

I. Week 10, Missions and Social Justice

A. Missionary Profile – Samuel Zwemer

- i. Samuel Zwemer was a pioneer missionary to Muslims in Arabia.
- ii. More than that, Zwemer has done more to promote missions to Muslims than perhaps anyone else in history.
- iii. He was born in 1867 in Vriesland, Michigan to a devout Dutch Reformed Family and was converted at a very early age.
- iv. His mother prayed that he would become a missionary from the time he was born and later He came to sense a call to missions himself in answer to his mother's prayer.
- v. This call first came in college during a presentation on missions by a representative of the Student Volunteer Movement in which a map of India was spread out on stage with a giant metronome in front of it, every tick of which marked a person in India who had died without hearing the gospel. After that message, being greatly moved by it, Zwemer signed a card which read 'God helping me, I purpose to be a foreign missionary.'
- vi. From 1887-1890 Zwemer attended the theological seminary of the Reformed Church in New Brunswick, NJ. During that time he not only completed theological studies but gained valuable ministry experience, learned several languages, and even gained some rudimentary medical training, before graduating with honors and being ordained in the Reformed Church of America (RCA).
- vii. More importantly, during his time in Seminary, Zwemer entered into an agreement with a friend, named James Cantine, to go to Arabia, the homeland of Islam and the most difficult missions field they could find, to begin a pioneer missionary work.
- viii. They adopted as their motto the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 17:18, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee."
- ix. After a brief period studying Arabic in Beirut, Lebanon, Zwemer and Cantine began working as missionaries in the city of Basra in Iraq. Two years later Zwemer moved to Bahrain where he eventually met and married missionary woman named Amy Wilkes.
- x. Zwemer served in Bahrein as a pioneer missionary in Bahrein for 13 years, from 1892 to 1905, when he and Amy returned to the US on furlough. During that time in Bahrein they lost two daughters to dysentery. On the tombs of their daughters the heartbroken Samuel and Amy inscribed the words: "Worthy is the Lamb to receive Riches."
- xi. Soon after his return to the US on furlough in 1905, at the age of 38, Zwemer began devoting the bulk of his considerable energies and skills to promoting the cause of missions to Muslims throughout the world.
- xii. He did this through publication. His books, such as, Arabia: The Cradle of Islam, The Glory Of The Cross, Across the World of Islam, and his biography of Raymund Lull, the first missionary to Muslims, all went through several editions and were translated into many different languages. He also edited and wrote for a quarterly publication called The Moslem World for 37 years.

- xiii. In addition writing, Zwemer also promoted missions to Muslims, through consultation and speaking at conventions and conferences put on by various missions organizations all over the world. His schedule was tireless. It is said that on one trip he gave 115 addresses in 113 days. One contemporary called him "A steam engine in breeches."
- xiv. And his efforts were remarkably effective. Not only were many Muslims converted as a result of his ministry, but he also did much to awaken the church to the Muslim mission field and was the means through which many missionaries were raised up to go there. His contemporary and frequent partner in these endeavors, Robert Speer of the student volunteer movement, once said of him, "In this century, not many men have lived who had the talent and drive of Samuel Zwemer. During his lifetime he exerted a tremendous influence on the Christian mission to Islam, as well as the worldwide advance of the Church and the Gospel." And Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette, said of him, "No one, through all the centuries of Christian mission to the Muslims, has deserved better than Dr. Zwemer the designation of Apostle to Islam."
- xv. Zwemer outlived his wife Amy and a second wife Margaret Clarke before he finally died in NYC on April 2, 1952 at age 86.
- xvi. At the Urbana Student Missions Conference in 1967, the 100 year celebration of Samuel Zwemer's birth, Dr. William Miller gave the following tribute to him: "Dr. Zwemer's pleading voice thrilled multitudes of Christians in many lands, inspiring them to work and pray for the Muslims of the world. The challenge he sounded then must be heard again today. For today the number of lost Muslims is much greater than it was when Zwemer dedicated his life for their salvation, but the number of Christians who are seeking to save them is pitifully inadequate. The doors are open, but who will enter? The walls are falling, but who will occupy the city? The fields are white unto harvest, but the laborers are few." May this commentary on Zwemer's life be a stirring call to us here today as well to consider missions to the Muslim world.

B. Missions and Social Justice

- i. The subject I am going to address today is: 'Missions and Social Justice'
- ii. 'Social Justice' is one of those terms that is often used but rarely defined
- iii. At a popular level today 'social justice' is a catch-all phrase for equality of opportunities and advantages in society.
- iv. Advocating for social injustice, then, often refers to seeking to remedy perceived inequalities in society (i.e. helping the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed).
- v. Advocating for social justice has become increasingly important to many, especially younger, evangelicals – Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert have said in their book *What Is The Mission Of The Church*: "From our anecdotal evidence we've found no issue more debated, especially on Christian college campuses

and among well-educated twenty and thirty-somethings, than social justice. Younger evangelicals are more concerned about the poor, about digging wells, about sex-trafficking, about orphans than any other time in recent memory. Social justice is hot and is bound to stay for some time. One prominent scholar has gone so far as to claim that a renewed interest in social justice, or what he prefers to call a missional or holistic gospel, represents the biggest shift in evangelism in the last century.”

