Declaring and Demonstrating God's Saving Rule

The connection between social action and evangelism in Christian mission

Introduction – *the issue and its historic roots*

> The relationship between the evangelistic and the societal dimensions of the Christian mission constitutes one of the thorniest areas in the theology and practice of mission (David Bosch, 1991: 401)

This paper is intended to propose an answer to the following question:

> What is the place of social action in the mission of the church?

It will ask whether our mission entails evangelism only, social action only or some combination of the two and, if it is a combination, then what the relative priority of the two should be. It will also consider whether the responsibility of mission, or of these two possible aspects, rests with individual believers or with local churches and will say something about the local and global dimensions of mission. Much has been written on these questions and this brief paper cannot hope to offer definitive answers. The author's hope, however, is that it offers some help to individuals and church leaders who are wrestling with these questions.

The debate about the role of social action within contemporary Evangelicalism stems in large part from the origins of the modern movement as it emerged out of Fundamentalism in the second half of the 20th century, although its roots run deeper still. From its origins in the mid-18th century, Evangelicalism has been shaped by a confluence of pietistic and activist streams, the former focused on personal devotion and holiness and the latter on a concern for mission and social transformation. Early to mid-19th century Evangelicals, for example William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury, were prominent leaders in social engagement who pioneered social reform. Although this social activism had waned somewhat by the end of the 19th century, it was only in the early 20th century that Evangelicals turned decisively away from social engagement. This shift was largely a reaction to the 'Social Gospel', which emerged from liberal theology. Influenced by modernistic confidence in the potential for human progress, this theory claimed that Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom was concerned exclusively with compassion and social change in the present age. Evangelism was, thus, pushed to the periphery or redefined in terms of restoring people to physical and social wholeness rather than calling them to personal repentance and faith in Christ. In reaction, Evangelicals, for whom the need for individual conversion had always been a defining characteristic, tended to become highly sceptical towards the idea of social engagement. Many sought theological justification for this position in an extreme form of world-denying dispensational premillennialism.[1] Thus Fundamentalism was born.

The neo-Evangelical movement that emerged from Fundamentalism in post-War America and Britain consciously rejected the world-denying, anti-cultural and ant-intellectual stance of Fundamentalism but did not initially recapture the earlier Evangelical interest in social engagement. The emphasis in mission was exclusively, or at least primarily, on evangelism together with church planting. Social change, it was believed, would follow because of the impact of the changed lives of converts. Billy Graham, speaking in 1966 (quoted in Bosch, 1991: 404), typifies this stance:

> I am convinced if the Church went back to its main task of proclaiming the Gospel and getting people converted to Christ, it would have a far greater impact on the social, moral and psychological needs of men than any other thing it

[1] Earlier Evangelicals had often been driven by postmillennial hopes, but it is my conviction that the reaction to the Social Gospel and the general reactionary nature and negative stance of Fundamentalism were greater factors in the abandonment of social engagement than differing systems of eschatology. Certainly it would be wrong to say that premillennialism leads inevitably to disinterest in social transformation or that postmillennialism always inspires engagement.

> could possibly do. Some of the greatest social movements of history have come about as a result of men being converted to Christ.

Within Evangelicalism there were, however, many who felt that social action should be given greater priority and their voice began to gain greater prominence in the 1970s. Through reflection on John's version of the 'Great Commission' (John 20:31), which describes Jesus' sending of the church in the same way that the Father had sent Him, leading British evangelical John Stott, who had earlier supported Graham's position, became convinced that Christian mission should be defined as service. Stott confessed that (1975: 23):

> I now see more clearly that not only the consequences of the commission but the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus.

Rather than seeing social action as simply a *means to* evangelism, opening up opportunities for the gospel to be proclaimed, or a *manifestation of* evangelism, making the message of the gospel visible, Stott (1975:27) argued that a 'truly Christian' view of evangelism and social action sees them as *equal partners*:

> As partners the two belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself. Both are expressions of unfeigned love.

Stott wrote these words just one year after the *Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization*, a worldwide gathering of Evangelical leaders had met to produce the *Lausanne Covenant*. The Covenant (1974: paragraph 5) affirmed that:

> Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ.

Thus, Lausanne, along with Stott, emphasised two duties of the Christian and the church: evangelism and social action. Some of those in attendance at Lausanne feared, however, that this position represented a false dichotomy. They responded to the Covenant by emphasising that (quoted in Bosch, 1991: 406):

> there is no biblical dichotomy between the word spoken and the word made visible in the lives of God's people. Men will look as they listen and what they see must be one with what they hear. […] There are times when our communication may be by attitude and action only, and times when the spoken word will stand alone: but we must repudiate as demonic the attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social concern.

Mission that emphasises both the call to personal conversion and the call to action for justice has come to be known as 'holistic mission' and has become widespread amongst contemporary Evangelicals. Chris Wright (2006), for example, promotes holistic mission in his monumental discussion of God's mission throughout Scripture, *The Mission of God*, in which he includes every way in which we serve God as part of our mission. There remains, however, significant tension around the fear of a false dichotomy and the question of whether evangelism should always be given primacy over social action. Some Evangelicals continue to call for a return to the pre-Lausanne consensus that mission is essentially evangelism and church planting. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert (2011: 62) represent this view when they write:

> The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.

Meanwhile, with the growing realisation that the West is now a mission field, inspired by the prescient writing of Lesslie Newbigin and continued by ongoing conversations about the missional nature of the church, the question of what exactly the church's mission is has never been more pressing.

