The Servant Solution: The co-ordination of evangelism and social action

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Introduction

In his popular and penetrating theodicy, *The Enigma of Evil*, John Wenham concludes his study with an attractive presentation of the character of God as revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He writes:

> Jesus was kind as well as severe – kind in an utterly unsentimental way, which combined depth of feeling with total self-giving. He pre-eminently showed the kindness of God to the world, for he taught God's love, he taught his followers to love and he demonstrated love by deeds and words and demeanour, and supremely by accepting his vocation to shed his blood for the remission of the sins of his enemies.[1]

Note the nature of that revelation: Jesus 'taught' God's love and his followers to love; a love 'demonstrated' by 'deeds' and 'words'. This, it

1 J. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 177.

would be argued by many, is sufficient justification for maintaining that it is the task of the church likewise to express the same divine love to a needy world by declaration and deed, evangelism and social action. So writes John Stott:

> It is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever need to ask whether social involvement was their concern, and that controversy should have blown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. For it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both 'went about ... teaching and preaching' (Matthew 4:23; 9:35) and 'went about doing good and healing' (Acts 10:38). In consequence evangelism and social action have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the church ... Christian people have often engaged in both activities quiet unselfconsciously, without feeling the need to define what they are doing or why.[2]

Whether it is strange or not, the fact is that tensions and controversy do exist amongst evangelicals on this matter. The controversy does not centre on *whether* Christians should engage in social action, understood as acts to improve the physical, psychological and social welfare of people;[3] but *how* that action might appropriately be expressed and upon what theological basis it should proceed. As Robert K. Johnstone accurately observes:

> *That* evangelicals should be involved socially has become a foregone conclusion ... but *how* and *why* evangelicals are to be involved themselves in society have proven to be more vexing questions. That they are to be involved brings near unanimity; how that involvement takes shape and what is its Christian motivation brings only debate.[4]

2 John R.W. Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and Scott 1984), 3.

3 This definition is put forward by John Woodhouse, 'Evangelism and Social responsibility' in B.G. Webb (ed.), *Christians in Society*, (Explorations 3, Lancer, 1988), 5.

4 Robert K. Johnstone, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1979), 70.

Current issues

On one side of the debate may be placed Tim Keller who states: 'The ministry of mercy is not just a means to the end of evangelism. Word and deed are equally necessary, mutually interdependent and inseparable ministries, each carried out with the single purpose of the spread of the kingdom of God.'[5] On the other side is Gary Meadors who argues: 'Jesus did not call Paul or present day Christians to a primary task of changing the world-system, but to evangelise individuals, to teach them all things he commanded, and to recognise that Satan is the 'god of this world' and that our only hope for ultimate political correction is Jesus' second advent.'[6] But he is equally insistent that: 'We do not disagree that we should have compassion for starving people and for those who suffer from political injustice.'[7]

Answers to questions of priority and motivation in evangelism and social action are inevitably shaped by the theological framework in which they are viewed. It is understandable that some evangelicals have reacted strongly against theological models which, in their eyes, are remarkably reminiscent of the 'social gospel' which wreaked havoc in many Western churches from the late 19th century throughout the 1930s and well into the 1960s, not least when definitions of what constitutes the Kingdom of God seem far removed from the way the New Testament writers use the term. Such a warning was issued by the late Sir Norman Anderson at the 1967 Anglican Evangelical Conference at Keele University:

> There is a sense in which that Kingdom is already a present reality, for the King is already on his throne, waiting till all things are put under his feet ... But is there a wider sense in which one can think of the Kingdom as advanced wherever the will of the King is done, even by those who do not give Him personal allegiance? This, it seems to me, is dangerous ground, for we cannot regard the Kingdom of God as having materialised in a factory for example, merely because social

5 Tim Keller, Ministries of Mercy, The Call of the Jericho Road (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P. & R. 1997), 106.

6 Gary T. Meadors, 'John R. W. Stott on Social Action', *Grace Theological Journal* 1/2 (1980), 146.

7 Meadors, 'John R.W. Stott on Social Action', 146.

> justice and harmony reign therein ... The Evangelical holds no brief for the so called 'social gospel', for society, as such, cannot be 'redeemed' or 'baptised into Christ' ... But it can be reformed.[8]

How, then, are evangelicals to react when they read such a statement as this: 'All the earth is the Lord's and so we trace the Spirit at work *beyond* the Church, especially in movements that make for human dignity and liberation'?[9] Anxiety and caution will be expressed by some and disdain and outright opposition by others. The danger, however, for the more conservative evangelical, is over-reaction, a concern raised by Ranald Macaulay when he writes of the move in some quarters to 'place exclusive emphasis on evangelism'.[10]

Is it possible to co-ordinate evangelism and social action in such a way that it reflects faithfully the pattern of the New Testament; enabling each to reinforce the other while avoiding the extremes of exclusive gospel proclamation on the one hand and the collapsing of evangelism into social action on the other? The contention of this article is that such a course is possible and that it is to be found in the 'Servant solution' which lies behind Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.[11]

We shall examine in detail the form that solution might take with special reference to Matthew 5:13ff. and the metaphors of salt, light and a city on a hill. This will be followed by a consideration of the extent to which the early church implemented this teaching as recorded in the Book of Acts. Brief reference will also be made to the impact Christianity made upon Greaco-Roman Society by virtue of its distinctive beliefs and practices. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn regarding what lessons the Church might learn for today.

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8 J. N. D. Anderson, 'Christian Worldliness-the need and limits of Christian Involvement', *Guidelines*, J. I. Packer (ed.), (CPAS 1967), 231.

9 Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1996), 112.

10 Ranald Macaulay, 'The Great Commissions', *Cambridge Papers* 2/7 (1998).

11 For a full discussion on the historical developments and theological implications of Evangelicals and social involvement see Melvin Tinker, 'Reversal or Betrayal? Evangelicals and Socio-Political involvement in the Twentieth Century' in *Evangelical Concerns*, (Fearn: Mentor, 2001), 139–66.

