

Integral Mission: Is Social Action Part of the Gospel?

Paul Barreca

Abstract: This paper evaluates the origin of Integral Mission and argues that the gospel is being redefined to require socio-economic engagement, something beyond its biblical definition. A review of Acts and the epistles of the New Testament demonstrates that although socio-economic injustices were widespread in first-century Rome, the Apostolic church did not establish programs to address social needs as a method for evangelism. Although societal changes may have been brought about by people whose lives were transformed by the gospel, societal change was not the reason that Christians shared the gospel. This paper seeks to elevate the biblical gospel because of its inherent power to change lives, while keeping it separate from human programs and social action, which, although important, are different endeavors.

Key Words: Integral Mission, gospel, social justice, compassion, evangelism

Introduction

Integral Mission is producing missionaries and mission movements that incorporate socio-economic engagement as an essential component of the gospel. This trend has become predominant in many churches, Christian universities, and missionary agencies. Hopefully no one, including this author,

Paul can be reached at paul@fim.org. As the director of a missionary agency rooted in classical dispensationalism, this author supervises missionaries around the world who, among other ministries, feed and educate the poor, care for refugees, and provide many types of humanitarian and disaster-relief services. In every setting, they and thousands of other Christian missionaries are helping the world's most needy communities while maintaining the centrality of the gospel of Christ as the only power sufficient to change lives.

would argue against compassion as the duty of every Christian. Christians can and should practice biblical justice and respond with Christ-like compassion to the needs around them. The concern is there is a shift today toward socio-political engagement that appears to be driven more by cultural adaptation than theological alignment. This paper argues for a reflective pause to evaluate the origin of Integral Mission and to take a closer look at the biblical passages used to promote socio-political engagement as central to the presentation of the gospel. It is hoped that this evaluation will strengthen the evangelistic commitment of both the author and reader.

Called to Compassion

Jesus exemplified compassion. Although Christians may differ regarding the integration of social engagement into the gospel, there should be no debate concerning the compassion that Jesus demonstrated toward the poor and needy, nor the expectation that Christians today should act with compassion toward those in need.

English New Testaments have translated “compassion” from the Greek root word *σπλαγγνον*, which is used frequently in the Gospels to describe Christ’s attitude toward various individuals and groups of people. He showed compassion on the multitudes needing a shepherd (Matt 9:36), the mourning widow (Luke 7:31), the large crowd at the feeding of the 5,000 (Matt 14:14; 15:32; Mark 6:34), the large crowd at the feeding of the 4,000 (Mark 8:2), the boy with the evil spirit (Mark 9:22), and the two blind men as he was leaving Jericho (Matt 20:34). Volumes have been written on the meekness, gentleness, and love demonstrated by Jesus. As Christians are being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Jesus, they will develop a heart of compassion and begin to act with compassion toward others, following John’s exhortation that “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6; see also Rom 8:29; 12:2; 13:14; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17; Col 3:10-12).

Regardless of one’s position concerning Integral Mission, every Christian should stand in agreement that the transformational character of Christ within a believer’s life should result in a heart of compassion. In a book that challenges

the shift toward a social justice gospel, Gary Gilley points out that all Christians should agree about compassion for the needy: “Make no mistake: that the people of God should be concerned about injustice and social issues that plague our world at large, and they should be model citizens who do good to those around them, is not in question and is not the issue.”²

The purpose of this paper is not to debate the necessity of compassion from believers toward the poor and needy nor is it to cast doubt on the intentions, godliness, or effectiveness of the large number of theologians, missionaries, and Christian institutions advancing the Integral Mission concept today. The question at hand is one of definition and the consequences of modifying the definition of the gospel to include the popular themes of social justice in contemporary culture.

Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison expressed this concern in *When Everything is Missions*:

Yet we are concerned that an uncritical use of words, and in particular a lack of shared definition for the words mission, missions, missionary, and missional, has led to a distortion of Jesus’ biblical mandate, ushered in an everything-is-missions paradigm, and moved missions from the initiation and oversight of local churches to make it the domain of individual believers responding to individualized callings.³

History is filled with excellent examples of Christians feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, building hospitals, and demonstrating the compassion of Jesus to a needy world. These practices are not in question, but rather, is there support from the Bible or early church practice to consider the gospel a blend of the spoken message about Christ and the acts of compassion demonstrated by ministers of the gospel?

² Gary Gilley, *The Social Justice Primer: In Search of the Message and Mission of the Church* (Springfield, IL: Think on These Things Ministries, 2019), Kindle loc. 1238.

³ Denny Ellison and Matthew Spitters, *When Everything is Missions* (BottomLine Media, Pioneers US, 2017), 22.

A Brief Introduction to Integral Mission

Integral Mission(s), also referred to as “Holistic Mission(s),” emphasizes the incorporation of social action as an essential component of gospel proclamation. The Lausanne Movement posts the following definition of Integral Mission on their website: “Integral Mission can be defined as the task of bringing the whole of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and includes the affirmation that there is no biblical dichotomy between evangelistic and social responsibility.”⁴ The Oxford dictionary defines dichotomy as “a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different.”⁵ The Lausanne definition of Integral Mission therefore considers evangelism and social action to be synonymous. If *evangelistic responsibility* means “sharing the gospel message” then equating it to *social responsibility* gives it a new meaning.