Three foundational principles

1. Justice matters to God

God is a just God and a God of justice. He always acts justly and rules with justice. The justice of God is a core quality in His character and there are a number of other biblical words that relate to it (e.g., holiness and truth). This is not, of course, the sole dimension of His character – He is also loving (related ideas include merciful and gracious). These two qualities – love and justice – are perfectly interrelated and balanced in the divine nature. His justice is always loving and His love is always just. Scripture consistently describes God as the holy and just One. Israel's Law (e.g., Exodus 21:2-6; 22:25; 23:6, 11-12; Leviticus 19:9-10, 15; 23:22; 25:2-7, 10; 35:27; Deuteronomy 5:14; 14:28-29; 15:1-18; 23:20; 16:19-20; 24:17-21), praise songs (e.g., Psalm 9:16; 11:7; 33:5; 36:6; 37:28; 45:6; 99:4; 103:6; 140:12) and Prophets (e.g., Isaiah 1:11-17; 16:4-5; 61:8; Jeremiah 7:3-11; 9:23-24; Amos 5:11-15, 21-24; Hosea 6:6; Zechariah 7:4-12) all testify to the importance of social justice to God. The central motivation for Israel to act justly was that justice is reflective of the character of God (Leviticus 19:2). Indeed, God is more concerned with just behaviour than with correct observance of the sacrificial system (Proverbs 21:3). Jesus also described a commitment to justice as central to God's desires, describing justice, along with mercy and faithfulness, as one of the weighty concerns of the Law that the Pharisees had neglected (Matthew 23:23-24).

Justice is also a key concept in understanding salvation. The ultimate eschatological vision of Scripture is of a perfectly just society, but this can only be achieved through God's direct intervention in judgement (e.g., Isaiah 51:4-5). The Old Testament Prophets longed for the 'Day of the Lord' when He would act in judgement and His Servant would bring forth justice for the nations (Isaiah 42:1-4); the early church in its proclamation of the gospel anticipated Christ's future just judgement of the world (Acts 17:31); and Revelation foresees the personal return of Christ as the one who brings justice (Revelation 19:11) including a decisive final judgement prior to the revelation of the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 20:11-15), which will be the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13), ordered perfectly in line with God's justice. Yet the testimony of Scripture is also clear that no human being is just – all are tainted by sin (Romans 3:10). Just as Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden because of their sin, so no sinful human being can enter into the new creation without tainting it. We stand condemned and deserving God's wrath and judgement. The Law, upholding the standard of God's justice, cannot save us – it only intensifies our awareness of our sin (Romans 3:20). The central enigma of Scripture, therefore, is how a just God can accept unjust human beings without acting unjustly. In the cross of Christ this dilemma is resolved – the just One suffers in the place of the unjust, taking the punishment that God's justice deserves, in order that those who are 'in Him' through faith may be declared just (Romans 3: 25-26). The cross demonstrates the justice of God!

In considering the importance of justice to God we must say something about the nature of sin. The same Hebrew and Greek words can be translated either 'justice' or 'righteousness'. Both words are appropriate in speaking of God's character, but when applied to human beings, the latter tends to imply the responsibility of individuals to do what is right whereas the former tends to refer to the ways in which structures, systems and the actions of others impact the lives of individuals. Both matter to God – He expects human society to be organised according to just principles **and** He expects individuals to act righteously. Traditionally, the wrong actions of individuals have been defined as sin but it has also been argued that there is such a thing as 'structural' or 'social sin', referring to non-personal aspects of human society that cause harm to people. There is some biblical justification for the idea of structural sin, for example the Old Testament references to God's judgement continuing to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Number 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9) and the New Testament references to powers and authorities that are hostile to God (e.g., Ephesians 6:12). It is particularly important for Western Christians, with our strongly individualistic mind-set, to realise the ways in which structures and forces beyond the individual's control constrain their choices. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the biblical emphasis on personal responsibility for our actions. Just as it is reductionist to describe sin and its effects only in terms of the actions of individuals, it would be wrong to neglect the call for individual repentance. We are all, to varying degrees, the victims of the sin of others and of cultural and societal forces beyond our understanding, but we are also loved individually by God and responsible before Him for our personal sin. Whilst Christ acted to purge the Temple and exposed the hypocrisy of privileged leaders who, confident of their own righteousness, condemned others, He also called those who were victims of their hypocrisy and of oppressive systems to repent and

sin no more (John 8:11). Evangelicals, nurtured in a strong emphasis on personal sin, must recognise the wider aspects of sin's effect in human society, but we must not fall into the error of liberal theology in thinking of 'sin' purely in terms of the limitations and constraints impersonal forces place on human beings as they seek to fulfil their potential. We are both victims **and** offenders. We need liberated from structural sin **and** from our own sinfulness. We need restored **and** forgiven. God wants social justice **and** personal righteousness.

Furthermore, the cross of Christ is the only means of redemption from human sin, whether personal or 'structural'. Christ's death dealt with both problems. The atonement was both a cosmic victory over every power that was hostile to God and a substitution of the sinless one in the place of the sinner in order to bear God's judgement for sin. The message of the cross is central to any genuine solution to sin, whether structural or personal.

2. Believers are called to act justly

Micah 6:8 summarises the duty of the Old Testament believer as: 'to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'. A humble walk with God is, thus, inextricably linked with just and merciful behaviour towards others. This same principle is clear in Jesus' teaching – He expected His followers to be inspired by their experience of the grace of God to extend grace towards others. This is the point of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). Good deeds are vitally important within the New Testament. They are the purpose for which God has saved us (Ephesians 2:10) and a goal to which we must devote ourselves (Titus 3:1, 8, 14). They are the inevitable fruit of the seed of the gospel growing in a life by the Spirit's enabling (Galatians 5:22-23) and the end result of Scripture's work in our lives (2 Timothy 3:17). Compassion for our brothers and sisters who are in need, issuing in meeting that need as our resources permit, is evidence that God's love truly lives in us (1 John 3:16-20). Faith without deeds, exemplified in empty well-wishing toward a needy brother or sister, is dead and not truly saving faith (James 2:13-17). Thus in every area of life where believers have direct responsibility or authority, there is a very clear expectation that they will act in a manner in keeping with the gospel. Ephesians 5:22-6:9 contains three examples of this principle as applied to husbands, fathers and slave owners, but it also serves to demonstrate how the same principle should cause believers who are under authority in each relationship (wives, children and slaves) to act in a distinctively Christian way.[2] Although the family of believers is to be given priority, Christians are expected to do good to all people as they have opportunity (Galatians 6:10).

