



RESURGENCE

Should Evangelical Churches Be Involved in Community Ministry and if so, WHY?

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Our church is committed to physically blessing whatever area we are trying to plant churches in. By that I mean not only do we want to see churches planted, we want to see the improvement of local education, health, and politics, and standards of living, and see the decrease of crime and poverty. We engage in projects to those ends. We don't do this as a bait and switch, as if it's just a gimmick to get people to trust Jesus. Part of the Gospel is loving our neighbor whether or not they ever trust Jesus. As a friend of mine says, "We don't serve to convert, we serve because we are converted."

Thankfully, a lot of evangelical churches today are re-embracing the need to love their world soul AND body. However, they don't always seem to agree on the reason behind why we do it. Some have never put much thought to it. There seems to be a theological haze around evangelical community ministry.

Let me sketch out for you a few of the different reasons I've encountered for why churches serve (or don't serve) the physical needs of their community. (I will leave the names associated with these reasons out in case I am misrepresenting them, but I have found popular evangelical spokesmen who advocated each of these positions)...

1. Some say we do community ministry because we are extending the Kingdom of God on earth: Some people believe that Jesus left us to build His kingdom on earth. We are not simply to be evangelizing the earth, as if we're simply trying to load up the Ark before God destroys the world again. These people embrace a worldview of creation/fall/redemption/restoration. The whole point of God's work is not simply to rescue people out of the earth, but to actually restore the earth to its glorified state. They point out that in the final chapter of Revelation what you have is not a group of Christians being evacuated off of earth into heaven, but a city coming DOWN from heaven to earth. Jesus' miracles, they note, were not (as commonly supposed) a suspension of the natural order, but a return to the natural order. They showed the earth the way it was supposed to be, the way it will be in the Kingdom. Jesus' resurrection, in like manner, was just the "firstfruits" of the resurrection of the whole world. We are to take the power of this resurrection to all spheres of the world. Martin Luther exemplified this when he answered the question, "What would you do if you knew Jesus were coming back tomorrow?" with, "Plant a tree. Imagine what that tree will look like in Jesus' glorified reign." For these people, community restoration is not simply a means for evangelism; rather, evangelism is the means to community restoration, because "community restoration" is the ultimate point of the church's work on earth! I've heard community restoration and evangelism described as two wings of the same plane, with community restoration being the "more important" wing!

When confronted with the question, "But doesn't the Bible say in 2 Peter 3 that the earth will be burned up?," these people point out that what Peter actually says (when you consider the Greek translation) is that the world be "purified" through fire and that the heavens and earth will "pass away." When the earth is purified by fire, the dross of

corruption and sin will be burned away but the gold of God's Kingdom will remain. Just as one day my physical body will "pass away" and my spirit will still remain, so the dead outer body of the earth will dissolve and only the Kingdom (which we have been building on earth) will remain. Jesus will simply finish what we have started.

2. Some say we do community ministry simply because we love our neighbor. Some other Christians disagree with the above, but are still involved in community ministry. They say that we are not called to build the kingdom physically on earth, other than to call people to surrender to the Lordship of King Jesus. Jesus will build the Kingdom Himself, our role in the Kingdom is to call people to King Jesus. Ours is not primarily the ministry of restoration, but the ministry of reconciliation. They point out that the city that we see in the final chapter of Revelation DESCENDS from heaven, not rises up from the earth as Christians build it. In other words, we don't build the Kingdom so Jesus can return to it. He builds it and brings it down to us.

These people are still involved in serving their neighbor, however, as they note that we cannot love our neighbors and see them cold and underfed and not meet their physical needs. Love is the most significant change the Gospel makes in our hearts, and to love people means that we can't sit by when they are in hungry. "We don't serve to convert, we serve because we are converted."

It's just that they would not see the restoration of society as the endgame of OUR (the church's) work on earth, they would see the redemption of people as the church's work. Evangelism is our PRIMARY task, not community restoration.

3. Some say social ministry is not the domain of the church; the church should only be concerned with preaching the Gospel. Other Christians go a step farther and say that preaching is the one, primary work of the church and that other good pursuits (like social justice) should not take the church away from her one task, the preaching of the Gospel. These people believe that preaching the Gospel IS the greatest act of community service they can do.

They would see themselves kind of like an EMT in an emergency. If there were an earthquake that left a lot of people dying, the most loving thing the EMT could do is not be distracted by cleaning up all the mess and do the one thing that only he can do, and that is perform emergency procedures that save lives.

