

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

POOR APOLOGETICS: POVERTY AND APOLOGETICS WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH

OR

SOCIAL MINISTRY AS A BIBLICAL AND SOCIALLY ADEPT APOLOGETIC METHOD
AS WELL AS AN EFFECTIVE FORCE IN DISMANTLING ANTI-CHRISTIAN PREJUDICE
WITHIN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The thesis for this paper is that, concerning the relationship between poverty and apologetics within the local church, social ministry is a biblical and socially adept apologetic method as well as an effective force in dismantling anti-Christian prejudice within contemporary Western culture. I will be interchanging the terms “poverty” and “social ministry” throughout this paper. My watershed definition for these terms is anyone who fits the definition of “the least of these” as classified by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46. Persons who fall outside the lines of economic, personal, or social stability have historically received no small amount of attention from the church. Before going further in the discussion on poverty, it is safe to say that misguided attempts assuage the ravages of poverty, from Lyndon Byrd Johnson’s “War on Poverty” to Karl Marx’s Communist utopia, have done little more than to exacerbate it.

A Christ-centered view of social ministry does gullibly enable an entitlement mentality on one hand or ignore unavoidable poverty on the other. Some are poor by choice resulting from sinful and unwise choices. An entitlement mentality is a refusal to provide for oneself or one’s family and assuming financial support from neighbors, family, or government. The Apostle Paul writes, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8, ESV). I am not advocating that unregulated aid is the answer. In fact, the problem is not the lack of funds but a lifestyle of irresponsible stewardship. Managed monthly payments, entitlement attitude, and government regulations that essentially punish productivity while rewarding sloth have largely replaced the classical virtues such as thrift, resourcefulness, diligence, self-reliance, and delayed gratification. Enabling those who refuse to act responsibly is to ally with society destabilizers and practical anarchists. Nevertheless, social ministry must offer a path of redemption to all who

are willing to begin the path to economic and spiritual reconciliation. Evangelicals would do well to distinguish between those poor by choice and the poverty-stricken due to circumstances outside their own control. The circumstantially poor are at center stage where the New Testament church cared for its poor (Rom. 12:13; Ac. 6:1-6). Care for widows¹ and orphans, along with holy living, was the highest evidence of religious virtue (Jas. 1:27).

I will attempt to argue for this premise with three particular divisions: First, I will provide a brief survey of the historical connection between tangible social ministry and rational apologetics. Second, I will expose historical abuses of social ministry as an attempt to supplant the preaching of the gospel. Within this section I will also provide an amended model of social ministry and rational apologetics. Third, I will argue how this model may dismantle anti-Christian prejudice within contemporary Western culture.

I. The biblical connection between tangible social ministry and rational apologetics

The writings of the early church fathers still stand as a testimony to the intellectual prowess of the early church. From rebuttals to Gnostic heresies to showing why Christians make model citizens, few would dare to claim that robust, intellectually rigorous apologetics have been part and parcel of the Christian *modus operandi* from the earliest times. Stanley J. Grenz writes, “The church is a community of memory.”² Yet deep within the not so latent memory of the church lies a robust tapestry of tangible social ministry combined with a resilient intellectual

¹ Regular assistance for widows was standard (Ac. 6:1). However, this was even with exceptions. In order to receive church assistance, widows must be “true widows” (1 Tim. 5:3), at least 6 years old (1 Tim. 5:8), a woman of one man (1 Tim. 5:9), having a reputation for good works (1 Tim. 5:10), raised children (1 Tim. 5:10), shown hospitality (1 Tim. 5:10), washed the feet of the saints (1 Tim. 5:10), cared for the afflicted (1 Tim. 5:10), devoted herself to every good work (1 Tim. 5:10). Relatives were the primary caregivers and the church was for those who had no other means of support (1 Tim. 5:16).

² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 499.

heritage. One instance of wealth categorization in the early church is the beautiful account of Deacon Lawrence around 258 A.D. Church historian John Collins recounts:

The Roman prefect, knowing that Lawrence was the principal financial officer, promised to set him free if he would surrender the wealth of the Church. Another account reads, “He is said to have complained to the bishop of being separated from him in death: ‘Whither are you going, holy priest, without your deacon? You never went to offer sacrifice without me, your minister.’ Lawrence agreed, but said that it would take him three days to gather it. During those three days, he placed all the money at his disposal in the hands of trustworthy stewards, and then assembled the sick, the aged, and the poor, the widows and orphans of the congregation, presented them to the prefect, and said, “These are the treasures of the Church.”³

Lawrence’s subsequent courageous martyrdom, according to one source, “made a great impression on the people of Rome, and made many converts, while greatly reducing among pagans the belief that Christianity was a socially undesirable movement that should be stamped out.”⁴ This account illustrates the early church’s novel concept in the ancient world of prioritizing persons over property. Placing value on outcasts traces back to Jesus traversing the line between the ritually pure and persons who were considered essentially untouchable. Christian cultural impact in the early church is often overshadowed by heroic last stands in the coliseum or Nero’s sadistic saga of illuminating his courtyard gardens with the sickening glow of Christian martyrs set ablaze.

