

## A Gospel of True Transformation

The issue of the church's mission in the world requires great nuance. The church is to take the gospel of Christ into the world without being worldly (John 17:14-16). There are believers who desire purity, but seek it at the expense of true mission, and there are believers who go out zealously into the world, but do so at the expense of purity.

Much has been written on these matters. We do not wish to offer a full-scale treatment here. Rather, our narrow focus will offer clarification on how two Old Testament texts should and should not be understood in the church's mission in the world.

### Jeremiah 29:7

The LORD's directions to his people in Babylonian exile are often used today for calling believers to the betterment of the cities in which they live. God's people, belonging to the special kingdom of God, must pray for and seek the peace of the common city of man. The new covenant church, like Jerusalem of old, is called to this (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Certainly, believers must see these things as biblical priorities. However, God's commands to his people through Jeremiah are often misunderstood and misused.

The most important misunderstanding of this passage involves conflation. The common city of man and the special kingdom of God must be kept distinct. Believers have been redeemed from this present evil age (Galatians 1:4) and belong to the age to come (Philippians 3:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17). As believers engage in cultural activities, side by side with unbelievers, they must understand that the common city of man does not become the special kingdom of God, certainly not by human (even Christian) effort. In terms of this passage, Babylon cannot become Jerusalem, not even through the efforts of Jerusalem's citizens.

Everything that believers do, even cultural activities done side by side with unbelievers, must be done according to their new identity (and citizenship) in Christ; whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we must do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). An unbeliever can clean up trash in a park, but only a believer can clean up trash in a park for the glory of God. And even though only a believer can clean up trash in a park for the glory of God, the believer cannot transform the park into the new heavens and new earth. The apostle Peter makes clear that this great transformation involves a cosmic cleansing (2 Peter 3:7-13). Just as God wiped out unbelief in Noah's day with the great flood judgment, he will wipe out unbelief in our day with a great fire judgment at the return of Jesus Christ. The suddenness of that day (2 Peter 3:10) shows that cosmic cleansing, ushering in the new heavens and new earth, will not take place gradually. The new creation comes in by an instantaneous act of God, not a gradual work of the church. While the people of God are to do all their labors, even cultural labors, for God's glory, they cannot change the common city of man into the holy kingdom of God. The common city of man must be removed in judgment and give way to the new creation at Christ's return.

What does this mean for the church today, especially with reference to our passage at hand? Edmund Clowney strikes the balance: "Like Israel in captivity, the church will pray for the peace of the city where they dwell as resident aliens (Jeremiah 29:7; cf. 1 Timothy 2:2), but they have no abiding city here; they seek the Jerusalem to come (Hebrews 13:14)" (*The Church*, 176). The (common) cities in which believers live are not their homes. The home of the believer is heavenly, not earthly; his home is future, not present. Thus, the greatest way the believer can make use of the temporary peace that the common city enjoys is to insist that it is an expression

of God's patience, giving unbeliever time and opportunity to repent, believe and escape the great fire judgment to come (2 Peter 3:9-10). The peace of the common city is for the ultimate purpose of the special kingdom of God. The exiled people of Jerusalem found their welfare in Babylon's welfare in God's preservation of the line that would eventually bring about the birth of Jesus Christ in order to fulfill God's promise to send the one who would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15; cf. Matthew 1:12-17). The temporary and common peace that believer and unbeliever enjoy today is for the purpose of bringing in the fulness of God's elect people to faith in Christ, calling the unbeliever to faith and repentance, and preparing the believer for glory with Christ through suffering (Romans 8:17).

### **Micah 6:8**

Another passage used in discussion of the church's mission in the world is the call to justice, kindness and humility in the famous words of Micah 6:8. The call to justice, understood socially (distribution of wealth and poverty relief, in particular), receives, perhaps, the most attention.

The difference between what this passage teaches and the "social justice" interpretation of this passage is radical: social justice is man-centered, while biblical justice is God-centered. The context of this passage will show this.

In Micah 6, God calls his people to appear before him in judgment for their sin against him. God has been abundantly gracious to his people (see, for example, his reminder of redeeming them from Egyptian bondage in v. 4), but they have been rebellious against him. When God's people, through a representative, ask how they can approach him (v. 6), they offer him gifts: calves, rams, oil, and even a first-born child (vv. 6-7).

God's response to the externalistic and heartless offer of his people comes in v. 8 when he says, in effect, that he wants covenant relationship with his people. God's people had been walking in disobedience; their hearts were far from him. They misunderstood why God instituted sacrifices in old covenant worship: not so that they could earn his favor, but so that he could apply the perfect sacrifice of Christ to them in those types and shadows, and so remove their sins and bring them into fellowship with himself. This was the goal of the sacrifices: communion with God.

God's call to his people in this passage is a religious call, a call to heart religion. Biblical justice puts God first and, on that basis, loves people. Social justice puts people first and God second, if God is acknowledged at all. As Geerhardus Vos says, "What the prophets feature is the religious in the social; what many at the present time proclaim is the social devoid of or indifferent to the religious" (*Biblical Theology*, 276).

Love toward must manifest in love toward neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40; 1 John 3:17). Social justice programs blur or even eliminate the distinction between believer and unbeliever. Biblical justice does "good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). This distinction helps us appreciate the call of God upon his people in this passage.

God's call to justice is not a timeless, economic principle, irrespective of whether one is a believer or unbeliever. It is call for the members of the theocracy, the old covenant people of God under his special reign, to love one another as they have been loved by their covenant God. It is the Old Testament equivalent of the second great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). It is a reminder of the second table of the law (Exodus

20:12-17). In particular, doing justice means doing the opposite of what God's people in Micah's day had been doing: letting a man keep what belongs to him rather than steal from him (2:1-2), and being fair rather than cheating (3:11). Justice means loving my fellow believer because God has loved me. In short, biblical justice is obedience to God's commands. Social justice is obedience to the shifting imagination of men.

What about the legitimate social ills in the common city of man? The kingdom of God is seen in different ways, in the invisible church and in the visible church. The visible church embodies the kingdom of God by preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments and exercising discipline; this is its specific and narrow focus. The visible church is a spiritual, not a civil, political or economic, institution. However, this does not mean that believers have nothing to say or no way to influence the common city of man. The invisible church embodies the kingdom of God in the various ways believers live for God's glory. God's kingship and supremacy must pervade all areas of the believer's life (Matthew 13:33). Believers may and must show themselves as living under the lordship of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:22) outside of the visible church in whatever ways they are able. Believers engage the rich diversity of life in the common city of man and display the absolute supremacy of God in all things by doing all their labor for his glory. These labors come from their regenerated life in the invisible church as the embodiment of the kingdom of God. Thus, the people of God are enabled to speak to social ills with the gospel of Jesus Christ as the invisible church without requiring the visible church necessarily to address these social ills.

## **Conclusion**

The whole matter is captured well by Vos: "It is the special function of the Church to speak unceasingly and unfalteringly for this one supreme aspect of the future world, to insist in season and out of season that in it God and the service of God are to the highest good and satisfaction of mankind, that without which all other desirable things will lose their value and abiding significance" ("The Eschatology of the Psalter" quoted in *The Pauline Eschatology*, 358).