The Sermon on the Mount and its Isaianic background

Jesus' teaching in the section on the Sermon on the Mount, running from 5:13–16, in which he likens his disciples to salt and light, has frequently been drawn upon not only to provide a theological rationale for Christian social action, but also as being suggestive of the means. Thus, John Stott can write:

> Both images set the two communities (Christian and non-Christian) apart. The world is dark, Jesus implied, but you are to be its light. The world is decaying, but you are to be salt, and hinder its decay ... Although Christians are (or should be) morally and spiritually distinct from non-Christians, they are not to be socially segregated. On the contrary, their light is to shine into darkness, and their salt to soak into the decaying meat ... Before the days of refrigeration, salt was the best known preservative ... Light is even more obviously effective; when the light is switched on, the darkness is actually dispelled. Just so, Jesus seems to have meant, Christians can hinder social decay and dispel the darkness of evil.[12]

Without wishing to deny that Christians can and do hinder social decay and dispel evil in a society, it is doubtful that this is the way Jesus intended these metaphors to function within the context of the address given from the Mountain. What such interpretations as Stott's tend to do is to understand 'salt' and 'light' as universal metaphors and then read off their sense as presently understood (preservation and illumination) and assume that this is what Jesus meant. This carries the obvious danger of engaging in an anachronistic reading of the text. What is more, the metaphors tend to be detached from the wider canonical context. They are then treated in isolation from the more immediate literary context, without exploring whether there is any *theological* connection to be made between them. Also, there is often a failure to note that Jesus uses *three*, not two pictures: there is also a 'city on a hill'. What is necessary is first, to consider how this part of Jesus' discourse relates to the immediate context; second to ask whether what is being said has Old Testament associations and thirdly, to

12 Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today* 65

tease out how such metaphors function in relation to both considerations. This will then enable us to identify more precisely the meaning of Jesus' teaching and its significance for his followers given that it is actual and prospective disciples which are in view.[13]

The wider picture

Matters of setting, background and context

In Matthew's Gospel, the setting is the sermon delivered from the mountainside. Parallels between Jesus and Moses have often been made at this point,[14] for example, the gathering of God's redeemed people before the mountain, the delivering of God's word to them by God's appointed mediator. Without wishing to deny such allusions, I would suggest that they are secondary to the more striking points of contact which exist with the heralding Servant in Isaiah 40–66. The identification of Jesus as this Servant has already been made explicit at his baptism (Matthew 3:17). Jesus is then presented by Matthew as the great fulfilment figure, with the quotation from Isaiah 9 in 4:14–16, who begins his ministry by proclaiming the Kingdom of heaven and the concomitant call to repent. This is in line with the mission of the Servant as found in the central sections of Isaiah who is given the task of announcing the arrival of God's reign in salvation (Isaiah: 52:7), a salvation which is established through his teaching and suffering (Isaiah: 50:4–11; 51:4, 16; 52:13 – 53:12).

Matthew's relating of the ministry of Jesus which immediately precedes the Sermon on the Mount also testifies to the fulfilment of the Isaianic vision (Matthew 4:23–25). There we observe that there is an *outward* movement in which Jesus heralds the good news amongst people who had no difficulty at all in recognizing their needy downtrodden state. At the same time as announcing the kingdom he acted to lift people out of their needy situation as evidenced by healing the sick and liberating the demon possessed (4:24). There might also be a hint of the wider ministry of Jesus as a 'light to the Gentiles' by the passing reference that news spread all over Syria.

13 Note the withdrawing from the crowds and it is when his disciples came to him that we read: 'And he opened his mouth and taught *them* saying'.

14 E.g. Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, (New Jersey: P & R, 1991), ch. 17.

This is followed, in the second place, by an *inward* movement: the gathering of Israel as represented by the large crowds of verse 25 which came from 'Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan' (cf Isaiah 60:4).

The commencement of Jesus' programmatic ministry in his hometown synagogue by Luke is well known with the assertion that the prophecy of Isaiah 61 had been fulfilled in the hearing of the congregation (Luke 4:16 on). What is not so readily recognized is that the same passage lies behind the commencement of Jesus' public ministry in Matthew as represented by the Sermon on the Mount.

For example, a convincing case can be made that the first four beatitudes have their grounding in Isaiah 61:

> Blessed are the *poor* in spirit for there is the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).
> The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the *poor* (Isaiah 61:1).
>
> Blessed are those who *mourn* for they shall be *comforted*' (Matthew 5:4).
> He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted ... to *comfort* all who *mourn* and provide for those who grieve in Zion (Isaiah 61:2–3).
>
> Blessed are the meek for they shall *inherit* the *earth* (Matthew 5:5).
> Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their *inheritance*; and so they will *inherit* a double portion in their *land* (Isaiah 61:7).
>
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after *righteousness* for they will be filled (Matthew 5:6).
> 'They will be called oaks of *righteousness*, a planting of the Lord' (Isaiah 61:3).[15]

There are other themes in Isaiah 61 and the surrounding chapters (60 and 62), which have direct bearing on the three metaphors which Jesus

15 W. J. Dumbrell has given some very helpful exegetical thoughts on the Old Testament background to the Sermon on the Mount in 'Seven Exegetical Studies in Matthew 5:1–17' (Moore Theological College, Sydney).

goes on to use in verses 13 onwards which we shall return to in due course. At this juncture let it suffice to note that there are several themes and motifs which are common to both the Sermon on the Mount and the Servant Songs.[16]

It, is however, to his immediate circle of disciples as distinct from the larger crowd, that Jesus addresses his words.[17]

These are they who are described as 'blessed.' In the LXX *makarios* renders the Hebrew comparative article, 'ashrey'. It therefore functions as a description of a state of affairs rather than acting as a performative announcement which brings into being a state of affairs. As such the addressees are the 'enviable ones' who are in a prized position. The fortunate situation in which they find themselves relates somehow to 'the kingdom' – a term which constitutes the *inclusio* for the beatitudes in verses 2 and 10. Given that the opening beatitude and the closing beatitude define the members of the kingdom, it is to these we shall give some detailed attention.

Jesus describes as enviable those who are 'poor in the realm of the spirit' (note the use of the dative). This is not a description of people lacking spiritual things as such – having a spiritual deficiency of some kind – but a description of someone's lower standing in relation to someone else. *Ptochos* is a depressive word describing a person who is in a dependent-client relationship; it refers to the destitute who could only exist with the help of charitable assistance (e.g. Lazarus in Luke 16:20).[18] It is hardly likely that Jesus was applying this term to describe the physical poverty of his followers as by the standards of the day they were not poor at all, indeed, they carried a money bag and gave alms rather than received them.

