

A Biblical Theology for a Campaigning Church

The Law, the psalmists and the prophets all highlight God's great concern for the poor and oppressed. Some of the sharpest words were reserved for those in positions of power who did little to help those in need or who themselves were the perpetrators of injustice.

The prophetic nature of speaking to power on behalf of the poor is seen in the stories of Moses and Esther. Both were called, sent and spoke out for those who could not speak for themselves.

The best example of divine kindness, justice and righteousness is found in Jesus. In Jesus' first public reading, he announced the thrust of his ministry: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18). The social and political backdrop in first century Israel gives important context to Jesus' ministry to the poor.

Jesus proclaimed good news that concerned both the spiritual and socio-economic dimension of people's lives. When John the Baptist queried whether Jesus was the Messiah he had been waiting for, Jesus' response indicated that preaching good news to the poor was an integral part of the Messianic Kingdom.

Following in Jesus' footsteps, the early church prayed for the sick, redistribute possessions and taught biblical values in dealing with the poor and rich within their own community. Acts 4:32-35 records that as a result of the great grace that was upon them all, they shared with those in need.

The messages of the prophets included hope for a future day of justice in which there will be a new heaven and earth (Isaiah 65:17-19). This future hope is an important guide for the church today and offers ultimate hope for the poor (Micah 4:3-4).

Small group suggestions

- Recall the occasions when Moses went before Pharaoh and when Esther went before King Xerxes. Can the group suggest modern examples of 'speaking truth to power'?
- Make a comprehensive list together of the kinds of people Jesus was referring to in his Nazarene Manifesto in Luke 4:18-19.
- What does the group think the church would look like today if it modelled itself on the description in Acts 4:32-35? What changes might be needed or possible?

- [Watch historian Dr John Dickson](#) talk about what the early church did to tackle poverty and injustice.
- The Bible speaks of the new heaven and new earth God will finally bring about. Discuss what implications could be drawn from these passages for the church today.
- Pray together for the Spirit's anointing to preach good news to the poor.

William Carey: A Community Builder Who Campaigned for a Better World for All

William Carey, the father of modern mission, co-founded the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. During his 40 years in India he was both missionary and social activist. After his arrival in India he built a Christian community in Serampore that underpinned all he and his team achieved.

In England, he had expressed sympathies for the American colonists in their struggle against the English crown, and he had refused to buy sugar from the West Indies because it was the product of a slave trade that he considered abhorrent. As Carey became immersed in Indian culture he saw a number of injustices that he could not remain silent about.

Carey took action on *suttee*, the burning of widows on their husband's funeral pyres. Within a 30 mile radius of Kolkata, he found evidence of 438 widow burnings in one year. This probably meant that tens of thousands of women were meeting this fate across the sub-continent. In 1829, after 30 years of campaigning and praying, he saw the practice outlawed.

Carey also took up a number of other issues – child marriage (which he addressed by focusing on education for girls), ritual infanticide and leprosy. The Christian politician and activist Vishal Mangalwadi says this amounted to a strategy of cultural transformation. 'Carey came and initiated a process of reform in India. He saw India not as a foreign country to be exploited, but as his heavenly Father's land to be loved and served, a society where truth, not ignorance, needed to rule.'

Firm belief in God's providence and his coming kingdom meant that Carey was prepared to put himself in danger with both Indians and the British alike as he campaigned for change. His gospel was not the good news of a lifeboat coming to rescue the drowning. His gospel was of the King who had come to redeem human beings and make all things new, a gospel that would lead to

tangible social change in the here and now, as well as eternal life in a new creation in the hereafter.

Small group suggestions

- Discuss whether the church should boycott commodities that have been produced in unethical ways. Has anyone refused to buy something on ethical grounds and, if so, why?
- Carey saw *suttee* as something he had to take action to stop. Are there current issues of social injustice which members of the group have acted on or would consider taking action against?
- Carey also wanted to stop child marriage, but understood it was a practice so deeply ingrained in Indian culture that legislation alone would not halt it. Why do people think he chose education, and particularly for girls, to combat this issue?
- Find out about the work of Christian Aid partner [Sona Santal Samaj Samiti](#) providing adivasi communities in India access to a quality education system to help protect them from discrimination and exploitation.
- Pray together for an effective education system in India that empowers marginalised communities.

The Prophetic Church Today

Thanks to individuals fighting for a more just world, huge progress has already been made in the fight against poverty. However the world still faces massive challenges. The churches' reaction to the recent financial crisis has been strong in the UK with food banks, night shelters and credit unions being set up to help support those struggling the most. And, around the world churches continue to give generously to charities such as Christian Aid to help those living in extreme poverty or affected by disasters.

In some quarters, something more fundamental is being asked. These questions are not new, but are vitally important. They are questions which the church must ask if it is to be truly prophetic. Why is our economy controlled by an elite minority? Why do the voices of a few hold all the power? Why do people live in poverty? To strive for God's kingdom and to challenge current systems and structures is innately political and radical because it means to live differently and to advocate a different set of rules. This does not mean being party political, but rather is a call to be active in challenging areas of governance, economics or society where they result in injustice.

The churches can do this by raising their voices, working as a collective, sharing common values of love and justice, and campaign to challenge the policies which lock people in poverty. In the recent past, churches across the country took part in the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign, Make Poverty History in 2005 and the Enough Food for Everyone IF campaign in 2013.

The prophetic church in the 21st century keeps challenging, keeps questioning, and strives to change the world. It reacts with urgency in situations where there is injustice. It is countercultural in embodying an alternative. It challenges specific policies and values. It is motivated by the vision and hope for the kingdom of God on Earth. It acts as a global body in solidarity with the poor. It is brave, outspoken and revolutionary. The prophetic church says 'It ain't over until God says it's done'.

Small group suggestions

- The world still faces a massive challenge in tackling extreme poverty. What are the big international issues that need to be tackled today?
- If campaigning is about addressing the root causes rather than the symptoms of poverty, how best can churches become effectively involved? What kind of activities would people in the group be prepared to do?
- Why do people think this resource has been called *The Prophetic Church*? Does the group regard campaigning as prophetic church ministry?
- Watch this short film with Rev Jacob Wandusim, who looks after 28 congregations around Tamale in northern Ghana. He explains how making sure companies pay their taxes is critical for people in countries like Ghana to develop and flourish.
- Pray together over what response you will make as individuals or as a group to the call to campaign on behalf of the world's poor.

Get involved

Visit christianaid.org.uk/thepropheticchurch and discover how people can get involved with campaigning on behalf of the world's poor.

- Sign up to receive regular campaigns updates and actions.
- Become a local lobbyist and take our campaigns to the heart of government.
- Find out what activities are happening in your area.
- Access background information and further resources on Christian Aid's campaigning, including our work on tax justice and climate justice.

More for small groups

Produced in partnership with Christian Aid, Compassion and Micah Challenge, the Jesus Agenda is a resource enabling small groups to explore how the good news of the gospel and the liberating power of the Spirit should lead 21st century Christians to become advocates for the poor and vulnerable. Further details available here: www.thejesusagenda.org