

You cannot find a man anywhere, however uncivilised or wild, who is without some idea of religion. This is because we have all been created to know the majesty of our Creator and, in knowing it, to think more highly of it than anything else. . . .

Now, eternal and immortal life can be found nowhere except in God. It follows, then, that the main care and concern of our life should be to seek God. We should long for him with all the affection of our hearts, and not find rest and peace anywhere except in him alone.

**—JOHN CALVIN, 1536<sup>1</sup>**

# INTRODUCTION

**Humanitarian:** *A person devoted to promoting the welfare of humanity.*<sup>2</sup>

**Jesus:** *The human-divine Son of God; the great High Priest who intercedes for His people at the right hand of God; the central figure of human history; the one who conquered sin and death; and the way, truth and life through whom alone can we be reconciled with God.*<sup>3</sup>

This world is broken. Make no mistake: no matter how your life has unfolded, God intended it to be different. In the beginning, when God created, all was good. It worked. But we broke it. We took pure Good and exchanged it for something impure and broken. We exchanged the truth that God created us to live with Him for the lie that there was something better. We exchanged what did matter for what didn't matter. We exchanged the magnificence of His eternal perspective for the banality of our temporal one. And we continue to do it today.

So we live in a broken world, groaning under the weight of its decay, haunted by the knowledge that it could have been different. We see shadows

and remnants of the perfection that was and is to be, but live in, with, and through the vestiges of brokenness.

We don't have to look very hard or dig very deep to discover the inescapable tragedy that surrounds us. Children starve, human beings are sold, multitudes die of malaria, and millions live in the streets. Medical epidemics sweep over countries like consuming wildfires, even while solutions exist. Devastating hunger plagues some homes, while culinary abundance exists in others—suffocating poverty living next to untold riches. In the midst of all of this, we grasp for meaning, hope, direction, and love, but often don't find them. We intuitively know that the world should be different.

This is the world Jesus confronted. He created this world and then became a part of it. Imagine what it must have felt like for Him to walk in what had been *good*, but was then corrupt and fallen. The God of the universe, the Creator of light and Giver of life, found Himself surrounded by injustice, sickness, hunger, and depravity.

If ever there existed a man for a job, it was Christ to fix the plight of His creation. It was Christ to restore the order of His Kingdom. Surely there has never been another human with proficiencies so perfectly fit to conquer the issues of global poverty, hunger, sickness, injustice, and oppression. It is odd then that of all the titles given to Christ, “humanitarian” has not been one of them.

In reality, there has never existed a person who taught and lived more for the welfare of humanity. Christ was a humanitarian for sure, but not the kind you would expect. He healed many, when He had the power to heal all. He fed many, when He had the power to feed all. He restored a few to life, liberated a few from suffering, and redressed a few injustices. But in all these matters, His work was totally incomplete from a statistical perspective. In fact, of all His work and effort, He actually focused on just one ultimate task. It was the task He prayed three times to have pass from Him, and after which He declared it finished.

Christ healed, He fed, He touched, and He loved; but above all, He conquered death and sin to provide an eternal solution to brokenness and separation.

So here we stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century, being

called to action—to get out there and touch a life, meet a need, and do what Jesus did. Without question we should respond to this call; there has never been a greater time or opportunity for Christians to get out of the church and into the world. Every Christian is called by Christ to radically invest in His creation, to walk as He walked, and to serve Him so that His purposes can continue to be fulfilled on earth. Jesus made immense social investment while on earth. But that is only part of the story.

We hold the power to do good on an unprecedented scale—and we should. But we should also ask ourselves *why*? Why should we invest in the suffering of all creation? Why did Jesus invest and why didn't He finish the task? Is there really a conflict between evangelism and social justice or just in the ways we understand them? These are the questions this book seeks to answer. But before we engage them, a few notes are in order.

Without question the issues discussed in this book are not easily resolved. This is due in part to the fact that there is no single, universally accepted approach to reconciling our spiritual nature and destiny with physical death, sorrow, and tragedy. There has rarely been agreement among modern Christians on how the work of evangelism and the work of social justice can be accomplished in harmony. One of the patriarchs of the social gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, when attempting to set down a complete understanding of the topic, admitted that his effort was both momentous and perhaps audacious.<sup>4</sup>

The topic of social justice, social Christianity, the social gospel, or the role of temporal humanitarian investment by Christians is expansive and any discussion must take place within clear boundaries to avoid confusion and frustration. At the outset, we must state that the foundation for our writing and thinking on this subject is the Bible, because we believe that it is the truth—the inerrant, authoritative, and final Word of God.

