

Why Did JESUS Come to Earth?

Why did Jesus come to earth?¹ Most Christians have a ready answer to this question. However, there are actually nuanced differences in how Christians think about this most basic issue, and those small differences can have dramatic consequences for all endeavors, including how the church responds to the plight of the poor. Let's examine how Jesus Himself understood His mission.

Jesus' earthly ministry began one Sabbath day in a synagogue in Nazareth. Week in and week out, Jews gathered in this synagogue to worship under the chafing yoke of the Roman Empire. Aware of Old Testament prophecy, these worshippers were longing for God to send the promised Messiah who would restore the kingdom to Israel, reigning on David's throne forever. But centuries had gone by with no Messiah, and the Romans were running the show. Hope was probably in short supply. It is in this context that the son of a carpenter from that very town stood up and was handed a scroll from the prophet Isaiah.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to

the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." . . . The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (*Luke 4:17-21*)

A shiver must have gone down the spine of the worshippers that day. Isaiah had prophesied that a King was coming who would usher in a kingdom unlike anything the world had ever seen. Could it be that Isaiah's prophecies were really about to come true? Could it really be that a kingdom whose domain would increase without end was about to begin (*Isa. 9:7*)? Was it really possible that justice, peace, and righteousness were about to be established forever? Would this King really bring healing to the parched soil, the feeble hands, the shaky knees, the fearful hearts, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute, the brokenhearted, the captives, and the sinful souls, and would proclaim the year of jubilee for the poor (*Isa. 35:1-6; 53:5; 61:1-2*)? Jesus' answer to all these questions was a resounding "yes," declaring, "*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

In the same chapter Jesus summarized His ministry as follows, "I must preach the good news of the *kingdom of God* to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (*Luke 4:43*). The mission of Jesus was and is to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to say to one and all, "I am the King of kings and Lord of lords, and I am using My power to fix everything that sin has ruined." As pastor and theologian Tim Keller states, "The kingdom is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ's rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom."²

Of course there is both a "now" and a "not yet" to the kingdom. The full manifestation of the kingdom will not occur until there is a new heaven and a new earth. Only then will every tear be wiped from our eyes (*Rev. 21:4*). But two thousand years ago, Jesus clearly stated that there is a "now" to the kingdom, saying, "*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (*Luke 4:21*).

A FULLER ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

We have asked thousands of evangelical Christians in numerous contexts this most basic question—why did Jesus come to earth?—and fewer than 1 percent of respondents say anything even remotely close to the answer that Jesus Himself gave. Instead, the vast majority of people say something like “Jesus came to die on the cross to save us from our sins so that we can go to heaven.” While this answer is true, saving souls is only a subset of the comprehensive healing of the entire cosmos that Jesus’ kingdom brings and that was the centerpiece of His message.

Contrast the response of most evangelicals with the following passage concerning the nature and work of Jesus Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (*Col. 1:15-20*)

In this passage Jesus Christ is described as the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of *everything*. Yes, Jesus died for our souls, but He also died to reconcile—that is, to put into right relationship—all that He created. This is what we sing every year in the Christmas carol, “He comes to make His blessings known far as the curse is found.” The curse is cosmic in scope, bringing decay, brokenness, and death to every speck of the universe. But as King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus is making all things new! This is the good news of the gospel.

When she was three years old, my daughter Anna bowed her head one night and prayed, “Dear Jesus, please come back soon, because we have

lots of owies, and they hurt.” I got all choked up listening to her, for she had captured the essence of the comprehensive healing of the kingdom and was longing for this healing to happen to her. She was praying—in three-year-old language—“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 KJV). Yes, come quickly Lord Jesus, for we do have lots of owies, and they really hurt.

Is Jesus Really the Messiah?

Jesus claimed to be the promised King, but how do we know His claims were true? This question has perplexed everyone from the lepers of Jesus’ day to the greatest minds of the twenty-first century. But it is a bit surprising that at the end of his life, John the Baptist himself was still uncertain about the authenticity of Jesus. John had spent his entire career eating locusts and wild honey, wearing strange clothes, hanging out in the desert, and preaching to one and all that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the King who would reign on David’s throne. But now John found himself in Herod’s prison about to have his head chopped off. He was likely thinking to himself, *If Jesus is really the Messiah, surely He would start the coup against King Herod before I, his secretary of state, get executed!* But there was no coup attempt, and John understandably developed some doubt.