One of the most notable extensions of the Judaic abhorrence for the exposing of infants, which was common practice in the world of ancient paganism, was a revolutionary Christian practice; rescuing exposed children and adopting them as one’s own. Paganism, rife with mantras, omens, and other superstitions, led to the common culturally accepted practice of

³ John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between old and new* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 116.

⁴ James Kiefer, “Laurence, Deacon and Martyr,” *Society of Archbishop Justus*, Accessed December 6, 2013. <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/223.html>

infanticide.⁵ The film “300” depicts a community elder inspecting a newborn as one would a product in the quality control section of an assembly line. The camera angle spans to a wide angle of a valley riddled with the skeletons of infants who were “exposed.”⁶

Carl J. Richard contrasts the Christian ethic to the callousness of paganism:

Converting to Christianity meant joining a family that offered physical, economic, and emotional support in an exceedingly troubled time. Early Christians shared their wealth freely with widows, orphans, the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled, and the ill. They placed their lives at grave risk caring for victims of the plague and other natural disasters, while pagans fled. They ransomed one another from barbarian captors, distributed bread during famines, and visited prisoners and miners, the most wretched of all the slaves. One group of Christians in Rome even sold themselves into slavery to raise the money to ransom their brethren from prison. They provided for the burial of the poor and were hospitable to travelers.⁷

Imagine the contrast in the ancient world. Not only were these early Christians simply trying to faithfully live out the gospel as they had received it but they were also giving the world a glimpse into previously unimagined existence: a social structure fueled by grace and love rather than cruelty and oppression.⁸ The Judaic ethos of respect for the sanctity of life had finally borne fruit that reached far over the ethnic-centered wall present in first century Palestinian Judaism. The bud had sprouted into intellectual and spiritual herbage literally extending into all regions of the known world.

On the Western shift to devalue human life and adopt practices, such as abortion, that have historically been anathema, William Lane Craig summarizes Francis Schaeffer as follows:

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 133-136.

⁶ *300*, DVD, directed by Zack Snyder (2007; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007). For a detailed look into the practice of Greek infanticide, see, Cynthia Patterson, “Not Worth the Rearing”: The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115 (1985): 103.

⁷ Carl J. Richard, *Twelve Greeks and Romans Who Changed the World* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 228.

⁸ John 13:34-35; Acts 2:44-47.

Schaeffer's efforts against abortion may be seen as a logical extension of this apologetic. Once God is denied, human life becomes worthless, and we see the fruit of such a philosophy in the abortion and infanticide now taking place in Western society. Schaeffer warns that unless Western man returns to the Christian world and life view, nothing will stop the trend from degenerating into population control and human breeding. Only a theistic worldview can save the human race from itself.⁹

Yet this initial Christian social impact was not reserved only to the hungry and ill but was extended to the center stage of the Roman entertainment industry. Rivaling the accepted custom of exposing infants in the ancient world was the blood spattered pit of the Coliseum farcically named "the games." One account is that of Telemachus, the Christian leader whose example brought an end to the gladiatorial games in the Roman Empire via Emperor Honorius' imperial edict in 404 C.E. After observing the horrific slaughter Telemachus' Christian sensibilities could no longer stand the barbarous spectacle. He jumped into the arena imploring each gladiator to stop the carnage. Although the accounts differ as to who struck the fatal blow, Telemachus was killed for standing against barbarism and a societal norm that was diametrically opposed to the basic standards of Christian morality.¹⁰ Telemachus's selfless example brought about a result

⁹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 70. Schaeffer comments, "If people are not made in the image of God, the pessimistic, realistic humanist is right: the human race is an abnormal wart on the smooth face of a silent and meaningless universe. In this setting, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia (including the killing of mentally deranged criminals, the severely handicapped, or the elderly who are an economic burden) are completely logical . . . Without the Bible and without the revelation in Christ (which is only told to us in the Bible) there is nothing to stand between us and our children and the eventual acceptance of the monstrous humanities of our age." See, Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Old Tappan, NJ: The New York Times Company, 1976. In, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, Vol. 5, *A Christian View of the West* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982, orig. 1979), 405-406. In, John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 158.

