
What is the Task of the Church?

“What Jesus began to do in the body, the body continues to do in Jesus.”

When Jesus was upon the earth He ministered to human needs by means of His earthly body. Because the Church is His body, directed by His Spirit, He continues to minister to human needs by means of His spiritual body, the Church. So what Jesus began to do in the body, the body continues to do in Jesus.

Simon Peter described Jesus as a man anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil (Acts 10:38). How beautiful! How simple! Jesus went about doing good! When He saw a need He met it. If people were hungry he fed them. If they were sick He made them well. If they were crippled He healed them. If they were confused He gave them direction. All of this He accomplished with an amazing measure of confidence and assurance.

His Jewish critics, however, were never quite certain about a legitimate course of action. For this reason they went through

life with nagging doubts about their personal conduct and profound questions about the orthodoxy of their actions. As Ignatius said, "With love there are no questions, and without it there are no answers."

Exodus to Hidden Valley

The *Reader's Digest* has published an excellent book entitled, *Exodus to The Hidden Valley* by Eugene Morse. This book is but one thrilling chapter in the lives of a veteran missionary family that has spent more than half a century in the Orient. It has been my good fortune to know personally many members of this family and to interrogate them in great detail about their work. The essence of their ministry has been much like that of Jesus. They have gone about doing good. They have moved with confidence into virtually every area of human need without suffering from pangs of conscience that they had violated the will of God.

Man's greatest individual need is for a personal relationship with Jesus. Thus they have preached the gospel in all its purity leading people to personal decisions for Christ. But the tribes with whom they work have many other needs as well. They needed help and instruction in agriculture, finance, and education. Not only were they illiterate, but some of the tribes did not even have a written language at all. Those who are members of His body, and who are motivated by His Spirit, must do for people what Jesus would do. Thus they have made a diligent effort to meet every human need.

They have reduced languages to writing and translated the Word of God into the vernacular of the tribal people. They have designed cities and built schools. In these primitive areas it has sometimes been necessary for them to manufacture their own "blackboards" and "chalk," their own gunpowder and medical supplies. Throughout their long years of service they have ministered for Jesus as doctors, nurses, educators, inventors, bankers, farmers, and in other areas too numerous to mention. In short, there is virtually no area of life which the Spirit of Jesus has not touched through them. Their great love for the needs of the people left them no alternative.

Those infected with a legalistic approach to the work of Jesus would have some serious difficulties with the church getting involved in "education" or "agriculture" or "medicine." "That's not the job of the church," they would howl. They would feel

more comfortable "passing by on the other side" and letting some lonely Samaritan handle this "social gospel" stuff.

A Christian Marriage Contract?

Christianity is like a marriage. As a matter of fact the marriage union may very well be the most accurate and complete analogy available to man about our relationship with God through the church. We are supposed to learn from marriage about the nature of the church, but we have not. To illustrate this let us reverse the procedure and attempt to set up a marriage like we do the church.

First of all we must begin with a "contract." This always gives to legalistic people a real sense of security. The contract itself, however, is not enough, so we must incorporate into the contract a series of safeguards and a system of enforcement. The finished contract may be something like this:

I, _____, the party of the first part, do take thee, _____, the party of second part, to be my lawful wedded wife.

Conditions:

A. It is hereby agreed that _____, the party of the first part shall spend at least 40 hours each week in gainful employment for at least 50 weeks per year. The remuneration from said employment shall be dispursed through a committee composed of both husband and wife together with at least four in-laws (two from each side of the family). This finance committee shall meet at least twelve times per year, no decisions are to be made unless a quorum is present and all checks must have two signatures.

B. The party of the first part also agrees to kiss the party of the second part at least twice each day (Monday - Friday). Once shall be while departing for work and the other time when returning. On emergency or unscheduled visits the kiss is to be considered as optional. The party of the first part also agrees that the more intimate experiences of marriage be regulated by the party of the second part and her mother, and one medical expert.*

C. In the event that children be born to his union the party of the first part agrees to spend at least 15% but not more than

* The term "expert" is to be defined biennially by a committee of husband, wife, two in-laws, and minister.

