

7 April 2009

The Pastor and the Community

35 somewhat overlapping statements as a pastor to pastors concerning the topic of the congregation's responsibility for its wider community.

1. We should have more passion for and compassion for God than for people.
2. We should have hearts of compassion for all people because they're made in God's image (*Prov. 14:31*), and because we ourselves have known such undeserved generosity from God (*Luke 6:32-36; II Cor. 8:8-9; James 2:13*). It is a privilege to be of service to any human being. And it is a joy to reflect something of God's own character in this, including His concern for justice (*Isa. 1:17; Dan. 4:27*), and especially to reflect the sacrificial love of Christ. In this sense ministries of compassion and justice which provide to people what they cannot provide for themselves are wonderful signs of the Gospel of Christ giving Himself for us.
3. Suffering is an inevitable part of this fallen world. Poverty, war, famine, death, and other tragic effects of the Fall will not be ended except by the bodily, visible return of Christ, (*e.g., Mark 14:7; Jn. 12:8; Rev. 6:1-11*). The Heavenly City comes down, it's not built up, that is, it's not constructed from the ground up (*Heb. 11:10; Rev. 21*). It is as one-sided as Creation, the Exodus and the Incarnation, the Cross & Resurrection, and Regeneration of the individual heart. It is a great salvation-act of God. If human culture can ever be said to be redeemed, it will be God that does it, not us.
4. The Gospel's main thrust is not the renewal of the fallen structures of this world, but rather the creation of a new community composed of those purchased by the blood of the Lamb (*Rev. 5*). It is only through the fulfillment the promise of forgiveness of our sins and acceptance with God that all of God's other promises are fulfilled. (*See Greg Gilbert's great 9Marks blog post from April 6, 2009!*) We must always be clear in our teaching that the joy of God's presence is superior to all the goods of this world.
5. No Gospel that tells Scripture's sweeping narrative that culminates in the coming of the kingdom but neglects to tell individuals how they can be included in that kingdom is any true Gospel.
6. Scripture gives us no hope that society will be broadly and permanently transformed by the preaching of the Gospel. (*See Matt. 24:21-22, 29*).
7. Individual conversions can have profound effects for good on people, not only in eternity, but in this life, too. John Wesley observed in 1787 that "I fear, wherever riches have increased . . . the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence, they proportionably increase in pride, in the desire

- of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this? this continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal; we *must* exhort all Christians, to gain all they can, and to save all they can: this is, in effect, to grow rich! What way then, I ask again, can we take that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who *gain all they can*, and *save all they can*, will likewise *give all they can*, then the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven,” (*Tyerman, vol. III, p. 520*). True or False? While conservative Christians are often said to be more concerned about “saving souls,” religious liberals give a significantly larger proportion of their income to alleviating poverty and meeting the needs of the downtrodden and underprivileged. False. Conservative evangelicals tend to give more to the poor than religious liberals. (*See Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion Sept. 1998; also Robert Wuthnow’s Acts of Compassion [1993].*) Many individual conversions have resulted in personal reformations and particular social improvements. And we hope will result in good effects in this world.
8. Since the Fall, the trajectory of unredeemed human history—the City of Man—is always in the Bible *to* judgment (the Flood, Babel, Canaan, Egypt, Jerusalem, Babylon, Rome & then Rev. 19). (Not quite as universal as gravity, but seemingly as inevitable in its overall tendency.)
 9. The Heavenly City in Scripture, though clearly having some continuity with our own age and existence (?*Rev. 21:24*), is presented as arriving only after a radical disjunction with our current history, including the judgment of the wicked (e.g., *Ps. 102:26; Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; 51:6, 16; 65:17; 66:22; Matt. 5:18; 24:29, 35; I Cor. 7:31; II Peter 3:10-13; I John 2:17; Rev. 6:12-14; 21:1*). The material world is to be restored only after something like we experience in death, before we are to be bodily resurrected. This is why Jesus told Pilate “**My kingdom is not of this world. . . . But now my kingdom is from another place,**” (*John 18:36*). Christ’s kingdom will come to this place (*Acts 1:6-8*), though when He comes, He will renew this place (*Rom. 8:21*).
 10. We should have a desire to see non-Christians know the common blessings of God’s kindness in providence (e.g., food, water, family relations, jobs, good government, justice). Actions to this end are appropriate for Christians and for congregations.
 11. Temporary institutions are still worthy of sincere Christian attention, thought, energy and action. (Think about marriage, for instance) Our teaching must not Platonically devalue this world as if we can discern better than Scripture what is of “eternal value.” We’re to do whatever we do “**unto the Lord,**” (*Col. 3:17*).
 12. We should have a desire to see all people saved.
 13. Our priority to unbelievers is the verbal proclamation of the Gospel, which alone can address the greatest part of human suffering caused by the Fall, and which is the fulfillment of the Great Commission (*Matt. 28:18-20*), which is, in turn the fulfillment of the Greatest Commandments (*Mark 12:29-31; cf. Gal. 6:2*) which, in turn, interprets the heart of *any* cultural mandate (*Gen. 1:28*). As Tim Keller

