

to think about . . .

The blessed shall inherit the earth.
What is our responsibility towards the earth today?

what on earth are we... doing

Harwood Lockton

Christ's dilemma

For some 2000 years Christians have grappled with a dilemma that Christ gave us – how to relate to our society or "the world"?

> *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world…They are not of the world, even as I am not of it… As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*
>
> *—John 17: 15-19.*

Hence we are to be in the world but not of the world. But how can we remain true to God while living in a society whose core values are often antagonistic to those of God?

Historical responses by Christians

It is possible to identify at least three major responses to this dilemma by Christians churches through the ages.

Separation— or fleeing the wicked world. Christians are called to "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Josh 24:15), "come out of her my people" (Rev 18:4) and to be "as aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Pet 2:11). This stance was demonstrated biblically by Noah, Abraham and Christ, and historically by the early Christian church. The Adventist Church has descended from the Anabaptist tradition as have the Amish – perhaps the most famous current example of a Christian community living separate from and "uncontaminated" by the contemporary society.

Assimilation— This stance sees the world as inherently good. It is God's by both creation and redemption. Biblical characters such as Joseph, Daniel and Christ were fully part of their societies and yet faithful to God. After Constantine (AD 313), church and state were seen as complementary. Christians became involved in a variety of social endeavours: the arts, politics and social action. Such a stance maintains the relevance of Christianity to society but easily leads to Christians becoming so assimilated into their society that there is no radical difference.

Transformation— This stance acknowledges both the good and evil in society and works for a transformation of society. Its focus is on bringing the values of the kingdom of God into the here and now whilst acknowledging that a perfect society awaits the Second Advent. Biblically the messages of the prophets ring with calls to social and spiritual reformation. Christ began his ministry through a statement implying social action (Luke 4:18-19). Historically the Christian church has done much to transform society: successfully lobbying for the elimination of infanticide and slavery, bringing education and health care to the masses, providing charitable relief and aid.

Christ's stance

Each of these positions has strengths and weaknesses, and each is Biblical! Christ subtly combined all three stances choosing for each situation the appropriate response. He separated Himself from the value system of the world at the same time as He was assimilated into Palestinian society. He also establishes the embryo of God's "upside down kingdom" which has led to the social transformation of human society. Christ's incarnational stance is well illustrated by his metaphor of salt (Matt 5:13): salt penetrates, transforms, preserves and is distinctive! It must be radically different to make a difference but it must be scattered and penetrate into the meat it is to preserve. Christians are not only called to be a distinctive witness to the grace of God, they are also called to preserve society and arrest its decay. Social involvement is an imperative not an option: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20: 21).

Social involvement is an imperative not an option

A theology of Christian social involvement

If we are not yet persuaded of the necessity to integrate social involvement into our Christian lives and witness, John Stott outlines five Biblical doctrines, any one of which "should be sufficient to convince us of our Christian social responsibility: the five together leave us without excuse":[1]

- God as the Creator of all – including the social and the spiritual;
- Human beings as holistic entities in God's image – physical, spiritual, in-community beings;
- Christ as the role model for Christian behaviour – He healed the sick, fed the hungry, showed compassion;
- Salvation – implies presenting to secular society an alternative community grounded in the "upside down values" of the Kingdom of God;
- The double identity of the church as a 'holy' people called out of the world, and a 'worldly' people, sent back into the world by God to witness and serve.

Evangelism *or* social action?

While many Christians accept the Biblical imperative of social involvement, some have constructed a false dichotomy between evangelism and social involvement, believing that evangelism is to take priority.[2] But the Bible clearly presents an integrated view of our vertical relationship – the spiritual that connects us to God – and our horizontal relationship – the social that connects us to other human beings. "I will make justice the measuring-line and righteousness the plumb-line" (Isa 28:17).

As any builder – or user of a building – will appreciate, the horizontal dimension (the measuring-line) is just as important as the vertical dimension (the plumb-line): without either the structural integrity of a building will be in doubt. Our vertical relationship with God informs and motivates us in our horizontal relationships with others. And these horizontal relationships testify of our vertical relationship. This is not a question of salvation by works – in fact the very opposite as we let God's grace cascade down and flow outward to others.