For the believers addressed directly by the New Testament letters the context of these good deeds was likely to have been limited to interpersonal relationships, especially given the low social status of many believers. There was little or no opportunity to change structural factors since there was no democracy and few Christians held positions of high influence. We can, however, extend the principle in the contemporary world to impact the way believers vote, the career paths they chose and the influence they have in wider society. Although each believer must consider these matters prayerfully, the commitment to do good and seek justice must influence the choices that are made. This principle should also extend to our attitude to consumerism – buying choices that minimise injustice and oppression for others – and stewardship of the environment. Our prayer for God's Kingdom to come on earth (Matthew 6:10) and our pursuit of the Kingdom and God's righteousness (Matthew 6:33) are not simply about personal piety – they are life-shaping principles that should define every choice we make. We seek personal and societal holiness and justice (see Scott, 1997: 263). In an increasingly globalised world our actions have an effect on an ever-growing circle of others,

[2] The case of slaves and slavery in the New Testament is worthy of special consideration given the questions that may be raised about justice. Although a full consideration of the issue lies beyond the remit of this article, it is worth noting that the complete New Testament picture inevitably points to an end to slavery – slave trading is described as sin (1 Timothy 1:10), slaves are encouraged to gain their freedom if possible (1 Corinthians 7:21) and the injunction to Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother strongly suggests that he was to be liberated (Philemon 16). The New Testament does not call for an end to the system of slavery, but this is understandable for two reasons. Firstly, the early Christians, a tiny marginal minority, had no power to make such a major societal change. Secondly, to end slavery overnight would have caused the economic system to collapse and left many slaves destitute. The commands to slave owners in the New Testament prohibit cruelty and we must realise that first century slavery was different in several important ways from the horrific African slave trade perpetrated by European countries and their colonies in the early modern era, not least the absence of a racial element.

including many we will never meet personally. Although it might seem an impossible task, we must begin to unravel this complex web of inter-connections and do what we can to minimise the harm and maximise the good our choices do to others.

3. God's covenant people are called to be a community of justice

God's call to just living is not confined to the individual believer; it is also a call to the community of God's people. Scripture is the great story of God's creative and redemptive purposes. The original creation reflected the goodness of God and the narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 reveal that human society can only be just and good when it is ordered under God's sovereign rule. Within this perfect creation humankind had a God-given mandate to rule and subdue – to act justly as stewards over God's creation (Genesis 1:28). The Fall (Genesis 3) creates a tension within Scripture between God's justice and human rebellion. The 'creation mandate' of Genesis 1 and the divine commission of Adam as keeper of the created world in Genesis 2 are marred by sin and God's curse on the earth. The first post-Fall narrative (Cain and Abel, Genesis 4) highlights the way in which injustice pervades human relationships, even between brothers, and the subsequent account of the Flood (Genesis 6-9) demonstrates the way in which injustice perverts and corrupts human society. Social injustice in all its manifestations is one consequence of human alienation from God and one reason for God's action in judgement. With the call of Abraham a new story emerges – the forming of a covenant community which will gladly acknowledge God's rule and obey Him, so becoming a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:2-3). Abraham is the father of the faithful (Romans 4:16) and his obedience marks the beginning of the great story of redemption that climaxes in Christ.

Abraham's descendants eventually found themselves in slavery in Egypt, subject to the unjust structures of human rule. Under Moses' leadership God redeemed the fledgling nation from slavery in Egypt through the Exodus. God called them to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:3-6) and gave them His Law to mark their distinctiveness as a theocratic nation. Subsequent Old Testament history recounts the nation's successes and (mainly) failures in living as God's covenant people. The Law set the standard for personal and social justice, provided the sacrificial system as a path to ongoing personal and national repentance and restoration, and enshrined principles of personal liberty and social fairness, most notably in the legislation about the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25). Israel had a special responsibility to be a light to all nations (1 Kings 8:41-43; Psalm 67:1-2; Isaiah 2:2-3; 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; Zechariah 8:22-23). Some authors (e.g., Waldron Scott, 1997: 55) thus speak about Israel's 'mission' being 'centripetal', with a drawing effect on individuals. Whilst it is certainly true that the Old Testament describes a number of individuals from other nations who are drawn to Israel's distinctive character as Yahweh's people (consider, for example, Rahab, the Queen of Sheba and Naaman), it is perhaps stretching the point to call this 'mission', since the word 'mission' entails the sense of being sent and, perhaps more importantly, because the drawing of the nations that these Old Testament texts envisage is primarily eschatological and is envisaged as God's doing (through His Messianic king) rather than a result of the activities of the nation. Jonah, the reluctant 'missionary' to the Assyrians, stands as something of an exception in being sent to a foreign nation with a message that included the possibility of repentance, although even his message was of the possibility of judgement withheld rather than of an invitation to join God's covenant people. Israel, then, was called to live as a holy people, reflecting God's character and to bless and include those people of other nations who came to recognise Yahweh as Lord, but there was no commission to go out into the other nations with a message about Yahweh. Nevertheless, the Old Testament establishes the pattern of God's people living justly under His just rule within a world that does not acknowledge His rule in expectation of the future direct intervention of God when, through His Messiah, He will establish justice through the purification of His people and the judgement of their enemies. Israel's rulers, judges and kings, were expected to lead in faithfulness to God and her prophets called the wayward people back to covenant faithfulness. Some of the Old Testament prophets also pronounced judgement on other nations, often in relation to their abuse of God's people.

The New Testament continues this same theme. Jesus came to announce the arrival of God's Kingdom, but, in the same vein as his forerunner John the baptiser, He called people to repent in order to receive the Kingdom (Mark 1:15). Christ declared the good news of the Kingdom, called people to enter it and demonstrated its reality through miraculous signs. His teaching picked up on important themes of justice from the Old Testament, especially the Exodus and the Jubilee

(Luke 4:14-21 is a prime example), and in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5-7) He restored the full intensity of the Old Testament law, explaining that God's desire is for inner righteousness flowing from an obedient relationship with God as Father rather than simply external 'acts of righteousness' (6:1). Jesus' parables emphasise the reality that some are in the Kingdom while others find themselves outside it and He taught that entrance into the Kingdom depends upon repentance, humbling of self and childlike faith (Matthew 7:21; 18:3; 21:32; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17). The new birth that brings entry to the Kingdom is an action of God's Spirit linked with belief in His Son (John 3:5, 16). Jesus exemplifies the motivating power of compassion towards those in need (Matthew 14:14; Mark 6:34), but His miracles were also signs of the inauguration of the Kingdom. He did not attempt to eradicate poverty or disease, even locally, and did not heal everyone that He could have healed. Although He healed people who did not subsequently follow Him, He gave primacy to the proclamation of the Kingdom, to the preparation of the Twelve to be the foundation of the church and to His journey towards the cross.