The background again is Isaiah. We see in Isaiah 11:4; 61:8; 49:13 that while the Messiah is most certainly presented as one who will be

16 'There are many themes and motifs common to both the Sermon on the Mount and the Servant Songs: The Messiah as teacher, the declaration of the gospel from the mountain, the gathering of Israel, the salvation of the poor, the kingdom of God, satisfying the hungry, giving gladness and laughter to those who weep and mourn, the reproach of people, being cast out for the sake of the Servant's name, reward and consolation, the importance of hearing, the blind and those who see, turning the other cheek, the mercy of God, the coming of the light, obedience to the Servant.' David Seccombe, *The King of God's Kingdom. A solution to the puzzle of Jesus*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 253.

17 Although, given the response of the crowds to his teaching in 7:28 caution should be exercised against making any hard and fast distinction between his immediate followers who are called to himself and the larger gathering of potential disciples.

18 See David Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke–Acts*, (Lintz: SNTU, 1983), 137.

concerned with the physical poor, those whose state of poverty is a result of oppression and injustice, the term poor/afflicted ones (*ani*) has been extended to describe the *whole* nation, which finds itself destitute and beggar-like in Exile, as it stands in a dependent-client relationship with Yahweh, wholly dependent upon him for salvation. As Seccombe writes: 'Seeing Israel as poor became so intrinsic to national self-understanding that sectarian groups like the Qumran community could seize the title and actually name themselves 'the Poor'.[19]

Thus the poor, *anihim* (LXX *ptochoi*), are those who are in a state of oppression and affliction; designated as being of lowly, humble status. This is the state which characterizes the true people of God.[20] But why should this be described as a fortunate position to be in? The answer is that to such is promised the 'kingdom'. With Isaiah 61 providing the theological backcloth to the beatitudes, what is being promised is the restoration of God's people – an end to Exile[21] and the announcement of the day of favour of Yahweh – the Jubilee. While this is a teaching that is open to all, it only becomes effective for those who identify themselves with Jesus. This will entail suffering which leads to the final beatitude in verse 10 and its extended treatment in verse 11: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

It has already been noted how the members of the Qumran community identified themselves as the poor. They described themselves as the *ebyonim*, a term considered appropriate not as a moral quality but because of the 'affliction' they suffered which is the lot of the remnant of Israel.[22] The perfect tense is used to describe Jesus' followers as the persecuted ones, 'Blessed are those who *have been* persecuted' and this reinforces the understanding that this is something which will occur repeatedly. In verse 10 the persecution is said to arise because of righteousness, but in verse 11 it comes about on account of Jesus. In verse 12 a direct association is made with the former prophets, presumably because they too were persecuted on account of righteousness. This raises the question: what 'righteousness' did the prophets perform, and the disciples were about to perform, which leads to such opposition?

19 Seccombe, *The King of God's Kingdom*, 162.

20 This is a position argued in detail by Warren Heard Northbrook, II, 'Luke's Attitude Toward the Rich and the Poor' A Puritan's Mind, <www.apuritans mind.com>

21 The most notable advocate of this view is N. T. Wright in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (London: SPCK, 1993). Also see, Mervyn Eloff ('From the Exile to the Christ', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Stellenbosch) who argues that 'return from exile is a valid 'hermeneutical prism' for the interpretation of Matthew's gospel' in its entirety.

22 1 QM 14:7

In the Old Testament righteousness is that which is well pleasing to God, that which receives approval in the heavenly court.[23] The connotation is not distributive justice, guaranteeing fairness so that each receives what is deserved, but acts on behalf of people who cannot help themselves. It is supremely in salvation, therefore, that God exhibits his righteousness (e.g. Isaiah 46:13: 'I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel.'). As with John the Baptist who, 'Came in the way of righteousness' (Matthew 21:32) to 'turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God' (Luke 1:16) so is the 'saving righteousness' performed by all true prophets. It is this calling of people to covenant fidelity, a total way of life given over to the Creator-Redeemer God which fulfils the righteous saving purposes of God.[24]

It is noteworthy that the manner in which this persecution comes is 'insulting' and 'speaking evil'. The nature of the prophetic ministry is such that it is invariably met in this way. Why that should be so turns on what the nature of that ministry is, which, having just been touched on above, is elucidated further by the section which lies on the other side of Jesus' 'salt and light' pericope, concerning 'the fulfilment of the law and the prophets' (Matthew 5:17–20).

In verse 17 Jesus says to his disciples, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and/or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' The use of the aorist subjunctive suggests that Jesus was heading off a future objection, which might be raised in the light of his teaching, rather than countering one currently being held by his followers. The identical term, 'law and the prophets' is used again in 7:12 forming an

23 See S. Motyer, 'Righteousness by faith in the New Testament' in, *Here We Stand*, ed. J. I. Packer, (London: Hodder 1986), 35.

24 Motyer writes of the Sermon on the Mount, 'We are struck by the way Matthew does not distinguish between God's righteousness and man's. "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" probably does not refer primarily to the ethical righteousness which Jesus' disciples must seek to attain, but (in parallel with to "kingdom") to the eschatological completion of God's salvation for which we yearn. If that is correct, then this will be the meaning of "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" (5:6) also. But it would be wrong to deny that in both these verses the thought is of righteousness resting upon man, for the longing expressed in 5:6 is to be caught up in God's saving purpose. Then 5:20 makes it clear that this places a rigorous ethical demand on us, 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven', and 6:1 NIV speaks simply of "your acts of righteousness". This ethical meaning fits in with Matthew's overall emphasis on the call to discipleship, and is always in mind when he uses the adjective *dikaios*.' 'Righteousness by faith in the New Testament', 36–37.

inclusio for the whole of this section and so strongly intimating that Jesus is emphasising continuity between former revelation and his present ministry, something which he goes on to expound at length. Also, from the fact that in verse 18 Jesus deals with the matter of the law alone, it would be legitimate to infer that the use of the term 'prophets' indicates that Jesus has in view the wider extension and application of the law, the 'spirit' as well as the 'letter'. This would be so since it was the function of the prophets to correct the people's misapplication and neglect of their covenant obligations (as Jesus himself does in the remaining section running from 5:21 – 7:12). This aspect of the prophets' ministry is summarized in 2 Kings 17:13: 'The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all of his prophets and seers, 'Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets.'

