

Feature Article

Moving A Church Toward Gospel-Centeredness

By Jeff Louie



Survey of Various Perspectives

In understanding how the gospel affects the church's role in society, it is important to develop the concept from a sound biblical theological framework. It needs to be consistent with a natural reading of Scripture. It should not be based upon a theological interpretation that forces itself upon the Gospels and the Epistles.

Reconstructionists

There have been various views that attempt to define the role of Christians in their community. The Reconstructionists hold to a literal carrying-over of both the moral and civil aspects of the Old Testament Law into modern times. The continuation of the civil aspects of the Law is what sets this view apart from the more common Reformed position, which sees a literal continuation of the moral Law alone. For the Reconstructionist, the civil and moral codes of the Law of Moses are to be the pattern of social justice for all cultures. Because of this understanding, societal interaction for the Christian is to focus on civil law reform in government, so that it reflects the Law of Moses.

I find three major weaknesses with Reconstructionism. First, is their insistence on the literal continuation of the civil Law. Second, their failure to realize the unique position of Israel both as a nation and God's holy people. Finally, their system does not reflect Christ's teaching. Instead their theological framework is forced upon the teachings of Christ. Nowhere in Scripture is there a call for Jesus' followers to change the laws in their governments to reflect the civil aspects of the Mosaic Law.¹

Cultural Mandatists

The culture mandatist believes we must use Christian principles to influence all spheres of society. Abraham Kuyper is the best-known proponent of this position. A modern adherent is Charles Colson. This view sees a cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." This represents God's enduring command to develop civilizations and societies. Colson writes:

The same command is still binding on us today. Though the Fall introduced sin and evil into human history, it did not erase the cultural mandate. The generations since Adam and Eve still bear children, build families, and spread across the earth. They still tend animals and plant fields. They still make music and works of art . . . It is our contention in this book that the Lord's cultural commission is inseparable from the great commission.²

¹ The Reconstructionist position is detailed elsewhere, and an analysis of it is beyond the scope of this paper. For arguments against this view see Ligon Duncan's article, "Moses' Law for Modern Government," Vern Poythress' *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (from a reformed perspective), and *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* By Wayne House and Thomas Ice (from a dispensational perspective).

² Colson, Charles, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 295.

Though I enjoyed reading Colson's book and agreed with many of his applications to society, the powerful concept of the "cultural commission" is overstated. Genesis itself does not use 1:28 as a major theme in the development of the book. The focus is on the "calling out" rather than the influencing "from within." It is reasonable to assume that followers of God would be involved in developing their societies, but this should not be based upon a cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28.

Legislative Moralists

The "Religious Right" would fit under the category of legislative moralist. They are not united by a well-developed theological system. It is a reactionary movement to the increasing secularization in American society. I describe them as "Legislative Moralists" because they seek to stop the moral decay in America primarily through the legislative process. Because it is a reactionary movement, the tone is defensive and combative. The legislative moralist contends that something is being taken away; (e.g., the identity of being a "nation under God," or school prayer). The morals of the nation have gone awry with the legalization of abortion, and the possibility of homosexual marriage. There is a need to mobilize the nation in order to stop this continual moral decay before it is too late. Because of this legislative focus, emphasis is placed upon the election of candidates who pledge to fight against the key issues that are promoting the moral decay. Other issues, such as poverty and global warming, may be important, but they are not equal to the critical moral issues that threaten America.

I understand the basis of this position. I agree with it on key moral issues. Nevertheless, I do not agree with its limited agenda. Certainly Christians must vote according to their conscience on moral issues – to articulate their positions publicly – but there is much more to the Christian's role in society than that of a political reactionary. The legislative moralist is "John the Baptist" in style, proclaiming the need to "repent." This Jesus did also, yet he simultaneously acted with a tireless devotion to demonstrate God's powerful grace to the multitudes. If we claim to represent a fully orb'd Christianity, then the graciousness of our Lord must be included in our role in society.