The terms “Integral Mission(s)” or “Holistic Mission(s)” are not always used to describe the contemporary emphasis on social action themes within the missions community. However, the influence of this philosophy is pronounced. Books advocating the integration of social action/social responsibility with gospel proclamation include *The Hole in our Gospel* (Richard Stearns, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), *Scatter* (Andrew Scott, Chicago, IL: Moody 2016), *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission* (Rene Padilla, Argentina: Ediciones Kairos, 2004), *Simply Good News* (N. T. Wright, New York, NY: Harper One, 2017), *Creation Care and the Gospel: Reconsidering the Mission of the Church* (Robert S. White and Colin Bell, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016) as well as books and articles by Shane Claiborne, Rick Warren, Jim Wallis, and Ruth Padilla DeBorst. The endorsement lists for these books include many well-known influencers, speakers, and personalities within the evangelical community including David

⁴ Ravi Jayakaran, *About Integral Mission*, Lausanne Movement, accessed August 3, 2019, www.lausanne.org/networks/issues/integral-mission.

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “dichotomy,” 2020, accessed August 28, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/dichotomy>.

Platt and Louie Giglio (*Scatter*), Bill Hybels, Luci Swindol, Max Lucado, T. D. Jakes, Chuck Colson, John Ortberg, Tony Campolo, and Eugene Peterson (*The Hole in Our Gospel*).

The Lausanne conferences and the covenants that they produced were highly influential and advanced the concept of Integral Mission. Writing about the first Lausanne conference called by Billy Graham in 1974, John Mark Terry and Robert L. Gallagher note, “The needs of the poor and the social implications of the gospel attracted much attention and comment at the conference.”⁶ One of the seven key issues agreed upon at the conference was “the relationship of evangelism and social concern.”⁷ This was a new concept from leaders who had previously been focused exclusively on world evangelization through the proclamation of the biblical gospel alone.

Integral Mission has its roots in the Liberation Theology of the Roman Catholic Church in Central and South America. Ron Sider, who wrote *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London, Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), was an early link between Latin American Liberation Theology of the 1970s and Evangelicalism in America. Gilley writes, “What Sider was advocating in the 1980s has become commonplace now, that is, many believe the gospel has both spiritual and social dimensions which are of equal importance.”⁸

Integral Mission proponents have a wide platform in many theologically conservative institutions involved in training and sending missionaries. Dallas Theological Seminary’s “World Evangelization Conference” featured Ruth Padilla DeBorst as the key-note speaker (March 5-8, 2019). DeBorst is a leading advocate for Integral Mission and contributed the essay “An

⁶John Mark Terry and Robert L. Gallagher, *Encountering the History of Missions from the Early Church to Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 309.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gilley, *Social Justice Primer*, Kindle loc. 1036.

Integral Transformational Approach” in *The Mission of the Church—Five Views in Conversation*, edited by Craig Ott.⁹

Lancaster Bible College featured Dr. Michael Young-Suk Oh, Global Executive Director/CEO of the Lausanne Movement, as the main speaker for the Lancaster Bible College Missions Conference, February 11-15, 2019.¹⁰

Jim Wallis, founder and president of *Sojourners* and a leading proponent for Christian engagement in social justice causes, has been a frequent guest speaker at prominent evangelical schools and events. Mary Danielsen provides the following analysis of Jim Wallis’s popularity in evangelical circles:

Lest any think that Jim Wallis and his social gospel are not being warmly embraced by many within Protestant/evangelical Christianity, some of the places that have invited Jim Wallis to speak of the last half a decade or so include Wheaton College, the Mennonite Church USA, Cedarville University, and Willow Creek to name a few. What’s more, his books are found in countless Christian bookstores including the Southern Baptist Convention Resource branch, LifeWay; and his books are frequently used in Christian seminary and college courses. In addition, at least three traditional Christian publishing house—Baker Books, InterVarsity Press, and Zondervan—publish his books.¹¹

Is Integral Mission Re-defining the Gospel?

Whether Scripture defines the gospel as an integration of the message about Jesus and action to alleviate social injustices will be discussed later. However, before offering a critique, the assertion that Integral Mission proponents are re-defining the gospel needs to be established.

⁹ Ruth Padilla DeBorst, “An Integral Transformational Approach,” in *The Mission of the Church - Five Views in Conversation*, ed. Craig Ott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 41-67.

¹⁰ “2019 Missions Conference Registration,” received by the author, December 21, 2018.

¹¹ Mary Danielsen, *The Dangerous Truth about the Social Justice Gospel*, [lighthouse Trails research.com/blog](https://www.lighthouse Trails research.com/blog), September 18, 2018, <https://www.lighthouse Trails research.com/blog/?p=28830>.

Richard Stearns “The Hole in Our Gospel”

Integral Mission advocates say that including social action as part of the gospel is a return to the true gospel proclaimed and modeled by Jesus. They put forward the idea that the gospel is incomplete when it is reduced to a proclamation of the truth about Jesus without associated action to remedy human suffering and injustices. Richard Stearns is critical of a message-only version of the gospel. He writes,

More and more, our view of the gospel has been narrowed to a simple transaction, marked by checking a box on a bingo card at some prayer breakfast, registering a decision for Christ, or coming forward during an altar call. I have to admit that my own view of evangelism, based on the Great Commission, amounted to just that for many years. It was about saving as many people from hell as possible—for the *next* life. It minimized any concern for those same people in *this* life. It wasn't as important that they were poor or hungry or persecuted, or perhaps rich, greedy, and arrogant: we just had to get them to pray the “sinner's prayer,” and then we'd move on the next potential convert... There is a real problem with this limited view of the kingdom of God: it is not the whole gospel.¹²

According to Stearns, the “whole gospel” includes something more than the proclamation leading to a “simple transaction.” Most would agree with his complaint against the type of ministry he describes and admits to having practiced. People are not born again because they pray “the sinner's prayer,” unless that prayer reflects that they understand their own sinfulness and have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, as the remedy for their sin. Stearns has identified some real problems, namely manipulative and incomplete presentations of the gospel and evangelism without discipleship. The solution, however, is not to incorporate social action into the gospel but rather to return to the genuine gospel, a message sufficiently powerful to change lives without emotional manipulation. Stearns advocates for a

¹² Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 5 (italics original).