In what sense, therefore, do Jesus and his followers 'fulfil' the law and prophets? The word *pleroo* occurs 16 times in Matthew. Twelve of these occur in relation to the fulfilment of prophecy. Not counting the one here in verse 17, the other three occasions, (3:15; 13:48; 23:32), indicate the completion and finality of something – the 'filling' of covenant obligations in baptism, the 'filling' of a net with fish, and the 'filling up' of God's judgement. So it would seem that the meaning in verse 17 is that in the new age of the Messiah amongst the Messiah's new community the final expression of the law will be manifest, its *telic* end will be reached.[25] Theirs will be a righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees (20), whose attitude was anticipated and condemned by Isaiah (Matthew 15:7) with their principle of 'minimum requirement' which is in the sights of much of Jesus' teaching in the following section. By way of contrast, Jesus, in true prophetic style, is concerned not only with outward action but also with inner attitude, motives as well as methods. He commends the principle of 'maximum application'. As the prophets in the past called God's people back to the true nature of their covenant obligations, not least in the realm of social justice, and were met with scorn and derision, so the followers of the Servant, who exercise such a prophetic ministry, will meet the same.

To summarize: the Servant heralds good tidings from the mountain; it is the time when the exile is ended and restoration begins for the people of God. The state of those who recognize their afflicted situation is one of

25 See, Zoe Holloway, 'Understanding and Misunderstanding the Discontinuity that Christ Makes to the Moral Order and the Mosaic Law: A Conceptual Foundation for Using the Mosaic Law in Christian Ethics' (Unpublished Thesis, Moore College Sydney).

great fortune for to them belongs the kingdom. This paradoxical state of blessing/affliction will continue in the form of the persecution of those who carry out a prophetic ministry. This happened with the former prophets and will continually re-occur as people are called to covenant fidelity. In this sense Jesus and his new community stand in direct line with the prophets of old and the righteousness spoken of in Isaiah 61 begins to be fulfilled amongst his followers.

A few further notes are in order on the Isaianic background to the Sermon on the Mount before studying three metaphors of 5:13 following.

Isaiah 61 links both back to chapter 60 and forward to chapter 62. Chapter 60:1–3 has the people awaiting the return to Zion with the promise that, 'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.' Verses 4–11 picture the rebuilding of the city on a hill – Jerusalem. Towards the end, in verses 21–22, we hear echoes of the Abrahamic covenant with references to the giving of the land and the growth of a mighty nation: 'Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land for ever. They are the shoot of the planted, the work of my hands for they display my splendour. The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the Lord, in its time I will do this swiftly.' In chapter 62 the blessings of the 'everlasting covenant', announced in 61:8 are elucidated further with the note of righteousness to the fore: verse 1, 'For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quite, till her *righteousness shines* out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. The nations will see your *righteousness* and all kings your glory.' All of this fulfils the eschatological vision in chapter 2 of Isaiah:

> In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief amongst the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many will come and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we might walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Isaiah is the only prophet who uses the light metaphor to any significant extent. The link between God's presence, the change this occasions amongst his people and his salvific purposes for the world, is a close one. Motyer commenting on Isaiah 60 writes:

> When the Redeemer has come to Zion, gathered his penitents (59:20) and appointed a covenant mediator to share the Lord's Spirit with them, it is not just that they are bathed in light but that they are irradiated, inwardly charged with new, outshining life ... This subjective experience has an objective basis, *for your light has come*.[26]

The presence of God as symbolized by the light metaphor and its saving and transforming witnessing effect, are also associated closely with the theme of 'righteousness' which is dominant in chapter 62 and the work of God's 'Anointed One'. The work of this divine agent which has been set forth in chapter 61 is to bring about a new status of righteousness before God, a rescue from bondage (verse 1) and a visible righteousness of life (2).[27]

Thus, the flow of the revelation in this section is the elevation of a New Jerusalem. It is the formation of a people of righteousness who will become a light to the nations. It will be a time of unprecedented covenant fidelity that will result in an inward movement of peoples drawn to the light, and an outward movement of God's word/law.

All of this has direct bearing on our key section and, in turn, our understanding of the relation between gospel proclamation and social involvement.

Jesus speaking to his disciples (the 'poor'- afflicted ones who engage in prophetic ministry), is emphatic: '*You are* the salt of the earth; *you are* the light of the world.' Here we discover a correspondence with the structure of the beatitudes themselves: the first four describe the condition of the members of the kingdom, the second four relate their activity. In other words, their 'doing': showing mercy, godliness (pure in heart); peacemaking and a prophetic ministry of righteousness: arising out of their 'being'. This is also very much in line with what has been seen regarding the Zion of the last days. It is because of the salvation experienced through God's servant that not only has a new status of righteousness been bestowed, but a new life of righteousness is being lived.

26 A. Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 494.
27 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 506.

The sense and referent of the metaphors

The meaning of the two metaphors salt and light and their connection with the third metaphor, a 'city on a hill'.

First, there is the description of the disciples as the 'salt of the earth'.

Given the substantiated premise that Isaiah 40–66 stands behind the Sermon on the Mount, it is perhaps suggestive that the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42:6 is described as one who is sent 'to be a covenant of the people and a light to the Gentiles'. On the basis of the covenant renewal, the light goes forth to the ends of the earth. This was to be the task of Israel as symbolized by Mount Zion in Isaiah 2, a servant which failed and which became blind and deaf (Isaiah 42:18) and so was as much in need as the Gentiles. This task has now been fulfilled by Jesus (Matthew 5:17 following) and, in turn, his gathered community. If the parallel is to be maintained it follows that being the 'salt of the earth' is a symbolic reference to maintaining the covenant. This is an interpretation which is justified by a consideration of the Old Testament use of 'salt' in covenantal agreements, for instance Leviticus 2:13: 'Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings'; 2 Chronicles 13:5: 'Don't you know that the Lord, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants for ever by a covenant of salt?' Could not the way the metaphor functions be that just as salt has the quality of making something last which would otherwise decay, having a preserving quality, so there is a concern to preserve the covenant, thus making it last when otherwise it would not? When this metaphor is transferred to the work of the prophets it is easy to see how it would operate. The task of the prophetic ministry is to remind the people of the covenant and the way of life which is consistent with that covenant and so ensure its continuing operation. This way the prophets acted as 'salt of the covenant', seeking to maintain the covenant's integrity amongst God's people.