The Kingdom of God broke into our world in a new way with the incarnation of the Son. With His victory over sin, death and the powers of evil through the cross and His triumphant resurrection, it became possible for a new covenant to be made. The church is the community of this New Covenant. The Messianic age or what may be called the 'end times' began with Christ's coming, but He has not yet fulfilled the Old Testament prophetic expectation of a decisive 'day of the Lord' when God's justice will be applied to all people of all nations. We can, thus, speak of an 'inaugurated eschatology'. The end times have begun and we can experience a foretaste of God's Kingdom, but we await its fulfilment when Christ returns in glory (Matthew 24:30). Within this Messianic age the church is called to live justly as a community of the Kingdom, acknowledging, celebrating and obeying God's Messiah, Jesus, as Lord as we await the return of the Messiah when God's justice will be fully revealed. Christ's Kingdom is 'now, but not yet'. As we live in these 'between times', the New Covenant people of God are called to be a community of justice – living in response to God's truth and grace, in keeping with His character. This entails a radical commitment to one another's well-being. Acts describes the importance of justice in the Jerusalem church both in terms of the compassionate acts of believers (2:42-47; 4:32-35) and the importance of truth within the community (Ananias and Sapphira, 5:1-11). The epistles often contain rejoinders to the church to live as communities of truth, love and justice (e.g., Ephesians 5:1-7) and the expectation of discipline of unrepentant sinners (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5) emphasises the importance of the purity of the church. The expectation of justice in relationships within the churches is balanced with a clear responsibility upon every believer to provide for their own needs as they were able and not to abuse the generosity of others. 1 Thessalonians 3:6-15 even describes neglect of these responsibilities as further grounds for expulsion from the community. Concern for the needs of other believers was not confined to the local community of believers either. Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians concerning the offering for the impoverished Jerusalem church introduces the principle of equality of provision among God's people across the world (8:13-15). Although Paul was writing into a specific situation there is no reason to think that this principle no longer applies today, yet it is a largely forgotten principle, both within the local congregation and across the global church, and should give wealthy Christians (in global terms) much cause for thought.

Connecting what we have said about the Old and New Testament people of God we can say something about how the message of the Old Testament Law and prophets applies to us today. The primary application of these passages must be within the community of God's people. The calls of Micah, Isaiah, Amos and others for justice are to the people of God. They should challenge the church to be the community of justice that God calls it to be. However, the eschatological vision of ultimate and universal justice and the messages of other Old Testament prophets to other nations remind us that there is a need for God's covenant people to speak prophetically to the world. The closest New Testament parallel to the Old Testament prophets is probably James 4-5. Throughout James 4 the concern is with the church's calling to unity, humility and faithfulness. In 5:7-20 the concern is also with the church as James encourages believers to endure patiently and to care for one another's spiritual well-being. Between these two passages, however, James speaks with the voice of those Old Testament prophets who pronounced God's judgement on the enemies of His people. The rich are called to weep and wail (5:1) because they have grown rich at the expense of others, have used their wealth in self-indulgence and have oppressed innocent people. This passage is a prophetic pronouncement that challenges God's people about the dangers of riches but it is also a challenge to the systems of the world that these rich non-believers represent. James 4-5, then, serves as a basis for both the prophetic call to God's people to act justly but also to speak boldly to oppressive political and social systems.

Christian mission – *declaring and demonstrating God's saving rule*

We have established that Scripture expects that individual believers and Christian communities will act justly in relationship to others. What, then, is the proper relationship of these good deeds to the sharing of the gospel? Firstly, their presence authenticates the faith we profess (see Goheen, 2011: 217-218). Secondly, since they gain the approval and favour of those who are not yet believers, they make the gospel attractive (Titus 2:3-10). This result is evident in the Jerusalem church, whose favour with the people was at least partly a result of the distinctive love and care within the community (Acts 2:44-47). Thirdly, they remove the possibility of slander against Christians or the church (Titus 2:8; 1 Peter 3:16). Fourthly, the consistent goodness of believers will cause non-believers to ask for a reason and so open opportunities to explain the gospel (Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Peter 3:15-16). This list, however, raises some problems. How can we do good to others without feeling dishonest if we are also hoping to share the gospel with them? How can we ensure that our good deeds and friendships are genuine and not contrived? The only way to reconcile this tension is to be gospel people – to ensure that our hearts are constantly gripped by grace and renewed by the Spirit. If our attitude is one of humility and servanthood we will not approach evangelism in an imposing manner, but as 'one beggar telling another beggar where to find food'.[3] Although the four connections between good deeds and our proclamation of the gospel are important, Scripture describes them as natural consequences rather than forced products. We do not do good deeds *so that* people will listen to the gospel; we do good deeds *because* Scripture commands us, the love of God compels us and the Spirit of God empowers us. Good deeds are an end in themself – a true demonstration of the reality of God's work in our lives. Evangelism is also an end in itself – a faithful proclamation that it is God who is at work in us. One may lead to the other, but faithfulness to God's leading in any given situation may result in one without the other.

Another way to think about these twin responsibilities is to consider the 'Great Commission' and the 'Great Commandment'. The 'Great Commandment' is to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). This twin responsibility is foundational to the Old Testament Law and to Christ's expectations of His followers. It reflects God's creative purpose for mankind and all sin is a failure to keep one or other commandment, or perhaps we should say that all sin is a failure to love God with our whole being either through direct rejection of Him or through failure to love our neighbour who is created in His image and loved by Him. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), on the other hand, is what we generally call Jesus' command to His followers to proclaim the gospel and make disciples. This command is given only to the church. The end goal of the Great Commission is that sinful human beings become people who are able and willing to fulfil the Great Commandment. In this sense the Great Commandment is prior to and more fundamental than the Great Commission. The Great Commandment's basis is in God's creation mandate, His original purpose for mankind. George Peters (1972: 166-167) summarises the distinction between God's creation mandate and the Great Commission. The former:

> was spoken to Adam as representative of the race and involves the whole realm of human culture', including 'the natural and social aspects of man such as habitat, agriculture, industrialization, commerce, politics, social and moral order, academic and scientific advancement, health, education and physical care.