- says, “Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being,” (“*The Gospel and The Poor*,” *Themelios* (33.3; Dec 2008), p. 17).
14. After the Fall, note that the cultural mandate is not uniquely given to the people of God, but to humanity in general (e.g., note the cultural advances in the line of Cain—building a city, raising livestock, music, metal-working [*Gen. 4:17, 20-22*]).
 15. We, as a congregation, are not required to take responsibility for the physical needs in the unbelieving community around us. We do have a responsibility to care for the needs of those within our congregation (*Matt. 25:34-40; Acts 6:1-6; Gal. 6:2, 10; James 2:15-16; I John 3:17-19*) though even within the church, there were further qualifications (e.g., *II Thess. 3:10; I Tim. 5:3-16*). Paul’s counsel to Timothy (in *I Tim. 5:3-16*) about which widows to care for seems to indicate that the list was intended for *Christian* widows. One qualification seemed to be lack of alternative sources of support. Thus the instruction that family members should care for the needy first, if at all possible, shows the kind of prioritization of allowing for families—even of unbelievers—to provide support so that the church wouldn’t have to do it (*I Tim. 5:16*). We can extrapolate from this to conclude that support that could be provided from outside the church (for instance, from the state) should be preferred over using church funds, thus freeing church funds to be used elsewhere.
 16. We should use historical examples and arguments for taking responsibility for our communities with care. Most people in the European past had established churches (also true many places in America before the 1840’s). Therefore the example of Calvin, the puritans, Edwards, etc. is less directly applicable than may first appear. They were not in modern pluralistic societies with large groups of people calling themselves non-Christians.
 17. Many texts which seem to promote the idea of taking responsibility for our community’s physical well-being (e.g., Micah 6:8, Matt. 25, Gal. 6 & I John 3) are about our charity to members of the covenant community, believers, not non-Christian members of the community at large.
 18. We are not forbidden from choosing to alleviate physical needs outside our congregation as a witness to the Gospel (e.g., providing computers to local schools, disaster relief, etc.). (contra a wrong idea of the spirituality of the church)
 19. We have the freedom to choose particular actions for the welfare of our community as a witness to them directly, or more remotely by cooperating with other congregations and Christians in the formation of denominations, educational institutions, and a great variety of boards, charities and other organizations.
 20. We should never mistake social action or mercy ministries (e.g., caring for the poor, soup kitchens, etc.) for evangelism (though it may be a means to it).
 21. We should expect *our members* to be involved in a wide variety of good works (*Prov. 19:17; 21:3; Luke 10:25-37; Acts 9:36; Heb. 13:1-3; James 1:27*), some of which we may choose to hold up as examples to other members. This can be done without leading the congregation as a whole to own or support those particular ministries (whether by congregationally funding or staffing them). We personally can set an example of care for others. So John Wesley “began the year