For the disciples to fulfil their duty of being the salt of the earth (salt of the land?), they, like the prophets, have to remain distinctive and speak God's truth. *At first sight*, therefore, if a strict parallel is to be maintained, we would maintain that it is a proclamatory ministry which is being envisaged here as was the case with the Old Testament prophets.[28] Acting

28 Since this Sermon constitutes the platform for Jesus' ministry in Matthew, with Jesus gathering his disciples to prepare them as his followers, and given the

in a salt-like capacity involves calling people to be true to the way of life of the new covenant community, a way of life Jesus expounds in the rest of the Sermon. Such a ministry will invariably meet with resistance, as Jesus has just warned. It is however, when faced with such opposition that his followers run the danger of losing their saltiness'. This may be by adopting values and lifestyles that are indistinct from the people being addressed and/or by diluting the message being brought to bear, and so, in effect becoming a false prophet (Matthew 7:15 following). If this happens, as it did with Israel herself, there will be a 'trampling under foot' in judgement (cf. Isaiah 5:5; 10:6; 22:5). The salt metaphor then, has little to do with 'penetrating society' and so 'preserving' it. It has much more to do with the followers of Jesus engaging in a 'prophetic' word ministry which brings people into a covenant relationship with the one true God through Jesus Christ, as well as a change of values and lives which flow from that covenant.[29]

The second metaphor, 'the light of the world', is specifically linked to the 'city on a hill which cannot be hidden' (14).

In Isaiah it is Zion which is to be such a city, the community of the redeemed whose light and shining righteousness attracts the nations in the end times (60: 1–3; 62:1–3). The 'irradiated' 'inwardly charged, new life' which shines like a light referred to by Motyer, is, according to the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah, brought about by the pouring out of God's Spirit and the bestowal of new hearts on which are written God's law (Ezekiel 36:24–32; Jeremiah 31:31–34). It would appear, however, that Jesus is giving the symbols of light and a city a new referent, namely, the poor/prophetic community of his followers. In Isaiah 62:2, the nations (Gentiles) will 'see the righteousness' of the redeemed which 'shines out of them like a torch'. Likewise, the new 'city' of the redeemed cannot be hid and their righteous good works (which are to exceed those of the Pharisees), will be seen and result in the offering of praise to God the

centrality of preaching in his own ministry (Mark 1:38), it would be most extraordinary to say the least, if *no* instruction were offered by Jesus on the proclamatory aspects of ministry. What is more, one of the main characteristics of the Servant in Isaiah is that he is one who proclaims God's Word (Is. 49:1, 2, 52:7, 53:1, 61:1–2). This interpretation of the disciples being salt fills what would otherwise be an astonishing lacunae in the Sermon.

29 The apostle Paul may be using the metaphor of salt in this way in Col. 4:6: 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.' The content of this 'conversation' is 'the mystery of Christ' (2), which is why he is in chains and asks for prayers so he can proclaim it clearly (3). Here then, in the life of Paul, is another example of the prophetic word salt ministry and which results in persecution.

Father (16). It is by being salt within one's own circle, calling God's people to be true to his covenant and being true to it oneself, that the covenant community will influence the world in drawing others to the one true God. It is also from this community that God's law/word goes into the world as a source of blessing (cf. Isaiah 2:3). This is the *raison d'etre* of the community: just as a lamp placed on a stand is to illumine the whole house, a hidden lamp is self-defeating, so there can be no retreat *from* the world for these kingdom people if they are to be a light *to* the world. It is 'before men' that such deeds are performed and so producing a desired doxological effect (5:16).

It is not without significance that the same programmatic pattern, established here at the beginning of his Gospel, is repeated by Matthew at the end in chapter 28:16 onwards. On that mountain the Son of Man, who has received all authority and an everlasting kingdom (cf. Daniel 7:13), gathers his people in order to disperse them into the world with the specified task of proclaiming and demonstrating his rule. This involves making disciples of all people's groups, baptizing them into his teaching[30] so that they will obey all that has been commanded (cf. Matthew 5:19). This is the calling of his people which they are to maintain until the end of the age, when the reign of God which has been inaugurated will be consummated. What is anticipated and promised in Isaiah, a new heavens and new earth (66:22), will finally be realized at the end of time. It is the renewed covenant community, the city on a hill, which is God's chosen vehicle for achieving these things.

Seccombe expresses well the relationship between the Servant, his gathered people and their mission:

> At the time of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus evidently did not see himself carrying out the Servant's mission as an isolated individual. We observe, how, having declared the gospel, he appeals to all who have ears to hear. This is a plea for response, and the nature of that response is to become his disciple and join him in his mission of

30 D. B. Knox presents a very strong case that this is the correct understanding of the use of 'baptism' in Matthew 28 in his chapter 'New Testament Baptism' in *D. B. Knox Collected Works, Volume* 11 (Kingsford, NSW Australia: Matthias Media, 2002). He concludes: 'The "great commission" of Jesus contains no reference to administering water baptism. The reference to baptizing is entirely metaphorical in line with other uses of the word by Jesus. It is a command to proclaim the news of the Messiah's coming to the nations to make them disciples of the true God, to immerse the nations into the revealed character of God so that their whole way of life is changed and their cultures sanctified (*cf.* Rev. 21:26)', 278.

suffering; he warns them that if they will not they will never see his kingdom. This is because first, the role of the Suffering Servant was Israel's role; secondly only in default did the task pass on to the disciples, and finally with their defection, to one individual. Thus Jesus calls upon all who heard him to join him in an active programme of outgoing love and generosity that would engage with others and demonstrate God's goodness. It would meet opposition with generosity, prayer, and a willingness to suffer. God was seeking to be reconciled with his enemies, and his sons were called to participate in the peacemaking initiative (Luke 6:27–38).[31]

The co-ordination of evangelism and social action

We are now in a position to see how evangelism and social action are to be co-ordinated, arising out of, and modelled by, the Sermon on the Mount and how they are shaped by the Isaianic motifs which lie behind it.

