

Is The Church Responsible For Social Services?

by Sid Latham

Asking this question may seem like an academic rehash of what went on in the fifties and not a real issue for today. However, the question needs to be asked. The problems of the past have a way of raising their ugly heads again when we least expect it & there is a real likelihood that this one will.

As the government becomes increasingly unable to deal with social ills someone else will be expected to pick up the ball. Mississippi governor Kirk Fordice has already gained national media attention for his suggestion that churches need to step in and solve the current crisis (*Can Churches Save America?*, *U.S. News*, 9/96).

It is true that someone needs to help the poor, and provide medical care and psychological counseling when necessary. The question is, should local churches be responsible for this work?

There are at least two reasons the church should not become a “social service provider.” The first is that God didn’t ask for it. We do not find a single case of New Testament churches providing for the poor outside of Christ, building hospitals, or providing counseling. The silence of God is prohibitive and we find ourselves without authority for such practices (Hebrews 12:14).

The second reason is that God has given them something else to do. God has charged churches with preaching the gospel, equipping saints, and taking care of the needy among them (Philippians 4:14–16; Ephesians 4:11, 12; 1 Corinthians 16:1–3). If churches attempt to solve societal problems on a grand scale they will not be able to handle the task God gave them of addressing far more critical spiritual problems.

Poverty, illness, and emotional distress exist because of sin. I am not suggesting that in every case someone is poor or sick or emotionally distressed because of personal sin. People do suffer because of their own sins but sometimes it is simply because we live in a world corrupted by sin (Romans 8:18–22). In either case, sin is at the root of the problem. **The church has been charged with calling people out of sin. Any attempt to solve the problems of society with large broad scale social programs is a symptomatic approach & does nothing to cure the disease.** If churches will concentrate on preaching the gospel and equipping saints to teach their neighbor they will have made a significant contribution to solving society's root problem, sin.

Someone may ask, "How will this feed and house the poor or care for the sick?" It will do so because those converted to Christ will take up their individual responsibility to bear the trouble and anguish of others (James 1:27; Galatians 6:10). It is, after all, an individual responsibility.

We are all familiar with the good Samaritan. Many times charitable organizations adopt the name "Good Samaritan" to describe what they are about. However, it should always be remembered that the good Samaritan was a "neighbor" to the one he helped by becoming directly and personally involved (Luke 10:30–36). He took care of the man's needs.

The Lord has called His people to give something more than money; **He has called us to give ourselves.** The more dedicated Christians there are the better society will be as a whole.

There is one final consideration with regard to whether churches should be social service providers. While poverty, illness and emotional distress are terrible problems they are only temporary. Sin is a problem with eternal consequences. **Churches have a limited commission.** If they take up the task of solving social problems their God-given task of dealing with spiritual problems will suffer. One wonders how grateful the lost people will be on the judgment day for all the social programs that deterred churches from their spiritual mission to prepare people to meet God.

The poor need to be fed and the sick need to be cared for, but **let not the local church be burdened with work which is outside its spiritual mission.** Let not the church be burdened because it will cripple the surpassingly vital work it has been called to do. Let not the church be burdened with needs which it is the calling of individual Christians to meet. Instead, why do not each of us take up the task of loving our suffering neighbors, and more importantly, teaching them the gospel. Pushing our responsibility to help those in need on to the local church will neither please God nor will it adequately solve the problem.¹

¹ Latham, S. (1996). [Should Local Churches Be Burdened with Social Services?](#) (P. Earnhart, Ed.) *Christianity Magazine*, 13(12), 17.