“whole gospel” that includes both the words of the gospel and works of humanitarianism. He rightly says that Christians who practice hit-and-run evangelism need to be exhorted to proclaim Christ clearly and to love their neighbor (Matt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39), serve those in need (Matt 10:43), and care for orphans and widows (Jas 1:27). However, Stearns goes much further than such exhortations. He adds a works component to the proclamation of the gospel itself that is not contained in the Bible.

Lausanne Movement, The Manila Manifesto, 1989

The second Lausanne conference held in Manila in 1989 produced the Manila Manifesto. Under the heading, “The Whole Gospel” is found the sub-point “The Gospel and Social Responsibility.” Part of that statement reads:

Yet Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom of God, he also demonstrated its arrival by works of mercy and power. We are called today to a similar integration of words and deeds. In a spirit of humility, we are to preach and teach, minister to the sick, feed the hungry, care for prisoners, help the disadvantaged and handicapped, and deliver the oppressed.¹³

The statement on “The Gospel and Social Responsibility” in the Manila Manifesto reflects a shift within the global community of evangelical leaders. Since the Manila Manifesto was published, Christian witness has been expanding from the proclamation of the gospel message to include socio-economic action in combination with that message. To be a part of the “Whole Gospel,” one is called to “minister to the sick, feed the hungry and care for prisoners, help the disadvantaged and handicapped and deliver the oppressed.” Gary Gilley describes this as the “two-pronged” gospel: “...A two-prong gospel has arisen composed of both the Great Commission and the so-called Cultural Mandate.”¹⁴ Historically, evangelism has been

¹³ Lausanne Movement, *The Manila Manifesto*, 1989, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/manifesto/the-manila-manifesto>.

¹⁴ Gilley, *Social Justice Primer*, Kindle loc. 43.

understood to be the proclamation of the gospel message itself. As Gilley writes,

Everywhere true Christianity has gone it has benefited the society which it has touched. But historically, conservative Christianity has always seen social improvement as taking a backseat to the church's true calling of proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. It has never seen the social agenda as an end in itself—until now.¹⁵

The Micah Network, the Micah Declaration, 2001

The Micah Network set out in 2001 to advance Integral Mission. Based on Micah 6:8, the group's objective is stated as follows:

Our definition of Integral Mission is taken from a consultation held in Oxford, United Kingdom, in September 2001, which resulted in The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission being produced. The introductory extract outlines the summarized definition of Integral Mission as follows:

Integral Mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in Integral Mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

The phrase “social involvement has evangelistic consequences” is significant and will be discussed in greater detail.

Lausanne Movement: The Cape Town Commitment 2010

A central phrase from the Micah Declaration (2001) was incorporated into the most recent Lausanne covenant produced in

¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle loc. 206.

¹⁶ Micah Network, “Integral Mission,” 2019, <https://www.micahnetwork.org/integral-mission>.

Cape Town in 2010. Article 10, “We Love the Mission of God” states the following:

Evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God...The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world...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 humankind, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ...The salvation we proclaim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. ‘Faith without works is dead.’ Integral Mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in Integral Mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world, we betray the Word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the Word of God, we have nothing to bring to the world.¹⁷

The Cape Town Commitment is built around a strong call to evangelism and engagement with all communities and people groups. Such a call is needed and commendable. However, it is at this point that the document takes a turn toward contemporary social engagement. After good theological development about the gospel, “socio-political involvement” is introduced without biblical example or instruction. While the key phrase “our proclamation has social consequences...and our social involvement has evangelistic consequences” is carefully worded, little attempt is made to demonstrate the biblical connection in uniting social action and evangelism. The Cape Town Commitment is more correct when it emphasizes that compassion

¹⁷ Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, 2010, https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#_ftnref55.

is the believer's duty. The NT does not confuse compassion or social involvement with the proclamation of the message, other than to urge believers that our behavior should be exemplary among the Gentiles (Titus 2:8; 1 Tim 5:14; 1 Pet 2:12, 15; 3:16).

The Integral Mission perspective mistakes the command for personal compassion and good works for a mandate that the mission of the church is to develop social action programs. It is not that these things are wrong for a church to do; it is simply that there is no NT mandate for the local church to fulfill these duties in a corporate sense.

Cru 19 Connection Weekend

This shift in how the gospel is presented in evangelical missions conversations can be found in the workshop topics at the Cru19 Connection Weekend. Several workshop topics and general sessions centered on social justice themes.¹⁸ In a general session, Sandra Van Opstal focused on social justice themes in the United States such as the disproportionate prison population of African American men, white supremacy, and the detaining and return of illegal immigrants. She condemned the church's refusal to intervene on behalf of immigrants (presumably those who arrived in the United States illegally) by saying,

I cannot come to you today Cru and not speak where I stand. Watching the church sing their songs in stadiums all across the country, raise a banner for Jesus, and stay silent while we experience another holocaust, stay silent while churches send their mission trips to Guatemala and Honduras, to the very places where these people are coming from, and then stay silent when they show up in your neighborhood.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cru19 Workshops, July 20, 2019, <https://www.cru.org/cru19/workshops/>. Workshops included "The Roots of Injustice," "Soul Care in a Racially Complex Society," and "Justice and Jesus."

