

# POINT

## Social justice and evangelism

DR. JOHN PATRICK



“THE KING WILL REPLY, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40 NIV).

As is so often the case with Jesus, it is important to see what He does not say as well as what He does. When it comes to social justice we have a prime example. I cannot find a definition of justice in the Bible. God simply says; “I am just, be like me.” Similarly even what constitutes the core of the Gospel is not defined; Jesus says “Go and make disciples by preaching the Gospel.” It is not all about us but all about Him and how we get to know Him better. This is always accomplished by being obedient to what we do understand rather than to the miraculous instructions most of us would prefer because we could bask in the light of our own importance.

In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark argues that the early Church was successful in evangelism; it grew by about 40% each decade, which allows the initial thousand or so to reach six million by the time of Constantine. He believed it happened because Christians modeled a happier more contented life than others. “Behold how these Christians

love one another” is a wonderful description of an undeniable and wholly new and captivating reality, which was apparent even at the time of the apostles. It was the mode of evangelism in the early centuries. They certainly didn’t do it by having commissions and conferences on social justice and evangelism. Stark’s subtitle captures the amazing reality; “How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant force in the western world in a few centuries.”

Early Christians did good works without planning sessions; almost certainly they were not thinking about winning souls but about responding to the good news they had experienced, which is precisely what Jesus wants. In our text those who did well were not even aware of what they had done well because they had done nothing except love the Lord!

Pregnancy has often represented a perceived threat to our plans and even existence but the early Church modeled the new reality. I love the story. These early Christians stopped exposing their unwanted children (the normal procedure in those days, replaced by abortion in our world) and then started to pick up the exposed children of others. A Roman official wrote to Rome for advice because he realized that people who loved children like this would take over the world. Even today the elite secular classes have an average of one child whilst believers have three. We are not in the same league as the early Christians but

we are different. How did this happen? This is artistic license but I don’t think they had profound philosophical discussions but rather honest commonsensical musings. They probably went something like this. The coming of Jesus into our lives has been the best thing that ever happened to us. What a gift it has been.

All His gifts are good even when they don’t look that way to begin with. But isn’t life also His gift so how can we think about refusing this new life I am carrying? I am sure they talked to their brothers and sisters in Christ about this profoundly countercultural idea and by the grace of God everyone got involved and the community grew by caring for its children. They all flourished and the new practice spread. Imagine if you had been a baby picked up by strangers at the city gate, picked up because the love of Christ flowed through them. Thus you were adopted and when you reached the age of understanding Mom and Dad told you the story of how God had trusted you to them. Would you need to be evangelized? Of course not, it had already been done. As Francis would put it many centuries later: “Preach the Gospel and if necessary use words.”

Similarly hospitals grew out of simple human compassion for those who were sick; it was institutionalized in the monasteries and it had nothing to do with evidence-based medicine and everything to do with being a disciple of Christ. The day by day practice of the early church

– continuing in the apostle’s teachings, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers changed hearts, minds and society. I have no doubt that it is possible to map the impact of the Sermon on the Mount in this process. Use of the means of grace shows us our desperate and ongoing need of Christ in bringing us to confession, repentance and grace. The joy of living this way leads to attention to the Spirit’s promptings to serve and build better communities. In a word it gives a practical scheme for growth in discipleship, which almost as an un-noticed byproduct increases social justice, except no one would use such a dry academic description for what was clearly the love of Christ.

A concern for social justice is not a striking feature of the New Testament; Christians are told to honour the emperor! Nero? Slaves are told to be obedient. Explicit New Testament ethics can be easily summarized. Love your spouse, care for your children and pay your workers. It is true that Paul taught that in the kingdom there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male or female, neither bond nor free. All are one in Christ Jesus but any practical expression of this was a long time coming and it wasn’t done by legislation when it did happen. Slavery disappeared from Europe without legislation. It reappeared and was rationalized by Christians as part of the unacceptable face of colonialism and capitalism. Adam Smith’s economics without Adam

**Does Mathew 25:31-46 establish social justice**

# COUNTER POINT

## Sheep, goats, evangelism, and social justice

DR. DAN REILLY

THIS QUESTION TOUCHES ON SEVERAL AREAS I have struggled to make sense of; Dr. Patrick's response gave me more to wrestle with. Let me share my struggles in the hopes the Holy Spirit can make some use of them in our walk with Christ.

