



# Justice and Social Activism

*How Does the World Change?*

---

By Reid S. Monaghan

# Justice and Social Activism

*How Does the World Change?*

## Table of Contents

Introduction	2
How and Why I am Using the Term “Poor”	3
The Biblical Mandate	4
The Historical Situation of Evangelical Churches	14
How Does the World Change?	25
Endnotes	31

## **Introduction**

If you look out upon our world long enough you will quickly realize that it is a bit perplexing. On one hand, the world is filled with great good. Love of family and friends, the beauty of the created universe, the joy of children, a good story, lives changing, and people working together to help one another remind us that there is something good going on here. Yet on the other hand, one needs to only be awake a bit to see that we live in a very broken world. Various injustices are perpetrated by one person toward another, wars split nations, tribes and families. Disease and poverty abound and we all will soon die. The majority of human beings, throughout all time, find life at once worth living, yet filled with problems and pain. If you talk to anyone: black, white, democrat, republican, atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, indie rocker or hip-hopper; all will tell you that the world needs to change. Of course everyone has their own path to the perfect world in their opinion, but then you can't get people to agree. We realize something needs to be done, but collectively we are at a loss of just what we should do.

In a world where injustice is everywhere and whole communities are wracked by disease and poverty, people in parts of Western culture wrestle with how we should respond while living in the midst of all our comforts, conveniences and

excesses. In this work I want to look at a few things. First, we'll survey the biblical mandate in the Scriptures to care about the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed. I will do this by making a brief comment about the vocabulary I am using and how I am using it. I will then do a quick survey of the biblical teaching on the issues. Next, I will look at the historical situation of evangelical churches in America related to issues of social justice and ministries of mercy. Finally, I will wrestle a bit with how we might move forward and actually make a difference in communities in need.

## **How and Why I am Using the Term “Poor”**

Before we begin, let's quickly clarify a term. In our culture there are a plethora of words which are thrown around in relation to folks that, for one reason or another, have fallen on hard times. People are called “at risk,” “disadvantaged,” “economically challenged,” “underprivileged,” “the have nots,” and the list could go on. In this work, I will most often use the term “poor” for the sake of clarity. By this I mean, those at the lower end of the economic spectrum of society; people who struggle or are unable to obtain basic life needs. I want to say up front that people are poor for various reasons. Some are in hard times due to constraints external to themselves; oppression, injustice, sin done against them by others. Some are destitute due to the consequences of their poor choices. In this discussion we are

not focusing on the myriad of causes of brokenness and poverty in the world but rather our response. In some sense the problem of poverty will never be completely removed, indeed, Jesus said “the poor will always be with you.” Yet God does not call people to be passive when needs are all around us. Rather, He calls us to love, to engage, to serve, and to help others. We should help lead them to trust Jesus

and follow Him as a disciple. Whether well-fed or hungry, whether in poverty or plenty, whether they caused their own problems or it was brought upon them, we are called to serve. So as we begin we must look first at what the Scripture teaches in regards to the poor.

### **The Biblical Mandate**

To provide a real answer, the question “What does the Scripture teach about the poor?” would be far beyond the

scope of this discussion. So it will suffice to say that we will only touch the very tip of the teaching of the Bible on the matter. But let it be certain; the Scriptures are



full with a declaration of God's compassion for the broken; both the spiritually poor and those without earthly means. So what follows is a sample of the teaching of both Old and New Testaments on the issue.

### ***Old Testament***

In the stipulations and regulations that God gave to the people of Israel for their life as a community, the Lord “built-in” caring for others in the community. The examples are many. First, God set up the practice of gleaning to influence the agricultural practice of the people. *Gleaning* was the intentional practice of not harvesting the corners of the fields so that the poor could freely access food from these resources (Lev. 23:22; Deut. 24:21; Ruth 2). It was a financial resource set apart from the whole for the specific purpose of providing for the poor of the community. Additionally, God set up a year which was known as the year of Jubilee for His people to observe. Every 50 years many things would happen. Land would be returned to its original ancestral owners and those who had been moved by poverty to sell themselves into indentured service (a form of slavery to pay off debts) were to be set free. Although much more can be said, the Jubilee year was about debt relief and restoration.

The picture which emerges in the Old Testament is that the community was to serve the widow, the fatherless, and care for the foreigner/sojourner among them.