¹⁹ Sandra Van Opstal, Cru 19 General Session Address, July 20, 2019, <https://www.cru.org/cru19/archive/general-sessions/07-20-sandra-van-opstal/>, approximate location minute 21.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the legal, political, and humanitarian complexities associated with immigration waves entering the southern border of the U.S. Opstal does not address these complexities either, except to condemn all who fail to embrace her point of view. In a speech loosely connected to the book of Amos, Van Opstal said near the close of her speech, “We will disciple you and form you to be Christian activists.”²⁰ The connection between becoming a mature disciple and a Christian activist was not established in her speech.

MOPS Admonition Concerning the Gospel

Another example of a change in the way evangelical leaders speak about the gospel is MOPS CEO Mandy Arioto on an all-leader call, June 22, 2016. She explained the gospel in the following way:

We are people who are reclaiming the good news, who are walking out among the way of the one we follow, a man named Jesus, and bringing good news to hurting people. Eight million people are leaving the church every year and so we are taking serious responsibility for the fact that we need to be people who come bearing the good news, reclaiming the good news. And what is good news? *Good news is friends when you are lonely, it is food when you are hungry, it is kindness with no strings attached, it is food when your baby is sick.* Good news is Jesus. And it is the embarrassingly extravagant love of God.²¹

Summary

These examples illustrate the way some leaders in well-known Christian mission and outreach organizations are talking about the gospel. In books, articles, and conference sessions, the Integral Mission concept is being presented on a wide scale. Christians are being taught that social action is a part of what it means to proclaim the gospel.

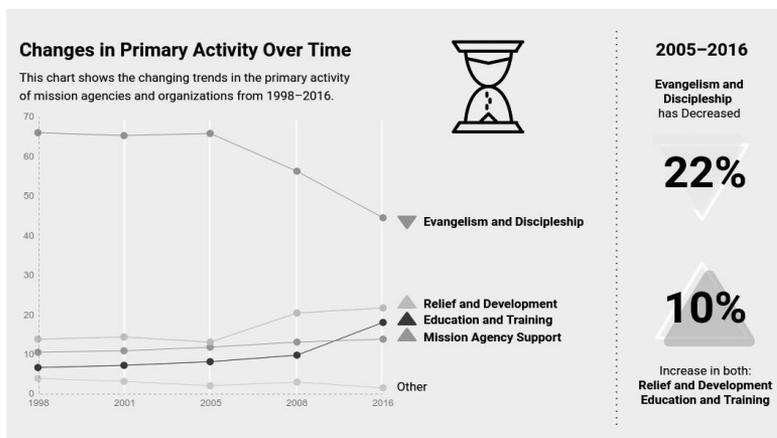
²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mandy Arioto, “All Leader Call with Mandy.” *MOPS International*, vimeo.com/179370370/9ac450e4b8?cjevent=405a5c48c29d11e983e201e50a24060c, minute 7 (emphasis added).

Declining Efforts in Global Evangelism and Discipleship

Is the Integral Mission approach as reflected in the books, articles, and organizations mentioned here a cause or an effect? Has this approach arisen *because of* general trends toward social justice among evangelicals, or has Integral Mission *created* a trend moving evangelical Christians toward social engagement themes? Although both are likely true, the result is that the evangelical church is widely embracing social engagement themes while at the same time reducing the emphasis on proclaiming the message of the cross.

One source indicates a shift in missionary emphasis away from evangelism and discipleship and toward relief/development, and education/training covering a span from 1998 to 2016. This shift corresponds to the time during which Christian leaders have promoted the Integral Mission concept. Using data from the North American Mission Handbook, Missio Nexus compiled the following charts:²²



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The shift is notable for several reasons. First, the shift begins in 2005, shortly after the Micah Declaration (2001). Second, the shift is away from *evangelism/discipleship* and towards

²² Missio Nexus. *Missiographics*, “Primary Activities of Mission Agencies-USA and Canada,” 2017. Used by Permission.

education/training, and *relief/development*. Third, the trend has not levelled off, at least through 2016. If this trend continues, it portends a tremendous decline in missionary efforts to proclaim the gospel, make disciples, and plant churches.

Was Social Action Integrated into the Gospel by Jesus?

An examination of some of the passages frequently referenced by Integral Mission proponents demonstrates that Jesus did not advocate the kind of social action promoted by many today.

Luke 4:18-19

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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19, ESV)

The inaugural announcement by Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue is often referenced to support social action as an integral part of the gospel. Ron Sider includes Luke 4:18-19 as one of several passages supporting his argument that "one of the central biblical doctrines is that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed."²³

Richard Stearns includes an appeal from this passage under the heading "Jesus Had a Mission Statement."²⁴ He writes:

Proclaiming the whole gospel then, means much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice, efforts to right the wrongs that are so prevalent in our world.²⁵

²³ Ronald J Sider, "An Evangelical Theology of Liberation," *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (1980): 130-32.

²⁴ Stearns, *Hole in Our Gospel*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9. There are many aspects of Stearns's book that are commendable. It is beyond the intention of this paper to provide a full analysis of *The Hole in Our Gospel*. Michael Stallard provides such an

Stearns and Sider were early influencers of today's social action proponents. Sider's article is helpful where he points out errors in Liberation Theology, even though he embraces many of its ideas. Stearns calls the church to consider the poor and to provide physical assistance alongside of gospel proclamation, something historically practiced in the Christian missions movement and strongly needed today. But Sider and Stearns both use Luke 4:18-19 as a mandate that the *mission* of the church is to care for the poor because that was Christ's mission. Such a position is without exegetical support.

