

International Council of Christian Churches

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The love of God and social justice: “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”

A discussion of the World Council of Churches’ theme for its 11th World Assembly in 2021

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Many, if not most human beings, feel pity and sorrow for those who suffer or are taken advantage of. There is the sense that wrong has been done toward those who deserved better. It does not seem right that only a few experience abundance, seemingly at the expense of others. The thought then is that something must be done about the misery, exploitation, and lack of opportunities. Such wrongs must be righted—we must bring justice to society.

Christians rightly feel sorrow when people truly suffer. Indeed, Christians are the only ones who understand why people truly suffer and why people take advantage of others. Christians understand that suffering and injustice exist because of sin. Sin brought God’s curse on every aspect of human existence, from physical pain, to the struggle to stay alive, to the very earth itself (Gen 3:16–19). Sin has so corrupted every human being that they do evil and wicked things to one another. Only Christians understand that sin is the reason there is evil, suffering, and injustice in the world. Such are the inevitable effects of sin.

Accordingly, Christians must understand that the only remedy for these effects of sin is salvation in Jesus Christ. Trying to fix humanity’s problems apart from salvation in Jesus Christ is like putting a band aid on skin cancer—you might look a little better, but death is coming quickly. Applying this to suffering and injustice, you could help them get on their feet, but the cancer of sin is still present throughout every part of their life.

This should help us see why trying to fix humanity’s problems through the government is so foolish. God created government to restrict and punish evil and promote what is right and good (Rom 13:3–4). God ordained that those in government would be able to accomplish these purposes through our taxes. This is the purpose of government and taxes.

Sometimes governments take on responsibilities and power that God never ordained for them to have. Such put themselves in the place of individuals promising equality of opportunity and abundance. That kind of government is not, never has been, and never will be the answer! That kind of government promises to end oppression by the wealthy and powerful but replaces such by government oppression over every aspect of life.

The terrible, heart-wrenching problems of humanity are the effects of sin. No government, social-justice effort, or humanitarian organization can remedy this, for sin is a spiritual problem that manifests itself in every realm of human life.

Thus, humanity’s only hope of truly dealing with its spiritual problem is salvation in Jesus Christ. When sinners are born again they receive a new nature and the effects of the new birth are evident in every area of life, bringing real, demonstrative, felt effects in every human institution. Families will be changed for the good—though Christ didn’t promise that every family would enjoy peace in this life (Matt 10:34–36). Society and government will be changed

for the good—though Christ didn't promise that every strata of society and government would enjoy peace in this life (Matt 5:10–11). These changes happen because saved individuals in society are made in the image of Christ and live Christ-like lives. As Christians grow more like Christ they sin less and do more righteousness. The effects of less sin and more righteousness are seen in everyday life.

Can—should—we as Christians help with the many needs around us? My answer is a qualified “yes.” There is a big difference between helping those in the course of our life and saying that is essential to the mission of the church.

Christians must help fellow believers with their pressing needs (Acts 2:44–45; 1 John 3:16–17). Christians must care for their families by working hard (2 Thess 3:10–13) and caring for both immediate and extended family members (1 Tim 5:8). Christians must live godly lives among unbelievers, being good neighbors and citizens. This involves Christians on an individual basis readily doing good and helping neighbors in need (Luke 10:30–37; Gal 6:10). In the course of our life the Spirit's fruits of love and kindness will be seen in concrete ways.

Individual Christians who get involved in addressing societal issues must never do so in disobedience to other commands, especially separation from apostasy and compromise. You must also never get involved in such efforts at the expense of other roles and responsibilities that are essential, especially the church and your family.

When it comes to the mission or purpose of the church, however, that is a different matter. God created the church to spread the gospel to the lost and help Christians grow in the faith. The church as Christ's body is entirely spiritual in character and aim. It alone is responsible for evangelizing the lost and edifying the saints.

Frequently—if not inevitably—organized church efforts aimed at social activism result in crossing theological and ecclesiastical lines that otherwise would not have happened. In other words, ecclesiastical separation (holiness to God) is set aside and ignored for the sake of meeting societal needs (the physical needs of man).

Another frequent result of involvement in social activism is a proportionate decline of spiritual effort in making disciples through one's church. One simply cannot be involved in both spheres at the same time.

Christians can involve themselves on an individual level in the various societal issues of the day, but the organized, institutional church should not—that is not its genius, character, and calling.

Organizations like the World Council of Churches who say that the church must “make the world a better place” usually point to some Old Testament passages calling for doing justice and mercy and caring for strangers and the poor. This is a wrong application of those passages.

- 1) OT Israel had the Mosaic Law as their “constitution,” governing every aspect of life. Civil, social, and religious aspects were all intertwined. When OT Jews did not care for their widows, orphans, etc. that broke the Law resulting in God's judgment on the nation.

- 2) OT Israel's social emphasis was to *their* nation, those who were of the seed of Abraham and under the Mosaic Covenant. They were not responsible to show "social relief" to the down and out of the surrounding nations (Canaanites, Philistines, etc.)
- 3) This is not the case for Christians today. We live in two "arenas"—the church and the state. The church has no social agenda for the state, nor does the state have a religious agenda for the church.
- 4) I wonder if social gospel advocates who make their appeals to the OT would be consistent and insist on other OT passages such as Psalm 101:5, "whoso privily slandereth his neighbor, him will I cut off [destroy]."

Another "biblical basis" given for the church meeting physical needs is "doing the work of the kingdom." Whether one views the Kingdom as essentially equivalent with salvation and the church or one views it as yet to be established at Christ's Second Coming, the citizens of the Kingdom are believers who have been born again (John 3:3). Sin's effects in society will not be alleviated apart from King Jesus doing that work himself. It is ironic that those who emphasize that Jesus' kingdom is exclusively spiritual in nature in the next breath talk about doing the work of the kingdom in this world with the weapons of this world!

The World Council of Churches believes that God's love requires the church to address life and world sufferings and seeming injustices. No. God's love requires the church to address the root cause of tragedy and suffering, namely, sin, by preaching the true gospel and striving for Christ-like righteousness and purity.

Because sin is not always "seen" like felt tragedies and suffering, addressing sin doesn't seem to really do much. Friends, that's exactly what Satan wants you to think. He wants the church to be distracted, if not entirely derailed, from its Christ-given assigned task. Satan would much rather see clothed, wealthy, safe, healthy, and empowered sinners go to hell than anyone go to heaven.

Satan would much rather see the church give its time, talents, and treasure trying to alleviate physical instead of spiritual needs. That kind of "ministry" only puts a band aid on cancer. Remember, that may hide some of cancer's ugliness, but the patient will still die.

So—are you moved to pity by injustice, suffering, abject poverty, etc.? Socialism is not, never has been, and never will be the answer! Make disciples of Christ! Baptize and add them to the church! Teach them to obey all Christ commanded! Such believers may be poor in this world, endure much suffering, even injustice, but such lasts only awhile—their time will soon come when there will be no tears! That will only happen through gospel preaching, the new birth, and repentance and faith.