So John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:19). There are so many ways that Jesus could have answered this question. He could have pointed out that His birth in Bethlehem from the line of David was consistent with prophecies about the Messiah. Or Jesus could have referred to His remarkable knowledge of the Scriptures and to His unparalleled teaching abilities. Or Jesus could have reminded John that they had both witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove and had heard God the Father say, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). If this latter event couldn’t convince John, it would seem that nothing could! But Jesus chose not to point to any of these signs. John was already aware of these and apparently needed

something else to comfort him. So Jesus said:

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. (Luke 7:22–23)

In essence, Jesus was saying to John, “John, you have not run the race in vain. I am the promised Messiah. And you can be sure because of what your disciples are *both hearing Me say and seeing Me do*. I am preaching the good news of the kingdom, *and* I am showing the good news of the kingdom, just as Isaiah said I would.”

How useless it would have been if Jesus had only used words and not deeds to declare the kingdom. Imagine reading the story in Luke 18:35–43 about the blind beggar who was sitting along the roadside. Learning that Jesus was walking by, he called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” What if Jesus had said, “I am the fulfillment of all prophecy. I am the King of kings and Lord of lords. I have all the power in heaven and earth. I could heal you today of your blindness, but I only care about your soul. Believe in Me”? Who would have believed that Jesus was the promised King if He had not given any evidence to prove it? As Peter stated at Pentecost, “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22). Jesus’ deeds were essential to proving that He truly was the promised Messiah. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom, and He showed the good news of the kingdom.

What Would Jesus Do?

In his book *The Last Days: A Son’s Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of the New South*, Charles Marsh describes growing up in Laurel, Mississippi, during the 1960s. Racial tensions were high as the federal government sought to end segregation. Civil rights workers, many of whom came from

the North, poured into the region, seeking to end centuries of discrimination against African Americans. Charles's father was the well-known pastor of First Baptist Church in Laurel and was a pillar of the community. Beloved for his outstanding preaching and godly living, Reverend Marsh was to his parishioners the model Christian.

Also living in Laurel, Mississippi, was Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, who terrorized African Americans throughout the region. Bowers was suspected of plotting at least nine murders of African Americans and civil rights workers, seventy-five bombings of African-American churches, and numerous beatings and physical assaults.

How did Reverend Marsh, the model Christian, respond to this situation? Charles explains:

There is no doubt my father loathed the Klan when he thought about them at all. In his heart of hearts, he considered slavery a sin, racisms like Germany's or South Africa's an offense to the faith, and he taught me as much in occasional pronouncements on Southern history over homework assignments. "There is no justification for what we did to the Negro. It was an evil thing and we were wrong." Nevertheless, the work of the Lord lay elsewhere. "Be faithful in church attendance, for your presence can, if nothing else, show that you are on God's side when the doors of the Church are opened," he advised in the church bulletin. Of course, packing the pews is one of any minister's fantasies—there's always the wish to grow, grow, grow. But the daily installments of Mississippi burning, the crushing poverty of the town's Negro inhabitants, the rituals of white supremacy, the smell of terror pervading the streets like Masonite's stench, did not figure into his sermons or in our dinner-table conversations or in the talk of the church. These were, to a good Baptist preacher like him, finally matters of politics, having little or nothing to do with the spiritual geography of a pilgrim's journey to paradise. Unwanted annoyances? Yes. Sad evidences of our human failings? Certainly. But all of these would be rectified in some eschatological future—"when we all get to

Heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be.”³

Reverend Marsh had reduced Christianity to a personal piety that was devoid of a social concern emanating from a kingdom perspective. He believed Christianity consisted in keeping one’s soul pure by avoiding alcohol, drugs, and sexual impurity, and by helping others to keep their souls pure too. There was little “now” of the kingdom for Reverend Marsh, apart from the saving of souls. For Reverend Marsh, James 1:27 said, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: . . . to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Somehow, he overlooked the phrase that pure and faultless religion includes “look[ing] after orphans and widows in their distress.”

