

Whatever Happened to a Caring Church?

David Cooper, Ph.D., Senior Pastor
Mt. Paran Church of God, Atlanta, GA

The Christian Band DC Talk sings a song titled, “Love is a Verb.” The Christian life is more than a matter of what we believe; it’s a matter of how we live. The question is, Whatever happened to good works? We know that we are not saved, sanctified or filled with the Holy Spirit by works; rather, it is by grace through faith. But the result of faith is a life of good works.

Jesus calls us to a life of good works: “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, *NIV*). There is the problem of *dead works* as in the case of the old life (Hebrews 9:14); *prideful works* as in the case of the Pharisees who prayed and fasted to be seen by men; and *traditional works* for the sake of ritualism that lacks true worship (Isaiah 1:13).

The word *good* (*agathos*, Greek) means that which is good in its character, morally honorable and pleasing to God, and that which benefits others (Ephesians 2:10; 4:12; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; Titus 2:14).

Lessons for Life and Ministry

I. GOOD WORKS QUALIFIES FAITH

The apostle James, in the first book written in the New Testament, builds a solid case that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). The kind of works he has in mind are works of love, benevolence and provision for the underprivileged:

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17, *NIV*).

James tells us in no uncertain terms that good works is the measurement of true religion: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27, *NIV*).

II. REMEMBER THE POOR

Ministry to the poor is central to the gospel of Christ and the commission of the church in its responsibility to others (see Luke 4:18, 19; Acts 4:32-35; Galatians

2:10).

Listen to the stunning challenge of the apostle John: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17, 18, *NIV*).

Ministering to the poor involved two vital acts of kindness: (1) to provide for their basic provisions; (2) to teach them responsibility for life so they break the cycle of poverty often ingrained for generations (see John 5:1-14). The goal of ministry is to restore people to health, not just give a handout. Jesus offers wholeness, not simply healing: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23, *NIV*).

III. PERSONAL PIETY AND SOCIAL ACTION

The authentic gospel is and has always been a social gospel that demands social action. Jesus was “moved with compassion” when He saw the multitudes (Matthew 14:14). Unfortunately, much of the church today is moved more to anger over social issues than it is to compassion. We have the tendency to think of social problems like poverty, crime, out-of-wedlock births, divorce and AIDS as issues instead of people. But the fact remains that love changes the world, not anger.

In some respects, the holiness movement erred greatly in its early beginnings by defining holiness primarily in terms of personal piety instead of social action. They talked a lot about loving God but very little about loving your neighbor as yourself. But you can't have one without the other. The commandments are inseparably bonded together. Remember John's sobering words, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Holiness is Christlikeness. Holiness means to be a friend of sinners even as He was a friend of sinners; to preach the gospel to the poor, for that was His mission, to touch the lepers of this world as He touched the leper, to show mercy to the sinful even as He pardoned the woman caught in adultery, and to go about doing good and healing all who are oppressed of the devil because that's what Jesus did (see Acts 10:38). Holiness is not measured as much by the negatives—what we don't do—as it is by the positives—what we do for the glory of God.

IV. GOOD WORKS AND SUCCESS IN MINISTRY

Christ's analysis for success in ministry is based on our good works of kindness and love.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’” (Matthew 25:34-40, *NIV*).

Mother Theresa puts it well in “Garment of Love:”

Love has a hem to her garment
That reaches the very dust.
It sweeps the streets and lanes,
And because it can, it must.