All human beings are thus responsible before God to create a healthy culture and society that promotes life and justice. The creation mandate may also be called the 'cultural mandate'. Those with political and economic power bear special responsibility as God servants, answerable to Him (Romans 13:6). The 'Great Commission', on the other hand:

> was spoken to the apostles as representatives of the church of Jesus Christ involving the whole realm of the gospel. It majors on the spiritual liberation and restoration of man although it does not overlook his physical and social welfare […] [It] is carried forward by evangelization, discipleship training, church-planting, church care, and benevolent ministries.

Both the creation/cultural and the redemption/gospel mandates are given by God and both are necessary for the good of man, but the first is to all human beings while the second is only to the believer. The world can provide social care but only the church can herald the good news in evangelism, speaking prophetically to the world. For Peters (1972: 170), then, only the second mandate can properly be described as the mission of the church. Peters sees mercy

[3] Of course, the desire to evangelise is not the only motivator for the Christian towards good deed – a desire to honour God and the natural outworking of the same compassion that we have already observed in the life of Jesus are others.

missions as the export of 'cultural fruit' while evangelism is planting of seed and church-planting is cultivation of trees which in time will bear fruit and create a greater impact on culture. Peters is, therefore, arguing for the primacy of evangelism over social action.

Chris Wright (2006: 304) also recognises the continuing relevance of both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, but he interprets the relationship between the two differently: 'Why have we allowed what we call the *Great Commission* to obscure the twin challenge (endorsed by Jesus himself) of the *Great Commandment*?' Using Nagaland, Rwanda and Northern Ireland as examples, he insists that increased numbers of conversions do not automatically lead to social change (Wright, 2006: 320-321). Wright's case is flawed in that he selects a few examples that suit his conclusion without considering all similar situations and because he fails to question the quality of discipleship in these contexts, as opposed to number of initial 'conversions' (or decisions for Christ). Nevertheless, his central point, that both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission are equally binding on believers and that neither is strictly subordinate to the other, is surely correct. The Great Commission is, as the Matthean form clearly emphasises (Matthew 28:18-20), about making disciples, which includes their formation through baptism into the Trinitarian community of faith and their obedience to everything Christ taught. The fulfilment of the Great Commandment by disciples is, therefore, evidence of the reality of that to which the Great Commission testifies, namely the universal authority of Jesus and His continued presence in His church. Furthermore, the path to more widespread fulfilment of the Great Commandment is through fulfilling the Great Commission, since disciples of Christ obey His command to love their neighbour and discover the motivation (God's grace) and the power (God's Spirit) to do so. We might say that although the Great Commandment, being a continuation of the creation mandate, has historical precedent over the Great Commission, the Great Commission has causal precedence over the Great Commandment. The mission of the Church is to see more and more people becoming disciples of Jesus Christ, obedient to His teaching and expressing their shared life in Him in local communities of believers. As disciples these individuals and communities will love their neighbours and do good deeds which make the gospel attractive, with the result that more people will come to faith in Christ and engage in the mission of making disciples. The good deeds themselves, however, will be offered as freely as the love of God has been given to us. There will be no sense of serving only those who show an interest in the gospel or of ceasing to serve when people reject the gospel. Both the offer of compassion and the offer of the gospel are to be made freely. This process will have inevitable implications in culture, society and the political realm – there can be no true discipleship without a concern for and commitment to social justice. Social action is not an option for the believer – it is an integral part of following Christ.

Is it, then, correct to call for a holistic definition of mission and should social justice and evangelism have equal importance for the church? Since 'mission' is not a biblical word there is room for a diversity of definitions. We must avoid becoming embroiled in semantic arguments but we must decide where our priorities should lie. The central declaration of the gospel is that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' (Acts 2:36). That 'the confession of Jesus as Lord becomes the authentic confession of ever new peoples' must, therefore, be the end result of 'The mission of the church' (Newbigin, 1978: 22). As Lord, Jesus is sovereign over every power and authority (Ephesians 1:18-23), this has implications for every dimension of human life – personal and political; local and global; personal and societal. In proclaiming the gospel, Christians call individuals to repent and believe in Jesus and challenge powers and systems to recognise that there is One to whom they must give account. John Howard Yoder (1994: 156-157) expresses this well:

> This proclamation of the lordship of Christ is not a substitute for nor a prerequisite to the gospel call directed to individuals. Nor is it the mere consequence within society of the conversion of individuals one by one. Nor does it dispense with, or guarantee, or always necessarily facilitate such conversions. […] That Christ is Lord, a proclamation to which only individuals can respond, is nonetheless a social, political, *structural* fact which constitutes a challenge to the Powers. It thus follows that the claims such proclamation makes are not limited to those who have accepted it, nor is the significance of its judgment limited to those who have decided to listen to it.

Although Jesus did not seek political power, the opposition He faced from the Sanhedrin was at least partly because He threatened the social control sought by the Pharisees through their hypocritical and distorted religious system and the economic oppression the Sadducees exercised through the Temple moneychangers. His life was also bracketed by two 'encounters' with members of the Herod family – at His birth Herod the Great sought to eliminate the threat to his rule and Herod Antipas was complicit in His death, as he had been in the death of John the baptiser, because neither Jesus

nor John would entertain him with a message that didn't challenge his hedonistic lifestyle. Even Jesus' interaction with Pilate, which is one of the clearest expressions of His lack of ambition for political power, demonstrates His rejection of deceitful political systems. Again Yoder (1994: 52) expresses this well:

> Jesus was not just a moralist whose teachings had some political implications; he was not primarily a teacher of spirituality whose public ministry unfortunately was seen in a political light; he was not just a sacrificial lamb preparing for his immoliation, or a God-Man whose divine status calls us to disregard his humanity. Jesus was, in his divinely mandate (i.e., promised, anointed, messianic) prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships.