While Reverend Marsh preached personal piety and the hope of heaven, African Americans were being lynched in Mississippi through the plotting of Sam Bowers. Less dramatic but even more pervasive was the entire social, political, and economic system designed to keep African Americans in their place. What would King Jesus do in this situation? Would He simply evangelize the African Americans, saying, “I have heard your cries for help, but your earthly plight is of no concern to Me. Believe in Me, and I will transport your soul to heaven someday. In the meantime, abstain from alcohol, drugs, and sexual impurity”? Is this how Jesus responded to the blind beggar who pleaded for mercy?

Reverend Marsh did play a role in the civil rights movement, but it was not to “seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, [or] plead the case of the widow” (Isa. 1:17). Instead, he focused his attention and energies on the lack of personal piety and unbelief of some of the civil rights workers. This culminated in his writing a famous sermon, “The Sorrow of Selma,” in which he lambasted the civil rights workers, calling them “unbathed beatniks,” “immoral kooks,” and “sign-carrying degenerates” who were hypocrites for not believing in God.⁴

In one sense, Reverend Marsh was right. Many of the civil rights protestors longed for the peace, justice, and righteousness of the kingdom, but they did not want to bend the knee to the King Himself, which is a

prerequisite for enjoying the full benefits of the kingdom. In contrast, Reverend Marsh embraced King Jesus, but he did not understand the fullness of Christ's kingdom and its implications for the injustices in his community. Both Reverend Marsh and the civil rights workers were wrong, but in different ways. Reverend Marsh sought the King without the kingdom. The civil rights workers sought the kingdom without the King. The church needs a Christ-centered, fully orbed, kingdom perspective to correctly answer the question: "What would Jesus do?"

What Is the Task of the Church?

The task of God's people is rooted in Christ's mission. Simply stated, Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom in word and in deed, so the church must do the same. And as we have seen, Jesus particularly delighted in spreading the good news among the hurting, the weak, and the poor. Hence, it is not surprising that throughout history God's people have been commanded to follow their King's footsteps into places of brokenness.

In the Old Testament, God's chosen people, the nation of Israel, were to point forward to the coming King by foreshadowing what He would be like (Matt. 5:17; John 5:37-39, 45-46; Col. 2:16-17). Israel was to be a sneak preview of the coming attraction: King Jesus. Like any sneak preview, Israel was to give viewers an idea of what the main event would be like and to make viewers want to see the main event. When people looked at Israel, they were supposed to say to themselves, "Wow! These people are really different. I can't wait to meet their King. He must really be something special." Hence, since King Jesus would bring good news for the poor, it is not surprising that God wanted Israel to care for the poor as well.

In fact, God gave Moses numerous commands instructing Israel to care for the poor. The Sabbath guaranteed a day of rest for the slave and alien (Ex. 23:10-12). The Sabbath year canceled debts for Israelites, allowed the poor to glean from the fields, and set slaves free as well as equipping the slaves to be productive (Deut. 15:1-18). The Jubilee year emphasized liberty; it released slaves and returned land to its original owners (Lev.

25:8–55). Other laws about debt, tithing, and gleaning ensured that the poor would be cared for each day of the year (Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 14:28–29; Lev. 19:9–10). The commands were so extensive that they were designed to achieve the ultimate goal of eradicating poverty among God’s people: “There should be no poor among you,” God declared (Deut. 15:4).

Unfortunately, Israel did not fulfill its task. She was a lousy sneak preview of the coming attraction, and God sent His chosen people into exile as a result. For what specific sins was Israel sent into captivity? Consider the following excerpts from passages in Isaiah in which God is indicting Israel for her sins and promising to send her into exile. What do you notice as you read these passages?

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths, and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. . . . Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (*Isa. 1:10–13, 16b–17*)

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” . . . Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day

acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. (*Isa. 58:1-3, 5-10*)

Why was Israel sent into captivity? Many of us have a picture in our minds of the Israelites getting out of bed every morning and running off to the nearest shrine to worship idols. Indeed, numerous passages in the Old Testament indicate that idolatry was a problem in Israel. But these passages give a broader picture. Here Israel appears to be characterized by personal piety and the outward expressions of formal religion: worshipping, offering sacrifices, celebrating religious holidays, fasting, and praying. Translate this into the modern era, and we might say these folks were faithfully going to church each Sunday, attending midweek prayer meeting, going on the annual church retreat, and singing contemporary praise music. But God was disgusted with them, going so far as to call them “Sodom and Gomorrah”!