¹⁰ For a sobering analysis of the rising tolerance among some Christians of gratuitously violent entertainment, see, William Lane Craig, "Violence and Christian Conscience," *Reasonable Faith*, Accessed December 6, 2013. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/violence-and-christian-conscience>

that Christian political action committees doubtless could.¹¹ Even secular historian William Lecky goes so far as to declare:

There is scarcely . . . any other single reform so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of the gladiatorial shows, and this feat must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian church. When we remember how extremely few of the best and greatest men of the Roman world had absolutely condemned the games of the amphitheatre, it is impossible to regard, without the deepest admiration, the unwavering and uncompromising consistency of the patristic denunciations.¹²

Telemachus's willingness to sacrifice his own life to save the lives of condemned criminals and nameless foreign prisoners of war serves as a clarion call for Western Christians to examine their own willingness to sacrifice for the voiceless. Under girding this powerful ethos is what Paul Barnette colorfully describes:

If his person with them was the firewood, it was his resurrection from the dead and the Spirit he sent which was the fire that would soon blaze across the world. And it was his resurrection, together with the coming of the Spirit to the first believers, in particular the apostles, which caused his words and works first to be 'remembered; and then to be written in the text we call the New Testament.¹³

Not only did this blaze spread across the known world but also it was also able to withstand the extinguishing attempts of the opposition. While it should be noted that martyrdom does not equal the truth of the martyr's claims, it can bolster an already robust belief system. It also should be mentioned that not all Christians who were threatened with martyrdom in the early church held fast to their confession. However, the vast majority chose to suffer the highest penalty rather than recant their Christian confession. Gary Habermas's point, "Liars do not make good martyrs,"

¹¹ D.L. Bomgardner, *The Story of the Roman Amphitheatre* (London: Routledge, 2000), 206.

¹² William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (London: Longmans Green & Company, 1890), 36. In, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, *History of the Christian Church*, Accessed December 6, 2013. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc2.v.x.viii.html?highlight=tertullian,on,spectacles#highlight>

¹³ Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 110.

deserves careful consideration and should not be flippantly rejected.¹⁴ The point is simply that history testifies to the fact that the message of Jesus of Nazareth has radically changed past cultures.¹⁵ Moreover, even when colossal attempts to explain away the veracity of Christian claims, the Western world still cannot rid itself of a Christian memory.¹⁶ In fact, if one does not understand the history of Christianity one will be at a loss as to why the West has often been called “the conscience of the world.”¹⁷

It is helpful to remember that these aforementioned actions were not formed in a philosophical vacuum. The Hebrew Bible stipulates a number of provisions whereby the community provides for the poor.¹⁸ Furthermore, God’s wrath against Israel throughout the Old Testament was, in large part, due to the ruling elite’s mistreatment of the poor.¹⁹ Outside the

¹⁴ Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), 227.

¹⁵ In an interview with Jerry Bowyer, Gregory Alan Thornbury states, “I think that when you study the texts of particularly the New Testament, although it has its origins in the Mosaic Law, I think what you see there is the seedbed of freedom of conscience. You see democratic religion in the pages of the New Testament. So whereas some people in Acts chapter 5 see some kind of nascent socialism, actually what you’re seeing is free people electing to gather together in solidarity around key principles and ideals and goals, and the people who joined in that were people like Lydia.” Jerry Bowyer, “The Book of Revelation is Hayekian,” *Forbes*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jerrybowyer/2013/10/10/the-book-of-revelation-is-hayekian/2/>

¹⁶ Elizabeth Anne Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 21.

¹⁷ Ashraf El-Kholy, ambassador from Egypt to the United Kingdom, lamenting the use of force against demonstrators in London, commented, “Europe is the conscience of the world.” Richard Spencer & Damien McElroy, “Egypt’s new authorities pave the way for the release of Hosni Mubarak,” *The Telegraph*, August 19, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10253322/Egypt-s-new-authorities-pave-the-way-for-the-release-of-Hosni-Mubarak.html>

¹⁸ Ex. 22:25–27; Ex. 23:11; Lev. 19:9, 10 Lev. 23:22. Lev. 25:25–28, 35–37, 39–43; Deut. 14:28–29; Deut. 15:2–14; Deut. 24:12–21; Deut. 26:12, 13; Neh. 8:10; Psa. 37:21, 26; Psa. 41:1–3; Psa. 112:4, 5, 9; Prov. 28:27; Prov. 29:7; Prov. 31:9, 20; Isa. 1:17; Isa. 16:3, 4; Isa. 58:7, 10; Ezek. 18:7 vs. 16, 17.; Dan. 4:27; Zech. 7:10.