To ignore this was a great injustice before the eyes of God and the people. In fact, God does something strange in the book of Proverbs; He self-identifies with the poor. Prov. 14:31 says, “He who oppresses the poor shows *contempt for their maker*, but whoever is kind to the needy *honors God*.” How people treat the poor in some way demonstrates their disdain or honor for God. Additionally, God tells Israel that their religion, even when done according to the law of God, smelled bad to Him if they were living unjust lives and oppressing others. The prophet Isaiah says some striking things to religious people. I’ll quote just two.

*<sup>12</sup>“When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? <sup>13</sup>Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. <sup>14</sup>Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. <sup>15</sup>When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. <sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup>learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.*

*<sup>18</sup>“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. <sup>19</sup>If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; <sup>20</sup>but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 1:12-20*

*<sup>6</sup>“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? <sup>8</sup>Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. <sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, <sup>10</sup>if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. <sup>11</sup>And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you*

*shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. <sup>12</sup>And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. Isaiah 58:6-12*

The reality of what Isaiah is teaching is shocking. God can hate the religion of His own people when their hearts are wicked and far from Him. How is the condition evidenced in the lives of the people? They don't give a rip about the poor, about justice, about the fatherless, and the widow. They are consumed with themselves and not with the Lord and His ways. *He has shown you, O' Man, what the Lord requires, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God;* so teaches the prophet Micah.

This is sometimes difficult for us to understand as the Hebrew view of justice is different than the one we understand as Americans. The American view of justice is a person getting their individual rights and having them protected. This will allow the individual opportunity to prosper and do well by her merits, unencumbered by systems which are racist, evil, discriminatory, and are set against her. This, of course, is not a bad thing, but the biblical version of justice includes our duty to actively care for one another in community. Proverbs 3:27-28 teaches us

something of this view: *Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you.* The Hebrew view of justice had to do with the good of the community, not simply the rights of the individual. This is the view of the Old Testament—the people of God had a duty to the poor among them and those who would be sojourners in their lands.

Yet what does the New Testament teach? What about Jesus? We'll quickly survey just a few passages.

### ***New Testament***

Jesus, when He began His public ministry, read a passage from Isaiah 61: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

This has *spiritual* implications, but it cannot be simply made to refer *only* to spiritual poverty, captivity and oppression. Jesus spent much time with the poor, the people on the margins of society. He was even a homeless guy Himself, as He said



A black and white photograph showing a person's hand holding a piece of corrugated cardboard. On the cardboard, a sign is written in large, hand-drawn letters. The sign reads "AS UNTO CHRIST" in two lines. Below the text is a simple drawing of a cross with radiating lines, symbolizing light or a shining cross. The cardboard has a white oval-shaped hole cut out near the top edge.

AS UNTO  
CHRIST



to one would-be follower: *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head* (Luke 9:58). He was one about whom the Bible says became poor for our sake in order to make us rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

Perhaps the clearest teaching from our Lord on the matter is another self-identification with the poor by Jesus Himself. Matthew 25 teaches us that what we do for the poor, the prisoner, the sick, we do to Him. The context of the passage is very interesting as Jesus is teaching that our faith is genuine when it causes us to live for the good of others. I want to ask you to do something; grab a Bible and read Matt. 25:31-46 and then stop to pray. Meditate for a few moments on what is provoked in your soul. I think we would make a mistake if we thought “I need to help people so I’ll be saved and among the sheep.” The point he is making is that those who have been saved by Jesus, by the grace of God, as a gift, received through faith in Christ, will actually live their faith out in these ways.

The epistles of the New Testament also lay out things relating to our relationship to the poor. First, the church should always be a body which is a mixture of people from various socio-economic classes, not simply a place for people of certain social class and standing. I say the church “should” be such a place, because this is not always the case. Yet as we look at some of the New Testament exhortations, we find they assume that our lives will be around each other; rich and poor and everything in between:

*Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have **something to share** with anyone in **need**.* Ephesians 4:28

*Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, <sup>7</sup>for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. <sup>8</sup>But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. <sup>9</sup>But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs...<sup>17</sup>As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup>They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and **ready to share**, <sup>19</sup>thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.* 1 Timothy 6:6-10; 17-19

*But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup>For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks*

*intently at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup>For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup>But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. <sup>26</sup>If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: **to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.** James 1:22-27*



Though this survey is necessarily brief and incomplete, I do hope more than anything that we see that it simply isn't an option for us to ignore the problems of our world. The call of God demands us not to simply seek our own consumer and creature comforts in this life, but to get our lives involved with one another. In light of the teaching of Scripture, we just have to give a d\*#@ about our world. With all our sin, with all the problems, with the brokenness, with the injustice, we must be willing to seek

change—first in our own hearts, and then how we choose to live. But why are many churches doing little to nothing for issues associated with the poor? Well, we all inherit, for good or ill, a certain history, and the churches in an American context have a history. Let’s peel back that curtain a bit.