Often Christian social action breaks down barriers of mistrust and may lead to the winning of people to Christ. However the 'entering wedge' should never be our motivation for engaging in social action for two reasons. Firstly, it is likely to produce 'rice Christians' – Christian mission history is unfortunately littered with such examples and even today some wish to use ADRA as a battering ram to prise open areas resistant to traditional forms of Christian evangelism.

Secondly, the Christian is called by God to do "good for goodness' sake."[3] Being socially involved in good works has its own intrinsic value and Biblical basis. If as a result people come to personally accept Christ then "Praise the Lord!" – but that should not be our motivation. Indeed, God's grace needs to be *demonstrated* in acts of disinterested service by Christians *being* good news as much as by *proclaiming* good news.

Note also that the author of the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) gave the Great Commandment (Matt 22:34-40) indeed the Great Commandment is included in the Great Commission: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28: 20).

The Church's response

What does this mean for the Church and the Christian in the real world of human need? Let us take the case of the poor.[4] The Bible is saturated with references to justice in regard to the poor and marginalised (the widow, the orphan, the alien). The material meaning of these texts was not lost on the first hearers even if we – affluent and privileged westerners – prefer to soften their message by reading only a spiritual meaning. The gospel commission does extend to such matters as the relief of sickness, hunger and poverty, and to the correction of injustice and exploitation, both social and economic.

Christians can act corporately through the institutional church via organizations such as ADRA (the Adventist Development and Relief Agency) and ADRACare. ADRA is one of the most widespread church-related aid and development organizations in the world, and ADRA-Australia has an excellent track record in the delivery of development programs in various parts of the world: one recent outside evaluation of an ADRA-Australia project in Asia was that it "was possibly world best-practice". ADRA is renowned for its disinterested but clearly identified Christian service. Frequently ADRA-Australia personnel are called upon to advise the Australian Government's aid agency. Adventists can also act corporately through various self-supporting Adventist social welfare organizations such as Asian Aid and International Children's Care, as well as through a host of other Christian and non-Christian social relief groups.

However, I believe it is vital that Christians also act individually and personally and not just rely on a 'remote control' approach by financially supporting institutional agencies as essential as that is. With the recent advent of ADRACare here within Australia there are increasing opportunities for Adventists to be involved in the front-line of service. But there are also a multitude of needy people within our own countries, indeed within our own cities, suburbs, towns and streets.

Our world is fractured along the fault lines of class, ethnicity, gender and disadvantage as any daily news bulletin will readily attest. There is an urgent need for Christians to create "communities of grace" where God's grace and love are clearly demonstrated by gracious Christians. Our loving response to God for His amazing grace should be to let this grace cascade down to those in our communities and in our world who need to see and experience (as much if not more than hear of) God's grace. This is something each of us can do individually but also more powerfully in concert with others. Would it not be wonderfuly if each of our local churches was known as a centre that attested to, and dispensed God's grace "on tap".[5]

Of Christ, the founder of the church, it was said he "went around doing good" (Acts 10:38). The challenge for the institutional church and individual Christians is to do likewise. We really have no choice! ■

1 Stott, John. *Issues Facing Christians Today*, London: Collins-Marshall Pickering, 1990: 15. See also pages 15-25.

2 For a discussion of the holistic view within Adventism see: Cameron, Earl, "Evangelism and social involvement: not either/or, both", *Ministry*, October 2000, pages 8-11; and Maynard-Reid, Pedrito, "Holistic evangelism", *Ministry*, May 2000, pages 20-22.

3 Roennfeldt, R. "Doing good for goodness' sake: towards a theology of social engagement", in Currow, S, H. Lockton, and D. Syme (eds), *Just Act Just*, Cooranbong: Avondale Academic Press, 2002.

4 For a fuller treatment see Lockton, H. "The Christian and social justice – does God care about the poor?" in McIver, R. & Roennfeldt, R. (eds) *Meaning for the New Millennium: The Christian Faith from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, Cooranbong: Avondale Academic Press, 2000: pages 185-188.

5 Yancey, Philip. *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997. See especially page 250 and the rest of Chapter 20.

For reflection . . .

- Suggest some practical ideas for supporting and caring for people in our own suburbs, towns and streets.