemption. The Israelites, for example, were to act towards the immigrant, the vulnerable and the poor in the light of their own experience of deliverance from slavery. The laws of gleaning were set in this context of redemption: "When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this" (Deuteronomy 24:21-22). We find exactly the same reminder in the jubilee laws that legislated for the release of slaves after seven years. The people were to act in response to their own experience of God's liberation (Deuteronomy 15:12-15). The God who had upheld their cause expected them to uphold the cause of the oppressed.

The New Testament expects the same, and more, from those who have been rescued from their spiritual poverty and powerlessness. Read Luke 14:1-24. The key is that phrase in verse 13: "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." It is repeated in verse 21. Luke is tying together this command to welcome the poor with the parable of the great banquet in verses 15-24. In the parable, God invites people to the great eternal banquet, but the rich and respectable people decline to come. Instead the good news goes out to "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (verse 21). Luke is saying that our attitude to the poor should reflect God's grace towards us. God has welcomed us to his banquet despite our poverty and powerlessness. In the same way we should welcome the poor and marginalised.

Jesus commends those who invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame around for dinner. The phrase is a kind of representative description (a metonym). These are four examples which stand for a whole group of people — the poor, the marginalised, the powerless, the vulnerable. They are the "widows and orphans" of James 1:27 or the "tax collectors and sinners" of Luke 15:1.

Luke 14:12-14 describes more than simply caring for the poor. This is more than just charity. To invite someone for a meal in Jesus' time was an expression of association or identification with them. It was an expression of friendship and, to use a word which should have a strong Christian connotation for us, fellowship. That is why Jesus' habit of eating with tax-collectors and sinners was so scandalous. He was saying, "These are my sort of people."

Jesus made a point of including the marginalised and sinners. The religious people of his day despised him for it. In Luke 7, Jesus says the religious leaders are like children who cannot be pleased. They complained that John the Baptist fasted too much. Now they complain that Jesus feasts too much. "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34) 'The Son of Man' is a reference to the one who comes in glory to rule all things (see Daniel 7:13-14). Yet "the Son of Man has come eating and drinking." It echoes Isaiah 25:6-8 and Isaiah 55:1-2 in which Isaiah describes God's promised future as a great feast of provision and enjoyment, acceptance and friendship. The religious leaders have no problem with this. They do not take exception to the coming of God's messianic feast —

that was what they longed for. What they object to is the invitation list. Jesus feasts with the wrong sort of people. By eating with ‘sinners’ Jesus modelled the radical grace of God. In response to the accusation that Jesus is “a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of the worst sort of sinners” Luke tells a story that shows that, to some degree, the accusation is true (7:36-50). He shows that Jesus does feast and drink and that he is a friend of the worst sort of sinners.

Throughout Luke’s Gospel, genuine disciples are marked out by their attitude to the poor — so much so that it is virtually defining of what it means to be a true follower of Jesus.

- In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, the rich man spends eternity in hell because he ignored the beggar at his gate.
- The rich young ruler of Luke 18 says he has kept every commandment, but still goes away sad because he loves his possessions more than the poor.
- In contrast, Jesus says of Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). When? When Zacchaeus has said that he will pay back what he has cheated and give half of his possessions to the poor.

The next chapter of Luke’s Gospel contains the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. They are wonderful stories that illustrate God’s grace, God’s initiative and God’s welcome in salvation. But notice the context: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” (15:1-2). These parables of grace are told to explain Jesus’ involvement with the socially marginalised. Jesus welcomes sinners because God runs to meet repentant sinners. The religious people, on the other hand, mutter and complain. They are like the elder brother in the parable of the lost son who, despite his hard work for the Father, is outside the feast. Jesus leaves them facing a choice: will they join the ‘sinners’ inside?