¹⁹ Neh. 5:1–13; Job 20:19–21; Job 22:6, 7, 9–11; Job 24:4, 7–10; Psa. 10:2, 8–10; Psa. 37:14; Prov. 14:20; Prov. 17:5; Prov. 19:7; Prov. 22:7, 16; Prov. 28:3, 15; Prov. 30:14; Eccl. 5:8; Isa. 3:14, 15; Isa. 10:1, 2; Isa. 32:6, 7; Ezek. 18:12; Ezek. 22:29; Amos 2:6–8; Amos 4:1, 2; Amos 5:11, 12; Amos 8:4, 6; Hab. 3:14;

actions of Jesus, this care for the poor is best reflected in the writings of James. James 2:14-17 reads, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” Douglas J. Moo comments, “While this illustration undoubtedly reflects conditions among his readers, James may also make allusion here to the teaching of Jesus in the Matthean parable of the “Sheep and the Goats.” God, says Jesus, will grant entrance into the kingdom on the basis of works of charity, but dismiss from his presence all those who fail to relieve the needs of the destitute.”²⁰ Kurt A. Richardson opines of the sort of “faith” James is haranguing, “Self-centeredness, rather than Christ-centeredness, is the dominant reality in such a faith.”²¹ According to James, refusing to meet the physical needs of a destitute person, when it is entirely within one’s power to do so, is a tell tale sign that one is unregenerate as evidenced by their “faith” that is foreign to Jesus’s teachings.

Simply put, the early church applied the Old Testament commands for care of the poor beyond cultural and ethnic lines. Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:31-46 carry wide-ranging implications in regards to care of the poor and overall social ministry. The historic Christian motif is captured in the words of Joseph Butler, “rejoice in the prosperity of others, and compassionate their distresses, we, as it were, substitute them for ourselves, their interest for our own; and have the same kind of pleasure in their prosperity and sorrow in their distress, as we

²⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 125.

²¹ Kurt A. Richardson, *The New American Commentary: James*, Vol. 36 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 132.

have...upon our own.”²² Even Stanford University’s elite *Hoover Institution*, notes the impact of Christian thought. In an article titled, *Religious Faith and Charitable giving: Believers give more to secular charities than non-believers do*, Arthur C. Brooks concludes, “If charity is indeed a learned behavior, it may be that houses of worship are only one means (albeit an especially efficacious one) to teach it. Secularists interested in increasing charitable giving and volunteering among their ranks might spend some effort thinking of alternative ways to foster these habits.”²³ Without the example and teachings of Christ along with the early church’s obedience to those commands, the entire concept of charitable giving would seem both foreign and hollow.

II. Abuses of social ministry as an attempt to supplant the preaching of the gospel

Over two millennia later, while political oppression still holds millions captive languishing under oppressive regimes, there is the bastion of the West. Despite its ills, Western culture largely affords religious and political refugees the opportunity to exercise the historically rare liberty of soul freedom. Unlike in the *sitz em leben* of the early church, the West has reaped the fruit of blood, sweat, and tears in the long war against despotism. Throughout this process certain non-biblical concepts have been grafted into the minds of many Western Christians resulting in a muddled worldview.

One of these ideas is first-class “Jesus was a liberal” bumper sticker theology. The sentiment is that Jesus was opposed to classical, conservative Christian moral values. Although

²² Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 83. In, Michael W. Austin, “A Brief Sketch on Compassion,” *Evangelical Philosophical Society*, Accessed December 6, 2013, <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=113&mode=detail>

²³ Arthur C. Books, “Religious Faith and Charitable giving: Believers give more to secular charities than non-believers do,” *Policy Review: Hoover Institution* No. 121 (October 1, 2003): <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/6577>

some consider Jesus a revolutionary as it relates to the establishment of first century Palestinian Judaism²⁴ Jesus's alleged liberalism primarily concerns the poor. Acts 2:42-47 has been often used as a proof-text for Socialism and a hermeneutical bludgeon against conservative Christians who disagree because they think certain welfare programs reward sloth.

Three salient points deserve mention here. First, care for the poor is a Christian duty. Second, rejecting socialistic ideas concerning care for the poor does not necessarily indicate a lack of concern for the poor.²⁵ Third, Scripture is not entirely clear on a specific methodology regarding care for the poor that is binding on all Christians in all cultures at all times.