Christ's public miracles provided sight for the blind, healing for the sick, and even resurrection from the dead, but the miracles themselves were not his ultimate purpose. As wonderful as they were to those who were blessed, their primary purpose was to validate Christ's identity as the Son of God and Messiah of Israel in order to gain a hearing for his message. If the purpose of Christ's incarnation was to heal the sick, then his mission was a failure, for there were many who were sick even after his resurrection. Those who were healed eventually succumbed to some later physical illness and died.

To claim that Christ was sent to reduce human physical suffering and that the mission of the church is to do the same misses the main point of this remarkable passage. Jesus' miracles proved that he was the Son of God. He made this clear when the disciples of John came to ask if he was indeed the Messiah:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.' (Matt 11:2-5, ESV)

analysis in his fair and thoughtful review in "Gospel Centeredness, Jesus, and Social Ethics," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 15 (Fall 2011): 5-24.

Jesus explains that his miracles served to bear witness that he was sent by God the Father: “But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36, ESV).

The author of Hebrews also clarifies that the signs and wonders performed by Jesus bore witness to the truth of his message: “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ‘while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will’” (Heb 2:3-4, ESV).

Christ was compassionate toward the poor. His compassion provides an example for Christians to follow. But the greatest thing that Jesus did for the sick and the poor was to deliver them from their sins. His physical healing demonstrated that he had the power to do this as he made clear when he said, “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” he then said to the paralytic, “Rise, pick up your bed and go home” (Matt 9:6, ESV).

The Commissioning of the Twelve, Matthew 10:5-42

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.’ (Matt 10:5-8, ESV)

The Twelve were commissioned to invite Israel to receive Jesus as their Messiah. The commissioning strategy established by Jesus in this passage is not in force today. Jesus was offering the kingdom (verse 7), an offer that will ultimately be fulfilled when the righteous remnant of Israel welcome Jesus as their King at the end of the Great Tribulation (Zech 12:10; Rev 20:4). In Matthew 10, the Twelve were instructed to “proclaim the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (ESV) “Proclaim” is translated from the Greek κηρῦσω, “announce, make known” by a

herald.²⁶ This is the same word used frequently in the epistles to exhort Christians to “preach the gospel” (Acts 8:25; Rom 1:15). The NT epistles speak about preaching Christ (Acts 8:5; 1 Cor 1:23), preaching the gospel (Col 1:23), and preaching the word (2 Tim 2:4), among other commands. It is only in the Gospels and Acts where we find reference to preaching the kingdom of God.

This passage is not a call to believers today to raise the dead and heal the sick, nor should it be taken as an appeal to social action. Craig Bloomberg writes, “Verse 8 [of Matthew 10] has regularly been taken as support for modern medical missions as well; appropriate as these may be, they are not what Jesus envisions here.”²⁷

The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37

This parable is often cited to support the integration of social action into the gospel. Jesus shares this parable in answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). The lesson strikes directly at the heart of Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans. Here we find the story of a victim—a man assaulted by robbers and left for dead. The example of the Samaritan is vitally important for us to follow today, but not in the way some social action apologists interpret this passage.

There is continuity in the parable of the Good Samaritan and Paul’s exhortation to do good to everyone “as we have opportunity” (Gal 6:10). There is no indication in the text that the Samaritan went out looking for someone to help. That was not the point of Jesus’ parable. Just as Paul instructs Christians in Galatians 6:10, the Samaritan was presented with an opportunity to “do good” (Gal 6:10). He did what we all should do when we see a need and have the means to meet it. He went

²⁶ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer’s Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 431.

²⁷ Craig Bloomberg, *Matthew*, NAC vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 171.

into action while others passed by. The fact that he was a Samaritan only reinforced that we are all called to compassion without prejudice. As powerful and familiar as this parable is to us, it should not be interpreted as a call to churches to establish programs to address community needs. There is nothing wrong with such programs, as they may be a part of a church or an individual Christian or even a Christian organization responding to real community needs locally or internationally. But they should not be construed as something commanded in this text.

Many passages in the Gospels speak of Christ's healing and compassion. These passages provide insight into Christ's character. They testify to his authority and genuineness as the Son of God, but they do not characterize the essence of the gospel as including a combination of the gospel message and social action.

Was Social Action Integrated into the Gospel by the Apostolic Church?

The Apostolic church does not provide an example of a church engaged in social action causes. Despite living during a time of great injustice, there is no evidence in the New Testament that the Apostolic church practiced anything resembling the type of social action suggested by Integral Mission proponents. Noting this absence of NT examples, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert write, "If you are looking for a picture of the early church giving itself to creation care, plans for societal renewal, and strategies to serve the community in Jesus's name, you won't find them in Acts."²⁸

There is much attention today to the "mission of the church." DeYoung and Gilbert address this in their book, *What is the Mission of the Church?*

It used to be that *mission* referred pretty narrowly to Christians sent out cross-culturally to convert non-Christians and plant churches. But now *mission* is understood much more broadly. Environmental

²⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 49.

stewardship is mission. Community renewal is mission. Blessing our neighbors is mission. Mission is here. Mission is there. Mission is everywhere. We are all missionaries.”²⁹

Whatever difficulty there may be in defining “mission,” there should be little debate concerning the definition and usage of “gospel,” as the Greek *ευαγγελιον* is used 76 times in the New Testament. None of those references include a description of social action or suggest that compassion should be shown to non-believers as a component of the gospel.