Although it is only eschatologically that Christ's Lordship will be universally acknowledged, the Christian lives in the present age as a citizen of heaven, gladly declaring and obeying Christ as Lord. Christians in the early centuries after Christ knew, and many even today in different parts of the world continue to know, that to declare Christ as Lord means that Caesar is no longer Lord and that obedience to God cannot always be squared with obedience to societal and political powers. Whilst the Christian seeks to live peaceably in submission to the authorities and will not engage in violent rebellion (Romans 13:1-2), there are times when we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29) and accept the consequences. We seek to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21), but we know that we cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24) and loyalty to God must be our ultimate responsibility. Following in the example of Daniel and the Hebrew midwives who delivered Moses we live at peace with everyone as far as it is possible without compromising our obedience to Christ (Romans 12:18). Still, the believer knows that social justice cannot ultimately be achieved by humankind working in isolation from God. The answers do not lie in political or economic systems without God. Attempts to transform such systems, whilst valid, must never be divorced from our living testimony to the Lordship of Christ and God's redeeming grace in Him. As Andrew Kirk (1999: 216-217) writes:

> There are some who have narrowed mission almost entirely to mean the struggle for justice, interpreted as engagement at all levels to bring about political structures which enable equal opportunities for all and which, as a matter of priority, meet the real needs of the disadvantaged. This, however, is to miss the very centre of the Christian faith. Evangelism is a visible witness to society concerning the core of all its basic problems […] and the fundamental solution is God's grace and forgiveness, reconciliation and a new beginning. Evangelism also points to the reality of a transforming power beyond daily political life.

To Kirk's definition of the 'fundamental solution' we must add justification (a strange omission given its relevance to the meaning of God's justice). The transforming power of which Kirk speaks is found supremely in the cross of Christ. Chris Wright (2006: 315) thus insists that 'the cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism', since only through the cross are the powers of evil defeated, death defeated, reconciliation achieved and the ultimate healing of all creation assured, as well as the forgiveness and justification of guilty sinners. What is ultimately at stake here is whether or not a person will be counted among God's eschatological people and therefore pass through the final judgement and enter into the eternal life of God's redeemed people in the new heavens and new earth.[4] We may ensure justice for a person or community in this age, but if we fail to introduce that individual or community to the good news of Christ's redemption and to call them to faith in Him we may be doing the ultimate injustice to them by leaving them to face God's justice without confidence that they have been justified through Christ's atoning death. Christians and churches, then, must not allow themselves to think or act as if social justice was the sole end of mission or to engage in social justice in ways that compromise their freedom to declare the good news of the redeeming Lordship of Jesus, God's Christ crucified and raised, and to call people to repent, believe and become His disciples.

So far we have suggested that the responsibility for good deeds, and for evangelism, rests with the individual believer, but is it also appropriate to expect the local congregation to share this responsibility? The insights of Lesslie Newbigin are helpful in this context. Newbigin described the local congregation as a 'sign, instrument and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society' (1989: 233) and therefore called churches to a selfless existence for the sake of those who are not yet members. In an earlier book Newbigin had also said that 'The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God' (1978: 124). Considering each of these three words in

[4] Common Evangelical short hand for this (although less precise) would be whether they will be in Heaven or not.

turn will help us understand the part the church can play in social justice and evangelism. As *foretaste*, the community of the church demonstrates the presence of God's Kingdom by living counter-culturally under His rule. As *sign*, the church points people to the Kingdom and grace of God as we proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is Saviour and Lord. As *instrument*, the church serves the Kingdom and extends grace to others by bringing the values of God's rule and grace to bear in every area in which it has influence. Although the commands to the New Testament churches say nothing about the church organising programmes for the purpose of either evangelism or social action, we may assume that in our different context where churches have greater resources and freedom that this is legitimate. We must, however, be aware of three dangers in this approach. The first, highlighted by Newbigin (1978: 123, 125), is that we must not allow our engagement in justice causes to compromise our freedom to testify to the ultimate justice of God:

> The church is not and can never expect to be the bearer of God's cause in the sense that it is the agency through which God's order is established within history. That is the Constantinian dream. Rather, it is called to be the witness to a grace and justice which challenges, judges, and redeems the structures in which we embody our hopes for justice. […] A just society can flourish only when its members acknowledge the justice of God, which is the justice manifested and enacted in the cross. If I do not acknowledge a justice which judges the justice for which I fight, I am an agent, not of justice, but of lawless tyranny.

A second danger is that the church may become so focused on programmes and activities that it may lose sight of its essence as an organic community in the Spirit. Church activities should not conflict with the many other ways in which individual believers incarnate the gospel and seek justice in other contexts. In fact, the church must equip and resource individual believers to life faithfully and do the good deeds that God has called them to in every sphere. The 'works of service' referred to in Ephesians 4:12 are not confined to, or even primarily centred on, what we do in the church. Thirdly, individual congregations should not act in isolation. As well having the pragmatic benefit of pooling resources, collaborative approaches also recognise the importance the New Testament attaches to the unity of the church in our testimony of Christ to the world (e.g., John 17:20-23). Newbigin famously summarised the role of the local church by describing it as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' – that is the means through which the gospel is to be understood by others. For him (Newbigin, 1989: 229) this meant that the congregation must be:

> a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighbourhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the church for those who wish to be members of it – or, rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be *for* the wider community. It is, I think, very significant that in the consistent usage of the New Testament, the word *ekklēsia* is qualified in only two ways; it is "the Church of God," or "of Christ," and it is the church of a place. A Christian congregation is defined by this twofold relation: it is God's embassy in a specific place. Either of these vital relationships may be neglected. The congregation may be so identified with the place that it ceases to be the vehicle of God's judgement and mercy for that place and becomes simply the focus of the self-image of the people of that place. Or it may be so concerned about the relation of its members to God that it turns its back on the neighbourhood and is perceived as irrelevant to its concerns.

Newbigin's insights and our reflections on the relationship between good deeds and evangelism lead us to conclude that both social engagement and clear proclamation of the gospel are important. The two tasks are 'inseparable consequences of and testimonies to God's Rule and they must be reflected in the lives of all disciples of Jesus' (Bowen, 1996: 64). We cannot be sign without being instrument and vice versa. As Waldron Scott (1997: 243) writes:

> This world would soon be a different place if we Christians were to make clear-cut commitments of nonconformity to our societies insofar as they are unjust and oppressive and, by the same token, commit ourselves unreservedly to the service of the poor. The earth's disinherited would see the signs as well as hear the news of God's love and the hope of this Kingdom.