III. Social ministry as a biblically effective means of dismantling anti-Christian prejudice within contemporary Western culture

A combination of the decline of liberal mainline denominations and the assault upon religion from the ranks of the New Atheists produces a curious mixture: Waning interest upon the part of congregants on the one hand and a voracious attack by opponents on the other. Even though church involvement has shown a fairly consistent pattern of decline over the past several decades as noted by Al Mohler in his work, *The Disappearance of God*²⁶, one should exercise

²⁴ See, Gerd Theissen & Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 225-234.

²⁵ Michael D. Tanner argues, "The real work of fighting poverty must come not from the government, but from the engines of civil society. An enormous amount of evidence and experience shows that private charities are far more effective than government welfare programs. While welfare provides incentives for counterproductive behavior, private charities can use their aid to encourage self-sufficiency, self-improvement, and independence. Private charities can individualize their approaches and target the specific problems that are holding people in poverty. One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Perhaps that's something to keep in mind the next time we hear a call for more welfare spending." Michael D. Tanner, "More Welfare, More Poverty," *Cato Institute*, September 12, 2006, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/more-welfare-more-poverty>

²⁶ Al Mohler, *The Disappearance of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2009).

caution, given the diversity of American regional cultures, in generalizing about the death of Christianity in the West.²⁷

Within conservative circles, Liberation Theology is usually frowned upon and for good reason because it essentially identifies social and economic freedom as synonymous with the Christian gospel. Rather than focusing on spiritual transformation, energies are directed towards changing the socio-economic fabric of societal structures that are viewed as prejudicial against women and minorities. The content equates social liberation with spiritual transformation. It is little wonder why Marxism and Liberation Theology have so often been bedfellows. According to D.D. Webster, “Liberation theologians agree with Marx’s famous statement: ‘Hitherto philosophers have explained the world; our task is to change it.’”²⁸ In the American context, especially throughout the Cold War, any hint of Marxism, within most conservative circles, was addressed with the furor of a religious McCarthyism. Conservative rejection of Liberation Theology could have been just as much fueled by politics and culture as robust exegesis.

After the dust settled from the 20th century fundamentalist-liberal wars, by and large, liberal churches adopted an array of social ministries as their missional strategy. Since the veracity of Scripture was denied along with the supernatural claims of the Bible liberal Christianity gravitated to the only undamaged bastion of historic Christianity: the ethical teachings of Jesus specifically in regards to the care for the poor. James Cone explains, “Sin is not primarily a religious impurity, but rather it is the social, political, and economic oppression of the poor. It is the denial of the humanity of the neighbor through unjust political and economic

²⁷ With his usual clarity, George Barna pinpoints what he calls, “The most post-Christian cities in America.” See, George Barna, “The Most Post-Christian Cities,” *Barna: Cities: Knowledge to Navigate a Changing World*, Accessed December 6, 2013, <http://cities.barna.org/the-most-post-christian-cities-in-america/>

²⁸ D.D. Webster, “Liberation Theology,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed, edited by Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1988), 686.

oppression of the poor.”²⁹ For progressive Christians, social ministry was all that was left after the theological famine incurred by liberal theology.

One of the unfortunate results was that many conservative Christians, in a knee-jerk reactionism, decided to focus *solely* on the preaching of the gospel. It was not so much that they flatly rejected that the Bible commanded care for the poor but they reacted against the primacy placed on social ministry by liberal churches. As it stands, whether conservative or liberal, the influence of Christianity in contemporary American culture is becoming increasingly marginalized. The result is that the voices of Christian leaders are being quickly moved from center stage to the cheap freak sideshows of religious extremists and other cultural Neanderthals. How then should evangelical Christians bridge this gap?

David Platt’s premise in his best-selling book “Radical” has greatly impacted the Evangelical world especially among millennials.³⁰ He argues for a reestablishment/reawakening of radical Christian living in the sense of personal and collective church stewardship. Platt’s pleas deeply resonate with younger Americans who have largely lived in luxury and safety compared to the rest of the world.³¹ By contrast, most Americans raised in the depression certainly were not privy to having personal rooms, regular vacations, designer clothes, and the option of recreational sports. These from the Builder generation have characterized the drive to provide material goods for one’s children.³² The Baby Boomer generation largely passed on the

²⁹ James H. Cone, *Christian Faith and Political Praxis, in the Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First-World Response*, ed. by Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richesin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 57.

³⁰ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010).

³¹ Matthew Lee Anderson, “Here Come the Radicals!” *Christianity Today*, March 15, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march/here-come-radicals.html>

³² Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), 18.

practice so that many children of middle-class parents today have yet to experience even a faint hint of poverty's anguish. Rather, many have struggled with the guilt of having received a plush life in contrast to multitudes throughout the world born into the deepest sort of poverty.