## **The Historical Situation of Evangelical Churches**

Christian people from their earliest days have always shown a deep concern for the poor. In fact, it was the compassion of the early church for the broken, the outcast and the poor which made its message all the more compelling. The church was birthed into a world which was ruled with the power and glory that was Rome. This was a culture in which “humility” was seen as a weakness. In this culture, the weak and poor of society were seen as a burden to be dispensed with. In this world, the early Christians followed the Scriptures teaching to care for “the least of the these” and reached out and helped the hurting which society had left behind. In their book *Christianity on Trial, Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry* Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett make the remarkable observation about the early church within the Roman Empire:

*There is no doubt the Christian charity exercised a powerful pull on converts and that Christian dedication to the poor, ill, disabled, imprisoned, elderly,*

*widowed and exploited was notable from the outset. Early bishops, for example, were expected to eat one meal a day with the poor. In the larger cities, the church founded orphanages and the forerunners of hospitals. As the Roman Empire spiraled into chaos, the church expanded its philanthropic role until it was virtually the sole recourse of the poor. "St. Gregory is said to have taken his responsibilities so seriously," recounts Christopher Dawson, "that when a single poor man was found dead of hunger in Rome, he abstained from saying Mass as though he were guilty of his death."<sup>1</sup>*

In our own context one cannot miss that many of the top humanitarian charities were founded by openly religious people, almost all of them Christian. United Way, Red Cross, The Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, Shriner's Hospitals for Children and Goodwill Industries, just to name a few, were all founded by religious people. Yet today you see many Christian believers almost completely disengaged from service with the poor. Many churches, apart from an occasional service project at the holidays are completely missing from the issues of poverty in our communities. How did this situation arise?

The history of the 20th century has much to bear on the reason evangelicals disengaged from social issues and concerns. During the late 19th century certain

ideological and intellectual movements caused great turmoil in the Christian world. First, theological movements from Europe were leading the Christian world to critically examine the teaching of the Bible in light of modernistic and scientific assumptions. Many theologians began to subscribe to a project to “demythologize the faith” and by doing so called into question central doctrines of the faith. This movement greatly affected the seminaries and divinity schools of America as well. Some institutions of learning and their associated denominations began to discard Christian orthodoxy for a new modernized faith which lacked much of the original biblical content. Additionally, theories of Darwinian natural selection and “descent with modification” gave the secular worldview a creation myth which could explain the existence of complex life apart from a Creator. These moves in the sciences and in biblical studies greatly divided the church. A liberal wing emerged which discarded major Christian doctrines including the virgin birth, the sinless life of Jesus, the truthfulness of Scripture, the death and resurrection of Jesus for our sins, and the necessity of faith in him for salvation. What was left in this modernistic upgrade of the faith? Social concerns. Christianity, for these people, was simply an ethical system which called people to be good, seek justice, and try to make the world a better place. Gone were sin, salvation, the need for Jesus, heaven, hell, and

the mission of the gospel. On the other side of things was a consortium of Christians who articulated their stand for what they called “The Fundamentals” of the faith. Christianity was not about a “social gospel” for this group, it was about “the gospel” which was in the New Testament. These people became known as the Fundamentalists (a word that today is used to mean religious nut-jobs) meaning that they stood for the *fundamentals* of Christianity. The fallout of this Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy was substantial. The mainline seminaries and institutions proceeded with a social gospel message, while the fundamentalists withdrew from the mainline denominations and institutions to form their own. The Bible believing fundamentalists repudiated the “social gospel” and set the church on a trajectory away from social concerns towards a concern only for souls. This rejection of the social gospel, along with the rise of pre-millennial views of the end of the world<sup>2</sup>, made saving sinners paramount and social concerns almost taboo. To this day, many evangelicals stand in this inherited tradition of being suspect of social concerns at the *expense* of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> There are many, many exceptions to this and we stand in a time where a passion to serve the poor is again igniting among evangelicals, but all too often we still live in this polarized world. Let me illustrate with two stories...two stories which are incomplete views of the “Christian Life.”

