

Social action

In this paper I want to tackle the question of the church and social action. But that is the second question. For me there is a question that must come first.

The first question is about how Christians relate to the world: I want to argue that we relate to the world almost never as church, but always as Christians—either as individual Christians, or as Christians working together in various ways.

You might think it is silly to make a distinction between the church and Christians. But I hope you'll see that it has a very profound effect on the second question: the question of the church and social action.

How are we to behave in relation to non-Christians?

In the New Testament there are two sides to this.

Live amongst non-Christians *with an explicit evangelistic intent*

- “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Peter 2:12)
- “Be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15)
 - 1 Peter 3:1–2 on how wives live with unbelieving husbands
 - 1 Peter 2:15 “it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people”

Live amongst non-Christians *as the faithful people of God*

Positively,

- “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31)
- “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27)
- “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31)
- “Show proper respect to everyone” (1 Peter 2:17)
- “Submit for the Lord’s sake to every human authority” (1 Peter 2:13, 17)

Negatively,

- “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...” (Colossians 3:5)
- “Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1 Peter 2:1) i.e. positively, “be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15,16)
- Suffer as a Christian (1 Peter 4:14ff)

Should Christians, then, do good to people? The answer is clear from these verses and many others. We must do good to people.

So, where does the church come in?

Perhaps we can see my point most clearly if we ask two specific questions:

1. Should we organize ourselves to do good to people?
Yes. The New Testament commands to do good to people are so many and varied that we must presume this to be so.
2. Does God call **the church** to organize itself to do good to people?
The New Testament says No to this question. 'Church' is a quite specific thing with a quite specific purpose, and organizing itself to do good to people is not one of them.

What is church?

(1) Church is a Meeting

We're used to saying: "the church is not the building, but the people." In a sense this is true, but in the New Testament the church is not the people but **the getting together** of the people in a particular place.

Church is a **meeting**. It is not an institution; it is a **gathering** of God's people. This means that church comes and goes—in a sense it is intermittent. It is like a rugby team, rather than a rugby club. The team exists in reality when it is meeting. To say, "I'm in the team," means "I've been picked for Saturday and I'll play in the team in that match (meeting)."

The greek word in the New Testament, 'ekklesia', was not a religious word. It was used for 'gathering of people', or 'assembly', or 'congregation', whether civic, secular or Christian.

When William Tyndale, in the 16th Century, translated the Bible into English he translated 'ekklesia' as 'congregation'. But there were too many vested interests in what 'church' had become to contemplate even for a moment such a radical change. So, like other versions based on Tyndale, the King James Version used the traditional word 'church'. And so the proper New Testament idea of 'congregation' was lost. The Brethren movement has got it right when they call their meetings 'assemblies'.

So, then, church is an activity—something we do, not something we are. There is lots of talk nowadays of 'being church'—but it seems to me that is foreign to the New Testament.

What this means in practice is that, in effect, **the church has no role or task in the world**. It does not exist there. It only exists when it meets; and when it meets—because it is a meeting of God's people—the world is mostly excluded. If non-Christians are there, they are visitors, as outsiders, observing Christians meeting (1 Corinthians 14:24–25).

It is similar to the synagogue in New Testament times. There were Jewish people; and sometimes they gathered together—that was synagogue. There was no such thing as 'synagogue' outside of that meeting: there were just Jewish people, some of whom met in the synagogue.

(2) Church is a meeting with God forever

In the Bible, church is presented ultimately as God's people **gathered** with him forever—gathering around him in heaven, listening to him (Hebrews 12:22–25a, noting Deuteronomy 4:10).

The church is Christ's bride, for his own pleasure. God has determined to live with his people, and ultimately to banish all others from his presence.

(3) Each church (gathering) is a manifestation on earth of the heavenly gathering

In the New Testament, earthly church is presented in the same terms as heavenly church. It is an earthly instance of gathering around God with more or less the same particular intent:

- building one another up (1 Corinthians 14:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:24)
- listening to him. This happens through proclaiming Christ, teaching and admonishing one another (sometimes through song) (Colossians 1:28, 3:16)
- meeting regularly (Hebrews 10:25)

Church is Christians gathering together to put these three things into practice.

So far as any **organizational features** of the church are concerned, there seem to be only two:

- Paul speaks about the kind of people to be appointed as **elders** of churches in the Pastoral Epistles; it is worth noting that only two specific functions are mentioned: teaching, e.g. 1 Timothy 3:2, and leading e.g. 1 Timothy 3:5.
- Paul also speaks about **deacons** in 1 Timothy 3:8 who are appointed to serve, apparently within the local church. Perhaps those appointed to manage the distribution of food amongst the believers in Acts 6:2–4 would be an example of this role in action. Deacons seem to take a leading role in the loving service of ‘building one another up’.

So from all this we can conclude that the church—the meeting of God’s people around God—has a very high purpose, whether that is the heavenly or the earthly meeting. Both will be wonderfully brought together in the future (Revelation 21–22).