Redemptive Moralists

The redemptive moralist is the counter-balance to the religious right. He may affirm some of the positions of the legislative moralist, but insists on a more positive, or "redemptive," response in his interaction with society. While the legislative moralist focuses on a few crucial issues, the redemptive moralist recognizes many issues of significant importance. Abortion may be important, but so is the poverty-cycle of the inner city. The breakdown of the traditional family is a key concern, but so also is the reality of global-warming. This group will not put all its eggs in the basket of a few political "litmus tests." It seeks to express Christian faith in a gracious and proactive manner, helping to relieve the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of society. The redemptive moralist believes that to simply focus on a few select issues would reflect an injustice that does not evidence the full heart of God. I have enjoyed reading works from this perspective, such as Jim Wallis' *God's Politics*, and Tony Campolo's *Speaking My Mind*. Nevertheless, I have observed tendencies in the redemptive moralist camp that need to be addressed.

Firstly, there is the problem of selective proof-texting to support certain claims. Tony Campolo refers to the "peacemakers" in the Sermon on the Mount to argue that our nation should refrain from war, and that Christians should not be soldiers. But does he understand the Sermon on the Mount fully? Why doesn't he ask for the application of the other 99% of the sermon? Why not advocate a nation where the citizens are poor, or poor in spirit? Jim Wallis cites the return of property during the year of Jubilee to illustrate the need for wealthy nations to cancel third-world debt. Of course, I am not opposed to the cancellation of debt. The purpose of returning the land during the year of Jubilee, however, was to remind Israel that the land belongs to God, rather than being a law to level the economic playing field.

Besides the proof-texting, I have also noticed a rhetorical emphasis. The argument is made that Christians should not limit themselves to such social issues as abortion and homosexuality, because other issues (e.g. the cycle of poverty and genocide) are equally important. But I suspect this argument is, at times, more rhetorical than real. While it is true the religious right focuses too exclusively on certain issues (while neglecting other glaring expressions of need), I do wonder how often the redemptive moralist preaches about the worldwide problem of abortion. Genocide is wrong, to be sure, and Christians

should seek to end it, for example, in places like Darfur. But the plain fact is there are more human lives lost in three days through abortion than the total lives lost in the Darfurian genocide. Sometimes the Christian desire to be more “redemptive” serves to skirt the more controversial issues.

Toward a Biblical Theology of Community Interaction

In developing a biblical theological framework, we should avoid any theological basis not founded on the teachings of Jesus. Rather, we should begin with the observable emphases in Christ’s teaching and ministry.

The Question of the Greatest Commandment

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."³

Jesus’ intriguing answer is critical to the development of a Christian basis for interaction with our community. He articulates the greatest commandment, but then follows with a second “like it.” Why does Jesus do this? Only one commandment was asked of him. Why give two? I see three reasons for this addition: 1) to establish that a faith in God without gracious interaction toward humanity is dead faith; 2) to elevate the less prominent focus of social graciousness in Old Testament Law; and, 3) to include the rebukes of Old Testament prophets to demonstrate that “loving our neighbor” is indeed a major teaching in the Old Testament.

Faith without a Gracious Interaction is Dead

The question asked of Jesus was law-oriented. A Pharisee asks the question. The issue is about a “commandment,” and both answers Jesus gives are from the Law. But one is expected, and the other is surprising. The obvious answer is Jesus’ reference to Deuteronomy 6:5, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” This is the greatest commandment. This was not a controversial response. It is a part of the *Shema*, which provided Israel with its monotheistic foundation. It was also a text repeated daily at the temple services; every religious Jew would have understood its importance.

This need to love God with the one’s entirety is what Jesus saw as most important. This would be consistent with the statements he made calling for the highest level of discipleship. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”⁴ “Let the dead bury their own dead.”⁵ “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last.”⁶ These statements make sense in light of Christ’s answer to the Pharisee. God requires total devotion from his followers. God asked for it in the Law, and Jesus reaffirms it in the Gospels.

If Deuteronomy 6:5 completely summarized all that God wanted, however, the conversation would have ended there. But Jesus then adds the second greatest commandment, and connects the two by stating that all the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments. Deuteronomy 6:5 is the greatest commandment. But it is incomplete. Jesus adds Leviticus 19:18 – the commandment to love our neighbors – because He understands that an internal devotion for the true God must be manifested in external love for others. One commandment is greater than the other, but both need to be taken together. This connection between loving God and living graciously in community is found throughout the New Testament.