Jesus' teachings on money, giving, and care for the poor carry a powerful existential payload for Millennials. Despite a lagging economy for most of their working career, an incredible 81% of Millennials "have donated money, goods or services, reports a study by Walden University and Harris Interactive."³³ Millennials do not seem so much concerned with frugality for the sakes of personal financial security as the reduction of poverty and the like. Karl Barth's warning against "sacralization" gains a wide hearing in contemporary culture. Barth writes:

"Sacralization" means the transmutation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ into the vanity of a Christianity which vaunts itself in his name but in reality is enamored only of itself and its traditions, confessions and institutions. Sacralization means the suppression of the gospel by a pseudo – sacred law erected and proclaimed on the supposed basis of the Gospel. Sacralization means the setting up of an idol which is dead like all other images of human fabrication; which cannot hear or speak or illuminate or help or heal; in which the man who has discovered and created it cannot in the last resort admire our worship anyone or anything but himself.³⁴

Such is the state of both liberal churches that have ceased to preach the gospel as well as conservative churches who are more enamored with their traditions than with living out the gospel they claim to believe.

Taken together with the decline of liberal mainline denominations, the attractional church

³³ Dan Schawbel, "Why You Can't Ignore Millennials," *Forbes*, September 4, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/09/04/why-you-cant-ignore-millennials/>

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Vol. IV, Part 3.2, trans G.W. Bromiley, eds. G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 670.

model may increasingly have less to do with pomp and formality as it does with social ministry and acts of mercy. Heidi Rolland Unruh and Ronald J. Sider argue, “Yes, individuals have to be transformed. That’s the only way real change happens. But transformed people transform the social environment in which they function.”³⁵ The strategy seems strangely biblical when taken together with Jesus’ words, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

Yet a monumental societal shift has occurred nowhere better evidenced than the platform of presidential debates. Even as late as a 1990s, questions of morality, especially that of abortion, weighed heavily on the moral conscience of the nation. Even though recent studies show Americans increasingly identifying as pro-life,³⁶ the Christian position on certain social issues, namely homosexuality, appears to be somewhat out of touch with the majority of Americans.

There are several options available to Christians who take the gospel seriously. First, edit the gospel by removing controversial angles by modifying the clear biblical teachings on culturally obtuse issues so as to accommodate the erosion of social mores. Scuttle exclusivist language, adopt inclusivism, and otherwise avoid culturally controversial subjects. Speak to felt needs and avoid substantive theology at all costs. Preaching then, should appeal primarily to the emotions rather than the intellect because apologetics are no longer in style.³⁷ Second, the church can adopt or maintain a mode of communication that is biblically sound but culturally abrasive. The church can take the position of simply “preaching the truth” but without explaining the

³⁵ Heidi Rolland Unruh & Ronald J. Sider, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 180.

³⁶ Ashley McGuire, “Why Americans are becoming more pro-life,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/why-americans-are-becoming-more-pro-life/2012/05/24/gJQAsqt4mU_blog.html

³⁷ William Lane Craig, “Does God Slam Doors Shut?” *Reasonable Faith Podcast*, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-slam-doors-shut>, November 19, 2009, accessed February 10, 2015.

context and the backdrop of a biblical worldview, the church may alienate persons with little biblical grounding. Second, the church can practice an uncompromised apologetic method of preaching of the truth in order to remove intellectual roadblocks to the gospel.

Since the clout of the Moral Majority is fading, Russell Moore advocates a recentering of Christian political involvement. He writes, “We shouldn’t see politics alone as the starting and ending point of our engagement. The gospel is the starting point, and the gospel is the ending point, of our engagement.”³⁸ Evangelicals can agree with Moore’s statement and add that a outworking of the gospel is the prioritization of robust doctrinal teaching and meeting the needs of the “the least of these” (Matt. 26:45).

Receptivity to biblical truth is often far more emotional than intellectual. James Spiegel writes, “The human mind does not neutrally observe the world, gathering facts purely and simply without any preferences or predilections.”³⁹ These predilections away from the truth of Christianity are, “not a loss of intelligence so much as a selective intellectual obtuseness or imperviousness to truths related to God, ethics, and human nature. *But the root of this obtuseness is moral in nature* (emphasis mine).”⁴⁰ Gary Habermas claims that 70% of the doubters he has ever counseled trace their doubts as having arisen from emotional, not intellectual, reasons.⁴¹ In reference to the Canaanite warfare issue in the Old Testament, Clay Jones argues, “Western culture’s embrace of “Canaanite sin” inoculates it against the seriousness of that sin and so

³⁸ Napp Nazworth, “Russell Moore Clarifies Misleading WSJ Article, Praises Predecessor’s ‘Prophetic Voice’,” *Christian Post*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/russell-moore-clarifies-misleading-wsj-article-praises-predecessors-prophetic-voice-107387/>

³⁹ James Spiegel, *The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴¹ Gary Habermas, “Emotional Doubt” (lecture, APOL 910: Religious Doubt, PhD seminar, Lynchburg, VA, February 20-24, 2012).

renders it incapable of responding to Canaanite sin with the appropriate moral outrage.”⁴² While continuing to accurately and lovingly herald the truth, social ministry circumvents pseudo-intellectual smokescreens provides an incarnational apologetic.

