



# The Universal Priority of Proclamation

Is giving a cup of water in Jesus' name fulfilling the missionary mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ? How does humanitarian work relate to the universal priority of proclaiming the Gospel?

## SOME BACKGROUND

Our first ministry assignment as young missionaries was in the Philippines. Many of the Filipinos who became believers in Christ were very poor. I struggled with how to relate to the poor. Is it proper to preach the Gospel first, or should I do deeds of compassion, justice and mercy and only then preach the Gospel? Of course, in the crucible of life you must do both!

However, I am convinced that the greatest good is done through the ministry of the Holy Spirit as He takes the Gospel proclaimed and brings conviction of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. Through the Spirit's ministry repentance and faith in Christ happens. This results in a "new birth," a new man! As the poor gain great worth as children of God through faith in Christ changes occur in their lifestyles which enable them to live with dignity and this often results in a lift in their economic status. This phenomenon of redemption and lift has been documented in many areas as the church grows among the poor.

This does not mean that poverty is always the result of lifestyle choices such as drunkenness or gambling, which make the poor even poorer. Many people are born into poverty. In some cases, as in the caste system of India, there is practically no way to escape the cycle of poverty. In many areas of the world, there are systemic unjust systems that make it very hard for the poor to rise above poverty. Sometimes even the good values of the local culture work to keep people poor.

Many of my good friends in the Philippines grew up in poverty. After coming to Christ through repentance and faith in Christ, they often took steps to get education or to ensure that their children

were educated. They worked and sacrificed to make this happen. Now, many of the next generation are professionals. Some have jobs with multinational companies; and many are working abroad. Their lifestyle and station in life has improved. In the process, many have remained true to their Lord and seek to live out their faith in the marketplace. Sadly, some have succumbed to the allure of materialism that has so gripped us in the Western World. Others have followed the Lord into full time service after graduating from Bible Schools or Seminaries. Those who are in Christian ministry work very hard to see that their children get a good education. Redemption and lift has happened.

## QUESTIONS AND PRIORITIES

At this point certain questions arise. What should a missionary do to address and help alleviate injustice or systemic poverty? Should we rail against the injustices? Should we seek to work for liberation of the poor by encouraging the overthrow of unjust systems? Do we simply go about our preaching and teaching being blithely ignorant of the condition of people around us?

I would plead for the priority of the proclamation of the Gospel. As I have studied the Book of Acts and the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, I am convinced we have been given a model of mission, close to the time of the Resurrection of our Lord, which gives us a clear understanding of how the Apostles understood Jesus' mandate to them. It is a revelatory paradigm. This does not mean that every detail of strategy can be applied in today's contexts; but it does mean we know how the early church understood the teaching of Christ and what they did about it.

Paul preached Christ in the Roman world which was full of injustices and rampant immorality. He preached Christ to rich and poor. He pled with men and women to be reconciled to God through faith in Christ. Many who responded



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were from the common folk the lower classes. In fact, many were slaves. Paul did not seek to change the government, nor did he lecture about obvious abuses such as slavery. However, he did insist that within the household of faith there was neither slave nor free. All came to the Table of the Lord on level ground through the cross. It was through the household of faith and their attractive love, even in face of persecution, that a quiet but powerful transformation began which impacted the society around them.

### JESUS' PRIORITY

There are many clear statements of Jesus regarding his purpose and priority. For example, "For the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19: 10). It is evident that Jesus had the cross in view from the start to the finish of his ministry on earth.

The disciples often missed this priority. They rejoiced when Jesus feed 5000 and were excited when the crowd wanted to make Jesus their King after all here was a person who could provide bread for the hungry! However, Jesus withdrew from the crowd and sent his disciples back to the Sea of Galilee to face a storm. They were arguing about places in the Kingdom as Jesus was headed for the cross. In the Upper Room our Lord gave the great object lesson of foot washing. A towel of service was to come before the robe of reigning with Him. They constantly rebuked him about his statements that he must suffer and die.