Why was God so displeased? Both passages emphasize that God was furious over Israel’s failure to care for the poor and the oppressed. He wanted His people to “loose the chains of injustice,” and not just go to church on Sunday. He wanted His people to “clothe the naked,” and not just attend midweek prayer meeting. He wanted His people to “spend themselves on behalf of the hungry,” and not just sing praise music.

Personal piety and formal worship are essential to the Christian life, but they must lead to lives that “act justly and love mercy” (Mic. 6:8).

In the New Testament, God’s people, the church, are more than just a sneak preview of King Jesus. The church is the body, bride, and very fullness of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:18–23; 4:7–13; 5:32). When people look at the church, they should see the very embodiment of Jesus! When people look at the church, they should see the One who declared—in word and in deed to the leper, the lame, and the poor—that His kingdom is bringing healing to every speck of the universe.

In fact, we see this from the very start of the church’s ministry. When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples for the first time, we read, “He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). Later, Jesus sent out seventy-two others, commanding them, “Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you’” (Luke 10:9). The message was the kingdom of God, and it was to be communicated in both word and deed.

And in the very first passage concerning the gathering of the church, we read, “There were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34). Theologian Dennis Johnson explains that Luke, the author of Acts, is intentionally repeating the language we saw earlier in Deuteronomy 15:4 in which God told Israel: “There should be no poor among you.”⁵ Luke is indicating that while Israel had failed to care for the poor and was sent into captivity, God’s people have been restored and are now embodying King Jesus and His kingdom, a kingdom in which there is no poverty (Rev. 21:1–4). Indeed, throughout the New Testament care of the poor is a central concern of the church (Matt. 25:31–46; Acts 6:1–7; Gal. 2:1–10; 6:10; James 1:27). Perhaps no passage states it more succinctly than 1 John 3:16–18:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

The Bible's teachings should cut to the heart of North American Christians. By any measure, we are the richest people ever to walk on planet Earth. Furthermore, at no time in history has there ever been greater economic disparity in the world than at present.

Economic historians have found that for most of human history there was little economic growth and relatively low economic inequality. As a result, by the year 1820, after thousands of years of human development, the average income per person in the richest counties was only about four times higher than the average income per person in the poorest countries.⁶ Then the Industrial Revolution hit, causing unprecedented economic growth in a handful of countries but leaving the rest of the world behind. As a result, while the average American lives on more than ninety dollars per day,⁷ approximately one billion people live on less than one dollar per day and 2.6 billion—40 percent of the world's population—live on less than two dollars per day.⁸ If God's people in both the Old and New Testaments were to have a concern for the poor during eras of relative economic equality, what are we to conclude about God's desire for the North American church today? "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

What is the task of the church? We are to embody Jesus Christ by doing what He did and what He continues to do through us: declare—using both words and deeds—that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords who is bringing in a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. And the church needs to do this where Jesus did it, among the blind, the lame, the sick and outcast, and the poor.

AN ARMY OF OUTCASTS

Given the focus of Jesus' ministry, carried on through His body, it is not surprising that James makes the following observation about the early church: "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (James 2:5). Similarly, Paul drives this point

home in his letter to the very unlovely Corinthian church when he says:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (*1 Cor. 1:26-29*)

Commenting on these passages, Mark Gornik, a theologian, pastor, and community developer in the United States, says, “Here then from both James and Paul is a central witness drawn from all of Scripture: God has sovereignly chosen to work in the world by beginning with the weak who are on the ‘outside,’ not the powerful who are on the ‘inside.’”⁹

The claim here is not that the poor are inherently more righteous or sanctified than the rich. There is no place in the Bible that indicates that poverty is a desirable state or that material things are evil. In fact, wealth is viewed as a gift from God. The point is simply that, for His own glory, God has chosen to reveal His kingdom in the place where the world, in all of its pride, would least expect it, among the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the despised.

