

Why Both Sides in the "Social Justice and the Gospel" Debate Are Wrong

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The recently published [Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel](#) has provoked a strong reaction among Christians. Over 7,000 have now signed the statement while many influential voices in the church and media have criticized it, including [Russell Moore whom I interviewed on the latest episode of The Holy Post podcast](#) about the matter.

Despite my strong aversion to the Statement, it does raise a valuable question all Christians should wrestle with: What is the relationship between evangelism and social justice? For the last century this question has been answered—at least by American Christians—in two ways. One side believes social action was unjustifiably divorced from gospel mission during the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy of the early 20th century. What God has joined together, they argue, we have wrongly put asunder.

Voices on the other side may recognize the goodness of seeking peace and wholeness for the suffering, but not at the expense of eternal salvation. They believe social justice to be an implication of the gospel but not central to it. Failure to make such a distinction, they fear, will lead the church down the slippery slope of theological liberalism. This appears to be the concern animating the authors of The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel.

As I've surveyed the responses to the Statement over the last week, what has surprised me is the lack of historical or global thought that is admitted into the discussion. We assume the relationship between justice and the gospel is a modern, American dilemma. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The fact is the church has been addressing matters of mission and justice ever since Pentecost—the book of Acts, after all, isn't just a list of evangelistic sermons. And the issue is repeatedly found among the early Christian writings. But my own understanding of how evangelism and social justice intersect has been greatly informed by a more recent church father—John Stott.

Stott was a theological heavyweight of 20th century evangelicalism. Together with Billy Graham, he established the Lausanne Movement and crafted one of the most respected and widely accepted modern statements of Christian faith and mission—the [Lausanne Covenant](#).

But having witnessed the many horrors of the 20th century, John Stott also wrestled with the question of evangelism and social action. And what he concluded has much to say to us in the 21st century. In short, Stott believed both sides of the controversy are in error.

In his book, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (InterVarsity, 1975), Stott argued that most people try to make social justice either superior or subordinate to evangelism. The superior

position diminishes the importance of calling people to be reconciled to God through Christ-- something Stott found utterly incongruent with the New Testament. The subordinate position, however, he saw as equally untenable. It made social action into a PR device; a way to win favor that will eventually lead to conversions, a mere means to an end. Stott wrote:

“In its most blatant form this makes social work the sugar on the pill, the bait on the hook, while in its best forms it gives the gospel credibility it would otherwise lack. In either case the smell of hypocrisy hangs round our philanthropy.”

Stott came to recognize that forcing every facet of the Christian life to fit into a mission/ evangelism framework was untenable, and asking whether evangelism or justice is most important was to miss the point entirely. Instead he concluded that social justice and evangelism “belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself.”

Therefore, according to Stott, our participation in social action is not fueled by a missional imperative, evangelistic pragmatism, or even theological certitude, “but rather simple, uncomplicated compassion. Love has no need to justify itself.”

For me, this is where the current debate about social justice and the gospel gets off track. Atonement-only advocates demand justice advocates justify their emphasis on social engagement at the expense of evangelism. And justice advocates demand atonement-only advocates justify their emphasis on gospel proclamation rather than social engagement. But, using Stott’s logic, if evangelism or social activism is flowing from a heart of love and compassion, than neither must be justified. Love is it’s own justification.

Also missing from the arguments this week has been any affirmation of a theology of vocation. By that I mean the notion—affirmed by Scripture and reaffirmed during the Reformation—that Christ has called his disciples to engage in different works for the benefit of the world and to the glory of God. While we all share a set of common callings as followers of Christ, including the calling to be his witnesses and make disciples, each person also has a particular calling. For some this is evangelism or pastoral leadership. For other it may be law, medicine, commerce, or the arts.

If Christ himself has called a person to care for the homeless, are we to intervene and declare such work less important than ours because it doesn’t conform to our reading of Scripture? Or, if a person is called to proclaim the gospel are we to shame her for not doing more to reform the criminal justice system? A proper, biblical theology of vocation recognizes that our work is valuable not because it has social or eternal impact. It is valuable because of the One who has called us to it. Period.

The current fight over The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel is indicative of what happens when Christians put their confidence in their theological systems rather than in the

living Lord. John Stott understood this temptation as well, and he affirmed Christ's sovereignty to call his servants to whatever work he wishes. "There is a diversity of Christian callings, and every Christian should be faithful to his own calling," Stott wrote. "The doctor must not neglect the practice of medicine for evangelism, nor should the evangelist be distracted from the ministry of the word by the ministry of tables, as the apostles quickly discovered [in Acts 6]."

Is John Stott's writing enough to calm the debate over evangelism and social justice? I do not know. But what he does offer is another path into, and out of, the controversy. As you engage with others about the Statement on Social Justice, and as you talk within your own community about it, do not get snared by the false dichotomy that declares either evangelism or social justice must be superior. And let's affirm every work God has called his servants to, whether it is proclaiming reconciliation or demonstrating it, as long as his love is found to be fueling it.