

COMMERCE WITHOUT MORALITY

As Christians, we are called to be light and salt in this world, to provide leadership in ethics and promote Biblical morals in our community and culture. Many theologians teach that the one of the jobs of the local church is to be the “conscience of the community.”

If you were to ask the general public, what campaigns Christians have mounted in this regard or what churches seem to be interested in, you would probably hear the top three as Abortion, Fighting pornography, and opposing Homosexual marriage. All these are highlighted often in the news. Certainly there are Scriptural references that would spur us to wage a fight against these social ills. But, Jesus never actually mentioned any of those specifically. He did talk about the way we treat our fellowman, though-- a lot. He spoke about materialism, greed, the problem of riches, the oppression of other people and was the champion of the outcasts of society—the sick, the handicapped, the women, the children, the publican and sinner.

Where are the voices of the Christian today as see the every widening gap between the rich and poor of our society, the injustice in the workplaces, and unfair treatment of others. Why does the public not perceive of the evangelical church as championing these causes?

I recently visited in a home of a friend in Mexico, one room with a bed, table, hot plate and a few chairs for him, his wife and daughter. You would think that this is an uneducated and unemployed man. In fact, he is educated (a good Sunday School teacher) and employed as a foreman for a major U. S. automaker plant, making \$12 a day. I read where the CEO of his company took home about \$19 million in a year or 5000 times more than the person making his company’s seatbelts.

The average CEO in America is now making about 300 times on the average the salary of his typical worker. A gap that has increased dramatically in the past few decades, as corporate salaries rise while worker’s wages remain stagnant. This, despite the fact that worker productivity has increased. It is also, by far, the biggest gap among any industrialized nation. In Great Britain, the CEOs make about 30 times more. Company performance doesn’t seem to play a role in the big paychecks of the corporate leaders. Their salaries and bonuses go up, even when the company performs below expectations.

The drum beat of corporate greed brings mega-mergers among competitors so as to minimize expense, cut thousands of jobs and eliminate pensions. Companies take jobs overseas to further exploit workers who are desperate for any paycheck thus fattening their own bank accounts more. With this consolidation and takeover movement, many independent companies and businesses are closed thus leading to virtual monopolies that anti-trust laws were designed to prevent. It has inhibits diversification and independence, the very virtues our capitalistic system is supposed to foster. Big companies avoid taxes by setting up storefront overseas corporations

and sidestep laws and regulatory bodies. We have witnessed the fall of major companies and their chief executives finally caught up in their unscrupulous practices.

Wal-Mart has become the nation's largest company yet its employees have to rely on food stamps, and other tax-supported programs to survive as a family, since health insurance is are offered to so few. Recently, governments have stepped in to require the company to offer benefits.

Congress now ponders laws to prevent check cashing companies charging 30% interest and more to of all people, our soldiers near bases.

We gasped this year at the record profits of major oil companies while almost weekly raising gas prices on a whim with no bearing at all to actual product costs. Profit is not a dirty word, of course. We all know that unless companies make a profit, nobody has job anywhere. And, we know in our free market society, there will be inequities in pay based on supply and demand, qualifications and education. Our economic system is truly one of the greatest historical accomplishments of humanity and provides freedom for investment, entrepreneurialism, and ownership. But the issue here is how people are treated by others who have control and about maintaining peace and comfort for as many as possible and giving everyone opportunity to pursue goals in life.

We are witnessing commerce without morality.

I have been a chief officer of a small broadcast corporation for over 30 years and know well that it is only through making a profit that a company can invest in capital improvements, perfect its product, and pay employees. Without profits, we don't have any money to spend, and spending money and buying products and services is what creates jobs for everyone. But is it fair, that just a few people have that opportunity to enjoy that spending? The wealthiest 225 people in the world earn more than 3 Billion of the world's poorest folk. The 400 wealthiest people in the U.S. have an astonishing net worth of \$1.2 trillion dollars.

People working hard for companies find it difficult to make ends meet and plod on without insurance or retirement benefits, while the executives lavish themselves with bonuses and perks. They stash their loot in guaranteed pensions, deferred compensation, and find ways to protect themselves from taxes.