Karl Barth writes, “The church of Jesus Christ can never – in any respect – be a pompous church.”⁴³ As the Apostle Paul stresses, “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight” (Rom. 12:16). Association with the lowly mirrors Christ’s humility through the incarnation (Phil. 2:5-11). Due to a Christian memory, mentioned earlier in this paper, American culture especially, values benevolence. It is even routine practice for professional athletes to sponsor children with disabilities as well as make special visits to children’s cancer wards. American media thrives on stories that touch the emotions.⁴⁴ What more heart touching story than the gospel and its effect on the least of these?

In one instance, a local church offered to host a Thanksgiving meal for local inmates. Upon approval by the Sheriff’s office, the church’s fellowship hall was filled with inmates and law enforcement officials. A meal was served and a message was shared. After taking a poll, less than 10% of the inmates reported a local church ever extending a ministry of any sort to them. Throughout the following weeks, social media was abuzz with an abundance of positive feedback from persons in the region who were both surprised and encouraged that a church

⁴² Clay Jones, “We Don’t Hate Sin So We Don’t Understand What Happened to the Canaanites,” *Philosophia Christi* Vol. 11, no. 1 (2009): 53.

⁴³ Barth, 648.

⁴⁴ Kevin King, “Contemporary Ecclesiology” (lecture, THEO 945: Contemporary Ecclesiology, PhD seminar, Lynchburg, VA, October 22, 2013). King’s assertions find external support. One article reads, “But when Oprah entered the talk show scene in 1986, she “just blew the whole thing open,” McNamara said. “The only thing she was interested in was what made you feel, what made you cry, what you were scared of, what you were proud of. She was interviewing people as if she was talking to a child, getting to the bare emotional core.” . . . Oprah didn’t just transform daytime talk shows from gossipy to intimate, after all. She also broke down the traditional barriers of journalism.” “How Oprah Winfrey Changed America,” *Discovery News*, May 25, 2011, <http://news.discovery.com/human/oprah-winfrey-changed-america-110525.htm>

would take the chance of hosting inmates on its church campus.⁴⁵

One point the church would do well to emphasize in a burgeoning secular society is the social and financial impact of social ministry. If secular persons see churches providing substantive ministry to inmates or the poverty-stricken then the practical results are undeniable. Except for a radical, Mad Max, Anarchist fringe, all morally sane persons can agree that reducing recidivism is both financially and socially beneficial. Seeing a consistent and effective pattern of transformation in marginalized persons may dispel many of the ungrounded prejudices secular culture holds against evangelicals. The fruit of the Holy Spirit has never been out of moral fashion per the Apostle Paul's summary, "against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:23b). Even in the most hardened atheistic regimes virtues are praised and vices punished because no regime can survive without making such moral demarcations.

It is, for lack of a better term, "hands on" ministry that must accompany an apologetically nuanced preaching of the gospel. Richard Wurmbrand comments, "In the United States and other countries there are not so many poverty programs which do not work. St. Francis of Assisi's program worked. He became poor and influenced many rich men to give away their money, not in heavily borne taxation, but in jubilating love."⁴⁶ Jesus's call, reiterated by Bonhoeffer and Platt, highlights the primacy of sacrifice. A social ministry-intensive model of pre-apologetics

⁴⁵ See, Standing Watch – Office of the Sheriff, Franklin County, VA, Facebook post, November 23, 2013, accessed December 6, 2013. The following description was provided on the social media post by the Franklin County, Virginia Sheriff's Office, "A special thanks to the Rocky Mount Baptist Church for hosting a Thanksgiving meal for the trustees of the Franklin County Jail! Why would a church use its own building to prepare and host a meal for inmates? Simply to show the love of Christ to men who society often forgets (Matthew 25:35-40). Thank you for your Christian hospitality and care. Thank you Sheriff Overton and all of the dedicated Deputies who helped put this together. Many of the inmates have expressed how grateful and touched they were by this compassionate act of Christian love and wanted to say thank you." As of December 6, 2013, there were 269 likes and 28 shares of this event.