In conclusion to this section we must propose a definition of mission that embraces the insights we have explored:

> Christian mission is God's sending of His people, individually and as a community, into His world to declare and demonstrate the good news of His rule and His offer of redemption through the crucified and risen Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, calling individuals to respond in repentance and faith and challenging powers to acknowledge Him.

Having made the case for an active commitment by individuals and churches to both evangelism and social action and proposed a definition of mission, we must say something about how we live this reality out. The worldwide Anglican Communion officially describes five 'marks of mission' (MISSIO, 1999):

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Although these are described as 'marks of mission' rather than a definition of mission, the danger of this approach is that it risks separating our mission into five strands that may become disconnected and unrelated. Evangelism (point 1) then becomes not one of two aims of mission but one among five. In our definition of 'mission' we proposed the two words 'declare' and 'demonstrate' as useful terms to describe the dual responsibility of both individual believers and churches. We *declare* the good news of God's Kingdom and Christ as Saviour and Lord to *both* individuals and powers, calling individuals to repent and believe and challenging powers to order themselves in line with God's will. Notice this difference of aim as regards powers and people – the 'powers' cannot respond in repentance. They are either non-personal structures and systems or demonic powers that stand under God's judgement without the possibility of redemption. People, however, including those who hold and administer power, can respond by acknowledging their sin and submitting in faith to God's saving rule. The aim of our proclamation of the gospel is to make disciples of Christ – this involves a lifelong process of transformation as well as the initial experience of conversion. At the same time as making our declaration, we *demonstrate* the reality of God's rule and grace through the distinctive nature of the church and through doing good deeds. This demonstration is also *both* to individuals and to powers. To individuals it serves to commend the truth and beauty of the gospel and to the powers it demonstrates God's wisdom (Ephesians 3:10). In *declaration* we seek to fulfil the Great Commission and in *demonstration* we obey the Great Commandment.

We can describe Christian mission in its dual approaches – declaration and demonstration – and its dual aims – to people and to powers – by way of the following table:

	God's saving rule through His Christ, Jesus the Lord, crucified and raised	
	Declared	**Demonstrated**
To people	Evangelism calling individuals to discipleship including (Matthew 28:18-20): • *Corporate* – incorporation into the community of faith through baptism. • *Individual* – teaching to repent and faithfully obey Christ's commands.	Equipping for ongoing obedience to Christ resulting in good deeds inspired by grace: • *Corporately* – living as a counter-cultural community of grace and truth. • *Individually* – using our influence in service of Christ, bringing justice to others.
To powers	Prophetically challenging systems and structures and those who create and maintain them to reform towards justice in recognition of God's just rule.	Setting an example of a more just and loving way to order human society, care for creation and create community and, where possible, creating movements of change and reform.

In all of this, the church, sent as Jesus was sent (John 20:31), takes the stance of a servant – selflessly serving God and serving those we reach for His sake – but stands firmly in peaceful resistance when confronted by opposition. This servant stance entails several values:

- *Bless, not success* – the church's own growth will not be the aim; God's praise and the blessing of others will.
- *Relationships, not relevance* – worshipful relationship to God and loving relationship to others will be our approach.
- *Responsive, not reactionary* – the church will change and adapt as the context changes and adapts but in response to God's Spirit and Word rather than in thoughtless pragmatism.

Social action in practice – *what should be done and who should do it?*

Three dimensions of social action – *relief, transformation and reform*

Timothy Keller (1997: 179-180) describes 'three dimensions of mercy ministry':

1. **Relief** – the alleviation of suffering caused by unmet basic needs (e.g., the Good Samaritan).
2. **Transformation** (or 'economic development') – restoring self-sufficiency (e.g., Deuteronomy 15:13-14).
3. **Reform** – changing social conditions and structures that create need.

In the preceding discussions we have made a biblical case for both 'relief' and 'transformation'. The New Testament is replete with examples of both at work within the church. There is, however, less of a clear biblical basis for 'reform', at least in the New Testament. The Old Testament contains many challenges to reform social and political structures, but these are directed to those with power and influence within Israel. As such, they apply most directly to leaders within the church today. Is it legitimate for Christians and churches to try and influence political powers and structures? The absence of clear New Testament commands to do so cannot be taken to mean that we must not do so today since the believers at that time lived in a hostile Empire in which there was little accountability of leaders to the people and little opportunity to change structures. We are in a different situation today and we must extend what we have said about the responsibilities of believers to every dimension of influence we possess. This will undoubtedly mean that some individuals will be called by God to focus on reform of structures and that churches will be able to initiate movements that can lead to social change.

Seven types of action

Keller (1997:181ff.) helpfully identifies 'seven concentric circles of intervention strategy' which 'move along a spectrum from relief to reform':

Relief

1. *Direct assistance* – meeting immediate needs for the most basic necessities, for example food, clothing, housing, childcare.

2. *Informational and counselling* – providing information about benefits and services. Care should be taken to consider the underpinning values of agencies we may refer people to. Are they compatible with God's justice and the gospel or not?

3. *Advocacy* – helping people to have their voice heard and empowering them to make real changes in their own situation.

Transformation

4. *Individual transformation* – e.g., literacy, education, housing, vocational guidance, training.

5. *Community transformation* – empowering and strengthening communities.

Reform

6. *Information for justice* – informing policy makers about issues, making them see what issues must be addressed and advising them as to how to change systems to bring greater justice.

7. *Intervention for justice* – Keller wisely suggests this is best achieved through specialist voluntary bodies or parachurch groups rather than local congregations or denominations.

Internal partnerships – *churches and parachurch agencies*

Picking up on the suggestion of the specialist role of parachurch bodies in reform, we may note that the tension within Evangelicalism between evangelism (and church planting) and social action is often perpetuated by a disparity between the interests of local congregations, which often give primacy to evangelism, and those of denominational structures

and 'para-church' agencies, which often have a greater focus on social justice. Lesslie Newbigin (1978: 11) recognised this 'structural dichotomy' and described its impact:

> The effect of this is that each is robbed of its proper character by its separation from the other. Christian programs for justice and compassion are severed from their proper roots in the […] life of the congregation, and so lose their character as signs of the presence of Christ and risk becoming mere crusades fuelled by a moralism which can become self-righteous. And the life of the worshiping congregation, severed from its proper expression in compassionate service to the secular community around it, risks becoming a self-centered existence serving only the needs and desires of its members.