33 ⅓ % of his gross annual income on said children. The monies will be divided among said children upon a pro-rated basis depending upon age. (Absolutely no discrimination is to be permitted upon the basis of sex, size, color of hair, eyes, or skin.)

D. In view of the many temptations to immorality the party of the first part agrees to watch only those television programs, and movies, and to read only those magazines, books and periodicals approved by committee composed of: the party of the second part (wife), the party of the second part's mother (mother-in-law) and two other parties, etc., etc., etc.

But enough of this trivia. You know that no marriage could possibly survive such legalism, but what about the church? Our legalistic approach has literally raised more questions than answers. It has bogged us down in a quagmire of technicalities that has stifled the Spirit and handcuffed the body of Christ. You could write a thousand rules on marriage and never have a Christian home. You could fill a library with legal precedents involving the Christian family and never deal with every circumstance that could arise. The home is not built upon law, but love and, praise God, Jesus has given us the same blessed relationship in the church.

Back to the Question

But now let us return to our question regarding the task of the church. Love provides us with the freedom to do whatever we think Jesus would do in similar circumstances. Because our backgrounds vary, and because our levels of education and understanding are different, we will always see "what Jesus would do" from different perspectives. This is the way it should be. Because every member of the body has a different role or function to perform, it is imperative that we see things from a different point of view. The body is not one member but many and each has a unique role to play. If the whole body were an eye how could it hear anything? Each member of the body is necessary, no matter how insignificant or diverse.

In an orchestra different people can play different instruments on different notes and still have harmony. This is the kind of unity and harmony we have in the body of Christ. It is a unity in diversity because we are all responding to the same Lord.

Once you depart from love and attempt to direct the body

of Christ by legalism you are caught in a quagmire of controversy. Remember the legalistic covenant is characterized by Ishmael. He was a wild man who was perennially in trouble.

Let me demonstrate these difficulties by referring to but one simple Scripture. Please remember that this series of debatable questions can be repeated on an almost infinite number of questions relating to the task of the church. The Scripture is:

“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their afflictions, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” (James 1:27)

In order to simplify matters as much as possible we will concentrate our attention upon but three aspects of but one phrase of this verse.

1. What does it mean to visit?
2. What is meant by fatherless and widows?
3. What is meant by “their affliction”?

I want to warn you at the outset that we are off on an endless venture. We can satisfy ourselves, and we may even convince a number of others to adhere to our own personal point of view, but not one of us will utter the last word on the subject even if we spent a lifetime in research and investigation.

What Does It Mean to Visit?

Students of the Greek language will be aware that “visit” is from the Greek word “episkeptomai.” It is akin to the word “episcopal” and therefore has some direct association with the type of “oversight” that elders or pastors were to give to the flock of God (Acts 20:28). (Forgive me as I parenthetically explain that many and perhaps most people do not know that the New Testament Scriptures were originally written in Greek, and could not care less.)

I will optimistically assume that everyone will be willing to interpret the word “visit” to mean more than an occasional hello at the front door. I will further assume that we all see the need for and agree in the wisdom of systematic and consistent oversight. The questions then become: “How?” and “To what extent?”

There are some who argue that the best and more obvious way to care for people is to take them into your own home, or otherwise personally to care for their needs. These would insist

that benevolent institutions rob the individual of his rights and privileges to practice pure religion.

Others contend that while this may be the ideal we are not living in an ideal world. Therefore it is better to have an institution doing benevolent work on terms that are less than ideal than it is to have no benevolent work at all.

One person may feel led of God to support one orphan and one widow and then politely shut the door on all others. In so doing he may prayerfully hope to "force" others to care for the needy. Another person may just keep taking in orphans and widows until he has to build a bigger house and ask for help from Christian friends . . . and an institution is born.

Each may be responding in perfect harmony with the leading of God in his life, but should he feel constrained to divide the brotherhood over his convictions he demonstrates that he is void of the Spirit (Jude 19).