Rather than a broad definition of the gospel encompassing social action, community projects, health care, and other noble causes, the NT usage of *ευαγγελιον* is narrow. The definition of the gospel is not elastic but specific and contained.

1 Corinthians 15:1-3

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand.... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:1, 3, ESV).

After numerous warnings to the Corinthians about divisions in the church (chapter 3), sexual immorality (chapter 5), lawsuits against fellow Christians (chapter 6), and the abuse of the Lord’s Table (chapter 11), Paul addresses perhaps the most consequential matter facing the troubled church. Some in Corinth were denying the resurrection, the cornerstone of the gospel message (15:12-19). He begins his correction of the Corinthian error by clearly elaborating the content of the gospel:

- (1) Jesus died for our sins (15:3).
- (2) He was buried (15:4).
- (3) He was raised from the dead (15:4).
- (4) He appeared to others (15:5-9).

This passage provides a minimalist picture of the content of the gospel message. If social action is a part of the gospel, Paul

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 (italics original).

withholds that information from the most straightforward explanation of the gospel in the New Testament.

Acts 15:7

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.’ (Acts 15:7, ESV)

The expansion of the gospel through Paul’s missionary activity raised a question among the Jewish church in Jerusalem concerning the core of the gospel message. At issue was whether the Gentiles needed to follow the commands of the law. The church council in Jerusalem was a significant event for clarification of the gospel message.

Peter delivers the council’s decision concerning the importance of the gospel message, unattached to any human effort. The phrase “the word of the gospel” indicates a spoken message that Peter faithfully declared to both Jews and Gentiles. The Jerusalem council could have included any number of social action programs as a means by which to satisfy the desires of the new Gentile believers or the established Jewish church, but they did not. Instead, they validated that the gospel is a word to be preached so that both Jew and Gentile could be saved.

Galatians 1:11-3:1

The Galatian Christians were quickly moving away from the gospel (1:6-9). Paul brings them back to the truth of the gospel, using the root word εὐαγγελιον fifteen times in this epistle. Paul explains that the gospel has not come from human origin (1:11-12) and rehearses his presentation of the gospel to the church’s leaders in Jerusalem (2:14). He declares that the gospel brings about justification by faith (3:8). Indeed, it was the gospel that brought about Abraham’s justification. Paul’s gospel to the Gentiles is the same gospel Peter proclaimed as the Apostle to the Jews (2:7-9).

Paul speaks much about the gospel in Galatians, but he does not include anything about social action. One statement about the poor is found in Galatians 2:10: “Only, they asked us

to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” This was not a request from the Jerusalem council that Paul establish humanitarian works among the Gentiles. This related exclusively to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem, a request Paul faithfully carried out by collecting a gift from the Macedonian churches to be brought to Jerusalem (2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:25-26).

Timothy George explains the context of this request:

Paul and Barnabas were asked to remember “the poor,” a shorthand expression for “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26). From its earliest days the Jerusalem church faced a condition of grinding poverty, as can be seen from the dispute over widows receiving sufficient food and the practice of sharing all things in common to care for the needy (Acts 4:32–35; 6:1–4).³⁰

The extensive treatment of the gospel contained in Galatians does not include social action as a component that gospel.

Summary

While numerous injustices existed in the first century, Paul did not address them or begin efforts to eradicate them.³¹ As Gary Gilley writes,

There are no examples of early Christians attempting to transform or create culture or influence the political system in a direct way. Nor do we find them organizing programs to feed the hungry of the world or to right social injustices. Almost all of their

³⁰ Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC vol. 30 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 165.

³¹ In Paul’s instruction to Philemon, he urges him to receive his runaway slave Onesimus back “no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Phlm 16, ESV). Paul’s advocacy on behalf of Onesimus was astoundingly countercultural, but it falls short of a full treatise against slavery. Later generations of Christians would boldly speak out against the injustice of slavery, bringing about its end in Europe and America.

attention was on evangelizing the lost as well as the spiritual life and physical needs of the believing community.³²

The idea that speaking about and participating in social causes was used to woo sinners to the gospel is not found in Scripture.

Practical Considerations About the Social Action Gospel

It has been established that integrating social action into what it means to proclaim the gospel is not supported in Scripture. Christians are commanded to love their neighbor (Matt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14), practice compassion (Col 3:12), practice justice (Mic 6:8), and do good to all men (Gal 6:10). However, the compassion that we are commanded to show to all people is nowhere equated in Scripture with what it means to preach the gospel. The following practical considerations demonstrate the weakness of integrating social action as a part of what it means to proclaim the gospel.

Non-Christians also Practice Social Action

If “our proclamation has social consequences...and our social involvement has evangelistic consequences,”³³ it has these consequences for Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, and atheists. The argument cuts both ways, making a case that in general, kindness and generosity reflect positively on all who practice these actions. Christians can and should respond to human needs both on a personal and corporate level, but compassion is not restricted to Christians, nor would anyone expect that it should be. The idea that people will be compelled to respond to the gospel because Christians have been kind ties the effectiveness of evangelism to the good works of a believer rather than to the power of the gospel itself.

A Christian’s Civic Responsibility

It is right that all people should care about poverty, homelessness, disease, and injustice, both Christians and non-

³² Gilley, *Social Justice Primer*, Kindle loc. 620.

³³ Micah Network, “Integral Mission,” 2019 and Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, 2010.