Jesus came to give his life a ransom for many. He came to demonstrate the glory of God through the cross, whereby "God was reconciling the world unto Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And *he has committed to us the message of reconciliation* [emphasis mine]" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

There is no question that Jesus ministered to real physical needs. He healed some who were sick. He raised some who had died. He fed five thousand on one occasion and four thousand on another. However, he did not eliminate poverty and disease. Nor did he overthrow the political powers of his day.

### THE GREAT COMMANDMENT / COMMISSION

A study of the life of Christ reveals a consistent pattern of teaching, preaching and healing. Even in that threefold

ministry there was a priority on preaching (Luke 4:14-21,31-36,43; 5:1,17-26,31). Jesus taught and lived out the Great Commandment to love God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. He loved people even unto death! All of His preaching, teaching and healing were a walking demonstration of the Great Commandment. However, there was a clear priority in the life of Christ that related to the glory of God being demonstrated through the cross whereby the great redemptive purpose of God would be accomplished.

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The Bible declares that all men (not just believers) are accountable before God with respect to the Great Commandment. This great summation of God's holy law shows how far we fall short of His glory. Fulfilling the Great Commandment is the responsibility of all humanity including the household of faith.

Jesus gave his disciples and all who follow him another commandment called the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; John 20:21-23) which only His believing community (Church) can fulfill. In that commandment there is a priority given to make disciples (Matthew 28:19) through proclamation (Luke 24:46-47; Mark 16:15). Proclamation is to be incarnate and in the manner demonstrated by Christ (John 20:21).

Jesus sums up the narrative of the Bible in His Commission to his disciples in Luke 24: 44-47, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their mind so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, *and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached* in his name to all nations [emphasis mine], beginning at Jerusalem."

There is no doubt that the Bible, from the giving of the law and especially in the Prophets as well as Psalms and the Gospels, has a lot to say about God's concern for the poor, and the people of God's responsibility toward the poor amongst them. However, how does God liberate the poor, whether that be poor in spirit or poor in economic terms? He does it through redemption. God will deal with injustice! God will rule and restore all of creation to its perfect state (Romans 8:18-25)! When Jesus returns to rule justice will flow like a river! In the eternal state of the New Heavens and the New Earth the great effects of sin will be wiped out! The glory and wonder of the Cross and God's redemptive plan will result in a Kingdom of Priests purchased by the blood of the Lamb from every tribe, people and nation who praise and give glory to the Lamb and to God the Father (Revelation 5)!

Jesus has declared to us the primary narrative of the Bible. Luke 24: 45-49 "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem."

We must do our proclamation in the manner of the Great Commandment. We declare Christ because we love God and love our neighbor, even our enemies. We must couple our proclamation with good works and deeds of love and mercy. We must be holistic. However, if we have not proclaimed the good news of Christ, His death, burial and resurrection, and have not proclaimed repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name, we have not done mission as Jesus Commanded! There is a priority in our missionary task.

### CONCLUSION

I am reminded of a decal which our local Fire Department gave to us after the birth of our last child. It was a picture of a baby which we were asked to pace in the corner of the window in our child's bedroom. If our house should catch on fire the firemen would enter that room first to save the infant even before they battled the flames. They had to do both but there was a priority on saving lives first.

The priority of the Great Commission also demands that we teach the followers of Christ to obey all of Jesus' commands. We are not simply snatching people from

the flames. We have seen the sad evidence of genocide and injustices among societies who have identified themselves to be Christian in some form. We confess that too often our proclamation has not led to teaching which results in obedience to Christ's commands. We must walk alongside our brothers and sisters who have repented and received forgiveness of sins and help them to apply Christ's teaching to their lives and contexts. Together with them we must strive to live out the New Commandment to love one another and to love our enemies. Our discipling must help the church to practice justice among the people of faith and be a prophetic voice by the way they love one another, help the poor and accept one another as equal recipients of God's grace.

It would be wonderful if the believing church in our day could put forth an apology like Justin's Apology 14.

"We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone; we who formally used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God, we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and share with everyone who is in need; we who hated and destroyed one another and, on account of their different customs would not live with men of a different race, now, since the coming of Christ, live on excellent terms with them and pray for our enemies." (Justin I Apology 14)<sup>1</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 As cited by Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), p. 45.