First, there is the heralding of the good news, the *euangelion*. The blessings themselves are evangelistic, declaring the good news of the year of the Lord's favour to his afflicted people, the *ptochoi*, that the kingdom is theirs.[32] As the word of the Lord was to go out from Mount Zion in Isaiah's oracle, so it now goes out from the 'new city on a hill' as represented here by Jesus' disciples. Evangelism is the priority ministry so that all nations will receive the blessing promised to Abraham (Genesis 12), will hear the news that there is now an appointed ruler of the house of David (2 Samuel 7) and that his name is Jesus who is the Christ (Matthew 1:1). The time of Exile is now over, God has come to dwell amongst his people in the form of the one who is called 'Emmanuel' (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). As the suffering Servant, he atones for the sins of his

31 Seccombe, *Possessions*, 259. Similarly David Peterson can write of Jesus' ethic as presented in the Sermon on the Mount: 'It is an ethic for the community of disciples, called to live for Jesus in a special relationship with one another and with a hostile world, holding forth to the world the message of the kingdom and living out the values and attitudes of the kingdom in anticipation of its consummation by God at the end of human history. Jesus does not provide a pattern for transforming society *per se*, but intends that the lifestyle of the disciples individually and collectively should be both judgement on fallen humanity and a pointer to the possibility of renewal and change under the rule of God', 'Jesus and Social Ethics' in '*Christians and Society*' 92 (Lancer, 1988).

32 Those who have argued at length for the evangelistic character of the beatitudes are reviewed by Seccombe in his *Possessions*, 34f; 85f.

people (Matthew 1:21/ Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12). What was said of the Servant can also be said of his servants: 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns".' (Isaiah 52:7/ Romans 10:15).[33] Furthermore, given the cataclysmic nature of not responding to this message (Matthew 7:13, 23, 27) the urgency as well as the priority of Gospel proclamation is underscored.

Second: as salt, the followers of Jesus are to engage in a prophetic ministry and ensure that the new covenant remains operative. Here again is stressed the priority of word ministry – declaring to people Gospel truths. These truths are not to be understood in a reductionist fashion, they embrace the concerns for justice and right living that God has. Social relations lie at the heart of Jesus' prophetic application of the law (Matthew 5:21 – 7:12) as they did for Isaiah himself (Isaiah 1; 2:6 following; 5:8 following). At the centre of the great 'Jubilee' passage of Isaiah 61 we find these words: 'For I the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity' (8). If his followers are to be faithful to their calling as 'prophetic salt' in maintaining the integrity of the covenant, can they settle for anything less? Such ministry is costly and it is often from the professing religious people that opposition will most likely come (as Jesus and the apostles were soon to discover).

Third: as a community of light, God's people are to embody and express the new life of the kingdom amongst themselves and outwards to others: being, as prodigal, in loving forgiveness as God is himself (Matthew 5:44); giving generously to those in need (6:1following); refusing to serve Mammon and instead storing up treasures in heaven (6:19 following; learning contentment and eschewing judgementalism (7:1 following). This is a community of light which will shine; whose deeds will impact upon a watching world and act as a witness to the reality of the breaking in of God's kingdom here on earth.

33 Note the priority of proclaiming God's truth 'justice' in the first servant song. Motyer writes: 'Justice is the leading idea in this first Servant Song, pointing to the scope of the servant's work, his reliability in its discharge and his perseverance through to its accomplishment. The word '*mishpat*' is versatile, but its sense is plain in this context ... it is a summary word for his revealed truth (cf. in verse 4, the parallelism between justice and law/'teaching') and its requirements. In this wide sense the servant brings the truth of God to the world, a pointed contrast to their former situation', *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 319.

Salt, light and a city on a hill in Acts

How the early Christians, as portrayed in the Book of Acts, fulfilled this calling of Jesus

It has been argued above that although the two metaphors are related, they are nonetheless distinct; being salt and engaging in prophetic action is a necessary condition for being light and vice versa. This distinction is maintained in the Book of Acts in relation to the proclamatory, evangelistic work of the apostles and the communal life of the Christian believers. This dichotomy also has bearing on the question as to whether it can be legitimately claimed that the church qua church actually has a 'mission'?

Blue [34] has shown that a clear differentiation of activities occurs in Acts between those which took place within the confines of a private domestic residence (the house church) and those which required a more open, public setting. He writes:

> Luke consistently pairs the public and private activities of the early church. On the one hand, the Temple precincts, synagogues, lecture halls, etc. served as platforms from which to preach the gospel. On the other, the converted hearers formed a community centred in the houses which were placed at the communities' disposal by affluent Christians.[35]

In Acts 5:42, he argues that the chiastic construction suggests the activity of the house churches was distinct from the public proclamation which took place in the Temple precincts: 'Every day in the temple courts and from house to house they did not cease teaching and proclaiming Jesus as Christ.' A parallel construction, and so a similar distinction, is found in Acts 20:20.[36]

34 Brad Blue, 'The Influence of Jewish Worship on Luke's Presentation of the Early Church', in *Witness to the Gospel, The Theology of Acts*, I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson, eds, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1998).

35 Blue, 'Influence of Jewish Worship', 482

36 The reference in Acts 5:21 to the apostles having entered the Temple courts 'began to teach the people' is no exception. This is just another way of saying they proclaimed the Gospel since the command of the angel in verse 20 who released them from prison, was to 'Stand in the Temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life' which, as Marshall points out, is similar to 'the message of salvation' (13:26; in Syriac 'life' and 'salvation' are rendered by the same word). Marshall goes on to say: 'The use of *this* word is odd (cf. 22:4), but is perhaps a Lucan trick of style.' I. H. Marshall, Acts (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 118.