At the end of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:14, a similar connection is made between God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of people.⁷ I’ve often wondered why Jesus made such a condition. It seems

³ Matthew 22: 34-40

⁴ Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34

⁵ Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60

⁶ Mark 9:35

⁷ Matthew 6:14

demanding, inferring that my salvation is conditioned on some work I need to do. But it is not a condition of salvation; it is the evidence. If one claims to know God's grace but refuses to demonstrate it to others, the claim is spurious. This same connection is clearly expressed in the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-35, who, in light of the cancellation of his huge debt, refuses to cancel a small debt owed to him.

In James 2, there is a question about whether or not an intellectual faith in God is sufficient. In 2:17, the declaration is made that: "faith without works is dead." This passage is often found in theological discussions concerning lordship and grace. But such discussions often overlook the verse's original and practical intent. The context of James 2 is the ill-treatment and neglect of the poor who attend church meetings. If one claims to know God but fails to treat the poor with respect (and help with their physical needs), then one's faith is dead. Paul writes:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.⁸

The Minority Teaching in the Law

Citing Leviticus 19:18 as the second greatest commandment was a surprising answer on the part of Jesus. Verses of mercy and compassion, though present in the Law, were in the minority. In analyzing Old Testament Law, Maimonides counted 613 *mizvots*. Within these, this noted medieval rabbi observed that 365 were negative. If one reads his list, it will also be noted that less than 10% of the commandments were compassionate and merciful in nature. And when it came to the "love your neighbor" in Leviticus 19:18, Maimonides took the usual rabbinic interpretation that "neighbors" are other Jews. Compassion and mercy are in the Law, but it is not the predominate teaching. And when compassion is to be shown, it is for the covenant community, or for the foreigner who enters the land of the covenant community.

But Christ's emphasis is different from the Law's. Jesus reapporitions what is important. A minor theme now surfaces to the top. And not only is there a change in the importance of the compassion laws, Jesus expands the understanding that compassion is to be predominately manifested within the believing community. He does this through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Any "faith community only" restriction to kindness is removed. The hero is now a Samaritan; the "neighbor" now includes those outside the covenant of faith.

Not only is the concept of the neighbor expanded, the meaning of showing love is dramatically changed as well. In the Law, compassion was legislated to express itself passively or by specific requirement. For example, a "passive" compassion was evidenced in the gleaning laws and the care to return the "garment pledge" of a poor person at night to provide adequate warmth. Compassion by "requirement" is made clear in the specific tithes that was collected for the poor. Now, however, Jesus demands a greater expression of compassion. It is no longer a matter of making less money, passively leaving some of the harvest in the field. It is no longer a matter of writing a required yearly check. Compassion is to be shown "on-demand." In the parable, it involved taking time to care for someone's wounds, bringing him to a place where he could get better, and then footing the entire bill! And notice that the hero is not a Jew. He is a Samaritan. The point is clear: the people of God who refused to show compassion to someone in obvious need are now shamed. Instead, the compassionate "covenant outsider" is closer to Christ's ideal.

Added Insight from the Prophets

Though the initial question posed was Law-oriented, Jesus skillfully adds the prophets to the discussion, as he concludes that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. The Law allows Jesus to mention Leviticus 19:18. But the Law by itself does not prove this verse's place as the second greatest commandment. Enter the prophets, and the call for justice and mercy grows. It cries out in the Old Testament prophetic rebukes.

⁸ 1 Timothy 6:17-19

The stern response in Zechariah 7 illustrates the consequences when God's covenant people fail to understand the need to be just and compassionate. In this passage, there is the innocent inquiry by the town of Bethel as to whether fasts commemorating the captivity still need to be observed. The question was reasonable, as they were no longer in captivity. The answer is shocking.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other." But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry.⁹

The town of Bethel observed the fast, but they didn't observe it correctly. They thought the fast represented their suffering. They were wrong. The fast was to remind them of why God sent them into captivity; they had failed to be just, merciful and compassionate.

The theme of social injustice is important in the structure of Amos. This book opens with a list of foreign nations and their crimes deserving divine judgment. Then, in Amos 2:4-8, the crimes of Judah and Israel are addressed:

"For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed, I will send fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem." This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines."