Second, this book is focused on the question of social investment and humanitarian effort as it relates to individuals, and in particular such work that is done by Christians for those who are not Christians. Of course, Christians have the responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering around the globe under the identical situations discussed in these chapters (James 2:15–17; 1 John 3:16–18), and we are most assuredly lacking

in our collective efforts. That said, this book does not cover that topic.

This also means that we will not specifically be addressing the need for corporate or societal efforts by the church (in the sense of local congregations of believers) or institutions. The present work is dedicated to how the individual follower of Christ should consider and react to these issues.

Third, this is not an academic treatment of these topics. We hope it is well reasoned and well supported, but it is neither scholarly in nature nor written from the perspective of a particular academic discipline (e.g., sociology, political science, economics, etc.). Detailed analyses of the historical social gospel have been written by competent scholars, and we have referenced many of these in our endnotes. If anything, this work has been written as an argument, intended to provoke consideration and reaction.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, the interviews and quotations in this book are not necessarily included because we agree with them entirely, but rather because we think they are worthy of consideration. Conversely, the interviewees in part two of this book, and the organizations they represent, may not agree with everything we have written. While part one of the book was substantially written before we did any of the interviews, the interviewees did not review the book before granting us interviews and therefore are not accountable for our opinions and conclusions.

Finally, it is our intent to challenge you to think through these issues deeply and carefully. In the first part of this work we are asking you to reconsider your view of humanitarian efforts. In the second part, we are asking you to exercise your renewed or solidified thinking by engaging interviewees and ideas you may be encountering for the first time. Both Ryan and I (Christian) are passionate about this topic, and while I have done the writing, we have engaged this work together in the hope that wherever you stand now, this book will move you closer toward Christ's call in your life.

PART ONE:

In Search of the  
**HUMANITARIAN**  
**JESUS**

The things that are seen are transient,  
but the things that are unseen are eternal.

**—2 CORINTHIANS 4:18**

# IS DOING GOOD, GOOD ENOUGH?

Buckled to the ground, covered in dirt, aching from a life of sickness and desperation; frantic for healing from a disease you don't understand, but know has killed your children, killed your family, killed your people, and is killing you.



Thirsty to your core, sun pounding down, willing to give all you have for a solitary drop of clean water. Praying that a well can be dug, water can be found, life can go on.



It's just another cold night on the concrete, getting harder by the day, but there's nowhere to go. The rain starts to fall and the wind picks up, but there's nowhere to go. You beg for food, for money, for hope.



Legs raw with welts from infected mosquitoes. You can hear your baby scream and know she is dying but are helpless to change her malaria-induced destiny. You desperately swat and brush the bugs away, but you know your other children will be bitten too.



You're still lying on the ground, covered in dirt, desperate for healing. Another year goes by; still no clean water, still no hope for life. Two more children gone, your welt-scarred legs a constant reminder of their fate . . .

Your life is draining out and deliverance doesn't come. You cling to the last bit, grip it in your fingers, because you fear the end and what waits beyond your last breath. You know there is something greater, but you don't know what. You pray that God, if there is a God, will reach out and speak. You pray for an answer to forever, but it doesn't come. Just one more shot, one more pill, one more glass of dirty water, one more lonely, hungry night, and then it is all over. You reach your last breath and then eternity.



Some two thousand years ago, while leaving a town filled with broken, hurting, hungry people, Jesus paused along the road to Jerusalem in response to a cry for mercy from Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. Jesus engaged him with a question: "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus responded with a request for sight, which Christ granted.<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, the encounter seems ordinary—a reasonable question with an obvious answer. But Bartimaeus was poor and blind; his life was unmistakably marked by his affliction, and Christ knew that before the encounter ever occurred. So why did He ask the question?

Bartimaeus lived with the seen and the unseen—the transient and the eternal. But for Christ, everything was seen—everything was eternal. Christ understood the reality that we see with physical eyes, the visible consequences of a broken world in our lives, but we often fail to see with spiritual eyes the eternal consequences that go with them. Christ said to people, "Your sins are forgiven," and they responded, "Yes, Lord, but I can't see." He said, "Your sins are forgiven," and they said, "Yes, Lord, but I'm hungry." "Your sins are forgiven . . ." "Yes, Lord, but I'm dying."

Today around our world, people just like Bartimaeus have real physical needs. But like you and me, they also have spiritual needs. Each of us, whether we realize it or not, needs to see Christ for who He really is. We need to have a powerful encounter with our Creator that can trans-

form our eternal destinies, not just our physical circumstances.