It is strange indeed to place the poor at the center of a strategy for expanding a kingdom, but history indicates that this unconventional strategy has actually been quite successful. Sociologist Rodney Stark documents that the early church’s engagement with suffering people was crucial to its explosive growth. Cities in the Roman Empire were characterized by poor sanitation, contaminated water, high population densities, open sewers, filthy streets, unbelievable stench, rampant crime, collapsing buildings, and frequent illnesses and plagues. “Life expectancy at birth was less than thirty years—and probably substantially less.”¹⁰ The only way for cities to avoid complete depopulation from mortality was for there to be a constant influx of immigrants, a very fluid situation that contributed to urban chaos, deviant behavior, and social instability.

Rather than fleeing these urban cesspools, the early church found its niche there. Stark explains that the Christian concept of self-sacrificial love of others, emanating from God's love for them, was a revolutionary concept to the pagan mind, which viewed the extension of mercy as an emotional act to be avoided by rational people. Hence, paganism provided no ethical foundation to justify caring for the sick and the destitute who were being trampled by the teeming urban masses. In contrast, Stark notes:

Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violence and ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.¹¹

God's kingdom strategy of ministering to and among the suffering was so powerful that other kings took note. In the fourth century AD, the Roman Emperor Julian tried to launch pagan charities to compete with the highly successful Christian charities that were attracting so many converts. Writing to a pagan priest, Julian complained, "The impious Galileans [i.e., the Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."¹²

As Christianity expanded across the Roman world, the urban poor were on center stage of the drama. And the same is true today. Historian Philip Jenkins documents that Christianity is experiencing explosive growth in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, regions of the world often called the "Majority World." For example, by 2025, in terms of numbers of adherents, Africa will have replaced Europe and the United States as the center of Christianity. By 2050, Uganda alone is expected to have

more Christians than the largest four or five European nations combined. And like the early church, the growth in the church in the Majority World is taking place primarily with the poor on center stage. Jenkins observes: “The most successful new denominations target their message very directly at the have-nots, or rather, the have nothings.”¹³

The Great Reversal

The idea that the church should be on the front lines of ministry to the poor is not a new concept in the North American context. As numerous scholars have noted, prior to the twentieth century, evangelical Christians played a large role in ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of the poor.¹⁴ However, this all changed at the start of the twentieth century as evangelicals battled theological liberals over the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Evangelicals interpreted the rising social gospel movement, which seemed to equate all humanitarian efforts with bringing in Christ’s kingdom, as part of the overall theological drift of the nation. As evangelicals tried to distance themselves from the social gospel movement, they ended up in large-scale retreat from the front lines of poverty alleviation. This shift away from the poor was so dramatic that church historians refer to the 1900–1930 era as the “Great Reversal” in the evangelical church’s approach to social problems.¹⁵

It is important to note that the Great Reversal preceded the rise of the welfare state in America. Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty did not occur until the 1960s, and even FDR’s relatively modest New Deal policies were not launched until the 1930s. In short, the evangelical church’s retreat from poverty alleviation was fundamentally due to shifts in theology and not—as many have asserted—to government programs that drove the church away from ministry to the poor. While the rise of government programs may have exacerbated the church’s retreat, they were not the primary cause. Theology matters, and the church needs to rediscover a Christ-centered, fully orbed perspective of the kingdom.

An Important Task but Not an Exclusive Task

Although the Bible teaches that the local church must care for both the spiritual and physical needs of the poor, the Bible does not indicate that only the local church must care for the poor. There is evidence in Scripture that even in simple societies, individuals (Matt. 25:31–46), families (1 Tim. 5:8), and even governments (Dan. 4:27; Ps. 72) have responsibilities to the poor. Of course, in the highly complex societies of today, a wide range of parachurch ministries is capable of ministering to the poor as well. While the parachurch should never undertake tasks that are exclusively given to the church—for example administration of the sacraments—the Scriptures indicate that care of the poor is not an exclusive task of the church.