I have always found Matthew 25:31–46 a confusing passage. It seems to indicate that eternal destination is determined by how you treat your fellow humans and not by what you do with Jesus' offer of forgiveness. None of the theological explorations of this passage, which I have read, have been helpful beyond informing me that how I treat others is literally how I treat Christ. It is verse 45 that is hard to reconcile to my reality. "I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me." Everyday, the requests for financial help and use of my time to aid the hungry, thirsty, stranger, poor, sick, or imprisoned far exceed the sum of my assets and 24 hours of time. So everyday I say no to most of those requests and yes to a few.

I have always found the often-intense debate in Christian

circles about the idea of social justice confusing. Being just to the needy in society has always seemed to be the standard of how someone would live if they truly loved Christ and neighbor. Dr. Patrick's thoughts on social justice were helpful. We must be obedient to what we know and be motivated by love of Christ and neighbor. We get to know Him and then respond to life's situations out of a heart of love. As usual, I found his disdain for organization and academia puzzling. I have found planning sessions, conferences, and profound philosophical discussions to be places where I often grow in my knowledge and love of Christ and neighbor. And I have observed "honest commonsensical musings" to lead some people far from God. Dr. Patrick seems to be agreeing with my sense that what matters is not the setting or label or context that we give to our efforts to serve Christ and others but the heart behind the effort and our surrender to Christ's Lordship and the Holy Spirit's leading. And then he discourages some of the very activities that

Christ's Lordship and the Holy Spirit's leading has brought me to pursue.

I have always found the obsessive focus of some Christians on evangelism to be disturbing. I agree with John G. Stackhouse Jr. in *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* where he observes four great biblical commands, each with similar importance to how we live our lives. The first is to create culture (be fruitful and multiply), the second to love God and neighbor, the third to love our fellow believers, and the final command is the great commission. We were asked if we thought Matthew 25:31–46 establishes social justice as a valid mode of Christian evangelization. I had never thought before that there could be invalid ways of doing Christian evangelization. But I suppose there is. Coercion by force would be an invalid move of evangelization.

Dr. Patrick responded to the editor's question about Matthew 25:31–46, social justice, and evangelization with a call to mimic the early church in its simple following of the apostles' teachings, fellowship, breaking of



bread and prayer. Amen.

Picking up babies at the city gates and building places to care for the sick were two examples of how the early Church created culture by loving God, their neighbors, and each other. Given that we now number two or three billion and live in a multitude of cultures and political structures, the expression of living out God's commands is beyond our ability to categorize. But the heart of love, life of service, and attitude of obedience are common to all Christians.

If exploring and following the concepts of social justice help you create culture and love God, neighbor, and fellow believer then it is appropriate to pursue social justice. Evangelism will follow. If not, then a lack of evangelism will be only one of many problems as you pursue social justice. 🙏

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*point conti'd* Smith's Presbyterian ethics can be just as oppressive as atheistic Marxism.

Social justice did appear as a wonderful product of the eighteenth century revival – the abolition of slavery in the colonies, the end of child labour, the reform of the prisons etc. are

all traceable to the Clapham sect and the evangelical revival. Sadly the Methodism of Wesley lost its way in the nineteenth century as the social gospel "tail" took over from the born again "dog." The same thing happens with missions today where the folk running development arm of the church

drive Toyotas and the pastor has a bicycle.

Social justice like its big brother legal justice is very hard to keep pristine when it loses touch with its creator. As Lenin understood "when we have done away with God it will be necessary to legalize terror." If your judges

do not fear God why will they not use the law to advance their own ends? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the service of the Lord is perfect freedom. Utopian dreams divorced from these realities will end in tyranny. 🙏

as a valid mode of Christian evangelization?