

RIGHT & WRONG? Social issues vs evangelism

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“Our church receives denominational literature that suggests we should address social issues. Doesn’t this smack of pulling us away from missions and evangelism endeavors?”

In order to answer this question, it is important to define what is meant by “social issues.” For some folks, that means “political issues.” For others, it means “societal issues” or the problems we face as a society. And for others, it means the attempt to address human need. I am going to answer this question as it relates to all three of these understandings.

Although we should value and respect the efforts by denominational leaders to communicate their beliefs, we should make our decisions about such matters based upon biblical teachings and the example of Jesus. Does the Bible teach that we should be involved in social issues? It clearly does.

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In the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law was given to the people of Israel so they might abide by God’s desires. Those laws are very specific about how one should treat a stranger, a neighbor, a person in need or a family

member. All are to be treated with dignity, respect and compassion. For example, in Exodus 22:21, the Israelites were instructed, “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.”

The Hebrew prophets also were concerned with social issues. They warned against political alliances that God does not bless (Isaiah 31:1-2). They condemned political bribery and graft (Micah 7: 1-3). They condemned economic exploitation. For example, the passage that begins with Amos 5:11 gives a warning to those who “trample on the poor.” Ezekiel 34:4 gives an indictment against the leaders of Israel: “You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.” Amos 5:24 expresses God’s desire for his people, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.”

Did Jesus address social issues? Of course, he did. In his teachings, we find the same kind of emphases we find in the Old Testament prophets. Jesus issued a series of “woes” upon the religious leaders of Israel who “have neglected the most important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.” When Jesus described the final judgment in Matthew 25, he said those who will be welcomed into the kingdom are those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned.

So, obviously we have a biblical mandate to be involved in the social issues of our day. This does not mean we do not have other mandates from God. We have a mandate to take the gospel to the entire world. We have a mandate to live godly lives. These mandates do not cancel our mandate to meet human need, oppose evil and transform society. In fact, when we do those things, we also are proclaiming the good news. There is no conflict in the New Testament between doing good and telling the good news.

For most of us, there is another problem. We don’t always know where to

come down on a particular social issue. We aren't always sure what God wants us to do. That's why we need help from our leaders—denominational and church leaders. We need accurate information and biblical instruction so that we may discern what the will of God is for us.

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Lubbock

Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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