In recent decades there has been a palpable shift within the Evangelical missions community towards 'holistic mission' and agencies that were once primarily or exclusively focused on evangelism and or church planting have embraced a major component of social action. The traditional tensions between churches and 'para-church' organisations and the proliferation of specialist agencies since the mid-20th century has not always served mission well. Alongside the debate about how the gospel is attested through the relative place of evangelism and social justice in mission, we ought to consider the degree to which our testimony to the gospel is diminished by our failure to express Christian unity.

One response in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century may be to consciously break down the divide between 'church' and 'para-church' and to recognise both as necessary aspects of church and of mission. Local churches should focus on being Christ's body in a locality through engagement in neighbourhoods and relational networks for the sake of the gospel. This will include much stronger partnerships with other Christian congregations in the same locality with shared learning, resources and initiatives. What has been called 'para-church' should focus on the kind of specialist missional engagement, research and training that individual local churches cannot or should not provide, ideally with a broad support base of churches that are committed to the gospel. This will involve strong partnerships, or ideally mergers, between existing agencies with similar remits and a greater commitment to serve the local expressions of church through providing the expertise they lack. This expertise is increasingly important given the complexity of a globalised world. We need people who can show 'ordinary believers' how to begin the process of 'unravelling' and change their behaviours in ways that make a real difference to others. We also need people who can use expert skills to speak in the right way to the right people, finding and using levers for political and social change. Creative ways need to be found to resource this translocal dimension and this vision requires a strong commitment to a core understanding of the gospel with a great deal of room for diversity on secondary theological issues. According to this picture it would be legitimate for some agencies with a translocal focus to have a specialist focus on justice. They should, however, seek to cooperate with any similar agencies, should maintain a clear confession of the gospel, and should ensure that their work does not conflict with the activities of the local church in each place and, where possible, works through building the capacity of local believers and churches to do the work in their own context using local resources.

External partnerships– *working with the State and other agencies*

A final question relates to the relationship between the church and non-Christian partners, whether the State or other religious groups, in social justice projects. The suggestion that this article leads towards is that partnership with the State is legitimate, since the State is also God's servant, but only insofar as the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is not compromised and the church's prophetic voice is not silenced. This will become an increasingly difficult relationship for the church in Western nations to work through. There will be situations where Christian groups can partner with the State without feeling constrained, situations where churches will feel the need to initiate new faith-based initiatives without State funding, and other situations where it is best for churches not to initiate new projects but to encourage individual believers to serve in existing projects sponsored by the State or by non-faith-based non-governmental agencies. Relationships with groups of other religious faiths are more complex. Although it is clearly appealing to partner where there is a shared concern for social justice, it is vitally important to consider what message such partnerships send about the nature of the gospel and of Christ's Lordship. In all cases, whoever the proposed partner is, it will be important to ask what worldview the project reinforces and whether its values reflect the full God-centred extent of Christian justice or only a limited, man-centred, conception of 'justice'.

Conclusion – *a mandate for social action*

We have suggested the following definition of Christian mission:

> God's sending of His people, individually and as a community, into His world to declare and demonstrate the good news of His rule and His offer of redemption through the crucified and risen Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, calling individuals to respond in repentance and faith and challenging powers to acknowledge Him.

Social action along with the distinctive Kingdom life of the church fulfils the 'demonstration' dimension of mission. To this definition we may add some statements about justice that summarise the preceding discussion:

- Justice reflects God's character and ultimate justice is only possible through His direct intervention in judgement
- God created a just world and in response to human sin He acted redemptively in Christ to justify unjust people
- The redeemed, covenant people of God are called to be a counter-cultural community of justice
- Believers must act justly to Christ's glory in every sphere of responsibility and in their stewardship of resources
- Christians are sent as Jesus was to declare and demonstrate the Kingdom to powers and people
- We seek to see people transformed as disciples of Christ and powers reformed as servants of Christ

All of this leads us to propose the following mandate for social action by churches and individual Christians:

> Christians and the church should be actively committed to social action,
> including relief, transformation and reform,
> as they seek to glorify Christ through good deeds that flow from their experience of His grace,
> without compromising their freedom to declare Jesus Christ as Lord,
> calling people to repent and believe in Jesus
> and challenging powers to acknowledge His rule
> in light of the coming day when Christ will bring ultimate justice through judgement.

Too often concern for social justice has been marginalised in the life of the church – left to a few fanatics or seen as an issue for distant places. Discipleship must entail a commitment to social justice in every area in which our choices impact the lives of others. We must desire to do good to all men as we have the opportunity. We must sense the heart of God for the oppressed and poor and respond as He leads us to act in their defence. Local congregations should speak to these issues and equip their members to be effective in obeying God in all of life. The church must demonstrate and declare the good news of Jesus Christ and must call every individual and power to recognise His Lordship as we await the great unveiling of His glory and establishment of a world where justice is at home.

As an example of the power of this approach, even in a hostile context, we can look to the early church. Sociologist Rodney Stark (1996) describes the reasons for the remarkable growth in the number of Christians in the Roman Empire from 15 and 25 thousand in 100 AD (0.025 to 0.04% of the population) 313 AD there were between 9 and 20 million (15 to 33% of the population) in 313 AD. This growth is all the more remarkable when we remember that during this period Christianity was illegal and Christians faced regular persecution, they had no church buildings, no professional clergy, no denominational support, no theological colleges, and a high standard was set for membership of the church. Among the reasons Stark describes the way in which Christians reacted differently than pagans to major epidemics, refusing to flee the cities, caring for (rather than abandoning) sick relatives and caring for sick non-Christians where resources permitted. This had the dual result that Christians were more likely to survive the epidemics and that other people were attracted by their faith and hope and converted. This was one of a number of ways in which the presence of Christian communities revitalised the cities, where Christian faith was concentrated, with other aspects being their welcome of ethnic minorities, hospitality to the homeless and charity to the poor. This lesson from history should challenge us today to think about how we may impact our society today.

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