This interpretation[37] could be applied to unravel the summary description of the activities of the early Christians in Acts 2:46:

Day after day	
They steadfastly met together on the temple *Place* (public)	In their houses breaking bread *Place* (private)
Sharing food with glad a generous hearts. *Main clause*: characteristic of private gatherings	
Praising God *Place* (private)	Having goodwill towards all the people **(***Echontes charin pros holon ton laon***)** *Place* (public)
The Lord added to their number those being saved *Main clause*: results of the public activity	
Day after day	

Blue concludes:

> If we have rightly understood the Lukan presentation of early Christianity, both in Palestine and the Graeco-Roman world, the gospel was first proclaimed in the publicly acceptable places. Subsequently, those who had responded were drawn together into house gatherings. Luke never even suggests that during these private meetings of believers the gospel message was preached for the purpose of converting the hearers. On the contrary, for Luke, these private house meetings were for the benefit of the Christian community alone.[38]

37 Originally proposed by Klauck and cited by Blue, 'Influence of Jewish Worship', 486.
38 Blue, 'Influence of Jewish Worship', 486.

Here it is being proposed that this pattern of public proclamation and private gathering parallels the two functions of being salt and light.

There is the ministry of the word in evangelism. On the day of Pentecost the redeemed community is gathered in an upper room (Acts 1:13). With the pouring out of the Holy Spirit the scene shifts as the group spills out into the public arena, the most natural setting being the Temple precincts, which at that time of day would have been busy. It is here that Jesus is declared Lord and Christ, fulfilling the promise of Scripture (2:32). In response to the preaching of Peter, the people are called to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. The setting is Jerusalem – Mount Zion. The people are being called to a renewed covenant relation with God as evidenced by the giving of the Spirit (Joel 2:28 following; Ezekiel 36:24 following). The gathering in of God's people to Zion has started from the *Diaspora* as represented by the different language groups present (2:9 following). This continued on a daily basis (2:47; 3:1; 5:12 on). The everlasting covenant made to David is fulfilled in Jesus and offered to the people (3:24–26).

Not surprisingly, given Jesus' warning in Matthew 5:11, such 'salt activity' is soon met with opposition from the ruling authorities (Acts 4:1 onwards; 5:17–40).[39] It was for 'acts of righteousness' that they suffer and, accordingly, they take Jesus' injunction literally when, having foretold of persecution because of him, they are to 'rejoice and be glad' (Acts 5:41).[40]

The prophetic activity was also directed inwards to the redeemed community, the 'city on a hill'. This comes out most clearly in the Ananias and Sapphira episode (Acts 5:1–11). Their lying to the Holy Spirit was met with swift and deadly judgement such that 'a great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about such events' (5:11). The words of Peter are reminiscent of the words of the Old Testament prophets to Israel.[41] Such

39 Whilst the occasion for the harassment and arrest of the apostles in Acts 4 is the healing of the crippled beggar, the focus of concern for the Sanhedrin was the 'name' by which the miracle took place. As Peterson has shown, this represents the divine authority and continued blessings of Jesus in salvation. Accordingly it is the content of the Gospel proclaimed which is the underlying issue and cause of contention rather than the 'act of kindness' itself (4:9) which Peter well understands and forms the basis of his defence (4:10ff.). This view is also borne out by the subsequent arrest and miraculous release recorded in chapter 5 when the apostles are forbidden to teach 'in this name', (5:28). See D. Peterson, 'Worship in the New Community' in *Witness to the Gospel*, 381.

40 The most striking example in Acts of the exercise of prophetic ministry of which Jesus speaks and the consequent opposition is met by Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. Note how in true prophetic style he recalls the history of Israel, the peoples' habitual covenant breaking and the persecution of the prophets of which the rejection of Jesus forms the climax (7:51–53).

41 See Is. 66:2b-4

behaviour was a denial of the new covenant and the renewed life which flows from it and as such threatened its future existence.

All of this is matched by the 'light' motif. As the redeemed community, new values and generous lifestyles were to be adopted and expressed. For Luke it is the formation of a community of property which most markedly reflects these things as indicated by its repetition in his first two summaries: Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32, 34. The statement of the last verse that, 'there were no needy (*endees*) among them', suggests the fulfilling of the Mosaic law of Deuteronomy 15:4.[42] Although the language may be verging on the overstatement, Capper provides some insight into the significance of what Luke records when he writes:

> Luke's intent is salvation-historical as well as ethical. As a salvation-historical reference, his account draws out the momentous significance of God's new act of the creation of the Church. God's Spirit of love, poured out on the community of his Messiah, brings a new ethical creation characterised by the *koinonia* which the first uncorrupted human beings shared. That a new phase of history has begun is symbolised by the momentary return of a paradisal state of the first human beings. Since the eschatological hope is hope for a return to paradise, Luke's description is also a glimpse of the eschatological future. The story of the Church's beginnings reveals its true essence as the vehicle of eschatological salvation through which all creation will be renewed.'[43]

More modestly what are envisaged are a reversal of the corrupt Zion which Isaiah condemned and the inauguration of the eschatological community that he foresaw. Instead of 'adding house to house and field to field' in greed (Isaiah 5:8) houses and fields were sold in order to meet need (Acts 4:34). Whereas in former Jerusalem the cause of the widows was neglected (Isaiah 1:23), in God's new Zion it is met (Acts 6:1 following).[44]

The public and private activities of the early church can be distinguished, but the distinction is not a hard and fast one. It is highly unlikely that others in Jerusalem were unaware of the activities of the church in caring and

42 Deut. 15:4: 'However, there should be no poor among you', the LXX uses endees.

43 Brian Capper, 'Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts' in *Witness to the Gospel*, 511.

44 Capper argues that: 'Although Luke describes the community of goods of Acts 2–6 with remarkable enthusiasm, the later chapters of Acts do not suggest that he wished his readers to institute formal property sharing arrangements. Rather, his model becomes almsgiving', 'Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts', 499.

sharing. The word ministry of the apostles to the people was accompanied by a ministry of healing miracles (Acts 5:12–16). Both would clearly constitute the 'good works' spoken of by Jesus, and mirror the pattern of his own ministry (Matthew 4:23 onwards).