In Africa and many other third world countries, the wealthy few wield such power that common folk have no opportunity to advance, no matter what their talent or ability. Poverty, homelessness, and the plight of millions of refugees is a cancer growing in our world. We know that such hopelessness among the masses is a root cause of unrest, bitterness, despair and terror.

Should we as Christians care about this? Does it break your heart? Does God care? Would Jesus care? What does the Bible have to say?

There is supreme virtue in neither riches or poverty. Either can be guilty of greed and injustice. The real issue here, is how we treat one another as God's children.

Let's look first at the Old Testament, where God himself developed the form of government and law.

Deut 15:4-11.. ..The seventh year, the year for canceling debts is near, so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this, the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land, Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and the poor and the needy in your land.

Laws provided for grain and crops to be left behind for foreigners, orphans, widows,. Other laws provided for sharing with immigrants, and lending to those in need with no interest. Every fiftieth year, the Jubilee property was returned to the family of the original owner. The intent of the laws was to prevent concentration of wealth. The prime mechanism of poverty and oppression in many cultures is of course, debt. This allowed for the cancellation and a new beginning.

When God provided for the his people coming out of Egypt, he gave manna, but firmly instructed that no one take more than they needed for that day. Paul also cited this example of equality in II Cor. 8-9 as he urged the Christians to be generous in giving to other Christians and in their wealth give to those in need. He said.. Our desire is not that others might be relieve while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time you plenty will supply their need. –He that gathered much did not have too much and he that gathered little did not have too little. Ex 16:18

The prophets also insisted on justice for everyone. Amos denounced those who trampled on the needy and destroyed the poor in order to gain wealth. He railed against those who live in luxury while the poor were being crushed. The prophets main judgments, in fact, were against idolatry and social injustice. The living God insists on morality and social responsibility- And certainly in commerce and that is what his children should stand up for in all situations.

The Old Testament is filled with admonitions – Isaiah said... What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces and grind the faces of the poor, said the Lord God of hosts. ...they take away the rights from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless. Isaiah further writes- How terrible it will be for those who make unfair laws and those who make life hard on people. They are not fair to the poor, and they rob my people of their rights. They allow people to steal from widows and orphans, what really belongs to them. He said the rulers of Judah were rich because they cheated others and indulged in self-centered wantonness, oblivious to the suffering of the oppressed. Jeremiah says... they judge not the cause of the fatherless, yet they prosper, and the rights of the needy do they not judge. Ezekiel speaks against those who greedily gain from their neighbors and dealt with stranger and widows with oppression Malachi condemns those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless and turn aside the stranger.

The Psalmist writes- God always keeps promises. God judges in favor of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. Happy are those who are concerned for the poor, The Lord will help them when they are in trouble. He shall break in pieces the oppressor. God executes judgment for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry, the Psalmist declares. Further the Wisdom literature declares- Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs) Concern for the poor, hungry and vulnerable people is pervasive in the Hebrew Scriptures. It flows from the revelation of God through the rescue of an enslaved people. God's people knew what it was like to be slaves, and they were to rise above that in their treatment of others in business and commerce.

Jesus's mission statement found in Luke the 4th chapter, quotes the words of Isaiah the prophet- he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And Jesus states that the prophecy is fulfilled in your ears. While certainly, Jesus mission was a spiritual venture to save the world from sins and not overthrow or change prevailing governments, it is clear where his heart lies-- He came as a poor man that recognized that it would be difficult for the rich to accept his message, because of their greed and love of money and power. Harder than the camel getting through the needles' eye, but of course, possible with God. Accepting Jesus required humility and sacrifice, something the poor understood. Even the mother of Jesus in her magnificent song- said he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty..and exalted those of low degree.