The two crimes of failing to love God and people are cited. How similar to Christ's description of the two greatest commandments!

In Habakkuk 1:2-4, the book opens with the prophet's cry for the intervention of God. What has upset the prophet? The lack of justice:

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

When the prophets are added into the discussion the minor theme of Leviticus 19:18 is no longer minor. The prophets declare that God's people experienced his wrath when they failed to administer fairness, compassion and mercy; that is, when they failed to love their neighbor.

Christ is clear in stating the two greatest commandments. In his answer he unites and summarizes the whole Old Testament. To be sure, the Law never specified the top two commandments. Jesus, however, reveals the true spirit of it. To know God is to follow him and exercise compassion to one's neighbors. This emphasis continues throughout the New Testament. In a gospel-centered approach, we need to uphold what Jesus defined as of utmost importance: to teach people to love God, and to teach people to love their neighbors.

⁹ Zechariah 7:8-12

In the history of our nation, orthodox Christianity has often failed to be champions of gracious compassion. Being an ethnic minority, I am aware of the history of slavery in our country and am sensitive to the prejudice and bigotry that exist. Often times orthodox Christianity speaks of the “glory days” in America’s past, and sounds the call to return to a time when we were “under God.” But whose glory days were they? For the African American living in slavery, or emancipated to live under Jim Crow laws? For Chinese railroad coolies discriminated by the 1882 Exclusion act, which basically said, “Thanks for your cheap labor, but Chinese women can’t immigrate, so you will be single for the rest of your life?” The civil rights movement was not led by orthodox Christians. What an embarrassment! Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, the heretic is the hero, closer to the ideals of God than his own people. Those who claim to know the true God prove to be the villain.

Measuring A Church’s Love For It’s Neighbors

Having given thought to the biblical basis for a gospel-centered approach to social interaction, a few practical questions will now be given to evaluate our congregations’ engagement in this ministry.

1. Is it to be positive, interactive, and helpful to the real needs in the community?

Much attention has been given to the role of the religious right in elections. Abortion and homosexuality are the issues; they are the “litmus tests.” For many Christians, the church’s role in society should take a decidedly political emphasis based upon these moral issues. Social involvement, therefore, is predominately fighting the decay by voting people into office who will change laws to stem the moral decline. This approach tends to be combative, developing an “us against them” mentality in order to get out the vote.

A gospel-centered church needs to proclaim both positive and negative truths to society, but the ministry must go beyond verbal proclamation; there needs to be gracious interaction with the community. This is how Jesus lived. I often tell my congregation that there are the red and black letters in the Gospels. In the red letters, Jesus is the tough-talking Messiah who calls his followers to give it all for God. He is not afraid to speak of the judgment to come. But in the black letters, Jesus is the most compassionate person one could ever meet. He is a tireless minister of grace, who will demonstrate this ultimately by dying for us.

2. Are our ministries of gracious compassion to the community substantial?

Most churches have some type of compassion ministry. Often it is reactive in nature, helping only those who come our way. Others times, they are small in degree, relegated to a handful of dedicated individuals. For example, there might be a ministry to the poor, but participation is also poor. This is because ministries of grace to the community are not really regarded as foundational ministries of our churches. They exist, but they are not that important. They wouldn’t be missed if they ended. This tokenism is unacceptable. If compassionate grace to others is the second greatest commandment, this work has to be important and substantial.

3. Are our workers voluntary and the services free of charge?

While such ministries may include paid staff, volunteer participation is the true measure of the spirit of compassion that exists in the culture of a church. A corollary to this is that the service provided to the community should be free if possible. If we must require some payment, it should be nominal. Remember, the Good Samaritan paid the entire bill for the injured person!