In the debate on the relation between evangelism and social action, both are often bracketed together as at least being different, but complementary, aspects of the Church's 'mission'. In recent years the suitability of this phrase has been brought into question. Peter Bolt writes: 'The concept of the "mission of the church" ought to be laid to rest. Acts does not present "the Church" as an institution which is sent. A particular church may send individuals to do a particular work (cf.13:1–4), but the church itself is not sent.'[45] Similarly John Woodhouse comments:

> The New Testament does not contain this concept. The apostles are 'sent'. And one may suppose that evangelists are 'sent'. Perhaps in some sense all Christians are 'sent' (John 20:21). But the 'church' as the church is not 'sent'. Individuals are given *to* the church, 'sent' to the church if you like (Ephesians 4:11) and the church sends individuals (Acts 13:3). But we do not find the *church* with a mission. This is because the New Testament concept of 'church' is not of an institution. All the 'sending' has the gathering of God's people by the gospel as its goal. The gathering, the 'church', is not the means to some other goal.[46]

This is very much in accord with what has already been seen in Acts. The public proclamation of the gospel has as its *goal* the addition of people to the gathering/church (Acts 2:47). That is where they receive the apostles teaching and experience fellowship as the redeemed community, thus bringing about in some measure the Zion of the last days, spoken of by Isaiah, with 'nations coming to your light' (Isaiah 60:3) and being 'taught his ways' (Isaiah 2:3). Individuals or groups of individuals are sent out (as were the disciples in Matthew 10) but with a view to 'gathering in' (Acts 5:12–14). The priority of Word ministry is asserted by the apostles in Acts 6:2 in response to the pending crisis amongst the Grecian Jewish widows that, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables'. Practical steps, however, are taken so as not to neglect the needy provision of widows which would have undermined the ministry in a different way, for by denying the proper expression of the new covenant the salt would be in danger of losing its saltiness.

45 Peter Bolt, 'Mission and Witness' in *Witness to the Gospel*, 211.

46 'Evangelism and Social responsibility', 22.

Being salt and light and the transformation of a society

The effect of the prophetic testifying to God's truth from which flow the good deeds of light amongst Christians in the first four centuries has been documented carefully by Rodney Stark.[47]

He shows how:

> Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. ... [That it] revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.[48]

The latter example of nursing is a good one to start with when In 260 AD, during what was probably a massive measles epidemic, Dionysius Bishop of Alexandria wrote:

> Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless

47 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. A sociologist reconsiders history*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

48 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 161. Following Stark, Alan Kreider puts forward the case that the remarkable growth of Christianity up to AD 300 at a rate of 40% per decade, was in large measure due to the impressive nature of the distinctive Christian lifestyles. He writes: 'How did these conversions take place? Not as a result of attractive worship services ... Christian worship was for the Christians themselves; their services were occasions to worship God, not to attract outsiders', (Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, Alcuin/Grow, Joint Liturgical Studies 32, Cambridge: Grove Books). Nor did conversions happen as a result of the Christians' public witness: 'Christianity was an illegal *superstitio*; its adherents could not speak in the public forum. To be sure, the early Christians produced some apologists, who gave account of the faith and practice of the Christian communities, for the edification of the members of those communities and if possible as a means of communicating to interested outsiders. The Christians

> of the danger; they took charge of the sick, attending every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains.[49]

Contrast that description with his account of the pagans:

> The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the suffers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.

That this was not the hyperbolic license of a preacher, casting the 'opposition' in a bad light, is substantiated by a similar description of the activity of non-Christians in Athens by Thucydides in 431 BC.[50]

What motivated such self-sacrificial action amongst Christians? Cyprian's instruction to his congregation at Carthage helps to give the answer:

> The people being assembled together; he first of all urges upon them the benefits of mercy ... Then he proceeds to add that there is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men or publicans, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well ... Thus the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.[51]

This is pure Sermon on the Mount – the salt ensuring that the community is light.[52]

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also spoke of their faith quietly, privately ... And people listened to them because Christians lived in ways that were distinctive and attractive. As Minucius Felix put it: "We do not preach distinctive things; we live them!"', A. Kreider, 'Conversion and Christendom an Anabaptist Perspective', www.c3.hu/~bocs/rcmenno.htm. Allowing for Felix's use of hyperbole, it is significant that even Kreider notes that they 'spoke of their faith' and what gave their speech credibility was their lives.

49 *Festival Letters*, Quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22, (1965 ed.).

50 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (London: Penguin, 1954), 51–53.

51 Quoted by Stark in *The Rise of Christianity*, 87.

52 In his remarkable book, *The Real Heroes of the Inner City – It can be Done* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2000), Sir Fredrick Catherwood gives many examples in

Conclusion

At the Mount of Matthew 5 the heralding Servant is seen gathering his nascent servant community to himself, thus beginning to realize the great act of salvation prophesied in Isaiah 40–66. The proclamatory prophetic ministry of the disciples which entails suffering is to the fore, acting as the salt of the covenant. But this cannot be separated from the new way of life created by the Good News which in turn testifies to that gospel. This prophetic ministry is one which not only calls people into a living covenantal relationship with God through Christ, but also seeks to uphold its integrity by calling the redeemed people to act righteously and so shine like the city on a hill – Zion – as it was meant to be.

In his teaching, Jesus presents 'being salt' and 'being light' as two different, but intrinsic and integrally related, aspects of what it means to be members of his covenant community. While it may legitimately be argued that theologically evangelism has priority for the church (for it is only the evangel which saves and brings people into the new covenant way of life), operationally, social action, as an expression of the community's 'light', cannot be neglected without bringing into question the church community's covenantal integrity, its saltiness.

The implications of this for Christians living in a postmodern setting have been powerfully presented by David Wells.[53] He writes:

> The postmodern reaction against Enlightenment dogma will not be met successfully simply by Christian proclamation. Of that we can be sure. That proclamation must arise within a context of *authenticity*. It is only as the evangelical Church begins to put its own house in order, its members begin to disentangle themselves from all those cultural habits which militate against a belief in truth, and begin to embody that truth in the way that the Church actually lives, that postmodern sceptism might begin to be overcome. Postmoderns want to see as well as hear, to find authenticity in relationship as the precursor to hearing what is said. This is a valid and biblical demand. Faith, after all, is dead without works, and few sins are dealt with as harshly by Jesus as hypocrisy. What postmoderns want to see, and are entitled

the UK where churches have followed this example in social action, leading not only to people being helped and communities transformed, but lives surrendered to Christ.

53 David F. Wells, *Above all earthly Pow'rs – Christ in the Post Modern World*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006).