## ***Two Incomplete Stories***

*Brian grew up in a church which would be categorized in the evangelical Protestant tradition. He was taught the Bible, believed in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for sinners like him. He believed in a God who would forgive all who accepted Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf thereby making them free and forgiven by God. Brian graduated from high school, then college, and then off to seminary in the Northeast in hopes of becoming a pastor. During this time he realized that Jesus talked a lot about caring for the poor. Additionally, he did not like the idea that people needed to have faith in Christ in order to be forgiven by God. There are many ways to God he thought. He thought everyone is just good on their own...when they fail, God would overlook it and just forgive everybody. He thought the Bible was a bit foolish in light of modern scientific knowledge and decided he would just believe the parts of it which seemed right to him. As such he abandoned the cross as God's judgment of sin and the means to forgive sinners and emptied the gospel of all New Testament meaning. He boiled down Jesus' message to a simple statement: Do good for society, care about the poor, plead the causes of the oppressed. What Brian has done is a tragedy, he has essentially denied the Christian faith into oblivion until what remains is but a social program*



*which tells people to “be good.” No one is saved from sin, death and hell; the gospel has been emptied of its power and the cross has been marginalized. He is living a very incomplete story.*

The second story is equally incomplete and tragic in its own way.

*Susan grew up in an upper middle class family attending an evangelical Protestant church in the suburbs. She embraced Jesus at a young age, but didn't really understand it all until she began to struggle with an eating disorder in college. During this time she began to party and did some things she deeply regretted. At this point a campus minister's wife introduced her to Jesus; someone she thought she met as a six-year-old. She realized that God wasn't just asking her to be good, but rather in ourselves we were not good. She knew she needed forgiveness and grace from God and that this could not be earned by just being a good girl on Thursday nights. At this point in her life, she bowed a knee to the living Jesus and was saved by Him. She was very thankful, got involved in Bible study, and graduated with a degree in nursing. She married a doctor who grew up in church and loved Jesus and would turn out to be a good Daddy. They support campus ministry, attend church, live in an upper class gated community, have their*

*children in the finest schools, they vote the right way and are generally nice people. Yet, she currently knows nobody who is not a Christian, she never associates with lower class people, and feels no need to do either. While her story may not be as tragic as Brian's (or is it?) she is living an incomplete story with Jesus.*

My guess is that you may feel I am being unfair to Susan and you probably think Brian has lost something precious. Or perhaps you feel the other way about things, but I hope you hear my point.

My concern today is that far too many of us live out a faith that is only part of the biblical portrait. On one side, some Christians rightly take seriously and hold firm to the part of our faith which is about seeing souls saved, people coming to faith in Christ, and the gospel being preached to all nations. We should take this part very seriously as we look at our calling before God. Yet others rightly take seriously the biblical call to do justice for the poor and the oppressed, address the sting of inequality, and work for the overall good of the community. The problem I see is that both sides of the same biblical coin get separated in many of our lives. Some never think of issues of mercy and justice, while others have completely abandoned the biblical gospel which teaches Jesus died to save sinners. God has given us the gospel to preach and it must be contended for and shared with others. Jesus Christ died to save sinners—this is our message. Yet those whom God saves, He

puts on mission. This mission involves us sharing this gospel with others and doing justice and expressing ministries of mercy in this world. In fact, these two things, preaching and serving, actually reinforce each other. The gospel heard, is validated by the gospel demonstrated. The gospel demonstrated is understood by what is preached and heard. Jesus is our model here and we dare not miss it. Jesus *demonstrated* His love for us by dying for us (Rom. 5:1-8), He didn't just tell us about it. Yet He also didn't just die and keep the reason He was crucified a big secret. He preached good news to us all, while serving and sacrificing for us all. We have no better model.

One final illustration is in order. I want to mention a passage often left out in these discussions. The apostle Paul, in writing the epistle to the church in Galatia (the Book of Galatians), gives us one of the most beautiful articulations of the gospel in Scripture. In this book we learn that we are saved by the work of Jesus on the cross, we are justified by our faith in Him alone, and not by the good works we perform. The gospel of the New Testament is NOT “do good things and God will accept you.” Rather, it is that we are sinners, and Christ died for us to make us righteous and bring us back into relationship with God. Yet, Paul writes something in this letter which is equally profound. His statement communicates to us what Christian believers should be eager to do in our communities for those around us. Speaking of his interaction with the apostles James, Peter and John in Jerusalem,

Paul recounts the following:

*Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. <sup>2</sup>I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. <sup>3</sup>But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. <sup>4</sup>Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—<sup>5</sup>to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. <sup>6</sup>And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. <sup>7</sup>On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised <sup>8</sup>(for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup>and when James and Cephas and*

