



Christian Youth and Social Responsibility

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Introduction:

There is a dichotomy in Christian thinking while discussing Mission – Evangelism and Social Responsibility. Over the years the church has emphasized Evangelism as the primary mission based on the Great Commission mentioned in Matthew 28: 18 – 20. However, it has to be noted that the Bible is not silent on the issue of Social responsibility. There are many passages in the Bible which exhorts Christians to carry out social responsibility. In fact, the focus is more on social responsibility than evangelism.

This paper works toward providing the biblical mandate for social responsibility and the various means for Christian youth to be involved.

I. BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Mission mandate for Christians does not just start from Matthew 28. Even Jesus himself came with a mission. Jesus got his own understanding of who he was and why he had come from the Scripture—the Old Testament. Therefore to understand Christian mission we have to step back into the Old Testament.

The need for evangelizing people which we call our mission became a necessity because of Adam's sin. This history is set in Genesis 3. If Adam would not have committed sin then what would have been the mission for humanity? The creation account of human beings is not found in Genesis 3 but in Genesis 1. So let us visit Genesis 1 to understand mission.

a. Creation and its implications on social responsibility

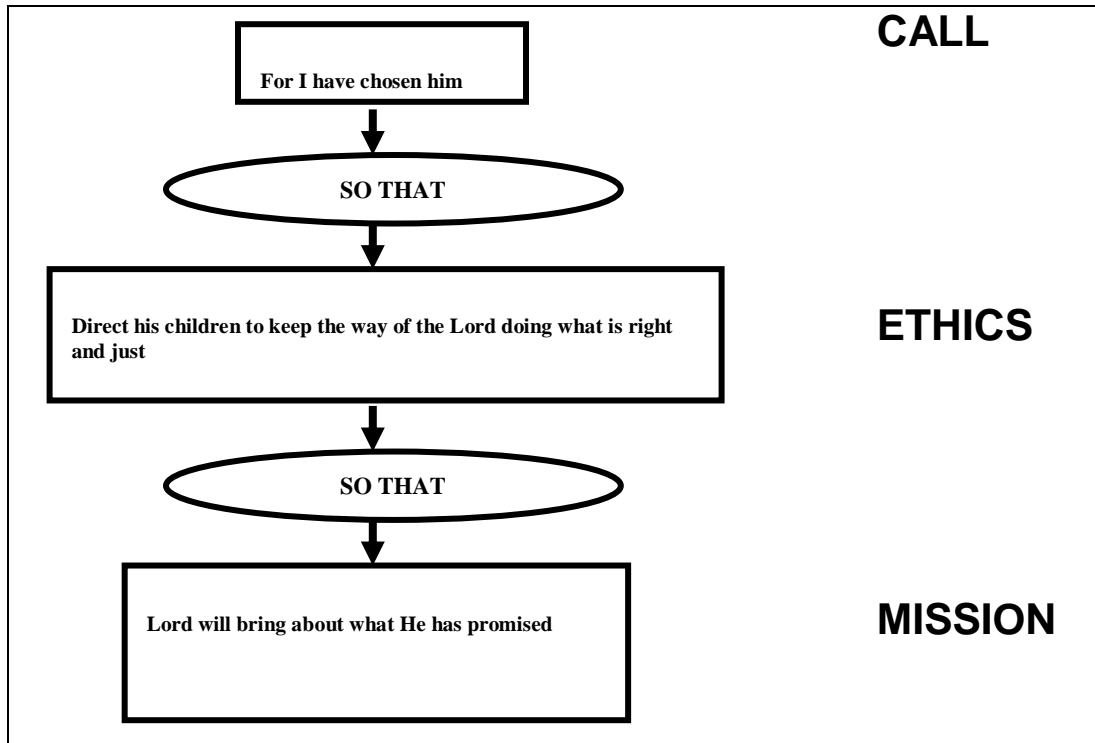
Humanity with a mission: Mission means to have a purpose to accomplish. The Old Testament presents the arena or the place of mission as the world. Mission does not happen in heaven or in hell but on earth. The very first thing we discover in the book of Genesis about humankind is that when God created them he gave them a mission. He put them on the earth to be responsible for the earth, to have dominion and manage creation (Gen 1: 28, 29). Stewardship and management of the earth and its resources is a valid part of the mission of being human in God's world. The implication is that if some human beings are denied access to the resources of the earth (eg. water) or cannot work productively due to their own belief systems or

rejected from being employed or deprived of economic resources then we have a responsibility to enable them live humanly. This is a social responsibility which God expects from each one of us.

Humanity in God's image: We are made in the image of God. God says in Genesis 1:26 "Let us make man in our image". And verse 27 goes on to say that, "In the image of God he created them, male and female he created them". Men and women are equal recipients of the image of God and there is no distinction between the sexes in terms of value and dignity or any race or caste distinction. This means that since all human beings are made in the image of God in the human society there is no place for any kind of differentiation based on class, wealth, caste, colour or sex. So to work for a new order of social equality and for the empowerment of women in a community is a valid part of God's mission – especially in a society where women are so often oppressed, deprived of dignity or rights and people are denied of their rights based on caste or race. That is why the Bible tells us that what we do to any other human beings who are considered least; we in effect are doing to God (Matt 25:40). There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ (Gal 3:28). The Christian view is that all are made in God's own image and therefore we have the social responsibility to love and share our life with them, which is the mission God has given to us.

b. Ethics in social responsibility

Genesis 18:19 records the selection of Abraham. We claim to be descendants of the chosen people from the call given to Abraham. This call is important for us to review from Mission perspective.