They point out that in Acts you don't see the Apostles running soup kitchens, you see them preaching. When they are presented with a social need like the hunger of the widows (Acts 6), they challenge other Christians to take up this task so that they will not be distracted from preaching. They point out that when Jesus was asked to get involved in social justice issues, he declined and preached instead: when he was asked to end world hunger in John 6 he declined and preached instead to the people about Himself as the bread of life; when he was asked to solve the property dispute of one person who had been cheated out of their property, He said that this was not His business and preached to the crowd instead about the sin of greed.

These people believe that individual Christians (or groups of Christians, as in charitable foundations, philanthropy groups, parachurch ministries, etc) can and should engage in community ministry issues, just not the local church body herself. The focus of the organized church should be preaching. However, if the church perceives that she can preach the Gospel better by engaging in community ministry, she should do that. But preaching is the endgame.

4. Some say community ministry is done as a "sign" of the Gospel, and a necessary part of preaching the Gospel. OK, I'll admit, this is my position (which is why I left it till last.) We believe that community ministry is more than just love of our neighbor, it is a sign of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated. In the same way that Jesus' miraculous signs gave physical pictures of what His kingdom was like (a Kingdom without blindness or sickness), community ministry also shows what the kingdom is really like: a kingdom of justice, progress, equity, health, and sacrificial love. Unlike the "build the Kingdom" people, however, we don't believe that we are actually building the Kingdom on earth. Jesus alone can do that. As pointed out above, the glorified, restored city comes down from above and the heavenly Garden is planted by God Himself.

What we are doing is giving signs, the way that Jesus did. Signs, whether done by Jesus or by us, are only temporary. The blind eyes that Jesus healed went blind again--they weren't Kingdom eyes, because Kingdom eyes will never decay. The dead people Jesus raised died again. He was only giving a temporary picture of what the Kingdom was like. Some theologians assert that had Israel accepted Jesus as the Messiah He would have inaugurated the Kingdom, in which case the healings He gave would have become permanent and the actual institution of the Kingdom. Regardless, Jesus is now in heaven and we await His return. He alone can bring resurrection to the earth. Just like his signs and miracles, our "restoration" is only temporary and only a sign of the future restoration. The bodies we heal will deteriorate again; the neighborhoods we rebuild will turn back into ghettos once again. Every single "renewal" that God did in the Bible, Old or New Testament, eventually deteriorated back into chaos, with the exception of the resurrection of Christ Himself and our souls resurrected in Him. We are not building the Kingdom for Jesus; we are giving signs of that Kingdom, just like He did.

To those that think we are actually building the Kingdom now, I would urge the consideration of a little historical context: this was the failed experiment of zealous Christians in the 17th and 20th centuries. In fact, much of the "America is God's chosen nation" heresy in the church today came out of the mentality that some Christians had at the birth of our nation. They thought they were building the perfect Kingdom government which Jesus would come back to. Those that are trying to build Kingdom businesses and Kingdom governments should be wary of trying to actually build the Kingdom without the King.

What we, the church, are here to do, primarily, is to preach the Gospel of His Kingdom and compel others to surrender to the King Jesus. Ours is the ministry of reconciliation to the King, not restoration of the Kingdom. HOWEVER, just as Jesus, as part of His preaching, gave signs of the Kingdom, so we are to perform signs in our communities. We are to heal the sick, feed the hungry and clothe the poor, sometimes by natural means and sometimes supernatural. We are to constantly testify that this is what the Kingdom is like and compel people to come to Jesus the King. Our kindness is neither random nor senseless. It signifies the Kingdom. We are to (in the words of N.T. Wright who, so far as I know, does not agree with my position) "sketch out with pencil what Jesus will one day paint over in indelible ink."

We want our cities to be like Samaria in Acts 8, who "rejoiced" because of the preaching and healing ministry of Philip. We want our communities to be like Tabitha's community in Acts 9 who wept at her death because of all the kind deeds she had done in their midst. We believe that the beauty of Jesus' kingdom is so compelling that our community will look at us and say, "Wow. We don't believe what they believe, but thank God they're here!"

Also, do not overlook that the local Church itself is the greatest earthly sign of the Kingdom. The Church is to be an inexplicable new community of unity and love--Jesus said in John 17 that the world would know Jesus' Messiahship by the love of His disciples for one another.

I guess my position is kind of a hybrid of the first 3. We serve people because we love them, and because we know that in order to preach the Gospel effectively to them we need to give them signs of the Kingdom we preach.

This is a work in progress for me, so I'm open to your thoughts.