Christians. Many of the appeals put forth by Christian social action proponents should be embraced by all. As fellow human beings, Christians and non-Christians have a common interest in helping those who are disadvantaged. Who would not be moved with compassion for an ill child, a starving nation, or women captured as sex-slaves? There is no objection to showing compassion in any of these circumstances. Christians should stand up with all others to speak out and act with meaningful intervention because it is a part of their Christian duty as good citizens. Failure to do so is a violation of the Lord's command and gives the unsaved an opportunity to bring accusation against Jesus and his followers. In 1 Peter, the apostle urges Christians that living as the "people of God" requires them to maintain a good and honorable testimony in front of their non-believing neighbors: "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pet 2:12, ESV; see also Matt 5:16; Rom 13:1-4; Titus 2:8; 1 Pet 3:16).

Theology or Political Ideology?

Some of today's social justice themes are driven by leftist political ideology. Ron Sider, an early promoter, advocated themes originating from Liberation Theology, as noted earlier. Gary Gilley points out the extent of Sider's influence.

Sider has long been a bridge between Liberation Theology and evangelicalism. While not endorsing the darker sides of Liberation Theology, such as bloody revolutions and overthrowing of governments, he has accepted the socialistic features of the movement and has attempted to integrate them into the evangelical church in the West.³⁴

Its connection with Liberation Theology brings many left-leaning themes into evangelical churches, colleges, and seminaries. Environmentalism, immigration policy, racial reconciliation, racial imbalance in the prison population, worker's rights, and other themes that have been prevalent in the

³⁴ Gilley, *Social Justice Primer*, Kindle loc. 1030.

American Left are now becoming mainstream in the evangelical social justice movement, as well.

Revealing Omissions

Injustices not in line with left-leaning politics are seldom mentioned by evangelical social justice advocates. Injustices such as abortion, anti-Semitism, and the persecution of Christians take a back seat to the environment, sex-trafficking, water and food scarcity, AIDS, and other medical needs. As mentioned above, who is not moved with compassion by these things? Certainly, Christians should engage in helping in these situations, as should all people. However, such engagement is not the same as proclaiming the gospel. Ministries of compassion might possibly become a platform for presenting the gospel, but they do not themselves communicate the gospel. While compassion work could potentially open doors for evangelistic communication of the gospel message, the gospel itself must be preached. It is the gospel that liberates, not human endeavors.

It is Easier to Dig Wells than it is to Share the Gospel

Social action tends to be much easier than evangelism because those who walk in darkness are opposed to the light of the gospel (Matt 10:22; John 12:40; 2 Cor 4:4; 2 Tim 3:12). A Muslim community is unlikely to be offended by Christians who provide safe drinking water. But that same community may be greatly offended by Christians who share the gospel. The concern of this writer is that over time, Christians will resort to the path of least resistance, leading to what could be called “The Social Gospel 2.0.” Under the goal that “our social involvement has evangelistic consequences,” Christians are finding it very easy to omit the “proclamation” part and just trust social involvement to take care of the “evangelistic consequences.”

The Lost Will Not be Saved Because Christians Do Good Deeds

Duane Litfin expresses the following thought:

The belief that we can “preach the gospel” with our actions alone represents muddled thinking. However important our actions may

be (and they are very important indeed), and whatever else they may be doing (they serve a range of crucial functions), they are not “preaching the Gospel.” The Gospel is inherently verbal, and preaching it is inherently verbal behavior.³⁵

Speaking directly to the question of Integral Mission he also writes,

Few would deny that the holistic mission of the church is the best possible platform for our verbal witness, and that our jaded generation will be more inclined to give us a hearing if we are living it out. (Indeed, the longest section of my new book, *Word versus Deed*, is devoted to the crucial role of our deeds.) But this does not permit us to hold the Gospel hostage to our shortcomings.³⁶

Christians must not allow the truth of the gospel to be minimized or even lost simply because our post-modern generation is more moved by image and intention than by precise words explaining the vital historical facts of Jesus, and the necessity of faith in him alone.

The Gospel is Powerful Even When the Messengers are Weak

Christians are called to compassion, justice, and selfless love for others. Failure to follow these commands is pure disobedience. But can the gospel be believed when its messengers themselves are unjust oppressors? If the gospel is sufficiently powerful to provide all that is needed for a sinner to understand Christ’s work on his or her behalf and turn in faith to him, the answer is, “yes.” This is not an excuse for Christians to disobey the Lord but rather a reminder that the power is in the gospel message itself, not in the messenger (Rom 1:16-17; Matt

³⁵ Duane Litfin, “You Can’t Preach the Gospel with Deeds: And Why It’s Important to Say So,” *Christianity Today*, May 30, 2012, 40. See his book on the same subject, Duane Litfin, *Word Versus Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

³⁶ Litfin, “You Can’t Preach,” 43.