### **PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS**

In 1854, Charles Spurgeon began preaching in London. The city was engulfed in such poverty and social injustice that just a decade later, another London minister, William Booth, left his pulpit and walked out into the streets, founding what would become the Salvation Army to reach the poor, homeless, hungry, and destitute. It was in this London that on June 18, 1876, Spurgeon preached the following words:

Men have enough practical sense always to judge that if professed Christians do not care for their bodily wants, there cannot be much sincerity in their zeal for men's souls. If a man will give me spiritual bread in the form of a tract, but would not give me a piece of bread for my body, how can I think much of him? Let practical help to the poor go with the spiritual help which you render to them. If you would help to keep a brother's soul alive in the higher sense, be not backward to do it in the more ordinary way.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps from these words, Spurgeon was believed to have said, "If you want to give a hungry man a tract, then wrap it up in a sandwich." Many since that time have struggled with this idea and have reflected that it might be better said that if you want to give a hungry man a sandwich, you should wrap it up in a tract.

The sandwich-and-tract debate highlights the basic reality of Christ's encounter with each of us. The hungry need food, but we all need redemption. The blind need sight, but we all need to see our condition and separation from God. Every encounter between God and us has these two dimensions—the physical and the spiritual.

Christ came to seek and to save the lost. He moved through the world reaching out in perfect love to bring people to Himself and His offer of eternal life. The focus of Christ's life, as given by His father, was to provide a singular opportunity for whosoever might believe in Him to not perish but have everlasting, reconciled life with Him. This fact is the cornerstone of Scripture.

Yet on His way to the cross, Christ invested His life in people. Not just twelve people, but countless thousands of men, women, and children. He fed, healed, and raised them from the dead. He demonstrated the purest form of selfless love the world has ever seen. And incredibly, He did this for both those who would come to follow Him and those who would not.

Even though He knew that the world was passing away and that all of the temporal afflictions He encountered would pass away with it, He provided temporal solutions for thousands of people who primarily had an eternal, spiritual need. Stated simply, Christ “did good” and instructed us to do the same.

Christ’s attention to both spiritual and physical needs is illustrated for us frequently in the Gospels, but with no greater simplicity than in Mark 1:32–39, where after healing Simon’s mother-in-law and teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, word of His power and authority began to spread through Galilee, attracting the masses:

That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. . . .

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Because of Christ’s compassion and healing ministry, the entire city gathered at His door and brought Him *all* who were sick and oppressed, but He healed and delivered only *many* of them. When they returned the next morning looking for Him to finish His work, He was gone to spend time with His Father. When they finally found Him, instead of healing and delivering the remaining sick and oppressed who needed His touch, He left the town to go elsewhere to preach because that is why He came.

Christ didn't minimize His compassionate work of healing and delivering the oppressed, but He also made clear that He came to *preach*, to proclaim a message as a herald with authority and gravity such that people would listen to and obey His words.<sup>3</sup> Christ did both things with clarity, harmony, and purpose.

### **AN EMERGING OPPORTUNITY**

For perhaps the first time in human history the question of “can” in relation to humanitarian and social investment has been rendered largely irrelevant. Modern technologies in the areas of travel, communication, science, and medicine have provided mankind with an amazing capacity to identify global need and respond in ways that were unattainable even fifty years ago. Science and technology have given mankind the practical capacity to “do good” on an unprecedented scale.

In 1907, Walter Rauschenbusch, in his incendiary work *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, opined that “the world is getting small.”<sup>4</sup> We can now say with confidence that he was right. Consider that in 1950, widespread international air travel was yet to be developed. In 1960, consumer debt was just emerging as an idea, let alone a tool for personal commerce and global influence. In 1975, most American families had no computer in their home. In 1990, most American families had never used a cell phone. In 1994, most American families had never used the Internet.

In just fifty years, the landscapes of information, communication, consumer debt, and travel have changed forever. If you wanted, you could find a village in Africa today, board an airplane tomorrow, and within a few days be sending photos, emails, and telephone calls home about the needs you are encountering. Even fifteen years ago, this would have been difficult, if not impossible.

Closer to home, we can make donations with the click of a mouse, provide shoes for children by shopping online, support AIDS relief by buying a T-shirt, and raise awareness of almost anything by wearing the right colored rubber wristband or lapel pin.

Individuals like Bill Clinton, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, Bono, Oprah Winfrey, Caroline Kennedy, and others are leading a growing number of

influential men and women in a discussion about giving, charitable investment, and social entrepreneurship. There can be no question that, at least in part, the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century is marked by an emphasis on our individual and collective need to “do good.”

