

Answers to Common Objections Regarding Compassionate Ministry

by Jerry M. Ireland

1. *Engagement in compassionate ministry will cause us to lose our focus on soul-winning.*
This is one of the most common objections to the church's involvement in compassionate ministry. It is believed that if we engage too much in compassionate ministry we are in danger of losing our focus on winning souls. It is believed that this is how some denominations lost their focus and came to an almost exclusive emphasis on compassionate works. The problem with this view is that it is based on several false assumptions. First, liberal churches that do have an almost exclusive focus on compassionate ministry did not become liberal as a result of their serving the poor and needy. It is not as though they went out and started loving their neighbor and suddenly became unable to love God, who commands us to do that very thing. Their liberal theology came first, and from that came their articulation of a social gospel. This is the case with all of the founders of social gospel movement. Second, the very term "soul-winning" represents a misunderstanding of what the Church is called to do. God sends us to people, and people are both body and soul. Plus, an exclusive focus on soul-winning actually gave rise to the social gospel! Because certain revivalist preachers believed that society would be automatically transformed as people got saved, they advocated that the sole Christian calling was evangelism. But this represents a departure from historic Christianity, which has always, since its inception, demonstrated a concern for the poor and marginalized by creating the first hospitals, the first orphanages, first facilities for the care of wounded soldiers, and numerous other ministries aimed at the poor and suffering (see Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*). Third, this view overlooks that the NT explicitly instructs us to love our neighbor (see Mark 12:31; Matt. 5:43; 19:19; 22: 39; 28:18-20; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8).
2. *Since eternal matters outweigh temporal ones, we should focus our efforts on evangelism.*
While agreeing that the eternal outweighs the temporal, we must remember that God created people with both a body and soul. Thus, Jesus himself met both spiritual and physical needs (Luke 4:23, 40; 5:15, 17; 6:7, 18–19; 7:7; 8:2, 43, 47; 9:1–2, 6, 11, 42; 10:9; 13:14; 14:3–4; 17:15; 22:51). Plus, the early church demonstrated an ongoing concern for physical healing (Acts 6:1; 8:7; 9:34; 10:34; 28:8), for caring for widows (1 Tim. 5:9, 16), and for helping the poor (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 13:3, Gal. 2:10; James 2:2-6). Since Jesus provides the model for ministry that we are to follow, we too should minister to physical needs. There is no basis in the NT for a strict focus on spiritual matters alone that ignores physical needs. We need to remember that in caring for temporal needs, we can sometimes direct folks to eternal matters. We should not engage in compassion *in order* to lead people to Christ, but rather because we ourselves are filled with God's love and, like Jesus, care about the suffering of others. Our genuine love demonstrates God's love in practical ways, and points people to the love of Christ.
3. *In the New Testament, concern for the poor always focuses on those in the Church.*
A few things can be said about this. First, there *is an emphasis* (though not an exclusive one) on concern for the poor in the church. This is the case in the book of Acts. This though should cause us to pause and reflect for a moment: Are we actually doing this?

Are we taking care of the poor within our own church, or within the Christian community at large? Or are we only showing up at churches in poor communities or in poor countries to preach from their pulpits? Are we including the poor as active members of our church boards and our committees, or are we only inviting the wealthy, because of their resources and influence? The point is, do we actually embody this emphatic concern for the poor in the church that is contained in the NT, to which we so readily point? Or, has it simply become an excuse to avoid caring for the poor wherever they are? Second, though there is an “emphasis” on the poor within the church, the NT picture does not focus *only* on those within the church. The commandment to love your neighbor, coupled with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), explicitly defines our neighbor as *anyone in need*. Third, Luke’s entire Gospel emphasizes God’s concern for the poor and marginalized. This comes out in the announcement of Jesus’ birth to poor shepherds, in Mary’s angelic visitation and subsequent song of Luke 1:46-55, and in numerous other verses (see Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13; 14:21; 16:20-22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:2). If this is a concern of Jesus’, it should be a concern of ours. Fourth, service to the poor must be understood as pointing to the kingdom of God, in which all things will be set right, in which people will be healthy, whole, and free from sin and disease. Therefore, even serving the poor within the church has significance and application beyond the precise event described. Fifth, the fact that every human being is created in the image of God means that they have inherent value as God’s creation, and deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and love (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; Col. 1:5). Sixth, Christianity, from its inception and more than any other force in history, has radically changed the way the world views the poor and needy. Christianity was born into a world in which society was advised to let die those unable to work (Plato), in which human life was cheap and expendable (evident in Greco-Roman Gladiator games), and sickness and poverty were often linked to judgment by the gods (pagans) or God (the Jews). Remember the disciples question—“who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” (John 9:2-3)? Christianity brought with it a radically different view of sickness and poverty. As disciples we should appropriate this view as our own.

4. *Jesus’ demonstrations of compassion were always through miraculous healings, not through orphanages or giving money.*

This is true. However, stated this way it is misleading. This is because, as just alluded to, Jesus’ miracles were meant as signs of God’s already-not-yet Kingdom (in John’s Gospel the preferred term for “miracle” is the Greek word for “sign”). Thus, miracles pointed to God’s coming reign of righteousness and justice, in which these foundational characteristics of God’s sovereignty will be fully manifest. Jesus’ healing miracles were an overturning of the effects of sin, demonstrating that the Kingdom had come in Christ. “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Jesus’ miracles thus represented the in-breaking of the Kingdom. The church’s demonstration of justice and righteousness in serving the poor accomplish precisely the same task. Thus, Jesus says, “greater things than these will you do!” Not only is the church equipped to point to the Kingdom by praying for God’s miraculous intervention, but to equally point to the Kingdom through acts of loving service.

5. *Even if we engage in compassionate ministry, we should explicitly make evangelism our top priority.*

This is one of the most challenging objections, because all Evangelical Christians want to uphold the importance of evangelism (that's why we call ourselves "Evangelical"). Sadly disagreement with this statement is often falsely portrayed as a lack of commitment to evangelism. But, as the late South African missiologist David Bosch has observed, as soon as we declare one thing to be the priority, then we make the other optional. As we have already shown, this does not line up with the biblical mandate. There is no reason that both the Great Commission (disciple making) and the Great Commandment (love your neighbor) cannot both be prioritized as necessary and related aspects, though distinct from one another, regarding the mission of the Church. In fact, as John Stott has observed, making disciples must include (not just result in) compassion and social justice, since compassion was a central feature of Jesus' own ministry. We would do well to heed the example of some who helped frame section 5 of the Lausanne Covenant on World Evangelization, titled "Christian Social Responsibility." They said, "we repudiate as demonic any attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action" (see John Stott, *Making Christ Known*, 24).

6. *Christians who emphasize compassionate ministry lack enthusiasm for evangelism.*

This is simply false. Though we may be able to point to individuals here and there who lacked the same passion for evangelism as they had for social concern, the fact is most great theologians and leaders throughout Church history have been advocates for both evangelism and serving the poor. Among them are the giants of the faith: Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Jonathon Edwards, Bonheoffer, Spurgeon, Carl Henry, and many others taught that Christians had a responsibility to care for the poor. Augustine once melted down the gold from the church's altar and gave it to the poor. Aquinas said that whatever one has in abundance belongs to the poor. Edwards said we should give "bountifully and sufficiently"! These were all men who were actively engaged in serving the poor, and yet also passionate about conversions.