Jesus reached out to those at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. He accepted people who were not among the elite. He invited the rich young ruler to sell his

possessions and follow him, but he refused. In the portrayal of the day of judgment, Jesus said we will be judged on how we treated him when he was hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison.. that is how we treated others for that is an indication on our treatment of the Christ. (Mt 25)

Jesus repeated similar themes of the Old Testament when he vilified the scribes and Pharisees who oppressed the widows while making a public display of their piety. They devoured widows houses, he said, no doubt with high interest and mortgage foreclosures. Jesus told them they had forgotten the key elements of religion=== justice, love and mercy.

Jesus told the story of the reversal of fortune when he pulled back the curtain of Hades to show us that the poor beggar, Lazarus, ignored by the rich man, though he was right at his house enjoying paradise, while the rich man was in torment.

Jesus redefined the meaning of love for neighbor in the story of the Good Samaritan when he said...whoever is in need is my neighbor.

The fair treatment of others is simply the foundation of the Christian ethical lifestyle as indicated by the Golden rule-- Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

The self-satisfaction and self-investment of the rich and others is seen in the parable of Jesus of the man whose soul was required of him, just as he had built bigger barns to store all his goods.

Jesus drove the money-changers from the temple who were defrauding the poor in the name of religion, even. He saw an injustice and took action...Do WE?

While Jesus primary concern was the souls of men, it is evident from his parables, his example and teachings that unfair treatment of other people is unacceptable. He challenged those laws that had been set up that stood in the way of accomplishing good. For instance, he healed on the Sabbath day despite the protestations of the Pharisees and permitted his disciples to pick the grain, because they were hungry.

One of the key principles taught by Paul to Christians was ...not to look at our own interests but To the interests of others!

Look at the early example of the church with regard to those in need- The Jerusalem church members were willing to sell what they had to distribute to those in need, a type of Christian socialism to make sure everyone was cared for in that situation. Paul speaks of the philosophy of generosity in II Corinthians 8 and 9. He tells Christians that they need to work with their hands to earn so that we may Share with Other.

James asks the question....why would you show favoritism to the rich man coming to church instead of the poor man, when it is the rich that are taking you to court and oppressing and exploiting you.

Listen to James- “You hoarded wealth in the last days, Look- the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord. “

James indicates that part of pure and undefiled religion is to look after widows and orphans (the helpless of that society) in their distress.

John tells us we can't just bless the needy with our lips, we must give to them as they have need, if we are truly Christians and truly love.

Are Christians today responding to the inequities in our society...to the rich getting richer and the poor, poorer?.. Are we taking a stand against the exploitation of poor and the excess of the riches?

The reason we hear so little is that unfortunately, more often than not, the church is guilty of the same type of sin--- ignoring others ... It is true that Christians are at the forefront of charities for the needy, but is it anything compared to what we spend on ourselves in the church. The average church allocates around 10% of expenditures for missions and benevolence, in other words- money spent somewhere else or given away. The rest we keep for church staff, building, programs, recreation, comfort, etc.

We like our large buildings, paid staff people, luxuries and convenience and see anything that disrupts that as a bother, even if it is the Great Commission or the call to help the needy. If our call is to Disciple and Serve others, how can we as a church of Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, justify using so little for our real purpose?!

We look at the television today and see lavish sets, designer clothes and hear of these leaders of the Christian faith, hauling in millions of dollars, having several homes, limos and personal attendants. Many have been charged with exploitation of widows and scam tactics, as we all well know.

The prevailing teaching of many of these evangelists is the “health and wealth” gospel, that God wants you rich and you just name what you need and claim it in His name. They excuse their excesses with “God is really blessing us.”

Recent national magazines highlighted the return of this with all the books written by evangelists.....Does God want you to be rich? YES Why not gain the whole world and my soul. It is appealing to the generation that has most everything given to them “I deserve it.. what I want, now . All about Me .. I deserve to be happy and I want money. Why would God want you to be rich, when he said, few rich will inherit the kingdom, because riches often separates us from God. No, God is not into us suffering,..and certainly not going hungry. We can enjoy the fruit of our labor .