- vi. ‘Missional’ a word that can imply the idea that the mission of the church is not only to proclaim the gospel but also to work toward transforming the culture by addressing social issues in it.
 - vii. The effect upon local churches has been to begin intentionally devoting the resources of the church, and developing ‘ministries’ of the church devoted to, social action (i.e. tutoring in struggling local schools, helping immigrants get settled in the community, opening a community center for at risk kids, running a food bank for the homeless, etc.). This is all viewed as part of the mission of the church.
 - viii. In global missions many people are going/being sent to do this type of ministry abroad: digging wells to provide clean water, providing medical care for refugees of war-torn countries, running an orphanage for children of AID’s victims, opening schools to provide education, building housing for the poor etc. In the process they may share the gospel with people as they have opportunity. And this is all viewed as the work of missions.
 - ix. What are we to make of these developments in the church and missions?
- C. What is the mission of the church according to Scripture?
- i. The central focus of the Scripture is the person and work of Jesus Christ
 - ii. The primary mission of Jesus was to save a group of fallen humanity from sin and all its effects of their sins through His life, death, and resurrection to be His holy people
 - iii. That mission began with the ministry of Jesus but is continuing to be fulfilled through his disciples as people are saved through their proclamation of the gospel and formed into local churches where they are taught to do everything Christ has commanded them (summed up in the Great Commission – Matthew 28:18-19).
 - iv. The mission of Christ is being fulfilled in a now and not yet way. There are aspects of the salvation He provides which believers experiences in the present (transformed lives and transformed society within the church) and aspects which believers will only experience when He returns at the end of the age (full

freedom from corruption in individual soul and body and in human society and the physical world).

- v. The unbelieving world who does not receive the salvation of Christ by faith in the gospel will continue to live in rebellion against God and as a consequence of this will experience increasing societal decline.
- vi. The church's efforts to *fulfill the Great Commission* by preaching the gospel and planting local churches are guaranteed to succeed because those efforts are in line with God's purposes in this age revealed in the NT.
- vii. But the church's efforts *to transform society* by addressing social inequalities is guaranteed to fail in the long term because it is not in line with God's purposes in this age revealed in the NT.

D. So what is the church's responsibility with respect to social justice?

- i. The church as God's NC people is called to be holy as He is holy in character and conduct – 1 Peter 1:15-6
- ii. If professing Christians have truly been saved through faith, their hearts will have been regenerated and they will do good works of obedience to God's righteous commands – James 2:14-26
- iii. If social justice is defined as treating people justly in the society around them, then the social justice is part of the good works the church should be practicing by the power of the Spirit – Leviticus 19:9-18; James 2:1-7
- iv. If social justice is defined as having mercy upon and doing good to those to in the society around them who are lowly and in need, then the social justice is part of the good works the church should be practicing by the power of the Spirit – Is 58:1-11; Luke 10:25-37 (The Good Samaritan); James 1:27; Acts 2:44-45
- v. From this we should also draw the good and necessary inference that just as the church should embody these forms of social justice in it's own society it should also proclaim them as right for the unbelieving world and call it to repent for refusing to do so (i.e. segregation laws or neglect of the poor).
- vi. HOWEVER if *social injustice* is defined as *any inequality in resources or opportunity in a society* (as it often is) and *social justice* is defined as *equal distribution of resources and opportunities in a society* (as it often is) than this is NOT a biblical definition and does not need to be practiced or advocated by the church. The biblical worldview teaches that because of the fall these type of inequalities will always exist in human societies and systemic attempts to change that will inevitably lead to oppression and ultimately to violent oppression (i.e. communist regimes).

- vii. Also the church should be examples of doing justly and loving mercy (Micah 6:8) in the unbelieving society in which they live, and should call the unbelieving society to do the same, ***yet it should not expect the unbelieving society to be able to do so since it is unregenerate.***

E. The relationship between social justice and the mission of the church:

- i. The Great Commission is the primary mission of the church so that should remain the primary focus of the church's efforts.
- ii. BUT the church is called to be a just and merciful society in the world as the covenant people of God who are called to be holy as He is holy, and this will have several results.
 - a. As just and merciful people, individual Christians will be involved with doing just and merciful things in the society they live in. Sometimes this will include founding or participating in organizations whose primary focus is advocating for just treatment of others in society or helping those in need in society (i.e. anti-abortion advocacy group, civil rights work during segregation, establishing an adoption agency, volunteering at a free clinic).
 - b. As a just and merciful people churches as a whole may choose to devote some of their resources to such things as well (a crisis pregnancy center, a soup kitchen, a drug and alcohol rehab center, a clinic, a homeless shelter, a tutoring program in the local public school, etc.).
- I.
 - c. Wherever there are a lot of Christians in a society they will have a transformative effect upon it to make it's structures more just and merciful (i.e. colonial America; all the schools, hospitals, homeless shelters, relief organizations, youth centers, etc. established by Christians).
- iii. But we must be careful to keep several things clear:
 - a. These good works of justice and mercy are NOT in themselves the work of fulfilling the great commission (although there can be overlap – i.e. sharing the gospel with the people in a hospital or orphanage or soup kitchen). The Great Commission is accomplished through proclaiming the gospel and planting local churches.
 - b. While churches have the liberty to devote some of their resources to such good works of justice and mercy, yet they must be careful to keep the work of the great commission central and primary (both locally and on the mission field) and direct most of its resources toward that.
 - c. The church must put their hopes in the fulfillment of the great commission and NOT in the transformation of society through pursuing social justice.

- iv. One more qualification: Fulfilling the great commission by proclaiming the gospel and planting local churches will often naturally require some organized efforts to address the temporal needs of new believers (i.e. education, job training, drug and alcohol rehab, providing shelter, adoption or orphanages, medical help) – Niddrie Community Church as example.

F. Some important danger to recognize:

- i. Danger 1 – being attracted to social justice causes more than fulfilling the great commission because people’s temporal needs begin seeming more important than their eternal needs – *note the opposite danger as well*
- ii. Danger 2 – being attracted to social justice causes rather than fulfilling the great commission because many social justice causes gain the world’s approval while fulfilling the great commission brings the world’s disapproval – *note the opposite danger as well.*