The political and social dialogue concerning religion is largely refocusing on the idea that we can be united in love, compassion, and the betterment of mankind. Not surprisingly, the Christian church is experiencing a resurgence of the social gospel with congregations, leaders, individuals, and nonprofit groups seeking to make significant social investments in their communities and around the world. “Doing good” is a new commodity within the corporate and philanthropic worlds. But for the Christian, the concept is more complex.

Now, more than ever, because of the almost limitless possibilities for global interaction and social investment, we need to start asking, “Of all the good that can be done in the world, what good *should* be done and *why*?” Is “doing good, good enough,” or are we called to something more?

### **A SPECTRUM OF RESPONSES**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his 1928 lecture “Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity,” gave a profound explanation of Christ’s call to the lost. Christ demands an answer to one question: “Will you follow Me wholeheartedly or not all?” There is no room in the answer to mix our own causes with His.

Bonhoeffer went on to conclude that “Christianity preaches the unending worth of the apparently worthless and the unending worthlessness of what is apparently so valuable. The weak shall be made strong through God and the dying shall live.”<sup>5</sup>

His comments reaffirmed that Christ and His relationship to us is all consuming and countercultural in its values and perspectives. When reading Bonhoeffer and those influenced by his writing, it is difficult to miss the point that Christ does not invite us to share our lives and agendas with Him, but rather to totally give our lives and agendas to Him.

Somewhat paradoxically, Bonhoeffer, who was resolutely focused on eternity and fundamentally committed to discipleship for the Christian, was executed in 1945 by the Nazis for his role in the revolutionary cause of over-

throwing Hitler and the Nazi regime. In 1944, just prior to his execution and in preparation for a book, he observed that “the church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . To make a start, it could give away all its property for those in need.”<sup>6</sup>

Bonhoeffer was doggedly committed to following Christ with an eternal perspective, but stood up for justice and the oppressed, making the investment that he believed was required of him—even to the point of death.

In his work *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer may have provided a solution to the dilemma he faced:

The way of Jesus Christ, and thus the way of all Christian thought, is not the way from the world to God but from God to the world. This means that the essence of the gospel does not consist in solving worldly problems, and also that this cannot be the essential task of the church. However, it does not follow from this that the church would have no task at all in this regard. But we will not recognize its legitimate task unless we first find the correct starting point.<sup>7</sup>

Much like Bonhoeffer, Christians in the twenty-first century are confronted with the complexities of engaging the topic of social investment and the Christian life. On the one hand, we may be tempted to totally abandon social investment in furtherance of the message of salvation and resolutely focus on the pre-eminence of eternity, choosing to center on Christ’s death and resurrection and the need for spiritual rebirth. On the other hand, we may be tempted to dilute, if not abandon, the gospel for the achievement of temporal social goods, choosing to focus on Christ’s acts of love and call to care for the poor and needy.

Not many people would define themselves as being aligned with either extreme, but we are all somewhere on the spectrum between them. Some of us resist or diminish temporal engagement because we are focused on the call of Scripture to proclaim the gospel, and see this life as a mere momentary passing. Others resist the gospel and the scriptural implications of death, heaven, and hell, and focus instead on the good that can be done on earth by being living illustrations of God’s great love.

The New Testament undeniably teaches that the concerns of a revisited social gospel—poverty, hunger, water, homelessness, medical epidemics, social justice, equality, and environmentalism—ought to be concerns of the redeemed. Social investment ought to be important to every follower of Christ because our love must emulate God’s love and our lives must emulate Christ’s life.

It is equally undeniable that the Scripture proclaims that Christ was and is principally concerned with eternity and the reconciliation of the lost. Fundamentally, Christ came to earth to seek and to save, not to heal and feed. Just as Christ came to provide the only means for spiritual reconciliation with the Father, He calls the redeemed to the specific task of continuing His ministry of reconciliation.

Jesus was a humanitarian, but of a unique kind. He healed to reveal true healing. He fed to reveal true food. He quenched thirst to reveal everlasting water. Christ’s actions were temporal, but His intended impact was for His every word and deed to be eternally transforming.

Christ understood that His life and our lives are rooted in the freedom of spiritual eternity, not the slavery of physical time and circumstances. This is precisely why He was so focused on what was unseen, the things above. Either eternity hung in the balance of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, or it did not. Either eternity hangs in the balance for each of us, irrespective of the quality or durations of our lives, or it does not.

If it doesn’t, then you should stop reading this book. But if it does, if our lives are merely a drop of water in the oceans of eternity, then perhaps we should ask ourselves in the realms of evangelism and social justice, “What on earth are we doing?”