Certainly Christians in the past have been at the forefront of movements that changed economic injustice in our society. It was Christians led by Wesley, Wilberforce and

Finney that stood up to begin the abolition movement to eliminate slavery. Progressive era leaders of the early 20th century fought for the child labor, safety and health laws that changed our business in America. The depression era initiatives and reforms after the wild speculation of the 1920s stock market were examples of corrections in our capitalistic system that had to be made to throttle the abuses of the wealthy. Then, the great Civil Rights movement that brought the end of discrimination and lack of opportunity for a segment of our society. All these reforms had at their heart, Christian ethics and fair treatment of others.

The current controversy of illegal immigrants from Latin America finds many Christian groups calling for walls to be built, workers here to be jailed or deported for coming in to take jobs. Shouldn't we be instead, asking the question, What can we do to help these folk. They come here not as terrorists, criminals or anarchists to break laws. They come only to find work to buy food... for they are hungry and in need. Remember the golden rule... would you, likewise risk your life, leave your country and family behind to find food, any food for your loved ones?

One time on the border in Nuevo Laredo, I met a young man who had ended up at the Iglesia de Cristo there after he saw a sign pointing to the church. He had come all the way from Honduras after a devastating hurricane had wrecked his country. There was not government aid, no agencies to help. His family had absolutely nothing. His wife and children were hungry. He set out to walk to America, where a distant relative in Dallas had told him there were plenty of jobs and money he could send back home. He had made it to the border but now was working odd jobs to earn \$400 to pay a "coyote" to get him into the U.S. He still needed \$200 when he told me his story. I said, you mean tonight, you could be on your way to Dallas and a job if you had \$200? He said, yes...we can cross the border tonight. I asked myself..do I help a person break an arbitrary man-made law...(borders) when no one will be harmed. Or do I obey God's law and lift up the fallen? I gave him the \$200. He made it.

Maybe Christians need to be asking our legislators...where are our spending priorities as a Christian nation? Why can't we help our neighbors, the refugees in Africa, the starving around the world more. If there are jobs here for people, why can't we open up legal means for them to enter. Yes, we do a lot, more than any other country in the world.. but think of the vast resources we waste on destructive activities.

What can I do, you ask?

First , we live our lives by moral principles ourselves. Be fair and just with everyone.. Resolve to live temperately, to support businesses that seem to have a more Christian philosophy of treatment of employees. Refuse to join into the race of always having bigger, better and more. If you buy stock in companies, watch their practices and use your vote and voice. Set aside an amount of money to assist others either individually or through reputable missions. \Second, we influence our church to take a stand and help in the world. Every congregation should have a policy to be benevolent and to serve the

needs in the local community and the world. Make sure the congregation provides generously for mission efforts. Churches, likewise, should never be guilty of hoarding money, building luxury around themselves, paying for staff just for convenience and comfort. ... Third, we strive to change what goes on in our culture through publicity, voting, non-violent organized efforts...just like we do for other social ills that violate our Christian ethics.

. We do not want to dismantle our strong economy and the freedoms we enjoy. Much of the reform we need must come from personal change. It requires a conversion within the heart of the violators, of course, and we as Christians have the means of change in Jesus Christ. It has been said that you can't legislate personal morality. No, we can force people to do right. We must preach, teach, pray and set the example.

But some of the reform can come via government intervention, just as we pass laws about treatment of others based on the Ten Commandments and common law. We live in a democracy and majority is supposed to rule. A majority of our nation is Christian. Our voice should be heard in our government hallways, in matters that can be altered by legislation. We can pass tax reforms to prevent many of the unjust practices and tax shelters. We can ask for minimum wage laws when US companies go into foreign countries. We can require companies of certain size to provide benefits to workers. We can pass laws to demand that corporate boards scrutinize all executive pay in light of company performance and ratio of wages of the workers. We ask legislators to continue to fund and not cut the aid to programs that truly help the poor not just in this country but our neighbors around the world. Sadly, the fat cats and corporations are the very ones funding the political campaigns of our representatives, so we face an uphill battle without reform in that circle as well.

The widening gap of the wealthy and the poor, the exploitation of the worker, the corporate greed, corporate crime, the lack of concern for the poor and homeless in the world. All these should touch our heartstrings and motivate us to preach it, pray it, practice it. We can make a difference!