For seventeen years, I pastored Sunset Church. In steering my church to become gospel-centered, three barriers had to be broken. First, I came to an existing church. It was not a church plant. It had a ten-year history prior to my arrival, and that history was not stellar. It was a small church that had a lot of infighting. It was carnal in spirit. Second, it is located in the city of San Francisco. It’s reputation of not being the bastion of Christian orthodoxy is well earned. Besides the political and moral climate, there is the ongoing exodus of families to the suburbs. Family-based churches like Sunset Church have a difficult time surviving. Third, we are a bilingual church. Our legal name is still “Sunset Chinese Baptist Church.” The bilingual Chinese church in North America has a unique cultural flavor: ethnicity takes precedent over

theology. Whether one is Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Christian and Missionary Alliance, or Evangelical Free, the Chinese denominational church is, first and foremost, “Chinese” in character. These churches have the same feel, regardless of denomination and theology. This ethnic emphasis naturally lends itself to a subconscious isolation from the different ethnicities around us. Perhaps the isolationist tendency was forced upon the ethnic church in America because of the prejudice, poverty and immigration issues of prior generations. Yet the ethnic church, whether as a consequence of our origins or our language limitations, still leans toward an isolationism.

Barriers notwithstanding, Sunset Church has begun a gospel-centered transformation. At the heart of our church is a phrase that I constantly restate: “Proclaim boldly and live graciously.” This simple statement allows me to speak on all kinds of issues during Sunday worship, including the hot ones of homosexuality and abortion. I probably make mention of the “judgment to come” twice a month in my messages. But I do not see myself as a “fire and brimstone” preacher. I speak on difficult issues with grace. I never demonize the community around us. The congregation leaves with a sense of what “I” need to do in my life, and never with an anger against “those humanistic-secularists in San Francisco who are going to hell.” The bold proclamation of truth in grace is of utmost importance.

But there is another facet of ministry at Sunset Church. It is that of “living graciously.” Between the opening worship set and the sermon is our “Community Time” that ranges from 10 to 20 minutes. We do three things during Community Time: 1) we greet each other; 2) we announce upcoming ways to get involved; and, 3) we have a time of intercessory prayer. I use this time to remind the congregation that our faith has to go beyond singing songs and listening to a message; that we need to express our faith to the outside world and care for people other than ourselves. Community Time is when we connect with others. Everyone who attends our worship service is aware of what we do in our community.

Sunset Church is not a perfect church; we have a long way to go. But we have made great strides in becoming a church that seeks to demonstrate love to our neighbors. The following are things we have done and, in some cases, continue to do:

1. We have sent four teams to Katrina-stricken New Orleans to help rebuild that area. We are scheduled to send three more teams by the end of this year;
2. We have monthly involvement with “Habitat for Humanity” in San Francisco. When we first got involved, I talked with an Americore worker who remarked, “Churches usually send either young people who goof around or senior citizens who can’t do the heavy work. Your church sends adults who can do the labor”;
3. We made up about 20% of the attendees at the International Justice Mission banquet in San Francisco last year. This was a \$100 per person fund raising event. Our congregation sponsored over 100 people;
4. We allow neighborhood groups to use our facility for free. Groups that regularly meet at our facilities include: “Sunset Artist’s Group” and “Westside Neighbors for the Ending of Homelessness.” Other neighborhood groups that have used our facilities are “Neighborhood Watch,” and “Neighborhood Emergency Response Training”;
5. On designated Mondays we have an ongoing homeless ministry, where we distribute basic need items and talk with homeless people;
6. We have members who regularly volunteer to tutor “at risk” San Francisco elementary school children. Christians often speak of problems with public education and the need for a school voucher program. I am not opposed to vouchers, but Christians need to do more than merely talk about what’s wrong with public education. We need to do something to help public school children;
7. We have a regular involvement with the city’s “SF-Connect” service for the homeless. The city sponsors a bi-monthly event where over a thousand of the city’s homeless come to a designated site to get help. City services are present and volunteers are there to assist;
8. We mobilized to become the only collection station for Samaritans Purse’s “Operation Christmas Child.” “Operation Christmas Child” gathers shoeboxes filled with items for children in needy countries. Our church volunteered to be the collection center for our city. We had dozens of volunteers who manned our church from 9 to 5 for an entire week.

I tell the congregation that they are not to do everything, but that everyone needs to do something to demonstrate God's grace to people around us. I also stress that our works of community grace would mean little if we did not proclaim the truth boldly. We need to show grace to this world, but ultimately the world doesn't need us, it needs Christ.