*John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. <sup>10</sup>**Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.***

Galatians 2:1-10

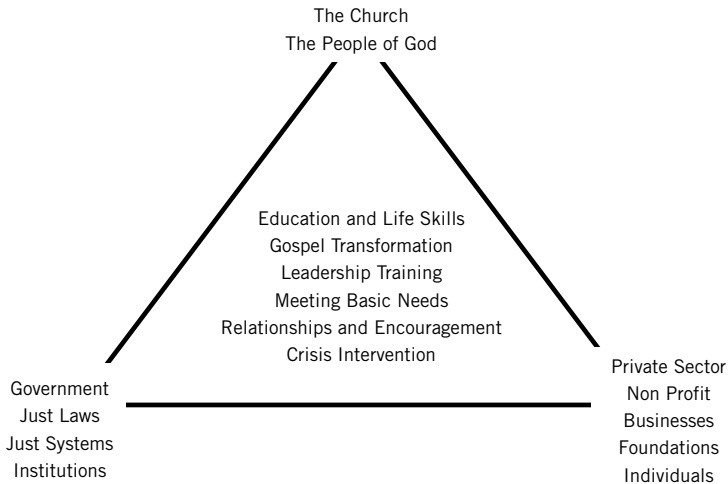
Here we see the two parts of our mission married in the mind of the apostle. Preaching the good news to all people, so that they might be saved from sin, death, wrath, and hell and remembering the poor, something we ought to be eager to do. So we desire to have both of our hands extended and not just one. We desire neither amputation of the preaching of the gospel, nor the cutting off of concerns of justice and service to the poor. We do not seek easy solutions, we do not desire to walk in the naivety that a few “service projects” here and there change the world. We also do not see our hope in giving handouts to others, but rather walking together with them to see lives transformed. People changed by Jesus: rich, poor, and everything in between. So now we continue to ask of the Lord a few questions: “Father, how does the world change?” and “What, Father, shall we do?” Very important questions, indeed.

## How Does the World Change?

In looking at our lives and response to God's call to love our neighbors, even the ones who are not like us racially, economically, or culturally, we want to respond in humility and obedience. Yet before just "doing something" it is good to ask "what to do?" I sometimes lay awake at night asking God this sort of question...just *how* the world changes. Most of the time a few things come to mind:

- 1) One life at a time, saved and transformed by the gospel!
- 2) Through governments and systems changing.
- 3) Through the powers of business, media and the monetary power brokers of the world.

All solutions to poverty and helping people usually live in one of these categories or combinations of each. Yet which is the way? I think my answer today is that all three are important. I just want to say, "Yes!" We need to preach the gospel and pray Jesus transforms individual lives, we need to seek justice in our government, laws, and cultural institutions, and we need an army of compassionate individuals working together for the good of all. A simple graphic may be helpful:



Communities are most effectively transformed by transformed people within them. Outside assistance, help, encouragement, and resources are important, but unless leaders love and serve among the people real change will be difficult to see. We need to see people working together, just systems and institutions, the church preaching the gospel, non-profits providing services, the private sector providing resources and expertise to leaders within communities. Finally, when we think of our involvement with the poor as Christians, I want us to think about a few things. These are principles which I see as guides more than anything. But I think as we live these out in our lives, we will walk a good path together.

- We should pursue efforts which are **personal and embodied**. The best way to serve others is by showing up and being there with them. While writing checks, sending items, buying bracelets etc. are good things to do, being with people is the best way to serve. Even when we think about where to send our money, it is best to partner with organizations that have a presence on the ground with the people. Relocation into communities of need is a very effective way to help people; many will be called to relocate in order to serve. This is the path that Jesus took with humanity—He came from the Father, to the earth, to walk among us and serve.
- Being humble, **servant learners**. Showing up to “solve other people’s problems for them” is a bit arrogant and can be perceived as very paternalistic and offensive. When we desire to serve we should be humble, seek to help things which are lead by community leadership, and to learn from others. God has made the world so that the rich need the poor as much as the poor need the rich. Many times it is not the well off who are better off. Many times those who in the eyes of the world “have nothing” may possess everything in the eyes of God. Additionally, serving across economic barriers can involve us in connecting across racial and cultural barriers. This is a great gift which God gives to all involved. We many times live in ignorance and misunderstanding simply because we never spend time together. We should be humble cultural learners and not cultural supremacists thinking “our way” is the best way.