Many times we look at the Call and then go directly to the Mission overlooking Ethics. In the call of Abraham, we see that when God fulfills His mission of redeeming the nations through Abraham He expects Abraham to follow the ethical principles by following the Lord's commandments. The call includes the ethical practices of the people who were called "To live as the people of God". It is not like the English saying "All's well that ends well". While living in this world it is also important how we live.

This has an implication for us on the social responsibility. We have to follow the commandments which God has given and fulfill our social responsibility. God expects us to live an honest life, have an attitude of serving and to be good stewards of the resources given to us.

c. Land and its implications to social responsibility

When the people of Israel were called to be the royal priesthood and holy nation (Exodus 19:18) they were given laws to follow. If they did not follow the laws it was said that the land will vomit them out (Leviticus 20:22). So the land demands a specific lifestyle from the Israelites and it acted as a Spiritual thermometer for Israel.

In the Old Testament the Lord expresses his desire that there should be no poor among you (Deuteronomy 15:4) and he constantly reminds the Israelites that they have to care for the poor. When they reap the harvest they are not supposed to reap to the edge and they are not supposed to gather the gleanings. They have to leave it for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10).

Do not deny justice to your poor people (Exodus 23:6). Even in the tithes the Lord expects a portion to be set aside for the poor, aliens and widows (Deuteronomy 26: 12). Even the cause for Lord's wrath against Israel in sending them into exile was attributed to their negligence in not taking care of the needs of the poor (Amos 2: 6-9).

The Lord also demands Israelites to ensure justice is done for all (Micah 6:8; Exodus 23: 6, Isaiah 1: 17 etc).

All these exhortations have implications on our social responsibilities. As we live in this world we have to strive towards providing care for the poor and be involved in issues of justice. To be blessed by the Lord and to live as the people of God we have to help the poor and needy and be involved in justice issues.

d. Gospel and its implications to social responsibility

Coming of Jesus: We all know that Jesus Christ came into this world to save the sinners (Matthew 9:13). However, we do not know that Christ came into this world to do Justice as well. The coming of Jesus as mentioned in Malachi 2:17 & 3:1 teaches us that the Lord intends to send Jesus Christ into this world as an answer to the wearying question asked by the people "Where is the God of Justice?"

While introducing himself in Nazareth he quoted Isaiah 61: 1, 2 which says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to preach the good news to the poor". Even good news preached to the poor was shown as a mark of the Messiah (Matthew 11: 5-6). It seems Jesus is giving a preferential option¹ for the poor. He even exhorts the rich person who came to him to sell all things and give it to the poor to have eternal life.

Jesus' teachings: The poor were denied equal rights and considered as sinners during the time of Jesus (Matthew 9: 10). But Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor; for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). The Samaritans and women were looked down socially by the Jews. But Jesus gave them dignity (John 4:1-26). He even chides the Pharisees saying, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former (Matthew 23:23).

¹ In 1979, the Latin American bishops met in Puebla, Mexico to address the affairs and direction of the Catholic Church in Latin America and issued a statement. The bishops titled one of the key sections of their document "The Preferential Option for the Poor". That single phrase that has so provoked the larger church's social imagination.

While talking about the final judgment Jesus said that it will be based on what you have done for the least of my brethren (poor, socially oppressed and marginalized) you have done unto me (Matthew 25:31-46).

Jesus' life and his teachings bear an implication on our social responsibility. Helping the poor and needy is not an option but duty of Christians as it has been commanded by Jesus himself. That is why Paul was reminded by the pillars of the church James, Peter and John to remember the poor in his ministry (Galatians 2:10).

e. Early church response to social responsibility

In Romans 12:13 and I Timothy 6:18 the rich were commanded to be generous. Romans 15:26-27 and II Corinthians 8:4, 9:13 talks about sharing as a proof of obedience to the gospel. Same concern is repeated throughout the New Testament for the poor and needy (I John 3: 16-17) and of economic and social equality between all people (II Corinthians 8: 13-15 and James 2: 2-6).

The early church's response to the gospel also emphasizes the social responsibility of the present church on how we should be involved in caring for the poor, needy and marginalized.

II. CHRISTIAN YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL ISSUES

Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the life of their societies. – Kofi Annan.

Paul while writing to Timothy mentions, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (I Timothy 4:12).

Christian youth could take up social responsibility in different areas as well as influence others. Some ways of involvement are given below.

a. Advocacy campaigns

In eradicating poverty in September 2000 under the aegis of United Nations 189 countries signed the Millennium declaration which contained a group of goals & targets to halve extreme poverty by 2015 called as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Christian response towards achieving these goals is a campaign called Micah Challenge India. This is part of an International Campaign. The Campaign works towards advocating with the government to enact pro poor policies, ensure government programmes are implemented properly in their own locations and work towards achieving the

MDGs at the local level. Christian youth can be part of this campaign. They can motivate the church to be part of the campaign and involve in programmes which work towards achieving the MDGs. (www.micahchallenge.co.in)

b. Involve individually on justice issues

Volunteer with development agencies involved in providing relief to disaster victims. In your localities be involved in caring for the poor and the marginalized. Keep abreast of issues that concern the society. Speak up against injustice meted out against the poor and the marginalized through the local paper. Take up issues with the local panchayats or authorities concerning development issues. Support and counsel HIV infected and affected families.

c. Career pathing

Youth can choose addressing justice issues such as working toward eradicating poverty and marginalization, being involved in peace initiatives and providing care as their Career. There is a great need in development sector. Medical professionals, social workers, people committed to serve poor in needy areas, in HIV & AIDS issues, the list can go on.

d. Embody Values

The place where we live either in the family, educational places or working places or in the wider society emulate Christian values, of honesty, trustworthiness, holiness, stewardship, accountability, transparency and servant leadership.

Conclusion

Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment (Ecclesiastes 11: 9).

Go forth with this renewed understanding and be involved with issues which concern the heart of God.