16:18). This paradox is demonstrated by African slaves who in large numbers became devoted Christians during the American nineteenth century. Enslaving another human is one of the most violent examples of injustice. Professing Christians not only engaged in this wicked atrocity, but they attempted to justify it with the Bible. Yet despite the appalling injustices committed against slaves, many of them saw the true Christ and turned to him for spiritual deliverance. Eric Lincoln writes, “The black Christians who formed the historic black churches also knew implicitly that their understanding of Christianity, which was premised on the rock of antiracial discrimination, was more authentic than the Christianity practiced in white churches.”³⁷

Only Jesus can Establish His Kingdom

Social gospel advocates often use the vague and biblically imprecise statement that by practicing justice, we are “building the kingdom.” Though there are many things that Christians and churches should do to please and honor our Savior, they cannot build his kingdom. There is little room here to discuss an issue so broad, other than to say that the future kingdom belongs to Jesus and only he can establish it. Integral Mission advocates proclaim that by improving society, we can see the kingdom of God come to earth. Richard Stearns writes, “The whole Gospel is a vision for ushering in God’s kingdom—now, not in some future time, and here, on earth, not in some distant heaven.”³⁸ Ruth Padilla Deborst writes,

The good news of God’s reconciling purposes will reach into our world, mired as it is in corruption, injustice, violence, poverty, and the plunder of creation, if and when the followers of the wounded King allow the Spirit to weave them into a community of such radical discipleship that in all they are, all they do, and all they say they witness to God’s integral transformation until the kingdom comes in full.³⁹

³⁷ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), Kindle Edition, loc, 332.

³⁸ Stearns, *Hole in Our Gospel*, xxii.

³⁹ Deborst, “Integral Transformational Approach,” 64.

Even the most utopian, crime-free, justice-focused human community on earth cannot compare to the glories of Christ's future kingdom. Instead of ushering in Christ's kingdom, believers should see their activity in this world as filling Christ-like character while we walk in this world: "that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil 2:15, ESV). "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Eph 5:8, ESV).

Dispensationalists understand that the church will not bring about Christ's kingdom. As good citizens, Christians participate in society because God has ordained human government and because until their redemption is complete, they are both citizens of heaven and citizens of earth (Phil 3:20; 2 Cor 5:1; Eph 2:19).

God's plan does not culminate with the glorious triumph of the church over injustice. It culminates with Jesus executing justice upon a world in rebellion, as he invites his redeemed ones to share authority with him in his righteous kingdom.

An Appeal for Compassion without Redefining the Gospel

It was stated at the outset that Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus and demonstrate compassion to those in need. But the demonstration of that compassion is not the same thing as proclaiming the gospel which is the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Integral Mission movement is redefining what it means to proclaim the gospel, something that should cause great concern for truth-loving Christians. The fact that many of its principles are drawn from the political left should be carefully evaluated so that Christians are not swept up by the philosophies of the day (Col 2:8).

This objection to redefining the gospel should not be interpreted as opposition to Christian compassion or efforts to speak against injustice or help those in need. The outworking of Christian compassion is powerful and beautifully diverse, just as diverse as the body of Christ. Galatians 6:10 provides an outline of how that compassion is focused.

“So then, as we have opportunity...” Wherever Christians see a need, they should seek to meet that need. Compassion is connected to the needs we encounter while living in a fallen world. Individual Christians, local churches and mission movements may be drawn to serve a variety of needs. This world will present no shortage of opportunities for Christians to selflessly love and serve others. Let the church do this with dedication and enthusiasm, but let the church proclaim the gospel.

“Let us do good to everyone...” There is no prejudice in how believers demonstrate compassion. Goodness should be shown to everyone regardless of spiritual condition. Where there is a human need, Christians are called to respond.

“And especially to those who are of the household of faith.” The primary recipients of Christian kindness are other Christians. Brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need should receive generous concern, prayer, and action from other portions of the body capable of rendering assistance. The first place to practice compassion is on behalf of fellow Christians suffering injustice, poverty, and persecution.

In a recent graduation lecture to the students at Bethlehem College and Seminary, John Piper gave a passionate and clear example of what it means to talk with biblical accuracy and deep tenderness about social involvement and the Christian’s responsibility to the world in which we live. His message “What Do Christians Care About (Most)?”⁴⁰ emphasized that Christians should think about social action and injustice differently than non-Christians because Christians are ultimately concerned with the injustices that we all have committed against God. He said,

Millions of Christians including many missionaries have convinced themselves that they are loving lost people by caring mostly about their suffering in this world and little about how they will spend eternity. It is unfortunate that some missionaries, who

⁴⁰ John Piper, “What Do Christians Care about (Most)?”

Commencement address at Bethlehem College & Seminary, May 17, 2019, Minneapolis, www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-do-christians-care-about-most (emphasis added).

are deeply committed to loving and helping people, are leaving out the most important part of Christian compassion—compassion for the eternal destiny of the people to whom they minister.

Three additional quotations from this address are worth considering. Piper continues,

Christians care about all injustice, especially injustice against God...The word “all” is intended to *prick the conscience of Christians*, who because of self-indulgence or fear, have dulled the capacity of their hearts to care about the injustices of the world and all the countless ways that people all over the world are treated by other people worse than they deserve.

“If you don’t care about all injustice, you’re striving in your heart against God.”

Christians care about all injustice, especially...injustice against God. The word “all” especially is intended to *call out unbelief among Christians*. It’s intended to call out practical unbelief of Christians for whom the injustices against humans ignite more passion in their hearts, in their mouths, than the global tragedy of injustice against God.

Although it has been shown that Integral Mission proponents equate social action with the proclamation of the gospel, Piper is more precise when he says, “If you don’t care about all injustice, you’re striving in your heart against God.” This is true and provides all the motivation that Christians need to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, ESV).

Christians do not need to re-define the gospel in order to practice justice, kindness, and humility in the world. They simply need to obey God. In efforts to speak out against injustice and help a world in need, Christians must remember that it is the gospel that liberates. Biblical evangelism relies fully on the power of God and not the efforts of humans (cf. Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:17; 2:4-5; 2 Cor 4:7). The Scriptures remind Christians of this

power, and this power should be kept in clear focus as we seek to witness to a lost and dying world.