⁴⁶ Richard Wurmbrand, *100 Prison Meditations: Cries of Truth From Behind the Iron Curtain* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2000), 22.

does not allow apologists selfish study by completely divorce themselves from contact with “the least of these.” At this point, Bonhoeffer’s convicting words are quite appropriate “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”⁴⁷ Christ’s call in Matthew 25:31-46 smacks of anything other than cheap grace. Feeding, clothing, and visiting unclean persons in rank prisons and unsanitary Third World hospitals not exactly a draw for persons whose religious commitment goes no deeper than sitting in clean seats in nice buildings for an hour on Sunday mornings.

Pushing back against this is the temptation for American evangelicals to slide into ministerial pragmatism. Barth explains the dynamic power behind effective Christian service:

The decisive work and the driving force in their daily defensive and offense of action will consist in their surrender; the decisive work of their hands and the fact that they lay all things, both great and small, in the hands of God. They know that all that men can do can be helpful only in the renunciation of all self-help, and the cry to God that he will be the helper and health of man and all men.⁴⁸

Barth’s words are helpful for those who wrongly infer that social ministry is some sort of pragmatic key for church growth.

As Spiegel so aptly writes, “Let’s not give atheists moral ammunition for their skeptical cannons. Let’s demonstrate patience and long-suffering with them.”⁴⁹ Active ministry to the least

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 47.

⁴⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Vol. IV, Part 2, trans G.W. Bromiley, eds. G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 704-705.

⁴⁹ Spiegel, 127.

of these will not only deprive the unbeliever of this ammunition but will expose their unwarranted bias against evangelicals. I am not claiming that skeptical arguments are qualitatively *ad hominem*s against evangelicals. However, the honest skeptic should be able to admit that Dawkins has taken pains to encourage his adherents to openly mock and ridicule Christians. Not only are Dawkins's diatribes soaked in *ad hominem*s, the popular-level reactions his arguments stir against people of faith are anything other than collegial.⁵⁰ Yet, would not Dawkins' championing of intolerance seem absurd if the ones mocked were pursuing inmate rehabilitation, adoption, foster parenting, brokering peace between families separated by court order, and providing hope to the ill, and assistance to the poverty stricken? Skeptics still may maintain that they cannot accept the tenets of Christian theology because of evidential concerns. Yet even in the face of mock and ridicule, 21st century Western Christians would do well to remember the words of Tertullian, "If then (as I have elsewhere declared) we Christians are expressly commanded by our Master to love our enemies, whom then have we left to hate?"⁵¹ *Yet given the massive and often unspoken influence of emotive stimuli, a robust social ministry to the least of these may be a reservoir of untapped pre-evangelism potential.* Due to a fairly recent renaissance in apologetics, the apologist has a plethora of tools at his disposal. In addition to having a well-stocked intellectual arsenal I suggest an emphasis of Matthew 25 in local church ministry could navigate doubters past emotional barriers to an actual assessment of Christian

⁵⁰ LaShawn Barber, "Richard Dawkins encourages atheists to mock and ridicule Christians," *World Magazine*, March 28, 2012, http://www.worldmag.com/2012/03/richard_dawkins_encourages_atheists_to_mock_and_ridicule_christians. Barber writes, "Dawkins called on atheists and agnostics to "ridicule and show contempt" for the religious and their doctrines. The example he used was the Roman Catholic belief that the bread and wine of communion turns into the actual body and blood of Christ. He encouraged atheists to mock and ridicule the religious in public."

⁵¹ Tertullian, *The Apology of Tertullian and the Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, trans. W.M. Reeve & Jeremy Collier (London: Newberry House, 1889), 103.

truth claims.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I argued that there is a possible link between poverty and apologetics within the local church in an increasingly secularized culture. Social ministry, a biblical and socially adept method of apologetics as well as an effective force in rebutting anti-Christian prejudice within contemporary Western culture, is that link. I argued for this premise in three particular divisions: First, I provided an overview of the biblical connection between tangible social ministry and rational apologetics. Second, I exposed historic abuses of social ministry that resulted an attempt, whether intentional or incidental, to supplant the preaching of the gospel. I also gave an amended model of social ministry and rational apologetics. This model is predicated upon the premise that biblical social ministry, combined with an apologetically nuanced communication of the gospel, is an effective means of removing ungrounded but pervasive anti-Christian bias in the culture at large. Third, I gave examples as to how this model dismantles anti-Christian prejudice within contemporary Western culture and opens the door for skeptics to be both emotionally and rationally justified in conducting an actual investigation into the truth of Christianity.

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