Our attitude to the poor, it seems, reveals a lot about our understanding of God’s grace. Suppose someone says: “We should not help the poor because their situation is their own fault.” It is a sentiment one often hears, though not usually phrased so politely. Imagine if God had said that to us. Where would we be? If we condemn the poor because of their lifestyle, then we have not understood the extent of God’s grace towards *us* with our socially respectable lifestyles that are really deeply corrupt. Gregory the Great said “belief in inequality arises from the spring of pride.”⁷ In other words, people accommodate inequality by reasoning that their wealth and privileges arise from some kind of superiority — whether skills, experience, entrepreneurial drive, national character and so on. Yet, grace humbles us before God. It forces us to renounce claims to superiority.

The parable of the good Samaritan is addressed to a teacher of the law who asks, “Who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29-37) At the end we expect the answer to be: the person we meet in need, but Jesus turns the tables on the lawyer by asking: “Who was a neighbour to the man in need?” The parable places the teacher of the law not in the position of benefactor, but in the position of need. The more we understand the wonderful grace of God to us in our need, the more our hearts will be open to the poor and marginalised.

⁷ Cited in Forrester, B, D., *On Human Worth* (SCM, 2001), 115

What does this mean for those who work with the poor? It means we must never be long away from the cross. We must be often teaching the cross, being taught the cross, remembering the cross, singing about the cross, remembering the cross in the Lord's Supper, praising God for the cross. We never graduate from the cross to some higher, advanced spirituality. We must be people of the cross, communities of the cross, communities of grace.

You cannot 'do grace' by legalistic means — obviously not. You cannot say: "I'm going to set myself some rules so that I am more gracious. I'm going to set some goals, some disciplines." That is not grace! You can only be gracious by living in the light of the cross, by being often at the cross — remembering your sin, your weakness, your failure and remembering the infinite, beautiful love and grace of God to us in the gift of his own Son.

Gary Haugen, the former director of the UN genocide investigation in Rwanda, presents the case for social involvement in a simple, but powerful way. He presents five stories — all true cases taken up by the International Justice Mission of which he is President. Reflecting on the parable of the good Samaritan, Haugen asks us to consider in each case: "What does love require?"

Joyti is a 14-year-old girl from a rural town in India who was abducted and drugged by four women who sold her into a brothel in Bombay. She was locked away in an underground cell and severely beaten with metal rods, plastic pipe and electrical cords until submitting to provide sex to the customers. Now she must work 7 days a week, servicing 20-40 customers a day.

Osner is a 45 year-old man in Haiti who was illegally arrested and thrown in prison when the local mayor wanted to seize part of his land for her personal use. The detention is completely illegal under Haitian law and five different court orders have been issued demanding his release, but the prison authorities refuse to release him because of their political relationship with the mayor.

Shama is a 10-year-old girl who was sold into bonded slavery for a family debt of \$35, which was incurred to pay for her mother's medical treatment. As a result, for the last three years, Shama has been forced to work six days a week, 12-14 hours a day rolling cigarettes by hand. She must roll 2,000 cigarettes a day or else she gets beaten. Her bonded slavery is completely illegal under Indian law, but local authorities do not enforce the law.

Domingo is an elderly peasant farmer in Honduras who was shot in the face and leg when police illegally opened fire on him and other Lenca Indians while they were marching in the capital city for better government services in their remote region. The President of Honduras issued a promise to compensate all the injured, but nearly a year has gone by and the payments have never come. Now Domingo has lost his house and land because he is disabled and cannot work to make the payments.

Catherine is a 13-year-old girl who lives in a Manila slum and cannot go to school because her aunt forces her to work as a domestic servant. Worse, Catherine's aunt allows some of her male friends to live in the house and one of them raped

Catherine while everyone else was out of the home. Catherine managed to file a complaint with the police, but the rapist is the son of a policeman and they have ignored the order to arrest the man for two years.⁸

Exercise

What does love require? What does it mean for us to love Joyti, Osner, Shama, Domingo and Catherine? Love certainly does require that the gospel is proclaimed to Joyti, to her oppressors and to her customers. But does that exhaust our obligation of love towards her? What does love require? “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

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⁸ Haugen, A, G., ‘Integral Mission and Advocacy’ in Chester, T., (ed.), *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor* (Paternoster, 2002), 189