- 1785, by spending five days in walking through London, often ankle deep in sludge and melting snow, to beg 200 pounds, which he employed in purchasing clothing for the poor. He visited the destitute in their own houses, ‘to see with his own eyes what their wants were, and how they might be effectually relieved.’” Wesley was 81 years old! (*L. Tyerman, Life and Times of Wesley (Harper & Bros; 1872), III.458*).
22. We as pastors must make sure that matters of secondary importance should not absorb our attention and energy to the detriment of our primary charge to preach the Gospel.
 23. Our exposition of God’s Word should certainly equip our members by applying Biblical teaching to issues which are (or should be) of current concern, e.g., poverty, gender, racism, justice (*cf. Isaiah 1:10-17*). This teaching, however, should normally be given without seeming to commit the church to particular policy solutions to problems affecting the wider community. For example, Christian preachers could strenuously advocate the abolition of slavery without spending their sermons laying out how specifically it was to be done. We can speak to ought’s without untangling all the how’s.
 24. We should warn our congregations about the dangers of accumulating wealth. Many Christians throughout history have read the Bible as being more suspicious of wealth than we modern American Christians seem to be. Everyone from Augustine to Wesley has written eloquently of the dangerous gravity of wealth, and the worldly pull it can have on our hearts. Such teaching need not cause us to reject careful financial planning, but it should cause us to be more vigilant, more wary and even suspicious of wealth than we tend to be. We should give fresh attention to cautionary passages like Matt. 6:21, Luke 12:34, I Tim. 6:17-19 and James 5:1-6. According to the Bible, wealth can be more spiritually dangerous than poverty.
 25. We must carefully prioritize the responsibilities unique to the church. Matters like a concern for education, politics, and mercy ministries for those beyond the church’s membership are proper concerns for Christians to have, but the church itself is not the structure for addressing such concerns. They are the proper concern of Christians in schools, governments, and other structures of society. In fact, if such concerns came to be the focus of the church, they could potentially distract the church from its main and unique responsibility, that of incarnating and proclaiming the gospel. “To the church is committed the task of proclaiming the whole counsel of God and, therefore, the counsel of God as it bears upon the responsibility of all persons and institutions. While the church is not to discharge the functions of other institutions such as the state and the family, nevertheless it is charged to define what the functions of these institutions are To put the matter bluntly, the church is not to engage in *politics*. Its members must do so, but only in their capacity as citizens of the state, not as members of the church,” (*John Murray, “The Relation of Church and State,” in Collected Writings of John Murray, vol. 1 [Banner of Truth, 1976], 255*). We want to protect the practice of evangelism, and the priority of evangelism in the life of the local church. We never want to allow our congregation’s activity in caring for the needs of the community to diminish, or encroach upon the priority of the Gospel.

26. We must beware of dividing the church unnecessarily over non-essential issues in which we involve the congregation (e.g., nuclear disarmament, constitutional amendments, particular art outreaches or ministries in the community).
27. We must be aware of the deadly distraction such good deeds have been to earlier generations. (e.g., the Social Gospel movement; NB ancient examples like Council of Rome in 826 establishing schools at cathedrals was done in a context where the assumption was they were serving the baptized. NOT an example of reaching out to those we take to be unconverted with physical charity.)
28. We must ask ourselves and others whether or not we are more excited by and about the Gospel, or other, secondary issues, and if others perceive this in our ministry.
29. We must be on guard against the preference many of our own members (perhaps especially younger ones, or ones with more theological doubts) may have for doing ministry which is valued by unbelievers. Matt. 5:13-16 and I Peter 2:11-12 that speak of unbelievers seeing our good deeds and praising God must be understood along with promises of persecution for following Christ, (e.g., *Matt. 24:9; II Tim. 3:12*) and remembering that Christ Himself was finally rejected by the crowds and executed. Certainly popularity in our community is a poor guide to faithfulness in ministry.
30. We must carefully consider the amount of our members' time, vision, excitement and prayers we are encouraging to be occupied by actions non-Christians might do, when non-Christians will never be giving themselves to evangelizing our community (or beyond).
31. We must beware the popular "share the Gospel, and if necessary use words" mindset. Similarly, the Gospel is, properly speaking, preached, not done (though our actions can certainly affirm it, e.g., John 13:34-35 [even here it is interesting to note that it is our love for *one another* that is said to point to the Gospel!]). Social ministry done by the church should be self-consciously engaged in with the hope, prayer and design of sharing the Gospel. J. Gresham Machen wrote that "material benefits were never valued in the apostolic age for their own sake, they were never regarded as substitutes for spiritual things. That lesson needs to be learned. Social betterment, though important, is insufficient; it must always be supplemented by God's unspeakable gift," (*J. Gresham Machen, New Testament, ed., John Cook, pp. 345-346*).
32. We must allow some latitude between pastors on differing judgment calls on the particulars of some of these secondary issues (e.g., how to oppose abortion; how much they would cooperate with non-evangelicals in social ministries, etc.)
33. We must be aware of the attraction to join our church certain non-gospel activities may cause (e.g., music, a school, certain community-help programs) and we must redouble our carefulness in only taking in members who understand the Gospel and give evidence of regeneration.
34. In our duties as under-shepherds, we want to protect our flock from the well-meaning writings and teachings of those who emphasize their role of making a difference in the culture. Those individuals may be uniquely gifted and called, but it is not a Biblical model for the local church.
35. We must not be naïve in this. We should realize that the priority of evangelism is

always one of the most difficult things for the pastor to maintain in his own life and in the congregation's ministry.

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