

Social issues and the life of praise

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‘... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.’ [1 Peter 2:9]

Rather than thinking about a particular social issue in this briefing, we pause to consider—why bother at all? Why attempt to think Christianly about issues like euthanasia, pornography or gambling? Or poverty, hunger, or the environment? After all, it feels hard to bother sometimes. The evils in the world are just heartbreaking. We often feel helpless to stop any of them, clueless about where to begin, and hopeless about succeeding. Even if Christianity does help with some social issue, we’re not clear how to persuade an unbelieving world. In any case, most of us avoid the conflict that is inevitably involved. Christians also fret about whether it is simply a distraction to bother. Some have felt that social concern and involvement detracts from ‘declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.’ Indeed in comparison to the difficulties of social involvement, declaring those praises seems so much clearer, straightforward and *doable*.

But the Bible displays a joyful and easygoing cheerfulness about these matters. It does not share our sense of burden, and displays a ‘seamlessness’ between declaring praise and caring for others. We see this joy and ‘seamlessness’ in the biblical theme of **doing good**. That phrase can turn us off a bit (e.g. ‘do-gooders’); but in the Bible, to ‘do good’ is a joyful expression of freedom. Here is a brief glimpse:

- In a famous letter [Jeremiah 29:4-11], the prophet urges exiles in Babylon to seek the ‘welfare’ or ‘peace’ or ‘good’ of their foreign city [v7]—which will also create good for the exiles. But they are never to forget their special identity and the special plans God has for them [v11].
- When the other apostles accept Paul, they only stipulate that he should remember to care for the poor—‘the very thing I was eager to do,’ Paul recalls [Gal. 2:10]. If we were to wonder ‘which poor?’, he may answer ‘let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith’ [Gal. 6:9-10]. Here is a neat balance between the special claim upon us of those who are close, and a genuine, outgoing concern for others further away.
- In 1 Peter 2, the life of praise in v9 becomes a life of ‘good conduct’ and uncomplicated cooperation with government [vv12-15]. There are deep connections here between praising God, doing good for others, and assisting rulers. Verse 17 is an amazing summary of the people of praise: they ‘honour all people’ (for all are precious to God); they ‘love the brotherhood’ (for those close need special care); they ‘fear God’ (because a relationship with God is central to all we do) and they ‘honor the emperor’ (because even flawed rulers protect our neighbours).

A kind of freedom is also seen in the biblical theme of **doing justice**. Here is an even briefer glimpse:

- Micah asks God’s people, ‘what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’ [6:8]. They had developed an unhealthy preoccupation with religious activities, but were forgetting others in need. But walking humbly with God brings kindness and justice with it.
- The same theme reappears when Jesus declares ‘woe to you Pharisees! for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others’ [Luke 11:42; cf. Matthew 23:23-24]. While his main point is explicitly to attack the folly of their anti-social blind-spots, it is interesting to see the way Jesus explicitly and seamlessly joins ‘the love of God’ to ‘justice’.

Peter Kell, CEO of Anglicare Sydney, quotes Archbishop Howard Mowll’s 1947 comment:

As Christians, we are pledged to the service of all those who are hungry, or destitute, or in need; we are pledged to the support of every movement for the removal of injustice and oppression. But we do not conceive these things as good in themselves, to be the whole of evangelism, since we are convinced that the source of the world’s sorrow is spiritual and that its healing must be spiritual, through the entry of the risen Christ into every part of the living world.

While we await the Lord’s return, we can love our neighbour without losing the centrality of the gospel. Pointing to Christ and helping others express the life of praise. We can respond even to difficult issues in praise of the one who creates and redeems the planet and its people.

For example, our response to something as sad as the Murray-Darling drought can be seen as the life of praise at work. Our prayers to God for rain are a form of praise to the God who sustains his world. We praise the One who loves drought-stricken rural neighbours better than we do, and his love for them gradually shapes our concern for them. Our initial attempts at wise uses of water, whether personal or communal, praise God for his goodness in giving water at all. Those who praise God need not be driven by fear of thirst or fear of rising prices.

But thinking Christianly about social issues is certainly hard. For Peter Kell, it is 'complex' and 'difficult' 'to fully grasp and apply' how both to save the lost and to serve those in need. It is hard to understand the facts and arguments surrounding an issue; and even when we do, our minds can be blinkered in ways that prevent us seeing a gospel-shaped solution to it. Given these difficulties and the others noted above, it may help firstly to **know your freedoms**:

- You are **freed to respond in praise** to God's goodness. When we praise Jesus for his Lordship, we begin to find how to relate rightly to his world. We don't earn our way to God and are not slaves to duty. We are those who are finding how to respond in praise to all that is good in creation, and to all that is good in God's redemption of his world, all as part of one seamless life. (This is why we would never engage in social issues as a *substitute* for knowing and declaring Jesus, as people do when they get fed up with declaring the Lordship of Christ. That is a road to the most terrible slavery, because without the loving Lordship of Jesus over his world, we start to think that changing it is entirely up to us.)
- You are **freed to listen and learn** for a while. There may be no problem in simply listening in to other people's conversations about social ethics, before deciding who and what is right.
- You are **freed to subvert**. The world falls into ways of doing things that have failed to notice gospel-shaped alternatives. We can sometimes be the ones who say 'have you thought about doing it another way?' (For example, 'what might it look like to extend *grace* to prisoners?')
- You are **freed to make mistakes**. God forgives people who mean well and fail. This is what Luther meant when he advised an anxious colleague, 'Be a sinner and sin boldly; but believe and trust in the grace of God more boldly still.'

Secondly, it may also help to **pick a specialty**. If some of us became 'specialists' on an issue, then over time, a variety of 'specialists' in various fields will grow. This concept is helpful in a number of ways.

- '**Specialties**' **affirm the impulses of those Christians who cannot sit idly by** while some terrible evil goes unchecked. Someone's impulse to care for their neighbour is almost always worth affirming. Making it their 'specialty' implies that a person can have significant involvement in combating some problem, while retaining their allegiance and praise to Christ.
- '**Specialties**' **stop us from thinking ill of others who do not have the same specialty**. No one can be told that they must sign on to some cause in order to be truly Christian. We might see those who nurture family life alongside those who fight greenhouse gases. Some may help drug addicts while others support single mothers. Although each might use friendly persuasion for others to join them, no one can claim that their cause is the cause of the whole church. Even those who disagree about social issues can then worship Jesus together at church.
- A '**specialty**' **helps a person become a well-informed agitator for change**. The world is too complex for any one person to master every social issue. But over time, each 'specialist' discovers and points to gospel-shaped solutions in their area of specialty.

The apostle Peter looks forward to an unbelieving world seeing our good deeds and eventually glorifying God [1 Peter 2:12]. It seems that praise *declared and lived*, cannot help but bring others to praise God too.

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Sources/Further Reading:

Peter Kell, 'Kell's Comments', *CARE* magazine April 2007, p. 2.

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