- Service should be **regular and committed**. If we are to serve with people, we need to be in relationship with them. It is not a good strategy to simply show up once a year to serve at the local mission on Thanksgiving. It is a nice tip of the hat and may make someone feel good about going, but regular involvement from committed people is what really brings change. Non-profits and helping ministries always decry the shortage of committed volunteers who want to give their life to others. Be regular and stay committed.
- Service should be **holistic and gospel centered**. The whole person should be served and ministered to. We do not want to just preach to people, we also want to meet basic needs. We do not want to just meet needs; we want people to know Jesus and the salvation he brings. It concerns me deeply that many Christians who are socially minded today, find it a reasonable path to bury their faith, conceal the gospel, and not see it as part of transforming communities. This is tragic. The unique thing we bring to the table in community development is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who changes lives. Should we pursue holistic ministry serving the whole person's needs? Yes! But we should pursue gospel-centered holistic ministry.
- Service should be done **together in community and through cooperation**. One person doing something is great; an army of people doing good things together is better. We want to serve together, cooperate with others, organize for greater impact in

the community, and help in ways that local leadership deems necessary. Too often people from a wealthy area think they know what others need in another area of town. Many times they have no freakin clue what they are talking about and offer to help in ways which are honestly, not very helpful. By following local leadership in cooperation and partnership we can avoid some of the blunders which may be made.

- Finally, service should **persist over time**. We do not simply do “service projects” as if we do something once and we are done. We do things which are event-oriented for the sake of ongoing relationships to be forged over time. Many times what changes the world are committed women and men who persist in the same direction without wavering over spans of time. Really embracing each other means commitment; the world does not change overnight. As the Scriptures encourage us: *And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* (Gal. 6:9)

I pray this essay continues the conversation we are having with each other, with God, and with our neighbors in the city. May we ever be conscious of the great love Jesus showed for us on the cross, sacrificing Himself for our sake, His Father’s glory and our joy. May we live like our great God and Savior by being willing to sacrifice, to suffer, to give time, talent, and treasure for our neighbors in need. May our lives be upside down so that we reject self-centered, self-obsessed, risk-free, and boring lives. May we give ourselves to

the mission of Jesus, who came to seek and save that which was lost, may we share His gospel with our mouths, and live it out in a broken world with our hands and feet.

**Soli Deo Gloria,**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Reid S. Monaghan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Reid S. Monaghan**

For further reading, ideas, provocation, etc. I recommend the following books:

- *With Justice for All* by John M. Perkins
- *God's Neighborhood*, by Scott Roley and James Elliot - this book chronicles racial reconciliation and community development efforts which are taking place in Franklin, TN.
- *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* by Paul Metzger – though it may challenge many treasured ideas, Metzger's critique of the forces and principles which divide Christians along racial and economic lines must be heard.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett, *Christianity on Trial, Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry*, (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002) 8.
- <sup>2</sup> This is the view that says the anti-Christ is coming tomorrow, most likely from Eastern Europe, Russia, or the Middle East. You know the guy with the bar code scanner which causes people to freak out all the time about the mark of the beast and the end of the world coming in 1988. This theology can cause some people to “hunker down and wait for the rapture,” buy can goods, stock up on gold and shot guns and hide out from the world. Why build culture, serve the poor, work for justice when the earth will be ignited in a fireball tomorrow? Not all pre-millennial theology has this effect, in fact I still personally hold a flavor of pre-millennialism, but unfortunately it has had this effect on some.
- <sup>3</sup> See the discussion in Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 208-210. Lewis lists five factors of what historian Timothy L. Smith has termed “The Great Reversal,” the disengagement of evangelicals from social concerns. 1) The evangelical reaction against theological liberalism 2) The division of the gospel into “social” and “spiritual” categories 3) Evangelical’s disillusionment with earthly life after World War I 4) The spread of pre-millennialism 5) The spread of evangelical Christianity among the upper and middle classes who equated it, more and more, with their own personal well-being.

## Note

All Scripture quotations in this publication are from The English Standard Version (ESV) of The Holy Bible © Crossway Books.

## Notes



2227 US Highway 1, #287  
North Brunswick, NJ 08902  
[www.JacobsWellNJ.org](http://www.JacobsWellNJ.org) | [info@JacobsWellNJ.org](mailto:info@JacobsWellNJ.org)

*"Jacob's Well is a Christian community for those who have given up on religion, yet still find themselves thirsty for God."*