Dealing With Negatively Charged Moral Issues

How does the church respond to issues such as abortion and homosexuality? These issues are negatively charged, and have political and restrictive overtones. In expressing kindness and graciousness to our surrounding community, can we also express our views on these issues?

These are approaches that Christians have taken:

1. No negative expressions at all, because abortion and homosexuality are not immoral.
2. No negative expressions from the pulpit, or negative official statements made in public. Only socially acknowledged sins can be talked about on Sundays, such as greed, unfaithfulness, abuse, and prejudice. The sensitive issues can only be talked about in clear "Christian-only" settings like small groups or leadership meetings.
3. Negative expressions have to be made on every level, and the society needs to be rebuked.
4. Negative expressions need to be made at the appropriate time on any level, balancing rebuke and grace, and we need to talk about the other sins, too.
5. Negative expressions need to be made at the appropriate time on any level, balancing rebuke and grace, and we need to talk about the other sins, too. But we also have to champion gracious activity to our community. Only in this way do we represent the true teaching of Christ.

If you have been following my paper, it is this final approach I advocate at Sunset Church.

Theory Put Into Practice: Same Sex Marriage

A few years ago, Mayor Gavin Newsom authorized the city to issue marriage licenses for same gender unions. His decision caused quite a political stir across the nation, but it also caused a spiritual stir in San Francisco. As a result of his action, I joined a group of about a half dozen pastors to respond to his declaration. We were to plan a rally and schedule a meeting with the Mayor about our concerns.

The involvement in this steering committee was difficult for me. Half of the committee had fundamentalist tendencies. Some wanted a "war-like" rally with a choir singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." A very hateful worded petition had been passed around the Bay Area with over 400 pastors signing it. Though I felt that Mayor Newsom's landmark decision needed to be addressed publicly, I was very uncomfortable with the combative tone.

The situation was made more difficult when I began calling other pastors for their support. Many young pastors disagreed with the Mayor's decision, but they also refused to say anything about it publicly. Fundamentalists were on one side and "redemptive-only" evangelicals on the other. This episode started my journey to find an approach to controversial societal issues that would be both uncompromising and gracious. First, I made a decision to refuse to sign the hatefully worded petition being passed around. I then asked my church's elders to read the petition. They all agreed that the statement was too harsh. We wrote our own response.

Next, I fought to remove any "fundamentalistic" tone from the scheduled rally. To help moderate the tone, it was agreed that no platform speakers would be from the fundamentalist camp. "Onward Christian Soldiers" was not to be sung on that day. I led the opening prayer by asking God to enable us (7,000) to humble ourselves and understand His forgiving grace so that we would not manifest a spiritually prideful, or hateful attitude. Finally, I was one of the four pastors selected to speak directly to Mayor Newsom when we met with him. There were about 200 other ministers in the room or outside. I spoke clearly and graciously. Issues of moral controversy will put Christian leaders to the test. If one speaks the truth, is it spoken graciously? If one is gracious, has the truth been hidden? A gospel-centered approach founded on the clear teaching and life of Christ can help us here.

Theory Put Into Practice: Abortion

Abortion seems like yesterday's issue. It is also too right-winged, too "moral majority," and too Republican. The popular issues today are global-warming, homelessness, Darfur, the War in Iraq, slavery, and social justice.

My church usually has two occasions of prayer in our worship service. Our first time of prayer involves intercession. The second time, after the sermon, is always personally reflective. I had been planning to have our church pray along with International Justice Mission workers who were meeting on the weekend of April 21-22, 2007 in Washington D.C. It would also be the perfect time for the prayers to include other areas of injustice and suffering.

In the extended twenty-minute worship prayer that Sunday, we started with intercession for children trapped in prostitution, and the raising up of local believers in those nations to change the culture of abuse. We then prayed for the genocide in Darfur, that the international gridlock would be broken. Next, we interceded for the families of those killed at Virginia Tech. We printed out the pictures and names of each victim along with a brief description. I ended the prayer time with the final item: abortion. I told the congregation of the 46 million lives worldwide that were terminated by abortion in 2006. I told the church that we needed to be concerned for all sufferings in this world; that abortion is a grave injustice because the developing life cannot defend itself. We are not to be a people who just support the "pop issues of the moment." We need to pray for the other great evils that plague this world.