As incredible as it might seem whole books and entire debates have been conducted on the very question before us. There are literally an infinite number of very practical questions to be answered when you begin to care for needy people. In addition to the spiritual aspects of their lives they may need food, education, medicine, discipline, clothing, housing, etc., etc., to say nothing of companionship and love.

Let us, however, let others write these volumes and proceed to question number two.

Who Are the Fatherless and Widows?

Once while teaching on this verse an elder said to me, "But we don't have any widows in our church." I think he had missed the point. Suppose you meet a starving woman in the gutter of some large city. Upon investigation you discover first of all that she is not a Christian, and that secondly she has a husband who is living. Are you therefore exempt from showing mercy and extending help? I think not! I rather imagine that James referred to the fatherless and widows simply to point out people with needs. But times have changed. Children's homes today are filled with needy children who are not orphans. Almost invariably they are neglected or abandoned children whose parents are both living. Widows in Jesus' day were the very symbol of helplessness. They often had no means of sustenance or employment. Widows today are sometimes among the most wealthy people in the entire community.

Again, from the legalistic standpoint, we are caught in the vortex of great controversy. Did James mean literally the fatherless and widows, or just anyone with needs? Did he mean Christians, or non Christians? If you say Christians then how do you define the term? What about people of different denominations, for example? The term "oversight" implies a willingness to be "overseen," some would say. Others say "No," "The people with the greatest needs often deny their need for help and Jesus would want us to help them in spite of it."

Again I hope you see that legalism paints us into a corner of confusion while love provides a sense of direction and assurance.

What is Meant by Affliction?

The Greek word for "affliction" is *Thlibo*. It is interesting to observe that this is the very word used to describe the pathway of the redeemed in Matthew 7:14. The word means "straightened" or "narrow." It refers to the tribulation one experiences from the pressures of life. The context in the Sermon on the Mount leads me to believe that the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 and the "strait" gate and the "narrow" way of Matthew 7:13-14 are one and the same. When we love our neighbor as we do ourself we share his afflictions as though they were our own.

What is a genuine affliction which would merit the prayerful concern and help of Christian people? Who is going to draw the line in cases of hardship, pain, and poverty? The truth of the whole matter is that each of us must draw that line every day of our lives. Our actions are not based upon some arbitrary standard handed down by some religious council or church board, but by our own threshold of endurance. We must love our neighbor as we do ourselves. Any other criterion will lead us to bind upon someone else some kind of burden which we would not touch with one of our fingers.

The priest and the Levite saw a man in need and passed by on the other side (Luke 10:25ff). We can never fully know the mental gymnastics which enabled them to do this but we can be sure that every way of a man is right in his own eyes (Proverbs 21:2). Whatever standards these religious men employed made sense to them. The way of religious legalism is a "broad" way. It enables us to rationalize around any personal involvement. How poor is poor? How hungry is hungry? How naked is naked? Our own cleverness enables us to escape scott free, until we

get hooked on the golden rule. Then like the good Samaritan we will find ourselves very much involved. When we bear some "affliction" in our own bodies, we become more sympathetic and understanding to others who suffer in the same way.

Remember that love works no ill to one's neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. When we love our neighbors as we do ourselves we will be operating upon a level which transcends legal definitions and judicial decrees. Such love will demonstrate to the world that we belong to Jesus.

By this shall all men know that we are His disciples, if we have love one to another.

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Six

1. How can we know what Jesus would do in a given circumstance?
2. Are missionaries governed by a different standard than others?
3. What is a missionary?
4. List ways that Christianity is like a marriage.
5. Is there any possible association between the breakdown of family life in America and the problems we are facing in the Church?
6. How can you distinguish between the task of the Church and the task of the individual Christian?
7. What can a person be wrong about and still be saved?
8. Why are divisive people said to be void of the Spirit? (Jude 19)
9. Who is our neighbor?
10. How serious should someone's problem be before we are obliged to help?