What about social action?

So if church does not have a face to the world, how do we do good to people?

The answer to this is obvious, but somehow it has become obscured. Christians are people who spend by far most of their time in the world, in families, in workplaces, in communities. This is our face to the unbelieving world. This is the frontline. This is where we engage in social action.

Two principles:

1. Christians should be at the forefront of social action

But the route to do those actions is not the church. Let me try to illustrate what I mean:

A coastal town has a very good lifeboat station. It maintains the lifeboat and recruits and trains a crew. Its job is to look out for ships at sea and rescue those in difficulty.

There is no fishing fleet in the town, and there is a real need for one. Should the lifeboat crew add fishing to their job description? No! But many members of the lifeboat station may feel the need to have a fishing fleet, and will be key players in setting it up, because of their experience of boats and the sea. They will feel a responsibility to take action. But they will not do it in the name of the lifeboat station; they will do it because they see the need—because they are people who are community-minded—and so they will organize and act accordingly.

2. Good works are not good works if there is an element of public display to them

In Matthew 6:1–4 Jesus says we are to do good works in secret. This means, in doing good works, we shouldn't advertise church. What we do should never be a P.R. exercise. For example, to say we're doing gardening for people in the name of St John's smacks of self-advertisement rather than love.

So good works, according to Jesus, mean that:

- people are helped—this alone is the main purpose; no other purpose is needed
- there is reward from our Father (Matthew 6:4)—if it is done in secret
- there might be a consequence of
 - having a chance to “give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15)
 - “silencing the ignorant talk of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:15)
 - possibly people turning to Christ (1 Peter 2:12)

Where do we go from here?

Mark Greene's *Fruitfulness on the Frontline*¹ is a very useful and practical book (and course). It makes clear that church should feed Christians and equip them so that we can spend our time serving outside the church. Our lives should be lived in the world, but our values and heart determined by the gospel. We feed on Christ through the scriptural teaching and fellowship we give and receive in church.

Individual Christians should follow gifts and their heart in order to serve: for some it will be tackling social need; for others it might be something else; sometimes no one will ever know you do it. Sometimes it will be in cooperation with other Christians. Sometimes it might be in cooperation with non-Christians. This means we should be very wary of judging others, even in our hearts, for not doing what we perceive to be the important thing.

- Someone may give hundreds every month to a charity, and no other person in the world knows about it
- Someone may, e.g. do a quiet unobtrusive service in church that costs them all their emotional energy—no one else even counts it as proper service or good deed, but their Father in heaven will reward them
- Someone may never be involved in activities that church people are involved in—but they may be serving faithfully and sacrificially in an entirely non-Christian context

The problem of St John's. Church should be lean and focused on its proper purpose so that Christians have time and energy to live in the world and explore, set up and get involved in things like this according to their heart and gifts. Our problem is that church eats up so much of many people's time and energy that they have no heart to initiate and support and take part in good things in normal life, where they could have significant impact for the gospel, and do good to people.

We need to encourage people to look for opportunities outside the church setting, rather than believe that spiritual service can only be done in a church context.

We also need to encourage those who are able to take a lead to draw in other Christians alongside them in their projects and schemes. At church meetings we should probably be providing a platform for people to let others know what they are setting up and doing.

1 The book is: Mark Greene *Fruitfulness on the Frontline: Making a difference where you are* (IVP(UK), 2014)

Examples of social action

1. **Baby Basics West Cumbria.** Christine Davey set this project up in January 2021 with the aim of helping local vulnerable families with baby equipment, clothing and toiletries, through referrals from midwives, health visitors and social services. The project is funded by Cumbria County Council and supported by the Howgill Family Centre. It is a perfect example of Christian initiative and love in action
 - Christine has gathered Christians to work with her from St John's and elsewhere, and wants, where possible, to take up any personal evangelistic opportunities that might arise
 - she has established it independently (it's now under the auspices of the non-faith-based charity Howgill Family Centre) not as an arm or branch of St John's
2. **Christians Against Poverty.** CAP is evangelistic and social: I would have liked our CAP debt centre to be run by interested local Christians independently, but CAP will only work with local churches; so it was either that or not have CAP working here at all

Answering objections

Here are very brief answers to a couple of questions people raise about this approach to social action.

Q Is the church not called to bless the world? Matthew 25:31–46 includes, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me."

A Note v40: The 'least of these' are believers, not unbelievers.

Q Galatians 6:10 says, "let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

A The most natural context for this call to action is our life in the world; it fits perfectly with what is said above about living amongst non-Christians.

Q Won't this approach just create more and more 'para-church' organisations pleading for our support?

A Yes, I think it will. But what is wrong with that? I would want to call them 'Christian organisations', and to encourage them. Calling something 'para-church' is using the non-biblical definition of church; 'Christian organisation' seems a better name for the thing we're talking about.