The Gospel And Government

Christianity provides principles that allow the believer to successfully live out his faith regardless of the political climate. Whether there is governmental persecution or a Christian state religion, believers can be spiritually vibrant.

Sometimes Christians have no ability to change the political situation of their nation. If a state religion is not Christian-based, then a peaceful coexistence is the best scenario for the believer.

But sometimes Christians have dominance in a country. This dominance might be the result of a numerical majority or based upon a national heritage that resulted in the naming of Christianity as the state religion. Are there any principles for the Christian's involvement in politics? From Scripture, we can derive the following:

1. The True Hope

The believer's involvement in the governments of this age must be tempered by the understanding that our ultimate hope is not in the kingdoms of this world. The teaching of Christ is clear here. This world rusts and decays. We are seeking something that is not of this world.

2. Moral and Gracious Legislation

Christ has taught us to be both moral and gracious, and both need to be present in the political causes of the believer. This is very difficult in the current political atmosphere in the United States where trigger issues are used to stir the passion of voters. Christians in government should have a conviction that is stronger than the party line. We should champion both moral and gracious causes.

3. Understand the Potential and Limits of Compatibility

Joseph and Daniel illustrate the benefits faithful followers of God can have upon a pagan government. Their spiritual integrity and wisdom allowed them to rise to positions of influence. Though Christians should not put their full hope in the governments of this world, we can use our integrity and competency to help remedy the temporal ills of society.

I have a great admiration for Lord Shaftesbury, a British nobleman, politician and philanthropist who lived in the nineteenth century. He was an apocalyptic, believing the time of the Lord's return was near. He was

an evangelical. He was greatly involved with organizations that promoted world evangelization. But his theological views did not prevent him from becoming a great blessing to the poor and neglected in England. He led the charge to change child labor laws in the coal mines. He helped to reform Britain's health care system. He made lunacy asylums more humane. He was the first major British politician to rebuke the government for its promotion of the opium trade in China, a trade that had great value to England, as it helped fund British colonialism. He developed a system to lend money without interest to young women so that they could start small businesses for themselves. During his time, 12 of 13 children did not go to school, so he helped start the "Ragged School Movement" that educated thousands of England's poor children. When he died, it was estimated that over 100,000 of England's poor came to pay tribute to him. Banners were held with words like: "I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked and you clothed me." Lord Shaftesbury is one of the best examples of what a Christian can do to help the ills of society.

The Cost Of Moving A Church Toward Gospel-Centeredness

The transformation of an existing church toward a gospel-centeredness will require a high degree of commitment and perseverance by the leadership, and especially by the lead pastor. It can take months, even years of commitment. The lead pastor must not only support the gospel ideals, he must bleed them. He is not to relegate the work to an assistant, but must be totally committed and involve himself.

This leadership requires a high degree of spiritual strength, as many in the congregation will not understand the direction being taken. Some will catch on quickly, while others will prove resistant to change. Disparaging comments may follow:

"We can't show compassion because we are not ready." But when will we be ready? Isn't "loving our neighbor" the second greatest commandment? This is not an option.

"We are too small of a church." We are not called to "change" our community. We are called to "love" the people around us. We may, or may not, bring a lasting effect. This is up to God.

"We won't be effective because the people in our neighborhood are different from the people at the church. We would do better to help our own kind." But this is not the concern of the second greatest commandment. The Good Samaritan didn't say, "I'm sorry, I don't speak your language. I show compassion, but only to my own kind. "It's a matter of effectiveness." Beware that we do not equate "cultural-pride" and "effectiveness."

The lead pastor may need to risk his own job for the sake of gospel transformation. Some will not understand why he declares bold truths. Others will claim that he is headed toward a liberal social gospel. There will be times of misunderstanding and bouts of sadness. But is it worth it? Definitely, yes! We do not serve ourselves, or our institutions. We serve the living God who will judge the works of our hands. We need to stand before the Lord knowing that we have sought to represent him in the fullness of his gospel.

Jeff Louie, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Theology at Western Seminary in San Jose, California. He has been in pastoral ministry for twenty-five years and is a member of The Gospel Coalition (www.thegospelcoalition.org).