

TALKING POINT #14
LIVING IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY #7: A COMMUNITY OF CHARACTER

JESUS LOVES THE WHOLE PERSON

One of the most significant emphases in Churches for the last 200 years has been the salvation of souls – and rightly so. However, one area of Church life and ministry that has become less obvious in that time has been the Church’s ethical task. To put it another way, as Ron Sider has said, we must love the whole person as Jesus loved the whole person.

There has often been a split between the Church’s ethical task and the Church’s evangelistic task but, as we’ll see below, these have always been two sides of the one coin, rather than competing priorities. It is as we love and serve people that we show them the love of Christ and thereby draw them to Christ as Lord.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Throughout the Old Testament, God commanded the Israelites to pursue justice and fairness. This encompassed justice in the sense of the law courts but also economic justice - “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8); “Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” (Jeremiah 22:3); “learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” (Isa 1:17).

Indeed, when we come to what Christ says on the matter, He is shockingly confrontational, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 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 gave you a drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:35-40) On the flip side, Christ says that those who do not do these things will not inherit eternal life. While clearly the Bible teaches that salvation is by faith, this faith is expressed through good works. As James writes, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:18)

Jesus Himself loved people fully, not just their soul. Consider the number of miracles Christ performed to help people, especially the poor and outcast of society. Think of how Jesus reached out his hand and touched a man with leprosy (Matthew 8:3) or how he healed a crowd until sunset (Matthew 14:14-15). Indeed, he defined his own ministry in these terms, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18-19).

As we look through the New Testament, clearly loving the whole person is part and parcel of Church life – from serving the poor and widows (Acts 6), to Paul’s collection for the Jerusalem Church (1 Corinthians 16), to the healing to the nations that will come with Christ’s final triumph (Revelation 22:2). It is as we serve and love people now, we give both a look back to Christ’s compassion on the Cross but also a foretaste of the love to be fully manifest when Christ comes again. Have you ever thought of it in those terms? Wow!

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HISTORY IS ON OUR SIDE

With that Biblical background in mind, we look through history and see the Church loving the whole person from the earliest times through til today.

For example, in the earliest days of the Church a savage famine gripped Rome to the extent that parents were putting newly born babies on rubbish heaps because they could not afford the extra mouth to feed. Christians scoured those rubbish heaps, rescued the children and raised them as their own.

Additionally, a vibrant Christian led the fight to end slavery in the British Empire – William Wilberforce. He took up a battle that lasted three decades to rid a moral evil of his day. Though it was initially unpopular and thought to be economically disastrous, Wilberforce and his supporters swayed a whole nation and empire to end this barbaric and inhumane practice.

Today, Christians lead the fight against human trafficking, against global poverty and to promote the dignity of every human being, who is created in God’s image. One such example is Global InterAction, which helps communities in developing countries in ways such as micro loans.

NOW FOR US AT FOREST LAKE

The title of this paper is taken from a book by a great Christian author, Stanley Hauerwas. In that book, Hauerwas argues that the Church’s role in the world will be best served as the Church becomes a community that lives out these values and virtues. In other words, that the Church becomes a community of example – practising these virtues of human dignity, compassion, love and generosity in deed, not just proclaiming them with words.

The call for us is to model these values to people in such a way that others will be inspired by our example and be drawn to Christ and His Gospel. The goal is for us to model Christ’s love of people in every sphere of our personal, family and Church life. For example:

- When we gather for Church, we share genuine concern for each other, including things as simple as talking to new people and crossing the room to meet others;
- In our families, we honour our parents, spouses and children and spend genuine quality time with each other;
- Personally, we choose to go without some levels of personal wealth to sponsor a child or give to charities, or give of our time to help others;
- In our society, we take a stand on important issues like poverty, injustice and human dignity.

CONCLUSION

The Church’s ethical task is important because it declares to the World that we believe Jesus is still the Lord of this World and that He places inestimable value on human dignity. If we are going to say that Jesus loves people, let’s show that He loves the whole person, including their soul, by our actions as His representatives in the World.

Next month, we’ll continue our series on “Living in the Church Community” as we look at fellowship in the Church.