Hence, while the church must care for the poor, the Bible gives Christians some freedom in deciding the extent and manner in which the local church should do this, either directly or indirectly. Sometimes, the local church might feel it is wise to own and operate a ministry to the poor under the direct oversight of its leadership. In other situations, the local church might feel that it would be wiser to minister indirectly by starting or supporting a parachurch ministry or simply by encouraging individuals to reach out to the poor. Wisdom must be used to determine the best course of action in each situation. However, whenever God’s people choose to minister outside of the direct oversight of the local church, they should always be seeking to partner with the local church, which has God-given authority over people’s spiritual lives.

What Do Laurel, Mississippi, and Kigali, Rwanda, Have in Common?

I had just finished presenting much of the material in this chapter to an audience in Africa. A very tall and muscular African man in the audience approached me with tears in his eyes. He said, “This is not what the missionaries taught us. They told us just to do evangelism to save people’s souls. But you are saying that Jesus cares about all of creation and that He wants us to minister to people’s bodies and souls. I can’t argue with the

Bible passages you cited. But now how am I supposed to feel about the missionaries? They are my heroes.” He was visibly shaken.

“I am not fit to carry the shoes of those missionaries,” I assured him. “They packed their coffins in the ships that brought them to Africa, and many of them were martyred for the sake of the gospel. They are worthy of your highest admiration. But like all of us, they had some weaknesses.”

Unfortunately, this man’s experience was not unique. The Great Reversal has shaped the North American church’s mission strategies since the late nineteenth century. Often lacking an appreciation of the comprehensive implications of the kingdom of God, many missionaries have focused narrowly on evangelism to save people’s souls but have sometimes neglected to “make disciples of all nations.” Converts need to be trained in a biblical worldview that understands the implications of Christ’s lordship for all of life and that seeks to answer the question: If Christ is Lord of all, how do we do farming, business, government, family, art, etc., to the glory of God? As one respected Christian leader in Francophone Africa stated, “You missionaries brought us Christ but never taught us how to live.”¹⁶

The consequences of this truncated gospel have been devastating in the Majority World in general and in Africa in particular. There is perhaps no better example of this than Rwanda. Despite the fact that 80 percent of Rwandans claimed to be Christians, a bloody civil war erupted in 1994 in which the Hutu majority conducted a brutal genocide against the Tutsi minority and Hutu moderates. Over a three-month period, an estimated 800,000 people were slaughtered, the vast majority of them Tutsis.

How could this happen? In their book *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* missiologists James Engle and William Dyrness explain that the answer lies in the Rwandan church’s failure to apply a biblical worldview, a kingdom perspective, to all of life. For most Rwandans, Christianity was “little more than a superficial, privatized veneer on a secular lifestyle characterized by animistic values and longstanding tribal hatred and warfare. . . . The church was silent on such critical life-and-death issues as the dignity and worth of each person made in the

image of God.”¹⁷ In other words, the church in Rwanda lacked a Christ-centered, fully orbed kingdom perspective and hence was not equipped to fulfill the Great Commission by “discipling the nation.”

So what do Laurel, Mississippi, and Kigali, Rwanda, have in common? It is this: They both had churches that did not know the Bible’s answer to the basic question, Why did Jesus come to earth? And as a result, what was taught from the pulpit on Sunday morning had little relevance to people’s public lives from Monday through Saturday.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Please write responses to the following:

1. Reflect on your answer to the question at the start of this chapter: why did Jesus come to earth? How has your answer to this question shaped the way you live your life? How might you live a life that more fully reflects a Christ-centered, kingdom perspective? Be specific.
2. Did you know before reading this chapter that one of the reasons Israel was sent into captivity was her failure to care for the poor? If not, why not? What does the North American church’s ignorance about the cause of the captivity suggest about the way it is reading Scripture?
3. Reflect on how your church answers the question: what is the primary task of the church? Your church’s answer to this question might not be explicit. Hence, you might have to discern your church’s implicit answer to this question by thinking about the messages from the pulpit, the types of ministries pursued, and the way those ministries are conducted. How might your church more fully reflect a Christ-centered, kingdom theology in its ministries? Be specific.
4. When poor people look at your church, in what ways do they see the embodiment of Jesus Christ and the comprehensive healing of His kingdom? What else could your church be doing?

5. List three specific things you will try to do as a result of this chapter. Pray for God to give you the strength to be faithful in doing these things.